

Classroom Activity

Instructor Suggestions

Sensible vs Ridiculous Ideas

This activity is the beginning of a multi-stage process of learning around the theme of highly contested ideas and issues, and was originally inspired by an incendiary list of questions introduced by Steven Pinker (2007). The aim of the activity is to cultivate in students a disposition towards inquiry, constructive argumentation and reflection within and outside the classroom. While the following stages work for me, they are suggested as general guidelines so instructors should feel free to adapt them to the needs of their particular class.

- **Identifying sensible vs ridiculous ideas**

Aim: to activate students' interest in the activity

Students scan a list of questions, all of which have the potential to provoke strong emotions and judgements. Several are questions drawn directly from Pinker's list, with the rest having been added subsequently from a range of social media platforms. Each student identifies two questions: one sufficiently sensible to warrant deeper inquiry, and another deemed too ridiculous to merit further consideration. Individual students make brief notes outlining their choices.

- **First impressions**

Aim: to stimulate personalised interest; generate further ideas; initiate lines of reasoning

In brief open class discussion, students are asked which questions stand out for them in any respect. At this stage the teacher fields preliminary questions superficially and mainly to clarify understanding, mediating responses briefly and dispassionately.

- **Looking back: deriving premises from conclusions**

Aim: to have students provide preliminary support for current positions on two statements

To ensure multiple students make the same selections so good-sized groups can be formed, the original list is substantially reduced to just two of the most divisive questions. (The teacher should be able to gauge which questions would garner a roughly equivalent amount of support and opposition from students.) The selected questions are now reformulated as statements or conclusions e.g. #7. *Should trans women be considered women?* is reformulated as *Trans women should be considered women*.

Students then work individually, considering the main reasons (premises) for their position on each statement and making brief notes to elaborate their reasoning.

- **Echo Chambers**

Aim: to give students opportunities to consolidate arguments by increasing their store of good reasons for positions they support or oppose

Students form groups consisting of people who hold the same viewpoint on a given statement. Since each statement will have supporters and detractors, each student will sit in on two groups (of a possible four) comprised of like-minded participants. To bolster their shared positions, students in

each group are encouraged to take notes of points supporting the given position that they find persuasive, as well as contributing their own.

- **Reflection**

Aim: to give individual students an opportunity to reflect on the previous activity and consolidate their ideas

Students update notes individually to reflect their current positions.

- **Captive audience**

Aim: to expose students to opposing majority viewpoints

In open class, four summary arguments are presented. A representative of one group holding a viewpoint *supporting* the first statement reads out a list summarising that group's main points of argument. This is followed by a representative of the group with the *opposing* view doing the same. The process is repeated with the second statement. All students are expected to listen and take notes of key points of argument, asking questions only to clarify understanding.

- **Plenary**

Aim: in open class feedback, elicit general observations about the session itself and/or whether (not how or why) any students' positions were influenced. Avoid details about the latter at this stage.

- **Homework**

Aim: to have students explore both questions further, confirming or conceding (partly or wholly) their original positions

Students research the two questions and write a succinct exposition on each, providing a critique which not only demonstrates cogent analysis and evaluation, but also draws judiciously on relevant research literature to substantiate each argument. This writing is due for submission approximately two weeks after this class.

- **Looking ahead**

The following week's class will involve an in-depth discussion on one of the questions. The session will not follow a formal debate format but rather resemble a round table discussion with the teacher as chair. This will afford participants the opportunity to present not just diverse viewpoints on the question under discussion, but considered and informed arguments in support of those viewpoints.

- **Extension (optional)**

a. Aim: to present consolidated oral arguments

Students are invited to give formal oral presentations (at a later stage of the course) of their updated positions on the two questions they originally identified. While this exercise is optional, all presentations given will be graded and count towards the final grade of the course.

b. Aim: to present consolidated written arguments

As an alternative to the set term paper, students are invited to submit an alternative term paper presenting a detailed critique of one of the questions they originally considered sensible or ridiculous. The question should be drawn from any of those on the original list, excluding the two discussed in

this session. The word limit of the paper will be adjusted depending on whether a student had given a presentation.