



thinking space

THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

WHAT IS IT?

A Thought Experiment is a device used by philosophers to encourage thinkers to explore a line of thought. Because philosophical questions can't be answered by asking an expert or looking something up, we can't devise a scientific experiment to help us find the answer. But like scientific experiments, thought experiments create scenarios where the distracting variables of real life situations are controlled. These fictional scenarios leave us free to focus on interesting aspects of a puzzle or problem.

Thought experiments are essentially stories; stories that explore our intuitions in an interesting way. They are a useful way to promote a discussion amongst learners because they often evoke strong feelings either for or against the topic they are about.

RECIPE

- **No. of participants:** 5 – 30
- **Age of participants:** Suitable for any age
- **Preparation time:** 10 minutes to source the thought experiment.
- **Delivery time:** 10 minutes – 1 hour
- **Materials:** A circle of chairs, the thought experiment.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

You can present a thought experiment as simply or creatively as you like. You could let students choose from a bank of thought experiment cards; you could present the thought experiment as a story or dramatization (see 'Enquiry in Role' Tool). If you have two thought experiments that push the group in different directions then perhaps present them to separate halves of the group before bringing them back together for discussion (see 'Community of Enquiry' Tool).

EXAMPLES

The Experience Machine by Robert Nozick

Imagine there existed a machine which could stimulate your brain in such a way as to produce pleasurable experiences. You'd believe these synthetic experience to be real, and by experiencing them you'd be free from anxiety, dissatisfaction and pain. Would you plug in?

Jim and the Indians by Bernard Williams

Exploring in remote parts you stumble across a group of villagers held hostage by a man with a gun. The man tells you that he was planning to execute the villagers as punishment for a crime. But as a gesture of goodwill he offers you the 'honour' of killing one Indian in return for the lives of the others. What should you do?

The Ship of Theseus attributed to Plutarch

On his long voyage at sea Theseus' Ship undergoes many repairs until every part of the ship Theseus sailed out on has been replaced. When at last Theseus sails back into the port the towns people say "Here is ship of Theseus." Are they right? Is it the same ship?

While Theseus was at sea all the original parts of his ship, once replaced, are kept and stored. When Theseus returns he asks his master carpenters to build a ship out of all the old pieces. When the town's people see two ships waiting in the harbour they are astonished! "Which is the Ship of Theseus?" they ask.

TIPS

- A useful way to ensure your comments build on what has already been said is to prefix your contribution with: 'I agree or disagree because...'
- If the discussion is losing focus, ask for a volunteer to summarise key points so far.
- Give counter-examples to challenge learners' responses. Many counter-examples can be found in Bagгинi's book.

FIND OUT MORE

- 'The Pig that Wants to be Eaten' by Julian Bagгинi
- 'Can a Robot be Human?' by Peter Cave
- 'What's Wrong with Eating People?' by Peter Cave
- See 'Taking Enquiry Further' Tool.
- See 'Thinking In Role' Tool.



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