Exploring Big Questions Through Critical Discussion

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Exploring how to pose and discuss big questions with an aim of deepening students understanding and reasoning skills.
**STAGES OF THE SESSION**

**Warm up**
Playing short thinking games to break the ice, get students thinking, and get people talking in a non-confronting, fun way before the hard thinking starts.

**Stimulus**
Introduce the stimulus and display learning intentions and success criteria. This might be a story, an experience, or anything that is engaging and meaningful.

**Think time/Posing questions**
Give students time to think individually. They might pose questions, write or draw their ideas in a thinking journal, or just take time to form an opinion before they are asked to share.

**Discussion**
Students discuss their opinions in small groups or as a whole class. Teacher facilitates the discussion by posing questions to dig deeper into a concept, model the language of thinking and challenge students to think critically about their own ideas. Discussion is not teacher centred, but ideally moves towards students monitoring themselves and posing questions to each other. Discussion does not always have to be just talking either. Students might have to work as a group to come up with a criteria, or design something to share and discuss with the group later on in the session.

**Reflection**
Reflect on what we heard, what conclusions can be drawn, and how our thinking was successful.
Stimulus Ideas for Discussions

~ Anything you can get a theme or big idea out of ~

Songs
Artworks
Pictures
Poems
Events
News articles or videos
Direct Experiences
Picture books with big themes
- Billy the Punk: normality, conformity
- The Lorax: greed, responsibility
- Yertle the Turtle: fairness, power
- This Moose Belongs to Me: friendship, ownership,
- The Lost Thing: Belonging, acceptance
- Prince Cinders: normality, gender roles
- White Socks Only: race, acceptance
- The Rainbow Fish: property, belonging
- A Child’s Garden: war, hope

Other themes to look for: truth, fairness, power, freedom, beauty, morality, reality, empathy, pragmatism.
Would You Rather
Have three options on three cards around the room. Ask students, “would you rather...?” and they go to the card of their choice. Share with someone why you chose this, then share some with the whole group. Eg: would you rather be chased by a bear, swallowed by a whale or slithered on by snakes?

Vote With Your Feet
Ask two option questions and allocate a side of the room for each answer. Students go to that side of the room they agree with and briefly share their thoughts with a partner, then some share with the whole group. Eg: Is the hole of a donut part of the donut? What is longer, the past or the future?

Concentric Conversations
Stand in two circles, an inner circle facing outwards and an outer cirle facing inwards. Each person is facing someone, and when the teacher asks a question, partners briefly discuss it. One circle then rotates, and a new question is asked.

Sort Youself Out
Students are given cards with a varying degree of a concept and must put them in order. Eg: put these scenarios in order from most evil to least evil.

Odd One Out
In partners, students take it in turns to turn over three picture cards and decide which is the odd one out, justifying their answer before their partner takes their turn.

Opposites
Teacher asks a series of “what is the opposite of...?” questions and students tell a partner their thoughts. Eg: what is the opposite of France? Writing? Apples? Chairs?

Yes, and...
Students play in partners or in small groups. One student starts with a comment and the next person says, “yes and...” adding on another statement and the game continues this way. Eg: “Let’s play basketball at lunch today,” “Yes and...”

Concept Cookcook
Given a concept, students think of the most important ingredients in it. Eg: what are the most important ingredients of happiness? Normality? Fairness?
Possible Discussion Questions

-Somthing contentious and meaningful-

- Is it better to be a grown up or a child?
- Can you change your personality?
- Do animals have a conscience?
- What is the most important ingredient of happiness?
- How do we know we are doing the right thing?
- Are dreams real?
- If you swapped bodies with someone, where would you be - where your body is, or where your mind is?
- Is it ok to lie?
- Why do we have feelings?
- Do we have to love our family?
- Is loving something the same as loving someone?
- Do we know anything at all when we are born?
- How do you gain knowledge?
- If we believe something, does it mean we know it?
- Can we ever really know anything?
- How do you test what you know?
- Is some people’s knowledge better than others’?
- Does being smart make you a better person?
- Can you trust your senses to tell you what is real?
- How do you know you are not dreaming now?
- Where were we before we were born?
- Can we change who we are?
- Is your mind separate from your body?
- What is your mind?
- Is your mind separate from your heart?
- Do animals have free will?
- What is the difference between right or wrong?
- Are we born knowing what is right or wrong?
- Where does our conscience come from?
- Is it ever ok to break the law?
- Does doing the right thing make you happy?
- Can our mind exist outside our body?
- What are thoughts?
- Is everybody born equal?
- Should leaders get more money?
- Are some people’s jobs more important than others’?
- Does money give you power?
- Should adults have more power than children?
- Can one person be more powerful than 100 people?
- How do you get power?
# The Question Quadrant

## Categorising Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textual</th>
<th>Intellectual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About the stimulus</td>
<td>About more than the stimulus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehension Questions</th>
<th>Speculative Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Answers can be found in the book or are literal to the stimulus</td>
<td>Questions are about the stimulus answers must be speculated or inferred</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Knowledge Questions</th>
<th>Philosophical Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions are about bigger ideas or themes, answers can be found with research</td>
<td>Questions are about bigger ideas or themes, answers are subjective and debatable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Closed**
- Can be researched

**Open**
- Have more than one
Socratic Questions
~To get students thinking more deeply~

The role of the facilitator is to probe students understanding, challenge them to think critically about their own and others ideas, and keep the conversation moving forward.

Clarifying Questions:
- What do you mean by...?
- Could you explain that further?
- Can you expand on that point?
- Can you give me an example of that?

Probing Assumptions:
- What is ... assuming here?
- Is this always the way?
- What could we assume instead?

Probing Logic, Reasoning and Evidence
- What makes you say that?
- Where have you heard this idea before?
- What led you to believe that?
- What evidence do you have to support your point?
- Can you give me an example of that?
- Is this evidence reliable?
- How do you know that?

Alternative Viewpoints
- Can you think of a time when this isn't true?
- What is an alternative opinion to ... 's idea?
- Who saw this another way?
- What perspective might.... have?

Implications and Consequences
- What generalisations can be drawn?
- If it's true that... what are the implications?
- What would the effect of that be?
- What does that imply? Is this logical?
- What impact does that have on ...'s idea?

Questions about the Question
- Why is that question important?
- Why do you think I asked that question?
- Does this question lead to other questions?
**Thinking Reflection**

*Year 1 & 2 Self-assessment*

**Collaborative Thinking**
- I share my thoughts and ideas
- I look at other people when they were speaking
- I use other people's names when I was speaking to them
- I speak in a friendly way

**Caring Thinking**
- I show respect for each speaker
- I am honest
- I am interested in what others were saying
- I am ready to change my mind

**Creative Thinking**
- I speak about the question
- I think about what others had said
- I give reasons for my thoughts

**Critical Thinking**
- I make sure I know what other people mean
- I say things about another people’s point
- I can disagree with my friends
- I ask questions to deepen my understanding
**Thinking Reflection**

**Year 3 & 4 Self-assessment**

**Collaborative Thinking**
- I shared my thoughts and ideas
- I looked at other people when they were speaking
- I used other people’s names when I was speaking to them
- I responded in a friendly way, even if I disagreed

**Caring Thinking**
- I showed respect for each speaker
- I was honest about my thoughts and beliefs
- I was open to changing my mind

**Creative Thinking**
- I kept my points focused on the question
- I thought about what others had said
- I gave examples and evidence to support my opinions

**Critical Thinking**
- I asked questions if I didn’t understand something
- I always made sure I understood what people meant
- I gave my opinion on other people’s ideas
Thinking Reflection
Year 5 & 6 Self-assessment

Collaborative Thinking
In this lesson, did I...
- Encourage others to speak?
- Refer to others by name?
- Respond in a friendly way, even if I disagreed?

Caring Thinking
In this lesson, did I:
- Show respect and tolerance for each speaker?
- Show interest in the beliefs of others?
- Show openness to changing my thinking?

Creative Thinking
In this lesson, did I...
- Keep my points focused on the question?
- Connect my points to what had been said already?
- Give examples and evidence to support my opinions?

Critical Thinking
In this lesson, did I...
- Make sure I knew what someone meant, if I was confused?
- Give my opinion on what other people said?
- Show my own, honest opinions rather than following my friends?
- Use probing questions to clarify my thinking or deepen my understanding?