

Facilitating Philosophy in the Classroom.

The role of the teacher in Philosophy classes differs from more traditional approaches to education where the teacher is the authority figure responsible for imparting information to the pupil. In Philosophy classes the teacher is first and foremost a facilitator. This idea of facilitation follows the classical Socratic model of the Philosophy teacher as a midwife, whose task is to help students bring forth their own ideas using skilful guidance and encouragement. The role of the teacher is to enable and advance philosophical inquiry and debate amongst the class, not to 'teach' philosophy.

Facilitation techniques and strategies.

Effective facilitation can be difficult to achieve and will need practice. It requires listening carefully to the overall unfolding of discussion across the group, whilst attending to points made by individuals. Challenges and corrections should, wherever possible, be made by other members of the group, rather than the facilitator, whose task it is to encourage these critical and creative interventions to further the inquiry. Doing this effectively will improve with practice, and it is up to the facilitator to set a good example of how to proceed in the early stages.

Key techniques for effective facilitation include:

Asking questions the responses to which will that broaden out or deepen an issue raised.

- Requesting justification or evidence in support of (and to clarify) a position.
- Asking for examples to make an issue more concrete and relevant to the lives of the group.
- Encouraging counter examples to generate alternative positions.
- Asking for criteria where classifications are being made.
- Encouraging counter argument as a means of testing a position.
- Introducing conceptual distinctions to clarify or deepen a line of argument.
- Extracting implicit assumptions to draw out underlying beliefs and principles for further examination.
- Encouraging the use of generalisations to help identify general principles and rules.
- Asking for speculation on consequences and alternatives to open discussion out.

With classes new to philosophy and in sessions where engagement is lacking or discussion has dried up, it will be necessary for the facilitator to take on a more leading role.

Below are a number of strategies that might be employed as ways of kick-starting, re-invigorating, extending and developing discussions:

- Time to think: Halting the discussion and taking a few minutes for quiet personal deliberation before proceeding. This may lead on to think-pair-share exercise, and is of particular use in quiet classes or in a discussion where quieter members of the class are not getting the chance to be heard.
- Agree/Disagree game: this is a great way of getting a discussion going. For details, see the relevant lesson plan in *Take it to the Classroom*.
- Clarifying: Asking the individual speaking or another member of the class to summarise a point, position, or the two sides of a debate, which can be helpful to anchor a point and/or refocus attention.
- Delving deeper: Focussing on a point that you believe to be of significance by asking others in the class to repeat what has just been said and try to make the same point using different words. Where a point has been made using an example, ask for other examples of the same point, and then encourage the class to extract the general point by seeing what the examples have in common. This kind of clarification will help to encourage the production of counter claims and examples.

- Playing devil's advocate: Encouraging the formulation of alternative perspectives by posting out unintended consequences of a position, suggesting counterexamples or pointing to inconsistencies.

Devising a Protocol.

Experience has shown that it is advantageous to differentiate Philosophy classes from other kinds of lessons in the classroom. This can be done by having the class designate their own set of rules for the sessions, which also enables children to 'take possession' of the classes, giving them ownership of the debates and helping to create an environment conducive to building a supportive and productive Community of Inquiry. It is usually best to have the class agree on a set of rules only once an initial class discussion has been attempted. In this way, pupils have the opportunity to discover the difficulties that need to be overcome for an inclusive and collaborative inquiry to take place.

As with most activities in this handbook, it is advisable that the process of rule formation begins with individual contemplation, followed by peer collaboration (e.g. discussion in pairs), and only then move to general class discussion and agreement. The process of devising rules can itself be run as a Philosophy class by using an Agree/Disagree exercise with a statement such as "Rules should always be obeyed". In this way, children can first discuss the purpose, the pros and the cons of rules, before formulating their own.

There is relatively little variance in the sets of rules that classes agree on, which generally include the following:

- Listen carefully when other people are speaking.
- Don't interrupt, but wait until it is your turn to speak.
- Look at the person who is speaking.
- Try to give everyone a chance to speak.
- Try to follow on from what someone else has said.
- Always try to give reasons for what you say.
- Respect other people's right to be heard and to think differently from you.
- Give people the time to think about an answer when you have asked them a question (a point as important for the teacher-facilitator to bear in mind as for class).

To the class list it is strongly recommended that you add the following, which help to instil a collaborative atmosphere and build a Community of Inquiry in the classroom:

- Always use the formulae "I agree with so-and-so because..." or "I disagree with so-and-so because..." rather than "So-and-so is right/wrong". [See session on Agree/Disagree]
- Always put your hand out in order to speak and take turns.

Sitting in a Circle

Where possible, Blooming Minds Philosophy sessions are carried out with the class seated in a circle, whether this be on chairs or on the floor. Having experimented with other arrangements, we believe that this is the most effective way of creating a Community of Inquiry in the classroom, and is well worth the effort of moving tables and chairs around. This said, sessions can be conducted with children seated in groups at tables and using a white board to record positions.

Hands out not up

The class should be instructed to put their hands out on their laps rather than up in the air when they want to contribute to the discussion. This helps to differentiate the discussion taking part in the session from other classroom activities, and does away with the distraction of madly waving arms. When pupils have spoken, they must pass the discussion on to another pupil who has his/her hand out. Pupils should be encouraged to pass to those who have not yet spoken or who tend to contribute less often than others. This technique enables pupils to control who speaks as a group and is a good way of developing the dynamic of the group and building a community of inquiry.

Preparatory exercises

There are a number of techniques that have proven very effective in setting the scene for the philosophy class. Discretion needs to be used in choosing the most appropriate exercise for any given class. There are clearly occasions when an exercise in enlivening the class is preferable to calming them down, but in nearly all cases a focussing exercise is an excellent start to a session. Some exercises of this sort are detailed in the Mindfulness section. The exercise that has proven the most effective and is the one preferred by most children is explained below.

The Thinking Room

A version of the narrative below should be quietly and calmly delivered to the class, once they are sitting quietly with eyes closed. It is important that the instructions are given quietly and calmly and that there are sufficient pauses for the children to think about and enact their designs.

Sit comfortably, breathe deeply, keep your eyes closed. We are going to create a special room for ourselves. This is a room that will exist inside of us, that will be our own private and personal space, a place where we can go when we need to think about things. Imagine a door, open it and go into a room, this is your own private thinking room. Look around. If there are windows what shape and size are they? What can you see through them? Are there other things on the walls – pictures? a mirror? decorations? You can put up or take down whatever you like. You might want to paint the walls or design wallpaper or murals. Do this now. [Note that some children may find it difficult not to move their bodies when guided to these sorts of actions. In this situation you can gently remind them that as this is a 'thinking room', all the things they are doing should be happening in their minds, so their bodies should be still.] Think about the floor, put down rugs, carpet, sand, grass, glitter, whatever you like. Choose something to sit on: a comfy armchair, a big cushion, a sofa, whatever you please.

In the corner is a box with a lid and a lock. In here you should put anything that's troubling you: an argument you had in the playground, something that happened at home this morning, anything that might stop you from thinking about what we are doing in class.

Look around. This is your room. This is a place that you can come to when you need to think about things. No one can come here but you, it is your own personal and private space. We are going to leave this room now because we want to think and talk together, but you should try to remember what it is like and be sure to come back and spend some time here whenever you want.

Close the door and put sign up – this might be your name and a 'do not disturb' sign.

Many children like to make drawings of their thinking room, and are keen to re-visit it at the start of philosophy classes to do a bit of re-decoration. There are a number of activities that you can talk through in the thinking room. Details of these are available on the Blooming Minds web resources.

Trigger materials

Using appropriate material as a central trigger for a philosophy session is crucial. Stories, poems and thought experiments can be particularly effective in stimulating both critical and creative thinking. The lesson plans in this handbook use a selection of classical and invented stories, which can be adapted as required for specific classes. Many young children's picture book stories and traditional folktales provide excellent starting points for discussions that can quickly become philosophical in nature.

Once a class has some experience in engaging in philosophical inquiry using stimulus material, you may want to experiment with new stories, poems and even contemporary news issues. It is recommended that you give the class time to reflect upon and discuss the content of these before moving on to consider and explore the philosophical issues and questions they may raise. You can find a list of recommended stories and poems on the Blooming Minds web site.

Thought Experiments

Thought experiments are used as imaginative tools of exploration in a range of subject areas, including science, economics and politics. They are of particular value in Philosophy, as they enable us to think through all sorts of possible scenarios without having to enact these in reality. Thought experiments, as the name suggests, are experiments performed hypothetically and are often based around the construction of a scenario. They enable us to think through the consequences of holding certain beliefs and values and of carrying out certain actions within this scenario, without having to actually put these into practice. In this way, they enable us to learn about both ourselves and the world, without putting either in danger. Thought experiments are an invaluable tool for philosophical inquiry and exploration.

There are a number of thought experiments used in this handbook. The best known is what is commonly referred to as the 'trolley problem' and which appears here under the title of the 'train problem'.

When using thought experiments in the classroom it is important that pupils understand that the scenario has been constructed in help us think through a particular issue, even if it closely mirrors a 'real life scenario. This being the case, pupils must work with the information they have within the scenarios rather than trying to change the rules in order to 'solve' the problem.

A number of interesting thought experiments that may be adaptable for Year 4 and above can be found at: <http://www.philosophyexperiments.com>

Ending a session: The Thinking Giraffe

The thinking giraffe is a tool used by the Blooming Minds team in order to ensure that all pupils have had an opportunity voice their opinions on the discussion topic by the end of a session. Quieter and more timid pupils may be reticent to express themselves in large groups, but will almost always take a turn with the thinking giraffe within a few sessions. The experience this gives of speaking in front of others without fear of challenge or dismissal has proven an excellent device for building confidence in these pupils to take a more active part in future discussions. It is also a means for ensuring that any points that may have been overlooked in the heat of a discussion are at least registered by the group.

This is how it works:

- Find an object of some significance for example a small teddy bear... this will be dubbed the 'thinking bear' (you can use other objects; 'thinking ball', 'thinking mouse', 'thinking shell' etc.). The key factor is to make it clear that this is a highly valued object that must be respected and handled with care.

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- The object is passed around the class at the very end of the session. Each pupil is allowed to speak their mind when they are holding it; no one is allowed to interrupt or challenge them. They merely say what they have to say and then pass the object on.
- Pupils may comment on any aspect of the session, and their thoughts and feelings about it.
- Stress that:
 - Only the person holding the thinking object is allowed to speak.
 - Each pupil may make only one (brief) point.
 - There are no challenges (disagreements) allowed in this part of the session.
- Encourage children to respect and listen to one another's inputs
- If pupils do not have anything to say they may "pass".

Other benefits and uses of this exercise:

The exercise can be used mid-session where a discussion is getting somewhat unruly, or where you feel that the quieter members of the class are not getting the chance to be heard.

The exercise can be very useful in giving an indication of how individual pupils have acquired knowledge in the session, as their comments are a report of the intellectual journey they have just taken. It also allows for them to reflect upon their own progress.

The exercise enables individual pupils to give a personal (subjective and emotional) response to a topic or issue raised in the session that is of importance to them. This is of great value and a clear indication that both reasoning and reflection is taking place.