



Philosophy Circles

Memories and Photographs

A stimulus and some questions about memory, knowledge and truth, approached through the familiar notions of early childhood memories and photographs.



Get children standing up in pairs to talk about the following two questions:

- What is your earliest happy memory?
- What is the earliest picture of you that you can remember being taken?

Put them into fours and ask one to “direct” the others to create a freeze-frame of either the memory or the picture. You might want to then let one or two explain theirs to the rest of the class, and you could probe to ask them how much detail they can remember, and if any of their scene is based on vague guesswork. This provides a good opportunity to scaffold shared understanding of what early childhood memories usually are usually like.



You could do this exercise without the attached stimulus, but it’s a good way to further consolidate the contestable and unreliable nature of memories and the complexities between memory, knowledge, belief and truth.

“Thinking about the sorts of moments people try to capture in a photograph – of being in a special place at a special time, perhaps with a special group of people – what are the differences and connections between...”

1. You know that you were there
2. You remember that you were there
3. You remember being there
4. You remember what it was like to be there
5. You have a photograph of you there
6. It is true that you were there
7. You know it is true that you were there

For older children, you could let them draw connections and differences themselves, but for younger children, you might wish to structure things with questions of these formats:

If 5 is true, then which of the others is true? Is it possible for x to be guaranteed true? How would you order these if they had to be ordered on certainty?



This exercise generally leads to deeper, philosophical questions, but if they’re struggling to latch onto one, you can jump in and provide one of these:

Is it better to have a memory but no photograph, or a photograph, but no memory of it?

When is a memory more true than a photograph? When is a photograph more true than a memory?

If someone tells you about something you did before you were old enough to remember, and you tell someone else about it, is it your memory?

NEXT STEPS

Challenge them to ask their parents whether their (children’s) earliest memory actually happened! Does that change their thinking the next day on any of the philosophical questions explored?

Isn't it funny how nobody ever calls himself "a little boy", because however little you are, you are the biggest boy or girl you have been so far, so it's only ever an older child or adult calling someone younger "a little boy". Anyway, one of my earliest memories of when I was a little boy is a sad one. My great-grandmother used to live with us. I remember coming back home from school and being told that she'd died. I remember not believing it, and going from one room in the house to another to see where she was hiding, and then out into the garden and into our conservatory where she sometimes liked to sit. When she wasn't there either, I realised that it was true, and my mum made me a cup of tea with a teaspoon of brandy in it, for the shock.

It's a sad memory, but not too sad, because it turns out it isn't true. We didn't have a conservatory at that time, so there's no way I could have gone looking for her there. And my mother wouldn't have given me a teaspoon of brandy when I was four, however shocked I was. But even though I know it's not true, it still feels as though I have a memory of it.

In the opposite way, there is a family photo with me in it from the same time, wearing a hideous seventies jumper, surrounded by my brothers and sister. I can't remember the photo being taken at all: looking at me in it is like looking at a photo of someone else, only I know it's me. Then there are other times where I have both a memory and a photograph, or where I think I have a real memory but no photograph to prove it, or things that I can only remember when I see a photograph that reminds me.

These days, people take photos more often than ever before. A lot of those are photographs of themselves, taking photographs of themselves. If you look at a selfie, and it brings up a memory, is it a memory of taking a selfie? I don't take many selfies myself. I sometimes take otheries, photos of other people, but to be honest I tend to prefer taking nobody-at-all-ies, photos of places without people in them, because I think I will remember the people but forget the places.

I think it's interesting how what we remember, what we photograph, what we know and what is true all fit together. So I've got some questions for you, which I've given your teacher, and perhaps you'll think of some other questions of your own. Enjoy.