

Generating philosophical questions

This tool is adapted with permission from Joe Oyler’s article in Philosophy for Children: Practitioner Handbook, Montclair, New Jersey: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 2008.

(Contact the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children to purchase a copy.)

One way to help children “go philosophical” is to nurture their skill in identifying and constructing philosophical questions. The following exercise helps participants to distinguish philosophical questions from more common questions they encounter in their everyday lives. One way to make this distinction is to identify the different processes that one must engage in to answer the question. Determining the answer to a question like, “What is my current checking account balance?”, would involve a very different process than trying to answer “How do I know I am not dreaming?” The following exercise explores this distinction.

DURATION: 30-45 minutes

AGES: Participants aged six and up

OBJECTIVES: To improve understanding of philosophical questions and how they differ from other types of questions

STEPS:

1. For the list below, ask participants to assign a label that they think makes sense for each question (this works well in small groups). The label choice is up to the participants. The point is for them to give labels that make sense to them and for which they can give reasons.
2. Once the labels are assigned, ask participants what they would have to do if they needed to find the answer to the questions. Record the labels and associated processes for each (especially questions 4, 5 and 6) so you can use them in subsequent philosophy sessions to help participants generate their own questions. (For instance, you can say, “Okay, let’s see if we can come up with a few _____ (insert appropriate label) questions based on what we just read.”)
3. Use the process identified by participants as criteria for the kind of question you want. (For instance, you can say, “Remember that ‘Wonder Questions’ require us to reflect and talk together in order to answer them.”)

QUESTIONS:

1. **How many miles can a car travel on a tank of gas?**
 (Label: _____ Reason for label: _____ What you would need to do to find the answer: _____)
2. **What time is it?**
 (Label: _____ Reason for label: _____ What you would need to do to find the answer: _____)
3. **May I have another?**
 (Label: _____ Reason for label: _____ What you would need to do to find the answer: _____)
4. **Where are our thoughts located?**
 (Label: _____ Reason for label: _____ What you would need to do to find the answer: _____)
5. **If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it does it still make a sound?**
 (Label: _____ Reason for label: _____ What you would need to do to find the answer: _____)
6. **What kind of people should we be?**
 (Label: _____ Reason for label: _____ What you would need to do to find the answer: _____)