

# Introducing “What’s the Big Idea?”

(Adapted, in part, from Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Big Ideas for Little Kids*)

This website is a tribute to the intellectual curiosity of young people. We know that they have questions about all the *big ideas* that have engaged philosophers throughout the ages. What they don’t have is a way to discuss those questions with other people, especially in an educational setting.

That’s where you come in! By using this website, you’ll provide your wonderfully intelligent and boldly inquisitive students with the opportunity to engage in a range of philosophical discussions about issues that other students their age have told us were the most pressing ones in their lives.

You may be wondering how you can do this without having any philosophical training. You will be relieved to discover that teaching philosophy to secondary school children does not involve giving lectures on the great philosophers of the past or the central problems of Western philosophy. What it does require is that you commit yourself to giving your students the opportunity to discuss philosophical questions among themselves.

We have tried to make this as easy for you as possible. We have created webpages devoted to different philosophical issues that students have told us they want to discuss with their peers. On each page, you will find a variety of different film clips. At the end of each clip, questions for discussion appear on the screen. If you just pause the clip, you or a student can read the question out loud to begin a philosophical discussion.

Your role is to facilitate that discussion, not tell the students what to think about anything; your role is to assist students so that they can have a productive discussion with one another. For even though children may be natural-born philosophers, they are not born ready to discuss issues with their peers. That’s what we hope to help them with on this site.

Because “all” that the teacher has to do is to assist the children in *their* philosophical discussion, it doesn’t require any special philosophical knowledge to teach philosophy to secondary school children. All you need to know is how to facilitate a discussion among your students and, of course, how to navigate this website so you know how to get to the material you need when you need it!

## **Learner-Centered Teaching**

When we “teach” children philosophy – and this method is suitable to other subjects as well – we seek to mobilize their natural curiosity and help them *discover, express, and support* their answers to questions that concern them. For this reason, we call this method of education *learner-centered teaching* to emphasize the centrality it accords to the children as natural investigators and learners.

The fundamental assumption of learner-centered teaching is that the student, no less than the human mind itself, is not simply a tabula rasa (a blank tablet) upon which anything a teacher wants can be inscribed. Instead, it recognizes that the student-learner has many dispositions, capacities, and ideas that education must acknowledge.

The learner-centered model of teaching attempts to create a classroom that takes account of the nature of individual learners and the social situation of the classroom in which they find themselves. It seeks to engage students communally in a natural way, so that they will be motivated to work together to solve problems that they themselves actually encounter and, hence, want to find solutions to. Those solutions get worked out through trial-and-error processes that the group undertakes together, and learning results when the children take part in them.

Since children are not generally used to treating learning as a group project, they need the teacher to facilitate the interactions with each other in such a way that they engage cooperatively and supportively in an attempt to answer a question that puzzles them. The teacher is a guide who oversees the students' own process of problem solving to ensure that it proceeds in accordance with norms that make it possible for the children to work together cooperatively.

### **A Word of Caution**

Finally, it is important to know your students and what material might be best suited for them. There are for instance some film clips that have violent or sad scenes that might be difficult for some students to watch. Please, before using this in your classroom, look at the Teachers Introduction, Students Introduction, and the film clips you plan on sharing. Also, please feel free to download, print out, and distribute any of the accompanying support text such as: What is Philosophy?, What is Ethics?, and the Guidelines for Having a Philosophical Discussion.