



Philosophy
Circles

When should you follow orders?

Soldiers, sailors and airmen in the Armed Forces have always had to follow orders. Are there any exceptions?



To introduce the concept of obedience, it's great to give children an immersive experience of being asked to do something they know is wrong. This gives them the dilemma of whether to follow the order. However, you know your class better than anyone, and so you can make a decision on how to approach this.

You could invite one child up, and gradually move orders towards more dubious territory (perhaps brief them beforehand, so you're only 'fooling' the audience). Alternatively, let something play out between yourself and a colleague – i.e. a senior teacher telling you to do something you feel is wrong. The pupils become involved with by voting if you should follow the orders.



Ask pupils what soldiers, sailors and airmen in war had in common - something they all had to do. This is one of the rare occasions when you can ask a question that is fishing for a particular answer ("follow orders"), as everything else they say helps to build the context.

Tell the story in the stimulus. The story was true, apart from one thing – that it's actually a story from the war in Afghanistan and not World War II. If you choose to reveal this later on, it would be interesting to see if it makes any difference to their thinking.

After hearing the story, split the class into those prosecuting the chief technician and those who were his defence, for one-on-one arguments. The defence formed a circle in the centre facing out; the prosecution formed a circle round them facing in.

Give them a chance to debate in pairs/fours, before moving to show what they think switching from one circle to the other if necessary.



Ask them to create questions in response. Because they are so warmed up to a context, it's a much faster and less onerous process than an inexperienced class creating questions after the brief presentation of a stimulus.

More of the questions lend themselves directly to discussion, rather than the facilitator having to shoehorn a deep issue into a question ostensibly about something else. Of course, a class practised in P4C becomes adept at creating questions, but it's making a rod for your own back to expect them to come up with philosophically fruitful questions from the outset.

Let them get some experience with questions you offer, and get them to create questions at the ends of discussions to start with, and they'll get to become skilled question crafters much more quickly than through a series of abortive attempts.

NEXT STEPS
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Can the pupils come up with a rule for when rules should be broken?

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Soldiers, sailors and airmen in the Armed Forces have always had to follow orders. There's a famous poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, about a real event when a cavalry unit were ordered to charge into a deadly situation. Here's part of it:

*"Forward, the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldier knew
Someone had blunder'd:
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.*

This is also a true story, about something that happened in the war, in the Royal Air Force.

A plane was urgently needed for a mission, but the Chief Technician, who knows his aircraft very well, thought that there was a problem with the engine that could be dangerous.

On his advice, his superior, the Engineering Officer, the technical expert in charge of all the engineers and mechanics in a Wing, refused to sign off the aircraft as ready to fly.

But the Wing Commander, the officer in charge of the whole Wing of many aircraft and men, needed the plane for the mission. So although his training was as a pilot, not an engineer, he overruled both of them and signed the plane off as ready to fly. And because the Chief Technician was needed on the mission too, he ordered him to get on board the plane.

The Chief Technician disobeyed the order of his commanding officer. He refused to get on board the plane, because in his professional opinion it was too dangerous to fly.

The plane took off without the Chief Technician. Very soon, it developed exactly the fault the Chief Technician had predicted, and was forced to land. Luckily, it landed in time and nobody was injured. What do you think happened next?

When I've asked that question before, a lot of people have said things such as, "The Wing Commander lost his job", or "The Chief Technician got promoted". What really happened is likely to come as a surprise.

The Wing Commander kept his job. It was the Chief Technician who was court martialled and dishonourably discharged from the RAF. Even though he was right about the plane being dangerous, even though "Someone had blunder'd" and it wasn't him, he paid the price for disobeying an order from a superior officer and lost the job for which had trained for years.

What do you think about that?