



# Ball State Philosophy Outreach Project Lesson Plan

**Topic:** Existentialism

**Time:** 45-60 min

**Recommendations:** This activity revolves around total participation techniques. Teachers should act as facilitators to ensure that all students have opportunities to share their thoughts. Teachers should also encourage students to choose a side before consulting or discussing with their peers. This encourages students to independently consider each question in order to form an initial opinion. Additionally, teachers should expand on student thoughts by asking clarifying questions and offering insight and connections to other notable philosophers/philosophies as appropriate. Notable philosophers, philosophical concepts, and essential questions are expended upon in the glossary portion of this lesson plan. Teachers should review this portion prior to the lesson plan and refer to it throughout the lesson. This is beneficial to ensure clear definitions, interpretation, and comprehension throughout the lesson.

## **Learning Objectives:**

- Students will be able to explain and defend their positions and opinions on several yes/no questions to their peers;
- Students will be able to examine their lives and identities through an existentialist lens by choosing a position for several yes/no questions;
- Students will have a better understanding of the existentialist concepts of essence and authenticity; and
- Students will listen and respond to their peer's justifications, which will serve to enhance open-mindedness in a real-world context.

**Activity:** The left side of the room is no. The right side of the room is yes. It may be useful to write "yes" on the right side of the board or on a piece of paper hung on the right side of the room and "no" on the left side of the board or on a piece of paper hung on the left side of the room. Then ask the questions listed below. Students will respond by moving to the side of the room that they feel best answers the question asked. If a student is unsure or believes that the question is not a yes or no, they may stand in the middle. After each question ask each side to explain

their reasoning. Follow-up questions are listed below each question. Each question should be discussed for roughly five minutes.

\* For virtual lessons, teachers can use the poll function within Zoom and ask students from each group to explain their reasoning.

### **Questions:**

1. Do human beings have a purpose?
  - a. How do you know?
  - b. Why do you think this?
2. Can human beings create their own purpose?
  - a. If so, why do you think so?
3. Are humans free?
  - a. How do you know?
  - b. Why do you think this?
4. Are you free?
  - a. How do you know?
  - b. Why do you think this?
5. Are you leading an authentic life?
  - a. How do you know?
  - b. What does it mean to lead an authentic life?
    - i. Why do you think this?
6. Does your life have meaning?
  - a. Why do you think this?
  - b. If yes, do you know your purpose?
7. Do our emotions tell us anything about the human condition?
  - a. Why do you think this?
  - b. If so, what do they tell us?

### **Glossary**

#### **Key concepts:**

Essence - an essence is what makes a person/thing who/what they are. In other words, it is a definition or a purpose.

- For example, a candle's essence is to burn and provide light. If the candle didn't have a wick and could not burn, it wouldn't be a candle. However, a candle's essence does not include things like color or shape because a candle can be any color or shape and still be a candle.



- Some philosophers believe that humans have a predetermined essence, but existentialists believe that we create our own essences as we live our lives by creating our own values, interests, beliefs, etc. The human essence is in fact the absence of essence.

Authenticity - the ability to recognize one's freedom while acting

- Existentialists believe that we are only acting authentically when we recognize that we are freely choosing our actions. If we ignore our freedom and act as if we have a predetermined essence, we are acting inauthentically.

Ambiguity - A rock is a thing, but a person is both a subject and an object. We have bodies; we appear in the world, so there is a thinglike aspect to us. But we are also freedoms, so we are subjects.

- If you deny this duality, you will be living inauthentically
- TikTok to help explain ambiguity: [Ambiguity TikTok](#)

Freedom - We are free in all of our actions.

- Existentialists believe there is no external force or truth that tells us who we are, what we ought to do, or how to live authentically. It is up to us to create that truth for ourselves in a genuine way.
- Existentialists also believe that human beings must be free to engage in their own projects or they will be ignoring their subjectivity.

Absurdity - the search for meaning in a meaningless world

- Existentialism is not the same thing as absurdism, but absurdism is an interesting theory to engage.
- Albert Camus believes that there is a contradiction between humans' desire to make sense of the world and the world's senselessness.
- The feeling of absurdity describes the feeling we get when we realize that we don't really understand our purpose or why we are here. It can also be described by the feeling you get when you think things like, "why am I here?" "what is the point of all of this work I'm doing?" "the universe is so big and I'm so small, how can I really matter?"
- TikTok to help explain the feeling of absurdity: [Absurdity TikTok](#)



**Essential questions:**

1. If you think human beings have purpose, what do you think gives them that purpose?
2. How do you know what your purpose is?
3. Can you think of a time when you changed your values or beliefs? Do you think that changed your essence or who you are? (ask students to share)
4. Can you think of a time where you experienced the feeling of absurdity? (ask students to share)
5. Do you think people create their essences or are essences assigned to them? Can we change our essence?
6. What do you think about the concept of being free to create who you are? Is this unsettling, scary, exciting, hopeful...?
7. Is being free to create your own essence more important than doing the right thing? Is it incompatible with doing the right thing?
8. Do you think you are living an authentic life? In what ways have you been free to create and in what ways have you not?
9. What do you like about existentialism? What do you not like? Where do you agree/disagree with existentialist theory?

