

## Resource 5

### Getting started with philosophy: Tips for teachers

Within the *Philosophy in Schools* model, the recommended method for creating a community of inquiry at school is whole class discussion. Small group activity may be added to whole group discussion in order to enrich learning or to facilitate assessment.

In some cultural contexts, however, small group discussion might be more conducive to student participation. Either way, the adult's role is one of facilitator. The teacher's role in the discussion is not to lead, but to act as a guide and model.<sup>1</sup>

When conducting a philosophical discussion, seat students so that every child can see every other child's face (eg: in a circle). Make sure that you have access to a chalkboard, whiteboard or easel for recording.

Tell students that a philosophy session/discussion time/yarning time is an opportunity for them to talk about their thoughts and feelings about particular ideas, questions or points of view. Let students know that, when doing philosophy/having a yarn, you don't always end up with answers to questions. Instead, you often end up with more questions!

#### Using a story to stimulate discussion

When using a story to stimulate substantive conversation, it is useful if students participate in the reading of the story and that each student has his/her own copy of the text to follow along with.

Once the story is completed, you can either follow a discussion plan you have prepared earlier, or ask the group if they have any questions. If you choose to use a discussion plan, you can start by trying out one of the plans provided in the module activities until you grow confident enough to develop your own.

#### Creating a discussion plan

If you prefer, you can develop a discussion plan collaboratively with students. Ask if the story made them think about something they'd like to talk about. Write students' questions and ideas on a board or easel, along with the name of the person who raised the question or came up with the idea.

Should students have difficulty posing questions, encourage them to talk about the parts of the story they found interesting then guide them towards asking a question, eg: "Maybe you'd like to ask a question about that?"

As you are recording students' questions, you might be able to identify some patterns or similarities. Mark the questions which resemble one another. After the questions have been organised, you will begin to see which areas of inquiry have generated most interest. These can form a good starting point for further discussion. Don't be concerned if the group doesn't have an opportunity to discuss all the questions raised, you can always return to them at another time.

<sup>1</sup> Cam, P. (1995). *Thinking together: Philosophical inquiry for the classroom*. Sydney, New South Wales: Hale and Iremonger, p. 41.

## Starting the discussion

Phillip Cam, an Australian academic who has written extensively on the use of philosophical inquiry in schools, suggests choosing one question, then inviting the student whose question has been chosen to start the discussion<sup>2</sup>. Explore the question, asking the student to explain why they asked it or what they meant. Ask them how they think their question relates to the other questions posed and what they think one answer might be.

Invite other students to respond. At first, you will need to monitor turn-taking and prevent students from interrupting one another. Gradually, you should teach students to manage their discussions themselves by listening respectfully to each speaker and waiting for a suitable moment to respond.

Give several students an opportunity to have their say, and as the conversation develops, begin to pose questions to clarify meaning, maintain consistency, confirm student perspectives, and encourage further reflection. For example:

- You've said that what happened to Parvana wasn't fair. Can you explain what you mean by fair?
- You seem to be saying that fair means equal. Have I understood you correctly?
- Do others agree that fair is the same as equal?
- Are you comfortable with what James is saying, Kate? It seems to contradict what you said earlier.
- Can you provide an example that will help us to understand what you mean?
- Ok, that's one way of explaining it. Can anyone else provide another example which might illustrate a different point of view?
- Would you say that's always true, or just sometimes?
- Before you said that fair meant equal, but now you seem to be saying that this is not always so. Can you make your point clearer?
- What evidence can you present to support your argument?

Try to use open rather than closed questions as these aim for higher order thinking rather than simple recall. Also, as you become more comfortable, you can begin to teach students techniques to enhance discussion, such as the use of analogy, distinctions and metaphor.

## Mapping the discussion

It is useful to make a rough 'map' of the discussion, by recording students' main ideas and points. Devices such as arrows, bubbles or brackets to show how questions/ideas relate to one another, and maps can be used later to link the discussion to later learning experiences.

## Monitoring student participation

Be aware of students who have not yet contributed to the discussion and direct questions to them where appropriate. Encourage students to listen to one another, not interrupt, wait for a turn and not dominate discussion. Teach students how to disagree respectfully, challenge one another's thinking and give feedback.

<sup>1</sup> Cam, P. (1995). *Thinking together: Philosophical inquiry for the classroom*. Sydney, New South Wales: Hale and Iremonger, p. 41.

## Need more help?

If conducting a philosophical discussion/yarn seems overwhelming, prepared stories and discussion plans are available (see Resources, p.37 of module). Alternatively, you can read more about developing a community of inquiry by referring to literature such as:

Cam, P. (1995). *Thinking together: Philosophical inquiry for the classroom*. Sydney, New South Wales: Hale and Iremonger.

De Haan, C., MacColl, S. & McCutcheon, L. (1995). *Philosophy with kids: More ideas and activities*. Melbourne: Longman.

Splitter, L. (1995). *Teaching for better thinking: The classroom community of inquiry*. Hawthorn, Vic: Australian Council for Educational Research.

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## Note:

*Should there be students who might experience difficulty reading a shared text, ask support teachers who work with these students to help them work on the story prior to the class reading.*

*Teachers should also consider any potential community sensitivities when selecting texts. For example, some school communities may consider Harry Potter books inappropriate for class use because of a perception that these books promote witchcraft. In such cases, teachers should negotiate the inclusion or non-inclusion of sensitive texts with the school's teacher librarian, principal and/or school community.*