Lesson Plan: Keep the Question Going

Topic/Question: The Nature of Philosophy/How does philosophical dialogue happen?
Age Group: 5th grade and up
Time: 10 minutes
Materials: N/A

Description:

This is a simple “energizer” type exercise meant to get students listening to each other while keeping in mind the importance of questions in philosophical inquiry. It’s similar to the word association game described above, but takes it one step further, asking students to listen to each other and respond in a manner that constructs a coherent sentence, in this case, a question.

To set up the exercise, make sure that students are arranged in such a way that they can more or less all see each other; a circle is ideal, but even if students are sitting in rows, it’s helpful if they can all turn so that they can keep an eye on their classmates as the exercise proceeds.

The goal of the exercise if for students to see how long they can keep a question going, one word after another, each word added by a subsequent student. When a student thinks that the question has ended, he or she claps his or her hands, indicating that a new question is to begin.

So, for instance, suppose the first student begins with the word, “How;” the next says, “does;” the next, “life;” the next “begin.” At this point, that last student might clap his or her hand to indicate the question is finished. Or, if not, the following student would have to keep the question going, perhaps by adding the word “on,” to which a subsequent student might say “earth,” and then clap.
On guideline to keep in mind, and communicate to students, is that it’s not permitted to just add the word “and” to the end of what the previous student has said; students must keep the question going without mere concatenation. So, in other words, it’s not kosher to continue a question like, “How did life begin on earth?” with “and,” (presumably setting up a continuing question, something like, “And how did it begin on Mars?”)

Again, as with the word association exercise, it’s important to emphasize that students should listen to each other and refrain from shouting out suggestions to their fellow students. Also, what we’re really trying to do is formulate interesting and provocative questions that we’d like to explore together.

Usually, it’s works well to the exercise run for about ten minutes, depending on the size of the group. It’s interesting to see if the class can formulate one single question, although the phrase tends to get pretty silly after about ten or so words.

A facilitator might also run the activity with the goal of formulating two or three questions that we agree to explore in more detail. Then, the exercise isn’t so much about the length of the question, but the quality of it.

In any case, at the conclusion of the exercise, it can be very effective to lead a reflective discussion about what has just happened. Try to steer the conversation around to the question of question and what makes a given question more intriguing, or more “philosophical” than another. This isn’t a required part of this exercise, especially if the exercise is being used as an energizer at the start of a class; it has, though, on occasion led to some pretty interesting discussions, especially as students raise questions about the nature of questioning.
As a related alternative to this exercise, one might try doing something similar, only instead of continuing a question, try continuing a phrase, ideally one with philosophical import. My colleague at Cascadia Community College, David Nixon, routinely does something like this that he spins as a “bumper sticker” exercise. Students use the one-word-at-a-time approach to collaboratively, and in real-time, “write” a philosophy bumper sticker. As in the “Keep the Question Going” exercise, they indicate that they’ve come to the end of the phrase by clapping. In one class I observed, for example, the following bumper sticker unfolded:

“The...meaning...of...life...is...to...search...for...the...meaning...of...life.” (clap!)

As with the exercise described earlier, the main benefit of the activity is to encourage students to listen to each other and respond creatively. It does require a bit more philosophical sophistication (or at least background) than merely continuing a question, but there’s no reason one couldn’t do such an activity with middle-school or older students, just so long as they’d had some exposure to philosophical content—even merely two or three class periods.