

# Things to Think About Before Introducing Social Justice Topics

Philosophy can be a powerful way for groups to think about issues related to historical and contemporary injustice, exclusion, oppression, and domination. The community of philosophical inquiry can be a helpful format for considering these kinds of complex issues, particularly in the wake of local and national events that warrant reflection and discussion. There are numerous materials practitioners can use to prompt conversations about social justice topics. Before doing so, it is important for facilitators to ask themselves several questions.

## **Who decides to have this conversation?**

The direction of the discussion is determined by the students and not the facilitator. Facilitators can choose a prompt that might stimulate discussion of social justice topics but should not impose their desire to address those topics or their own views of the topics. Students may raise questions unrelated to questions of social justice and wish to discuss those. They have authority over what conversation to have.

## **Who needs to have this conversation?**

We often think about philosophical discussions about social justice issues as “important,” but we must ask ourselves: important for whom? Think carefully about who actually needs to have the conversation you are planning to facilitate. Is it the students from marginalized groups in the room? The students from privileged groups? For example, facilitators often think it is important to discuss race. That is correct as far as it goes, but it is critical to ask oneself *who* needs to talk and think about race, and with whom. This relates to the third question facilitators should ask themselves.

## **Who is in the room?**

Rather than thinking “this is an important topic to think about with students!” ask yourself “is this an important/valuable/appropriate topic to discuss with *these* students?”. For example, leading a discussion about race in the United States in a classroom where most students are white and only a few are Black or Brown can be problematic for several reasons. First, students of color already must think about race as they navigate the world day to day. Thinking about race is not novel for them and they may in fact prefer philosophy to be an escape from those burdens. Second, in a classroom that is majority white, Black and Brown students can often be problematically tasked with speaking for the perspectives of marginalized groups. It is not their job to do so, nor should philosophical discussions put them in that position. Finally, it is problematic to subject students from marginalized communities to privileged students’ learning process regarding the injustice in question. For students living with a disability, for example, it is not a learning or growth opportunity to hear other students work through the realization that people with disabilities live rich and varied lives. Facilitators should think about who needs to have the

conversation they propose having and how those in the room who may be impacted negatively by such conversations.

### **How are you, the facilitator, situated relative to the students in the room?**

It is critical that facilitators consider their own positionality when planning to discuss topics about social justice issues. Are you a member of the community most impacted by the injustice to be discussed? If not, are you a member of a community that has some responsibility (past or present) for the injustice you would like to discuss? What are the social, racial, religious, and cultural ways in which you are different from your students that are relevant to how they will experience the discussion? For example, for a non-Jewish person, discussing a recent synagogue shooting is very different than it is for Jewish students who may feel fearful for their and their loved ones' safety when they go to synagogue.

You may need to think about whether you are the best or even an appropriate person to facilitate the discussion. If you are not the classroom teacher, it can be helpful to check in with them to find out if the topic is already under discussion, how it is going, and how the students are doing. It can help to overtly raise the issue of your own positionality and express your understanding that you do not experience the topic to be discussed in the same way as your students. Always be ready to pivot to a different stimulus or topic if students are showing signs of problematic discomfort (some discomfort is normal for philosophy). Commit to listening, taking ownership and apologizing when you are wrong, and saying that you are willing to learn. Finally, engaging in pedagogy research that discusses teacher positionality and how that can impact students' experiences is a helpful way to gain information and insight into how best to handle these discussions.

### **What is the power dynamic between you and your students?**

By virtue of being adults and being in a facilitation role, P4C facilitators are already in a position of power relative to the students. This is true even when we work assiduously to decentralize the classroom. There may also be other relationships of power in the room, depending on what privileges the facilitator has that the students do not (e.g., race, class, gender, etc.). Differences in power can influence whether and how students share their thinking. Responding to age/power differences is often also mediated by culture. This is all important to consider before embarking on a discussion related to social justice.

### **How can you help the students end the session feeling healthy and safe?**

Should you decide to proceed with the discussion, it is important to make a plan that leaves time for self-care practices at the end. Pick an activity that encourages movement, mindfulness, journaling, energy building, or connection to help students close out the session in a healthy way.