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Doing Philosophy with Young Students

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Introducing philosophy into the classroom can happen in many ways. What works best for one class or one teacher may not be as effective or as meaningful for another class or teacher. Consequently, a variety of techniques and approaches have been used with success. One point of pedagogical agreement within the community of advocates for doing philosophy with K–12 students is that the aim is to encourage students' own philosophical thinking and reflection, rather than simply to teach them the names, dates, and historical significance of important figures in the history of philosophy. In other words, we want to help children to *do* philosophy, to contribute to its questions and subject matter, rather than to study its history. To do this, they must be actively engaged, not only in the discussion, but also in the choice of the material and ideas for discussion.

Most philosophy sessions begin with an activity designed to spark students' interest and to generate questions for philosophical discussion. This activity might be a shared reading, a thought experiment, a piece of art, or a game. Shared readings (e.g., a story, an excerpt from a novel, history book, or classical philosophy text, or a current newspaper article) foster language and reading comprehension skills as they raise philosophical issues. Although excellent novels and stories written specifically for doing philosophy with young people are available, often the students' regular reading curriculum materials, when looked at critically, may suffice to spark the initial discussion. Thought experiments are a classic technique used to assess intuitions and invite philosophical imagination (e.g., if you had a ring that could make you invisible, how would you use it?). Works of art are well suited to stimulate thinking about our assumptions of meaning and intent, and also serve as a way to elicit participation from students who might have language comprehension problems or who are simply inclined towards the visual rather than the verbal. Finally, games designed to raise philosophical issues (e.g., the rights drawing game described in this issue) can encourage philosophical thinking in a fun, engaging manner that addresses young students' needs for tactile and physical stimulation. Philosophy games that utilize role-playing challenge students to think beyond their own identity and circumstances.

Following the initial activity, students generate their own questions or points for discussion. The teachers involved are encouraged to take on the role of co-inquirer, participating in the discussion with the students rather than directing, leading, or simply facilitating it. Through this process, students learn to ask and construct relevant questions, develop their own views and articulate reasons for them, and listen and learn from their peers. At the end of the session, the students are invited to reflect back on the ground covered in the discussion, either through a collective summarizing of the various lines of argument, or perhaps through individual written reflections or drawings.

Philosophy can enter the classroom in a wide variety of ways. In some areas, teacher trainers are available to offer intensive training and follow-up guidance to teachers who are interested in doing philosophy in their classrooms. In other places, graduate students and senior-level undergraduates in philosophy work with selected classes on their own or in partnership with practicing teachers. Some teachers have previous college experience with philosophy and raise the issues in an integrated fashion throughout their curriculum. We invite you join the movement to bring philosophy, with its sense of wonder and curiosity about the world, into schools in your area.