

Philosophy in the Classroom

Creativity in Thinking

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Philosophy for Children (P4C) is a powerful tool for helping children develop deep, critical, philosophical thinking skills in a way that is a great deal of fun, that doesn't involve teaching in its traditional sense, that children of all academic abilities seem to love and that, almost as a side benefit, helps develop speaking and listening skills, team work, citizenship, confidence and self esteem.



Step one

Ensure that the children know that they are going into P4C mode. Rearrange the seating. It cannot be done in a traditional didactic classroom layout. It needs to be a closed arena so that there is no one in charge (think King Arthur). The tighter the circle the greater the tension.

Step Two

Identify the material to be given the P4C treatment. Could be a passage, a story, a question, a statement, a picture, an artifact, an equation with a text read around the group a sentence

at a time with children 'passing' if they do not want to read.

Then, in silence, give them a minute to come up with at least one question. The questions are then collected on the board upon which the Community of Enquiry has to decide which one to go with first. How they choose is for them to choose! Once chosen the question is passed back to whoever came up with it to clarify what they meant.

Let the philosophy begin...

Step Three

One person at a time, no interrupting, listens to others, respond to others' point of view, no put downs. See where you get. Give it a deadline. Teacher' role is not too teach, not even to steer it down any one path, never to moralize. You are the throttle, ensuring that there is enough pace and direction so that it does not stall. You will find yourself desperate to 'teach', to amaze them with your own wisdom and sagacity. Save it for the staffroom. In the Socratic Dialogue it is the questions that count most, not the answers. Expect periods of silence, let them crack under the pressure first. Choose a number (higher than ten) and count to it in your head. If you are confident that you are going to get nowhere try reframing, rephrasing or attacking the question from a different point of view completely. Encourage them to address the Coe with their comments and questions, rather than you as the adult/teacher. Communication lines should cross not all point to you ideally. One teacher had a ball of string that was passed to whoever was speaking to see where the lines of communication went.

Step Four

A good way to finish is to give them 30 seconds to come up with one statement to sum up what is going through their head as a result of the P4C session and the must quickly go round the group. This can be done in pairs to save time.

And that's all there is to it!

One of the secondary schools where we have been developing cutting edge P4C approaches across the entire school recently took a group of Philosophy Club students to work with children in year six from the feeder primary schools, a great experience for everyone involved.

Here is the process written up by one of the secondary school students:

It's quite a daunting prospect; a room full of little people waiting for you on the other side of the door. Your palms are sweaty. You draw your breath. The door slowly opens and they're there. Little face after little face staring up at you waiting for you to speak. You cannot believe that you too were once that small, that naive. This is the feeling my friends and I felt when we went into our local primary schools. We were there to be seen. We were there to talk. We were there to do Philosophy!

Fortunately, I can assure you that it did get a lot easier; maybe I was over exaggerating, just a little . . .

I go to Kings Brook School, near Milton Keynes and last year helped to set up a Philosophy for Children Committee. After a year of successful sessions during a lunchtime philosophy club, we were eager to expand elsewhere. We'd already pushed the idea on our teachers, with the help of several members of the staff and wanted to promote P4C in the wider community. The answer was simple; why not lead some P4C sessions in our local, feeder schools? So letters were sent off, times and dates arranged and recruits, organized. In no time, we had a list of primary schools that were expectantly waiting for us to come in to their year six classes and teach them the basics of a philosophical discussion. The response we got to our original letter was astounding; we had head teachers calling us all times of the day in an attempt to get an appointment.

As the day drew nearer, we began to think about what stimuli we might use. In our lunchtime sessions we used controversial, teenage issues to spark a good debate, but were these suitable to show primary school children? In the end we decided to use two pieces of music from Holst's The Planets; Mars and Venus. The logic behind this was that music could evoke all sorts of feelings and emotions. By using two such contrasting pieces of music, we hoped to get a wide variety of questions and thoughts.

Finally, our first visit was upon us, to a smallish school in which we were leading a discussion for a class of about thirty year sixes. The reaction we got to our stimulus was overwhelming. Who knew such small people had such large thoughts? The children were coming out with questions and statements I myself would have been proud of thinking up. The queries and thoughts ranged from the roots of fear and evil to the existence and explanation of magic.

Over the next few weeks, we and our other committee members travelled around the Primary Schools delivering P4C sessions to children as young as nine! I found the diversity and range of discussion, which developed from the two pieces of music astonishing and as I left each school it was difficult not to feel a sense of pride, as you had given these children the chance to open their minds and express themselves. What on earth is there to be prouder of than that?

Tom Middlehurst
Kings brook School

This is the same experience written up by one of the small people with the large thoughts, now a student at Kings brook School and a fully paid up member of Philosophy Club.

When P4C came to my school last year I didn't think I would enjoy but I did.

The stimulus was a piece of music about the war planet Mars and another on peace.

We chose peace. We had then to think up some questions. We wrote them on the whiteboard.

Some of them were: "Is war necessary to achieve peace?", "How long will it take to achieve peace?" and "What is peace?" The winning one was "How long will it take to achieve peace?"

We talked about it for half an hour. Some of the things that were brought up were, peace will never be achieved as long as there is any form of life and peace may eventually kill us because of over-population.

Once the discussion was over, we played a game where you all had to sit down without sitting down at the same time.

At the end we filled in a "blob" sheet to show how we felt about the lesson.

I think everyone enjoyed it as much as I did. I think it made me open up my mind a bit more and it made me think about certain subjects a bit more in depth.

It helped me in writing stories as well because it got me to think about more than one issue and one point of view.

Mitchell Bluck

Kings brook School



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