

Either-Ors

This is a hot-off-the press approach to philosophical dialogue which I road-tested today at Nelson Central School, New Zealand. It works a little like a “Choose Your Own Adventure” book, with the slight cheat that most of the choices lead back to stories that advance in a similar way.

In each episode of the story, the class are presented with a choice which they can make in a “Dividing Line” Thinkers’ Game, sharing their ideas in pairs or small groups first, then standing on either one side or the other to indicate their choice, and then having a “pass it on” discussion before a final vote.

Some questions may be simply about getting them involved in the story and encouraging participation – preparation for philosophy. The trend, though, is towards questions that involve important concepts, often ethical decisions – philosophy itself.

Intended Audience

This method has been devised to be ideal for:

- 1) Younger children, whose engagement in dialogue is most easily captured by narrative.
- 2) Children of all ages who are new to sustained peer-to-peer dialogue, for whom deliberative dialogue (deciding what to do) is more immediately accessible than enquiry dialogue.
- 3) Situations where you can only do philosophy lots of short bursts, rather than a single sustained session each week, for example in place of the questionable use of time for taking the register.

So, if you have a reception class who are new to philosophy and you want to do 10 minutes each morning, it will be ideal!

What follows is just the bare bones of the narrative. You can elaborate as much as you like, and if you can reincorporate some of their ideas in the story as it progresses, so much the better.

Many thanks to Jenny Gray of Nelson, in conversation with whom this was developed.

Example Scenario – Jungle Adventure

They are explorers – if you want to add some detail, they can be Victorians exploring somewhere in Africa. You can warm them up to the scenario by asking what you need to take with you if you were exploring, and then they can mime putting these things into a rucksack, and then traipsing round the classroom following you as you improvise the sights they see on their way.

Episode 1

You reach a place where to continue, you have to either build a raft and float down the river, or go through a deep, dark jungle. Which do you choose?

Episode 2

You have been travelling for a long time, and have run out of food. You see a village (in the jungle, or on the bank of the river). You investigate. Nobody is there. In the biggest building in the village is a table covered with food from a feast. Some of it is still piled high in baskets in the middle of a table, untouched. Do you eat the food, or not?
(Concepts: needs, stealing, ownership)

Episode 3

The villagers return. They are angry that you have entered their village without permission (and eaten their food, if that is the case). By their rules, you have done them wrong. To make up for it, you must work for them for a week, doing all the jobs they hate. Do you accept their rules, or run away?
(Concepts: rules, punishment, compensation)

Episode 4

If they decided to stay and work, you might ask what they think are the worst jobs that might need doing; if they run away, you might describe how they escape. In either case, they end up wandering through the jungle. They find a pair of beautiful birds that are new to science – nobody back in England (or wherever you are!) has ever seen them before. Do they catch them and take them home so that other people can see them or do they leave them where they are? (Concepts: conservation, scientific knowledge, fame)

Episode 5

Over to you. What new dilemma could the explorers face for the final episode of their adventure? Let us know what you come up with!

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