

How to live forever

A community of enquiry around the concept of immortality

Introduction: I have used this session plan up till now only with years 5 and 6 and it has been popular. However, I can imagine it being used well into secondary school as the theme has a strong appeal across different age groups, especially as it is such a common theme in popular culture, films and TV.

Preparation: Talk about the centuries-old search for the 'elixir of life'. Tell the group that with today's research, scientists think they have made a breakthrough and discovered the real secret to unending life. Hold up a small container (the more exotic the bottle the better) and tell the group to imagine that there is a very small quantity of the elixir in it. How many of them would bid to buy it?

Hold a secret ballot to find out who would bid for the elixir – *yes*, *no*, *don't know* (we simply agreed three different ways to fold a small piece of scrap paper to indicate choice). Count the votes and record them publicly. Explain this is the preparation for considering the stimulus.

Presentation: Present a story in which a character has to decide whether or not to remain immortal. We can recommend *How to Live Forever* by Colin Thompson, which is superbly illustrated. Read the story as far as the point at which the main character (in this case, Peter) has to decide whether to become immortal (in this story, he does by reading a book containing the secret of immortality) and then tell the group they are going to advise him of how to resolve his dilemma.

Conversation: Form your group into smaller groups of people who voted *yes*, *no* and *don't know*. If you are lucky, you will have a working number (we have always had roughly equal numbers of the first two and a smaller number of *don't knows*, which is ideal). If not, you might have to ask a few people to swap around for the purpose of the exercise. Instruct each group to marshal their arguments in favour of, or against becoming immortal, whilst the *don't knows* discuss their uncertainty and what sorts of arguments might sway them.

Conscience Alley: Form two lines made up of the *yes* group on one side and the *no* group on the other. Send the *don't knows* up the middle whilst the opposing sides take it in turn to put their arguments and counter arguments. At the end, ask the *don't knows* which arguments they found particularly persuasive.

Building: Reseat everyone and hold a discussion in the normal way.

Last words: Ask participants to reveal if they have changed their mind and why. Compare this with your original ballot.

At this point, you can reveal what the character (Peter) in the story decided to do.

Points that may arise in discussion

1. Definitions

Does immortal simply mean living forever or does it mean some sort of invincibility? The implications of this are quite far reaching. If the former, one would be vulnerable to the ravages of accident and disease, with one's body becoming increasingly damaged and racked by pain. If the latter, would this mean that one

could abuse one's body with drugs, unhealthy food and physical challenge almost ad infinitum? (rather like a character in the *X Men*.)

2. The process

Would one be 'frozen' in time, *ie* stay the same age forever, or would one gradually age so that one ended up like a wrinkled prune? There is likely to be a lively debate around the notion of which age would be the best to take the elixir if one had the choice (20s and 30s tend to be popular). Of course, in the story, characters usually have to take the decision there and then and many children who are initially keen on immortality go off the idea when they realise they might have to stay children for all time (with the consequent eternal obligation to attend school)!

3. Emotions

Would one be endlessly grief stricken, as one's relatives and friends gradually died, or would one gradually become desensitised to bereavement? Would one eventually become prey to boredom, having enjoyed all possible experiences over and over again.

4. New technology and inventions

One of the lures of immortality is finding out what happens in the future. Some people also suggest that new scientific research will counter the negative effects of ageing so that one's body can be repaired in the event of accident and disease and one will not necessarily have to live in pain.

5. Social and economic implications

An obvious question here is, if there were widespread take-up of the elixir, what would be the impact on continuing reproduction and population growth? This, of course is already a matter of debate in relation to global warming, biodiversity, potential shortages of energy, food and water. How much depth of discussion takes place on this topic may depend on the age of the group members and the extent of their knowledge, but there are clear links to other parts of the curriculum. Adults or older students might be more aware of the economic implications of an ageing population – and the fact that working for eternity might not be wholly attractive!