# Concepts

## How to make concept activities

## Introduction

HAVING A CONCEPT of X at a basic level means being able to recognise X things, distinguish them from non-X things and compare them with non-X things.

But exactly what things one recognises as X things and what one associates with X-ness, is not often straightforward. Concepts cannot simply or established like facts. The question, 'Is John taller than 5 feet?' is a factual question. We can answer this by finding out accurate information. However, the question, 'Is John my friend?' is a conceptual question. To answer this question we need to consider what counts as friendship to ourselves and others. We also need to interpret John's behaviour in the light of our understanding of the concept of friendship. This isn't just a theoretical matter with no connection to real life. The way we try to be a friend to someone will depend on our working out of the particular concept of friendship that we hold.

The concept of friendship is one of those concepts that are central to our lives and common to everyone. Philosophers are interested in these kinds of concepts such as self, nature, justice, freedom and cause that often prompt deep questions leading to contestable answers. The questions often concern right actions, beliefs, arguments and judgements.

These 'philosophical' concepts overlap with other concepts in almost every subject area. For example the question: 'Does tourism cause unacceptable cultural and environmental damage?' requires a good deal of conceptual and philosophical consideration as well as a grasp of appropriate knowledge. Thus we argue that there is a philosophical dimension in all subjects.

We look out at life through a prism of concepts and we learn to understand new things through the concepts we already know. They are our main tools of interpretation and they help us to articulate what is important to us as we look inwards at ourselves and outwards to the world around us. Concepts help us to develop our own philosophies and to think for ourselves.

We can help children and young people to become more reflective about the concepts they already use and also try to extend their range of concepts with less familiar ones. You will find many concept activities on our website but sometimes you may want to create your own in order to explore some ideas that are particular to a discussion you have just had with pupils. Here, we show you have it's done.

# 1. Exploring concepts with examples

A tried-and-tested approach to exploring concepts is to generate possible examples of a given concept and write them down for your group to ponder. You would include items you think are good examples of the concept, along with items that might be contrary examples and borderline cases. So, for the topic of **courage**, you might generate the following examples in the form of situations:

- Good examples: (1) Standing up to a bully. (2) Risking embarrassment in order to try out something you think is worthwhile

- Contrary examples: (1) Putting the blame onto someone else when you have done something wrong because you are afraid to be blamed or punished. (2) Not doing something you really want to do because you fear you might feel embarrassed.

- Borderline cases: (1) Being extremely shy and not being able to get over it. (2) Overcoming shyness and embarrassment by taking a pill. (3) Stopping someone from bullying another person. You are a lot stronger than both of them.

When you present your items to the class, mix them all up and suggest category headings of YES, NO and NOT SURE. Pupils working in small groups would discuss each of the items and decide which heading to put each item under. You will expect the good examples to find their way into the YES column, the contrary examples into the NO column and the borderline case into the NOT SURE column. However, the important point is to encourage students to explain their own choices and to develop some general criteria for the concepts under review.

**Whole class review:** After the work in small groups you can review all or some of the pupils' choices and explanations with the whole class.

**Translate into a discussion move:** The giving of examples, contrary examples and borderline cases for concepts are important moves to make in a dialogue. When students are used to analysing concepts through examples, encourage them to recognise and reflect on concepts that arise spontaneously during class dialogues. Get them used to questioning each other's assumptions about the meanings of concepts they are using and exploring the concepts through discussing examples.

Related concepts: It's a good idea to have pupils compare a concept with related concepts to help them understand it more precisely and to stimulate new avenues of thought. For example, concepts related to courage might be: *similar concepts* such as bravery, fearlessness, daring; *contrasting concepts* such as foolhardiness and impulsiveness; and *concepts with more general connections* such as heroism, emotion and reward. When we enlarge and refine the pupils' repertoire of concepts we help them to think more clearly, more deeply and with more discrimination.

'What's the use?' Try to get pupils to think about who would use the concept under review, how they would use it, and why? For example, let's say pupils read the picture book *Willie the Wimp* 'by Anthony Browne. They choose to discuss the question 'What is wimp?' Asking 'what's the use of this concept?' raises the idea that it has been created by people. It didn't arrive ready formed. So how is it used and why? Are there some people out in the world who are wimps in the same way as some people are blondes?

Practical variations on the basic principles of using examples

- Ask pupils to create some or all of the possible examples. They could even run the whole activity.

- Make a pencil and paper exercise by listing all the possible examples in one column of a table and having YES, NO and NOT SURE columns for pupils to tick as appropriate. Or use small cards with examples written on to allow some movement and the changing of minds.

- Instead of a list, use a target with 3 rings. YES is the centre ring. NO is the outer ring and NOT sure is the middle ring. Ask pupils to position possible example cards in the appropriate ring.

- Make large cards with the possible examples. Also have cards with the headings. Show each card to the class and ask for suggestions about which heading it should be placed under. Take several suggestions from pupils and ask them to explain their reasoning. Ask others if they agree or disagree and require reasons from them too. Another variation is to make sets of the cards and give them to groups of three or four pupils for discussion, followed by a review of decisions on several significant items.

- Use a '3x3 strategy'. Limit the number of possible instances to 9 and have the pupils group them into the 3 best examples of the concept, the 3 worst examples and the three middle examples. Again, ask pupils to give reasons for their choices.

- Use a 'concept line'. This can be a small-group or whole-class activity. Give out large cards with the possible instances written on. Have two cards, YES and NO, placed a distance apart. Ask pupils to signify their thinking about the item on their card by positioning themselves between the YES and NO cards. So, for example, the better the example of the given concept, the closer will be the position to the YES card. This variation allows for a more nuanced judgement and gives some interesting opportunities for dialogue between the people with the card and other members of the group who can question the card holders and challenge their judgement.

- The target and listing activities above can also be achieved with physical movement. For listing, the headings are put in different parts of the room and people with cards asked to move towards them. Perhaps also, groups of 4–6 pupils could be given a set of cards so there is one card for each group member. The sets for each group are the same. Group members discuss where to place their cards and each member of the group carries one card to the chosen heading. Differences in outcomes are explored and debated by the people stood at each heading. They report their discussions back to the whole class.

## 2. Exploring concepts with comparisons

A common and useful way of exploring concepts is to suggest pairs of concepts for pupils to consider. The pairs would be chosen with the aim of pinpointing some areas of fruitful dialogue about a concept you. For instance, in exploring the concept of friendship, you might ask pupils to make connections and distinctions between 'friends' and 'pets'. Your purpose would be to get them to think about qualities such as loyalty, dependence, reciprocity and care in order to focus their minds more precisely on ways we might identify a relationship as a 'friendship'. Other pairs of concepts concerning 'friends/friendship' might include:

- A friend and a best friend
- A friend and a classmate
- A friend and a relative
- Friendship and love
- Friendship and caring
- Friends and favourite toys
- Friends and favourite pets

Organising activities using connections and distinctions. You could use the same combinations of small-group and whole-class work as with 'exploring concepts with examples'. You can use cards, slide presentations or just read out the pairs of items one at a time. You could focus on distinctions, or on

distinctions and connections (similarities and differences). You could suggest pupils use a Venn diagram or another visual tool to help them order and record their thinking. You could just ask them to discuss the matter quickly with a partner and report back.

Translate into a discussion move: making distinctions and making connections, like giving examples, are important moves to make in a dialogue. When students are used to analysing concepts through making distinctions or connections using the concept-stretching activities, encourage them do the same thing in open dialogues. Encourage them to use vocabulary such as 'same', 'similar', 'different', 'identical', 'distinction' and 'connection'.

## 3. Exploring concepts with opinions

You can explore concepts with pupils by presenting them with opinions and asking them to agree or disagree with each one. So, continuing with the theme of friendship, some opinions might include:

- We should always agree with our friends
- We should help our friends if they ask us
- Anyone who is nice to us can be our friend
- Friends feel exactly the same way about each other
- We should never tell our friends' secrets to others
- We should care about people who are not our friends
- We can be friends with the environment
- We can be friends with our pets
- Teachers and pupils can be friends

Each opinion is constructed to focus the pupils' attention on some aspect of the concept, the limits of applications of the concept, or the value of friendship in relation to other values. For example, the question about secrets might lead to discussion about the relative importance of loyalty to our friends and caring about their safety or wellbeing.

Organising activities using opinions

- Prepare a set of opinions and read them out in turn to pupils. Ask pupils to consider each opinion for a moment and then indicate their response as either: agree, disagree or not sure. If you wish, you could make this a paired activity and suggest that pupils agree a response to each opinion with a thinking partner. Ask pupils to put their thumbs up if they agree, thumbs down if they disagree, or thumbs horizontal if they are not sure.

- Choose a few people and ask them to give reasons for their responses. You could question their responses for as long as you think appropriate in order to draw out their thinking. You could also open up this short dialogue to the rest of the class and ask for further agreement and disagreement with reasons.

- A worthwhile variation is to split the class into groups of 3 or 4 members. Each group devises a set of opinions on a concept you suggest. Then members of each group, modelling their behaviour on you, carry out the questioning and dialogue with the rest of the class.

This approach to exploring concepts will be useful if you want pupils to analyse opinions, agree and disagree without rancour, and give reasons for their views. It also provides a model for them to agree and disagree (with reasons) in a future enquiry that is more open.

## 4. Exploring concepts with questions

We could turn the set of example opinions in the previous section (exploring concepts with agreement and disagreement) into questions:

- Should we always agree with our friends?

- Should we help our friends if they ask us?

- Can anyone who is nice to us be our friend?

If we used these questions, then the activities that followed would be similar to those with opinions but, instead of concentrating on agreeing and disagreeing, we might focus on the giving of opinions supported by reasons. Agreement and disagreement could follow on from there. We might also ask pupils, if they are able, to come up with a list of their own questions on a concept that is chosen by you or by themselves.

**Digging deeper (or probing) with questions**. Another fruitful way of using questions to explore concepts is to focus on one opinion, one pair of related concepts or one example, and then 'dig deeper' through exploratory thinking prompted by further questions. For example, here is a series of questions following on from one of our questions about friendship:

1. Should we always agree with our friends?

2. If we disagree with our friends, should we tell them we disagree?

3. Are there times you have disagreed with a friend but not told them that you disagree?

4. Are there times when we shouldn't tell our friends we disagree with them?

5. Are there times when it is essential that we should tell our friends when we disagree with them?

6. If you expressed your disagreement with a friend and she told you she would no longer be your friend, then was she a friend in the first place?

The purpose of this activity is to prompt pupils to consider the kinds of questions that could be asked in order to explore the first question in more depth. The questions prompt pupils to consider example scenarios and to be precise about language by reflecting on the implications of expressions like 'always'.

Questions 4 and 5 prompt pupils to consider the possibility of conflicting ethical scenarios (should being sensitive to our friend's feelings override our Inclination to tell them the truth as we see it?). Again, it is worth emphasising that this isn't meaningless drill. These activities sometimes lead on to valuable discussions as well as serving to provide pupils with models of questioning. We often hear about pupils falling out because they fail to accept that friends can disagree over things they think are important.

We can use the same kinds of 'digging deeper' questioning to explore pairs of related concepts such as 'friends' and 'family'.

Organising activities using questions to 'dig deeper'

- Split the class into groups and ask them to discuss the set of questions. Have them report back to the whole class for a comparison of decisions and reasons. Then ask if individuals or pairs can suggest any other questions that might 'dig deeper' into the first question in the same way as the ones they have been discussing.

- Depending on the pupils' writing abilities, use the first question as the title for a short piece of writing after the group have discussed all the other follow-up questions.

- As pupils get used to this kind of activity, give them the task in groups of creating the 'digging deeper' questions. This will benefit their thinking in open dialogue around questions they have chosen themselves.