

Thinking Straight Critical Reasoning Workshop: Week 1-1 (March 29, 2011)

I. Introduce yourself to people at your table.

II A. Individual/small group activity: Placing yourself on a continuum:

Your comfort level with argumentation

I avoid argumentation
whenever I can,

I am eager to engage
in argumentation.

Your belief in what argumentation accomplishes

Participants in arguments
usually end up with the
same beliefs they started
out with.

Participants in arguments
often end up more enlightened
as a result of the experience.

1. Put a mark on each line, indicating where you stand.
2. Show the person(s) near your where you placed yourself and talk about the reasons for being in this place on each continuum.

B. Plenary Group (class as a whole) discussion of activity

III. Preview: Critical Reasoning as a 2-step procedure

(Step One) **Reconstruct:** If an argument is offered, identify the position being advanced (the *conclusion*) and the supporting reasons (*premises*).

(Step Two) **Evaluate:** Determine whether the conclusion follows and the premises are acceptable

TASK 1. (Individually) Read the following editorial. Briefly write out what you take the main claim the author seems to supporting by her argument. Some possible claims are listed below, but you need not limit yourself to these choices. Next, state in your own words one or two points from the editorial that support the main claim.

Some possibilities for the main claim of the editorial *Gay, Straight: What's the Deal?*:

- a. Gay marriage is morally wrong.
- b. Gay marriage will undermine the family.
- c. Gay marriage will threaten special rights given to heterosexual married couples.
- d. Heterosexual married couples should not get special rights.
- e. Neither heterosexual married couples nor gay married couples should get special rights.
- f. Gay marriage is morally right.

(Small Group) Discuss your understanding of the main conclusion of the column and try to reach agreement on a reading of the text)

(Class as a whole) Report the result of group activity.

From Harrop / Syndicated columnist, *Seattle Times*, Editorials & Opinion: Tuesday, July 20, 2004

Gay, straight: What's the deal?

The U.S. Senate has blocked the proposed constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage. In doing this, the senators have earned my gratitude — though for reasons not directly related to gay rights. Rather, the move will spare us all some of the repetitive back-and-forth that has characterized this debate. It has gotten boring, and both sides of the argument irritate me. About 82 million unmarried American adults will know of what I speak.

Gay advocates always note the thousand-plus federal rights and benefits that are available to married heterosexuals and not to committed same-sex couples. The guardians of traditional values then counter that marriage has always been a man-and-woman thing — letting gay couples in on the deal would harm whatever is left of the American family.

What really rankles me, though, is "the deal" itself. That hit home in a news story around the time that Massachusetts started recognizing gay marriages. The day after a lesbian couple wed, the women filed a medical-malpractice lawsuit. One of them suffered from advanced breast

cancer, which the suit claimed, a doctor had failed to detect. The other wanted to collect for "loss of consortium." In other words, the doctor's alleged negligence was depriving her of the love and companionship of a mate, and she wanted monetary compensation for her pain.

You can't read this without thinking about similar hurts being felt all the time in non-marital relationships. People develop intense connections with old friends, neighbors and grandmothers. Why can't they sue for loss of companionship, also?

Quickie marriages get more legal respect than friendships lasting decades. An hour after Britney Spears gets hooked to her next husband, the federal government will shower her with all sorts of rights and benefits not available to the man who has spent eight years caring for a mother with Alzheimer's.

So here is the point: The push toward gay marriage doesn't threaten hetero marriages as much as it threatens "the deal." It puts light on the illogic behind handing a variety of goodies to certain people because some civil authority issued them marriage certificates.

There is a potent political issue here, which could complicate matters for candidates. They must do more than just choose between advocates of gay rights and those of so-called traditional values. They must consider the lot of single Americans, who could cause a ruckus if they ever woke up.

So much attention is paid to married couples that most of the public — including single people themselves — thinks of unmarried adults as a marginal minority. Actually, they account for half of America's grownups. Households headed by single people are now the majority in 13 states and 113 congressional districts.

These districts are wildly diverse. Some include the poorest black inner cities, while others are wealthy and mostly white. In the nation's richest congressional district — located on Manhattan's East Side — more than 70 percent of the households are headed by unmarried adults.

Government should have no interest in a citizen's marital status. It certainly has no business sending a bigger tax bill to cohabiting sisters than to a man-and-wife team reporting the same income and deductions as the sisters.

Marriage is a fine institution and a very important stabilizing force for the raising of children. Some purists will argue that even child tax credits are a kind of social engineering. Using the tax code to help people pay for child expenses seems OK to me. But giving tax breaks to Larry King and his seventh wife — and in the name of helping children — is outrageous.

Of course, stereotypes underpin these unfair policies. Married couples are seen as the moral backbone of America. Singles, on the other hand, are regarded as questionable citizens and possibly misfits. In truth, single America includes everything from 21-year-old serial daters and bachelor playboys to widowed grandfathers and divorced parents. And whose business is it, anyway?

Perhaps the diversity of the group helps explain why unmarried adults haven't made common cause. They should, and when they do, the whole conversation will change. The real issue will no longer be whether gays should get in on the same marriage deal as heterosexuals, but why the deal exists in the first place. *Providence Journal columnist Froma Harrop's column appears regularly on editorial pages of The Times.*

Task 2 (Individually) Read the Passage What is the position (main claim or conclusion) being advanced?

(Small Group) Discuss your understanding of the main conclusion of the column and *try* to reach agreement on a reading of the text). Once you have done so, identify some of the supporting reasons offered in support of this main claim. Discuss whether you find them acceptable.

(Class as a whole, i.e. plenary session) Discuss the results of this task.

Honesty is on the decline in the United States. Increasing numbers of people admit that they lie on a regular basis at work and at home. These lies are not just minor omissions or trivial untruths designed to save another's feelings, nor even lies in the "traditional domain" of sexual behavior. Many workers indicate that they regularly lie at work. This change in American attitudes began with President Johnson's denial that he would expand the war in Vietnam, just before he did just that. It was fostered by the lies leading to Nixon's resignation as President. The belief that politicians at all levels of government will not tell the truth has only grown. Clinton's revelation that he did not tell "all the truth" about his sexual behavior just confirmed what was a widespread expectation that politicians and other public figures routinely lie. Why do public figures, as well as the rest of us, feel that they need to lie? The real reason is that Americans in their private, public and workaday lives are not willing to hear the truth. The voters don't want to be told that big tax cuts will result in decreased public service. Bosses don't want to be told that their favorite plans are likely to fail. And friends don't want to hear that their binge drinking is interfering in their lives. If this trend continues, the fabric of the country is in danger. We all need to be willing to face the truth as citizens, as employees, as friends. If we stop penalizing others for telling the truth, then they will be more willing to be honest in what they say

Assignment for Friday Morning Critical Reasoning Session:

Read CR Chapter 1, Chapter 2 to p. 38 Do Ex 1.1 #1 Ex 1.2 A2, A4, B1, B2, B3 , C applied to editorial "Truth about 'Assistance'" Bring your written answers to class for submission.