



The Community of Philosophical Inquiry: Getting Students Engaged in Philosophical Class Discussion

It may seem difficult to teach philosophy. The teacher is not only responsible for delivering ideas but is also expected to provide students with better thinking and discussion skills. This is a tall order for any teacher, especially since philosophy is known for its complexity. Fortunately, it's easy to overcome this problem by implementing a **Community of Philosophical Inquiry**, or CPI.

Community of Philosophical Inquiry: A group of students and teachers who work together to come to conclusions about philosophical issues.

This model is fairly similar to something you may already be familiar with: the Socratic method. However, there are a few key differences.

Socratic Method:

- Focuses on reaching truth or a concrete answer to a question or problem.
- Teacher often leads or instructs the conversation in both content and direction, generally by asking questions to students, rather than with them.

Community of Philosophical Inquiry:

- Focuses on reaching greater understanding and confidence.
- Teacher may provide a starting point, but conversation includes the students and teacher, with the teacher providing guidance rather than instruction.

The point of a CPI is to help a group of people engage in critical discussion of a topic to deepen their understanding and come closer to developing a well-formed opinion. In a CPI, it's important to encourage **epistemological modesty** and **intellectual safety**.

- **Epistemological modesty:** The understanding that everyone has at least some faulty or incomplete knowledge. It means making sure people are aware that they don't have all the answers.
- **Intellectual safety:** A sense of safety in sharing an idea or question. Philosophical questions often get at people's core beliefs which constitute their identity. Questions about them can be hard. Making sure the environment encourages productive discussion and discourages personal attacks is essential.

In a CPI, the role of the teacher is to be a part of discussion and guide it. But how? Try **Prompt, Reflect, Form Questions, Discuss, and Close**.

1. **Prompt:** Give students a reading, a piece of media like a video or picture, or just ask them a philosophical question. Then, with some general guidelines like what kinds of things or arguments to consider, give them time to think. For example, give students an article about self-driving cars and give



them time to read it. Then, ask the to think about how self-driving cars work and what kinds of “decisions” these cars should be able to make.

2. **Reflect:** It’s important to give students time to think about the issues at hand before diving right into discussion so they can better refine their ideas. It can help to let students work in pairs so they can bounce ideas off each other and clarify things they might not understand individually.

3. **Form Questions:** Toward the end of their reflection, have students form questions based on what they’ve talked about. They can be clarification questions or discussion questions. **This allows students more agency with regard to the direction of discussion.** Questions might range anywhere from, “Who gets to decide what is right and wrong for a machine?” to “Who is responsible, if anyone, if a self-driving car kills someone?,” or even, more broadly, “What does it mean to be responsible?”

4. **Discuss:** It helps as the teacher to guide the discussion but not dominate it. You should guide the conversation but recognize that tangents can sometimes be beneficial as they serve to provide more contextualization or guide the conversation toward things students might find more interesting. If students talk about their experience with driving personally, things may seem to start to veer off topic, but it is important to keep in mind that they are contextualizing the discussion with their own lives. This can aid in understanding.

5. **Close:** Toward the end of the time you have for discussion, it’s important to wrap things up. Conversations like this can often be complex, and having some summary can help students come to their own conclusions. Students can come out of this kind of discussion with an understanding or at the very least think about questions that go beyond just the discussion topic itself.

CPI is a form of cooperative, collaborative learning where students rely on positive interdependence to complete lessons, activities, and discussions. One of the main benefits of this kind of discussion, and of the CPI in general, is that it teaches ideas as well as skills. While there is sometimes merit in learning from a lecture, in philosophy, having a teacher simply hand over knowledge doesn’t really work. Philosophy works best as a process, because it is a process. Students get the chance to find the questions and answers they find the most compelling, an important skill which they can then apply to any topic at any level. Broadly, it makes students much better critical thinkers.

The Community of Philosophical Inquiry is a great way to teach philosophy to students, allowing them to discover philosophical truths and skills while also helping them develop skills that will serve them in all areas of their lives.

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