

Universal Intellectual Standards: And questions that can be used to apply them

Universal intellectual standards are standards which should be applied to thinking to ensure its quality. To be learned they must be taught explicitly. The ultimate goal, then, is for these standards to become infused in the thinking of students, forming part of their inner voice, guiding them to reason better.

Clarity:

Could you elaborate further on that point? Could you express that point in another way? Could you give me an illustration? Could you give me an example?

Clarity is a gateway standard. If a statement is unclear, we cannot determine whether it is accurate or relevant. In fact, we cannot tell anything about it because we don't yet know what it is saying. For example, the question "What can be done about the education system in America?" is unclear. In order to adequately address the question, we would need to have a clearer understanding of what the person asking the question is considering the "problem" to be. A clearer question might be "What can educators do to ensure that students learn the skills and abilities which help them function successfully on the job and in their daily decision-making?"

Accuracy:

Is that really true? How could we check that? How could we find out if that is true?

A statement can be clear but not accurate, as in "Most dogs weigh more than 300 pounds."

Precision:

Could you give me more details? Could you be more specific?

A statement can be both clear and accurate, but not precise, as in "Jack is overweight." (We don't know how overweight Jack is, one pound or 500 pounds.)

Relevance:

How is that connected to the question? How does that bear on the issue?

A statement can be clear, accurate, and precise, but not relevant to the question at issue. For example, students often think that the amount of effort they put into a course should be used in raising their grade in a course. Often, however, "effort" does not measure the quality of student learning, and when that is so, effort is irrelevant to their appropriate grade.