Proverbs & fables

Sic et non – Yes and No

PETER ABELARD, the medieval scholar once wrote a text called *Sic et Non*, which translates from the Latin as 'Yes and No'. In the text, he picks out contradictory quotations from religious writing, excluding Old and New Testaments. He then asks a question to be answered 'Yes' or 'No' with reasons. It is believed the text was written for students and so Abelard leaves the answers and the reasons open to them. Here is an extract from his text:

> 'I have ventured to bring together various dicta of the holy fathers, as they came to mind, and to formulate certain questions which were suggested by the seeming contradictions in the statements. These questions ought to serve to excite tender readers to a zealous inquiry into truth and so sharpen their wits. The master key of knowledge is, indeed, a persistent and frequent questioning.'

Proverbs often express the common sense of a time and culture. They offer short cuts to judgment but they are often contradictory. Do they always express good sense? We could present proverbs to pupils in the spirit of Peter Abelard and ask, 'Yes' or 'No' – do the proverbs deserve thier longevity and, when they contradict each other, what questions should we ask?

Fables, in the words of Polish fable writer by Ignacy Krasicki (1735–1801): 'should be brief, clear and, so far as possible, preserve the truth.' Like proverbs, fables are structured to offer practical wisdom and, of course, they are always questionable.

In the proverbs and fables section of p4c.com we have collected together items to provide opportunities for inquiry in the the spirit of Peter Abelard's *Sic et Non*. The text to follow will give you ideas on how you might use them with your pupils. We won't repeat these ideas for every item. We'll just give you the texts extra ideas that are not generalisable to all texts. **We suggest to use the proverbs first to get most benefit out of this section.**

Ideas for using the proverbs

1. Print off the proverbs and cut and paste those you select into a word processor or PowerPoint

2. Ask pupils to read the proverbs or read each one aloud to them.

3. Ask them to discuss what the proverbs mean or what ideas they suggest. Some meanings depend on metaphor and analogy. Talk with pupils about what is the point of the analogy. Some proverbs may use language the pupils do not understand. Help them out or provide meanings for obscure words.

4. Ask pupils to group proverbs with similar meanings together.

5. Ask them to pick out two proverbs that seem to contradict each other.

6. Ask them to consider their similar and contradictory proverbs and then have them create questions on each theme (*eg*, 'Believing and doubting').

7. Share the question on each theme with the class, ask all pupils to vote for a question they find most interesting and discuss the question with the whole group.

Further ideas

1. Have them pick a pair of contradictory proverbs and think of examples from life, stories or their imaginations that seem to support the opinion expressed by either of the proverbs.

2. Have them choose one proverb and agree or disagree with what they think the proverb is trying to say. The argument should contain examples and reasons for their agreement or disagreement.

5. As 3 above but have them write the argument.

6. Have some pupils write a story, poem or new proverb stimulated by their discussions.

Ideas for using the fables

We've chosen fables and retold them in a slightly more modern style. Then, instead of providing one 'moral' at the end of the text, we provide several to choose from. Some are contradictory. Have the pupils, in small groups, decide which moral they would choose with reasons. Can they think of their own alternative moral?

Then ask them to create questions about the fable, choose one and discuss it together as a whole group in the normal way for p4c.