

## How to put reasons first and opinions second

Opinions are like... belly buttons. Everyone has one. Perhaps that's why it's easy to ask for opinions first, and then get the reasons afterwards. Different opinions bring disagreement, and disagreement brings energy. If a class is split down the middle on a question, I think, "This'll be good!"

Seen that way, children who don't have opinions about a question are a problem. They can seem as if they don't care much about the question, or are being indecisive.

### But philosophers are meant to avoid rushing to judgement

Not having an opinion can be a sign that you do care about a question. Too much to make a snap judgement before you've heard the arguments. So let's turn things on their head and encourage people to suspend forming opinions until they've heard the evidence.

### Here's a method for hearing the reasons first, and forming opinions afterwards

You can only use this method with questions that have two possible answers. It will work for "Should...", "Can...", "Do...", "Are..." and "Would you..." questions. But not for a many-answered question such as "What is a true friend?"

Like most facilitation it's about matching the approach to the enquiry. Have this method ready for use, but don't plan it in before you know what the question is going to be.

You'll need two coloured cards or pieces of paper for each participant. They should be big enough that they can be easily seen across the circle. Blue and yellow are a good idea. They don't have positive or negative associations like green or red. They also contrast well for anyone colourblind.

### Then there are three steps to follow:

- Step #1: Blue for no
- Step #2: Yellow for yes
- Step #3: Opinion time

#### Step #1: Blue for no

The whole class place their blue cards on the floor in front of them. Let's say the question is, "Is it fair for rich people to pay for the poor?" For this step, all you want is reasons to answer "No, it isn't." It's best to start in pairs or small groups, and then collect the reasons together as a whole class.

#### Why start with no?

When creating a question, people often start from an opinion. They then turn it from a statement into a question. "The rich should pay for the poor" becomes, "Should the rich pay for the poor?" So people usually phrase their questions so that "yes" is the answer they agree with.

The chances are that the questioner's opinion is the majority opinion. So if you start by getting reasons for "yes", you'll be going with the flow and the reasons will come thick and fast. You might build up such a strong case that when you switch to "no", people feel that the argument is already won. Then important reasons won't get an airing.

### The same applies to choice questions

The opinion "I would rather have friends than be rich" becomes, "Would you rather have friends or be rich?" The questioner's preferred option will almost always come first. That's likely to be the option most people will side with too. So in this case I would start with reasons for "be rich" to avoid the enquiry being too one-sided. After you've heard lots of reasons for the blue side, it's time to switch.

### Step #2: Yellow for yes

Everyone switches to yellow cards and you hear only reasons for "yes". Again, use pairs or groups feeding into whole class discussion. Let it run until you've given a fair hearing to reasons on both sides. Only then do you go to what normally comes first in an enquiry.

### Step #3: Opinion time

Each child decides whether their own opinion is "yes" or "no" and displays the appropriate card. If someone can't decide, they could show both cards. Don't advertise this option, but if someone asks, let them. Some children might lean the cards against each other, or overlap them. There are lots of ways for them to "break the rules" and show what they think.

### Now you've made the thinking physical

Each child can see the opinions of the others, and you have lots of options.

**If you want to get lots of people talking** get yellows to pair up against blues. They then try to convince each other to change their minds. You can even up the numbers using "undecideds" or having 2 versus 1 in some talk groups.

**If you want an adversarial whole class discussion** get the blues to sit on one side and the yellows on the other.

**Or you can have a normal "pass-it-on" discussion**, perhaps with yellows passing to blues to undecideds".

### Isn't it rather teacher-directed and artificial?

Yes, it is artificial to push children to come up with reasons for one side or the other, rather than just saying what they think. But you're not replacing the sharing of opinions, just making sure every opinion has some reasons to back it up.

Society gives too much status to people who can form an opinion about anything at the drop of a hat. The world's not short of opinions, but it does need more reasonable people, and that's what P4C is about.