



The Philosophy Foundation

THINKING CHANGES

Intellectual virtues

Though by no means exhaustive, we have identified some candidate core intellectual virtues (excellences/competencies/dispositions/sensitivities) that it is hoped the children in classrooms will develop through doing philosophy that also have application in other subjects. They are cross-referenced to show their interdependence. You may also notice that critical thinking skills are absent, this is because the intellectual *virtues* have been distinguished from intellectual *tools* and one's familiarity with them. In this list critical thinking skills are captured under virtue 20.

You may be able to develop an assessment tool for these competencies using this list.

One aim of doing philosophy is that those taking part in philosophy will learn...

- 1) To be **intellectually sensitive** – they will learn how to respond (see 38) to others in an intellectually appropriate way: whether to be critical (6), logical (20), sequential (22), structural (8), semantic (16) and so on.
- 2) To be **socially sensitive** – they will learn how to respond to others in a socially appropriate way: with respect, with confidence, tentatively (29), supportively (37), taking turns and so on, that is also intellectually sensitive (see 1) and that does not compromise 1. In this way 1 limits 2. **Note:** Some of these will be integral to doing philosophy, such as (possibly!) *listening*, but others will simply be conducive to doing philosophy, such as using a ball for speaker management in a way comparable to leaving windows open if it is hot; while doing so provides better conditions for doing philosophy it is not an integral part of philosophical practice. It is helpful to consider which of the virtues you find in this list are of the former kind and which the latter.
- 3) To be **discerning** – they will learn to *recognise* and *distinguish between* different kinds of response, either to a question, problem, or peer.
- 4) To be **selective** – they will learn to *select* the appropriate, *relevant* response (38), either to a question, problem or peer that is both intellectually and socially sensitive (see 1 and 2).
- 5) To be **empathetic** – they will gain some insight about how their peers think and learn to approach problems from thinking with their peers, sometimes thinking on their behalf. Compare this with 39: there is a difference between thinking about someone else's point of view from your own and attempting to 'enter into' someone else's point of view, at least to the extent to which this may be possible. If the aim is greater understanding (see 43) then this can only be better reached from adopting both of these perspectival strategies.

- 6) To be **critically collaborative** – they will practise how to appropriately *oppose* each other in the service of a collaborative effort to address recognised controversies and problems (see 13). Importantly, it can be collaborative to be critical (see 1 and 2). Philosophy is the synthesis of collaboration and opposition par excellence (see '[Collaboration: How to be a rebel](#)', Peter Worley, TEDx talk King's College School)
- 7) To be **creative** – they will think of *new* ideas and concepts and new ways around problems, new ways of thinking about something, or new strategies to solving problems or recasting them. They may also think of new ways of combining older or familiar ideas and concepts. Being creative in philosophy may also involve creating counter-examples and thought-experiments, stories and scenarios to exemplify or test ideas.
- 8) To be **coherent** (structural sensitivity) – they will learn how to *structure* their thinking well, but also how to *identify* coherence and incoherence in themselves and others.
- 9) To be **articulate** – they will learn how to give clear expression to their thoughts so that others may understand them and therefore respond appropriately.
- 10) To be able to **develop ideas** – in addition to creating ideas (see 7) they will also be able to take them further, to refine them in light of further considerations either from themselves or others (see 19), to synthesise ideas with other ideas and to extend arguments formulated or to formulate new arguments in order to support other arguments. (See also 19)
- 11) To be able to **abstract** – they will develop the ability to think abstractly and generally.
- 12) To be able to **move between the concrete and the abstract** – they will learn how to move from thinking *concretely* when necessary to thinking abstractly and more *generally* when necessary, and to be able to *apply* abstract insights to the concrete and vice versa as well as *test* abstract and concrete notions against each other.
- 13) To be able to **problematise** – to be able to recognise a genuine *problem* as a problem where one was not recognised before, either by oneself or others, or to recognise a problem or controversy introduced by a peer. 1). The word 'problematise' implies the creating of problems (that may not otherwise be there!) so we prefer to call this 'problem-seeing' and problem-seeing is intrinsically motivating towards problem solving (see 14).
- 14) To be able to **problem solve** – whether able to spot a fallacy, intuitively or eruditely (see 6 and 20), or able to draw necessary distinctions (see 3 and 4), they will be able to see how to approach solving problems even if unable to solve the overall problem being investigated. This is one important way that philosophy may make progress and be understood to be constructive.
- 15) To be able to think about **meaning and value** – they will develop the ability to gain a sense of why something does or does not matter, either to themselves, to others or within a specific context. They will also start to recognise their role in taking on this *responsibility* (42) in thinking something through either with others or on their own.
- 16) They will develop a **semantic sensitivity** – an awareness and understanding of the role of *meaning* (see 15) within words, phrases, sentences, propositions and discourses.
- 17) They will develop a **conceptual sensitivity** – an awareness and understanding of the relationship between the structural (8 & 22) and semantic (16) aspects of words, phrases, sentences, propositions and discourses.
- 18) To be disposed to **interpret** – they will develop the ability to engage in attempting to understand texts, peers, notions, arguments (and so on) *interpretatively*. They will also start to recognise their role in taking on this *responsibility* (42) in understanding 'the other', be it a text, peer, notion or argument and so on.

- 19) To be **re-evaluative** – the ability and willingness to revise or reject an idea or argument and how to judge (see 23) when to re-evaluate (*revise or reject*) and when to *defend* (31) their own and/or other’s ideas.
- 20) To be **rational** – they will practice constructing (7) their own reasoned arguments and learn *how* to answer to the demands of reason and logic, to make inferences according to them and how to recognise (3) good and bad reasons and be prepared to evaluate them (23). (*Critical thinking skills* enable one to exercise this virtue*)
- 21) To be **reasonable** – they will demonstrate a *willingness* (38) to answer to the demands of reason (20).
- 22) To think **sequentially** – they will learn to approach problems (14) in the right *order* according to rational, logical demands (20).
- 23) To be **judicious** – they will practise *making judgments* with the aim of making good ones (see 43).
- 24) To be (judiciously) **resilient** – they will practise appropriate resilience in the face of other’s opposition (6) to their own ideas, and resilience to demonstrations made by others of shortcomings within their own positions and arguments.
- 25) To be (judiciously) **open-minded** – how to judge (23) for themselves when to be open to alternative positions or re-evaluation (19) and when to make a judgment (23) on an issue or question.
- 26) To be (judiciously) **self-critical** – they will practise reflecting critically (6) on the quality of their own reasoning and how to improve it (20).
- 27) To apply (judicious) **doubt** – to be disposed to recognise the possibility, when appropriate, that what is believed to be true or right, may be false or wrong or open to revision (see 19).
- 28) To be (judiciously) **defeasible** – to be disposed to recognise the possibility, when appropriate, that what they themselves believe to be true or right, may be false or wrong or open to revision (see 19).
- 29) To (judiciously) adopt a **tentative voice** – to express themselves in a way that appropriately reflects their defeasibility and openness to doubt (see 27 and 28).
- 30) To be **autonomous** – they will practise *thinking for themselves*, making judgments based on the quality of reasons (see 20 and 21) and not simply on what others think (in the sense of *conformity*) when it would be wrong to do so. Autonomous thinking may also include the decision to agree with another or a group; it does not necessarily imply opposition.
- 31) To be **courageous** – they will be prepared to hold on to a belief if there are good reasons to do so (20), and they will be prepared to give up a belief if there are good reasons to do so (20), despite how difficult this may be and for whatever reason.
- 32) To be **comfortable with discomfort** – they will learn to appropriately challenge each other (6) and accept that they may be appropriately challenged and that this may lead to feelings of discomfort, *and that this also is acceptable*.
- 33) To be **comfortable with the ‘aporetic’** (i.e. the inconclusive, the ambiguous, the uncertain) – this does not mean that they be satisfied with these such that they ignore them or accept them (see 38), but that they recognise that they are necessary consequences of the kind of intellectual activity that characterises disciplines such as philosophy. They will learn to understand this and become reconciled to it.
- 34) To **listen well** – they will practise how to listen *in order to understand* (see 43) as best they can to what it is their peers say - and *intend* to say (44) - so that they can properly engage (38), in a critically collaborative way (see 6), with their peers’ ideas.

- 35) To **consider** – to be disposed not only to listen (34) to others’ ideas but also to give those ideas due, merited attention. (See 1 and 2.)
- 36) To be (judiciously) **idea-focused** - to be able to distinguish (3) between an idea being represented and the person representing the idea and, where appropriate, to consider (35) the idea being represented in isolation from any views held about the person.
- 37) To be (judiciously) **supportive** – they will learn how to offer *reasoned support* (20 and 21) to a peer when it is judged appropriate to do so.
- 38) To be disposed to respond in the appropriate **psychological** way – they will learn how, once a problem has been recognised as a problem (see 13), to be intellectually *responsive* and *reflective*, to respond to *puzzlement* (33) with *curiosity* and a *willingness to strategise how to approach the problem*. Not, perhaps, with *cynicism* and *helplessness*, for example. Key to this is what might be called *present engagement* (see also 13) and a tendency to be disposed to *defend the defensible*, whether defending his or her own idea or that of another (including an opponent – see 6).
- 39) To gain a **synoptic** view (an holistic overview) – they will learn to gain a sense of the conversation as a whole, and the various roles – their own included – played by group-members during the conversation. This aspect aids *meta-learning* and is one of the more difficult intellectual virtues for young people to cultivate. This may allow for more than simply considering the views of the other group members (35) or of the group as a whole; this is a kind of ‘stepping out’ from different viewpoints. So, for example, one may consider the conversation from a) one’s own perspective, b) from the perspective of others, c) from the group as a whole, d) from the position of the facilitator, and d) from the position of an external observer.
- 40) To be disposed towards appropriate **detachment** – to see one’s role (42) within a discussion *as if* one of the other group members. This is not to the exclusion of seeing oneself from one’s own perspective but in addition to it. (See also 36.)
- 41) To be **methodologically reflective** – once one has a sense of the different perspectives (39) that can be had within a conversation then one is in a position to consider the legitimacy (19) of the method(s) being used to follow the conversation. This can also be a reflexive attitude: so, within a within a philosophical discussion attention may be drawn towards philosophical method itself or to the philosophical method(s) being employed by the group.
- 42) To recognise **intellectual ownership and responsibility** – they will learn to *credit* (ideas, arguments, notions, moves, terminology etc.) to others or themselves where credit is due. They will also learn to take *responsibility* for their ideas, arguments, notions, moves, terminology etc. and their consequences.
- 43) There is a *normative* aim: to learn and to cultivate a willingness (38) to practise the intellectual virtues *as well as possible* and to employ them appropriately (not misuse in the service of *sophistry*, for instance) in the service of **greater understanding** (that must also include understanding what is *not* understood).
- 44) To develop **intentional sensitivity** – in order to achieve *greater understanding* (43) of one’s peers one must not only be sensitive to the logic (20), meaning (16), concepts (17) and structure (8) within words, phrases, sentences, propositions and discourses but also to the intention *behind* them: what the speaker wishes to express. This implies a responsibility (42) of interpretation (18) and highlights that there is an important human aspect to philosophy.
- 45) To be judiciously **questioning** – they will practice asking questions, identifying them, understanding them and recasting them; but this virtue can also be understood to mean that they will apply *appropriate and genuine doubt* (27), in the form of asking questions, to ideas and/or assumptions held by peers, the group or the wider community (i.e. society, the world).

46) To be (judiciously) intellectually **kind** — they will be disposed to see ‘the best’ in an idea so that when criticising it (which must, at some point, follow - see 6) they do not criticise a ‘straw man’. In demonstrating this type of kindness they will need empathy (5), intentional sensitivity (44) and be willing (38) to defend and develop (10) someone else’s idea where it can be defended and developed, perhaps beyond the ability of the person who created the idea. It should be pointed out, however, that if the idea cannot be defended or developed then kindness would be inappropriate. It is kindness towards the idea and not the person (see 40). Virtue 6 (critically collaborative) helps to keep this one in check.

* See Warburton’s [A to Z of Thinking](#) or Baggini & Fosl’s [The Philosopher’s Toolkit](#) and similar books for a fuller list of critical thinking skills mentioned at 20.

Bibliography and references

This ‘starting’ list of intellectual virtues has been written by Peter Worley (CEO and co-founder of TPF) but arrived at through many conversations between TPF members and associates including:

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The list is also especially informed by the following two papers by Professor Mary Margaret McCabe (KCL):

‘Plato’s Ways of Writing’ In *The Oxford Handbook of Plato* edited by Gail Fine (Oxford University Press 2008)

'Is Dialectic as Dialectic Does? The Virtue of Philosophical Conversation' in *The Virtuous Life in Greek Ethics* edited Burkhard Reis (Cambridge University Press 2006)