Lesson Plan: Energizer Activity—Word Association

**Topic/Question:** The Nature of Philosophy/How is Philosophy Done?

**Age Group:** Middle-school and up

**Time:** 5 to 10 minutes

**Materials:** a watch with a second hand

**Description:**

At a relatively early point on in the practice of doing philosophy, it’s useful to have students reflect on what they’re doing and on how philosophy is best done. Perhaps more than any other discipline, philosophy makes the study of itself part of the discipline. The question “What is philosophy?” is a legitimate area of philosophical inquiry and one that readily inspires students to engage in the very practice they are interrogating.

A variety of exercises and activities can be used to inspire this sort of critical reflection, and in doing so, begin creating a foundation for philosophical reflection across a wide range of topics, not just those associated directly with philosophy.

Teachers can point out to students that sometimes doing philosophy involves wondering about issues that open outward from the discipline, famous “philosophical” questions like “What is truth?” “What is beauty?” and “What is the meaning of life?” But at other times, doing philosophy involves turning the inquiry inward, to wonder about the practice itself with questions like “What is philosophy?” and “How do we do philosophize together?”

The following activity is a very simple exercise intended to provide students with an opportunity to think about that second question and, with any luck, to get a better idea of what skills come into play when we do philosophy in a group. The point is merely to get students listening and responding to one another—which indeed, is key to effective philosophizing. The activity entails nothing more than word association, but this is a big
part of what we do in philosophy: we listen to what another person has to say, and then respond, based on what he or she had said.

To set up the exercise, briefly model what is about to occur. Point to a nearby student and say something like, “We’re going to do a word association game, so imagine that (this student here) says a word”—and here ask the student to do so—“and then when (another student there) hears that word, s/he would say…” and so on.

As an example, in a recent class, the first student said, “dog,” the next, “cat,” a third “fish,” and so on. Or, less typically, one girl started with the word “philosophy;” the next student said “falafel,” and the following offered, “gut-bomb” (which I allowed, even though technically, I suppose, that’s actually two words.)

Tell students that we will see how fast we can go around the room, associating word to word. The only rule is that if the facilitator can’t see how the words are associated, then he or she gets to stop the game and the student who made the opaque association has to explain how the words are associated. Advise students not to talk when one of their fellow students is thinking; there’s a natural tendency for people to shout out words when there’s a lull; discourage them from doing so since it simply puts the person thinking on the spot and makes it more difficult for he or she to respond.

Pick out a student and say that the exercise will begin when he or she has a word in mind. When that student is ready, begin. It’s usually a good practice to point to each student as the word associations go around the room and sometimes, to repeat the word spoken out loud so others can hear.

Keep the clock ticking, even if you have to stop to ask how to words are associated. A typical example would be a pattern of words in a 6th grade class that went, “cake,” “ice
creamy,” “fudge,” then, oddly, “seashore. I stopped the process and asked the student how “seashore” was related to fudge; he said that whenever his family goes to the seashore, they always stop for fudge.

At the end of the round, when each student has said a word, tell the class how long it took them and ask for suggestions as to how they could go faster. Typically, students will suggest that they simply say the first thing that comes to their minds, or that they work within categories, or that they listen more carefully to each other and not try to predict what the person before them is going to say.

Take those suggestions to heart and do another round; usually, it goes faster this time. Again, ask for suggestions for how to speed up the process; usually, at this point, students want to work together to develop a strategy for all to follow. It’s also at this juncture, typically, that the broad categories—food, animals, sports—tend to emerge as suggestions.

Do a third round and usually, it does go faster; what’s more important, though, is that students, at this point, tend to be really listening to each other and working together within some common framework of ideas. In doing so, they are improving their skills in doing philosophy even though the exercise itself is not what one might typically consider “philosophical.”

After this third round, and some discussion, propose, as a final step, that the class play “Word Disassociation.” In this last round, students have to listen to the person before them and say a word that has nothing at all to do with the one before. The point here is that, although usually when we do philosophy, we try to build upon what someone else has said, it’s also necessary that sometimes we head off in a completely unexpected
direction. Philosophy typically proceeds by connections; occasionally, though, it leaps forward via disconnection. In any case, this round tends to be a fairly amusing little exercise and students come up with all sorts of random responses, but it’s also fun to see how difficult it can be to not make connections between words and ideas, especially when that’s what they’ve been trying to do previously.

This concludes the exercise, but it’s not a bad idea to restate the point that although it’s a kind of silly endeavor, it does model one of the things we try to do in philosophy, which is to listen to another person and then respond by connecting what we have to say with what he or she just said. Although the exercise itself is quite simple, it’s proven to be effective for making that point as well as for helping to get students somewhat focused in a classroom and readier to work together in a philosophical community of inquiry.