**Guidelines for developing good seminar discussion questions (BIOL 510, Fall 2022)**

Developing good questions is a fundamental critical-thinking skill. The best seminars and lectures are often focussed on addressing a clearly articulated, high quality, thematic question. Likewise, good writing is often based around synthesising your thoughts into a clear, focussed question that then becomes the basis for the argument or thesis statement or specific research questions or hypotheses. Thus, being able to develop good questions is a fundamental component of learning how to ‘think like a scientist’, but more widely, it is an important life skill for any citizen. And in this course, one of the goals is not just to help you ‘think like a scientist’, but also to think about the larger context in which that science is placed.

Seminar questions should be constructed so that they will likely lead to focussed, intelligent discussion that will move the seminar group toward some potential answer, or toward a more refined perspective on the issue/theme, or toward an even more refined question.

Study the assigned reading material carefully, and reflect on it. What really interests you about it, and why? Develop questions that would take you (and your audience) *beyond* the reading’s text. In other words, formulate a question, and then develop an answer... and use the ideas that arise in that initial answering process to further develop your original question so that is more refined, and probing, and therefore likely to lead to an interesting focussed discussion. This iterative cycle can be repeated multiple times. Good questions have the following features:

* Challenging – they contain ideas that are new and indicate an advance on what is stated in the text
* Original – they indicate clear deep thinking by the questioner, often including his/her own specific ideas
* Focussed/specific – they contain enough detail that they will narrow the discussion and constrain it from vague generalisations
* Rarely can be simply answered as Yes or No, without adding some explanation. For example, don’t ask the reader what ‘he/she thinks’ (e.g. Do you think.....?) - instead put in your own thoughts and then pose the question as an assertion (E.g. If.... , then why/what/how....).
* Concise – Keep your text as focussed as possible... text length is NOT correlated with question quality. Recommendation: If your question absolutely needs some introductory text (and it may not!!), keep it to **no more than 2-3 sentences at most, followed by just one single question.**
* Questions that begin with ‘Why?’, and sometimes with ‘How?’ are often particularly engaging, focussed, and effective in developing a good discussion.

**Some examples of good questions, or text from which good questions could readily be developed (note most are too long, and would be better if made more concise):**

1. After reading the papers circulated on indigenous perspectives, I started wondering about not only how we can use Indigenous philosophies but also about what the implementation of such philosophies would look like. With this in mind, how could we ethically use Indigenous philosophies to work towards sustainability without verging on an almost modern act of colonialism whereby we try to avoid undermining the grief and trauma of these communities or appropriating aspects of these cultures for our own benefit?
2. In the documentary “Surviving Progress” Ronald Wright talks about how civilization itself is a ‘progress trap’ in which the rapid rate of human change and innovation of technology, economy, and industrialization may seem beneficial in the short term, but ultimately leads to major problems due to its unsustainable nature, thus causing eventual collapse in the long run. At the end of the film Wright suggests that humans will need to go against their natural instincts to correct this path and create a more equitable and sustainable world. However, would deconstructing civilization (a product of human “intelligence”) actually inactivate human nature’s want for continual progress? Or has the creation of civilization prevented humans from recognizing their animalistic instincts and their important connections to nature, such as their relationships to other organisms and spirituality?
3. How does our language framework shape our interpretations of human exceptionalism, and can its transformation allow for us to overcome our genetic disposition for selfishness?

**Thoughts/responses from me:** An excellent question. Well done!

1. I think a more refined iteration would include your thoughts on how exactly language frameworks affect “our interpretation....”....and then incorporate those thoughts/answers into the wording of the next iteration. E.g. If we chose to use more animate language and language frameworks, would......?
2. Is ‘interpretation’ really the word you mean?
3. Why choose the word framework? -Why not just language alone?
4. Dr. Little Bear explained that the western metaphysics revolved around the assumption that there was an underlying order in place. It seems like this is a huge aspect of many religions that revolve around creationism. Because adopting the metaphysics of sustainability would require accepting that the situation is reversed, would people be able to make this shift in thinking without “foresaking” their religious beliefs? **In order to accept the indigenous metaphysics, would individuals need to rework or even give up their religion? Can sustainability co-exist with religion?**

**Thoughts/responses from me:** An excellent question – clearly original, synthesizing and challenging.

1. What do you think? Isn’t indigenous metaphysics in some ways also a religion – a faith; a perspective on life/our existence/our world?
2. Isn’t creationism also a part of the Indigenous metaphysic?
3. Maybe to advance the question to the next more refined iteration, it would be helpful to identify which aspects of religion might need to be forsaken, and which retained, in order to advance sustainable living?