

THE SIX WISE MEN

THE PHILOSOPHY

- ✓ Aristotle on parts and wholes (see quote below).
- ✓ Socrates on knowing that you know nothing.
- ✓ Frank Jackson and 'Mary and the Black and White Room'
- ✓ Russell's theory of descriptions
- ✓ Plato on particulars and universals

Teaching Strategies

Quote to use with class (if appropriate): 'The whole is more than the sum of its parts.' Attributed to Aristotle in his Metaphysics but is present in the work as a whole rather than as a part! Plato sets up this problem in his Theaetetus.

As you describe the different sensations that the wise men feel help the children by visualising the descriptions with mimed actions as you speak. For this reason, it is a good idea to memorise this story rather than read it. I also find that miming helps you to find good description words without having to remember them all. You are almost just saying what you find.

Most of the nested questions and extension activities have emerged from discussions with children, and have usually come from the children, aged between 5 and 10 (Years 1-5).

Easily adapted for nursery, reception and KS4 / KS5

Stimulus

A long time ago in India there were six wise men and each of the wise men thought he knew everything there was to know. News of their great wisdom travelled far and wide throughout India until the news reached the ears of a King. He decided to offer a test to the six wise men to see if they really knew everything there was to know. In the message he added that thousands of people would attend so if they did not accept his invitation they would be seen as cowards.

Upon hearing about the King's test the wise men all arrived at his kingdom as they had a reputation to preserve. He showed them a huge tent that he had erected in his courtyard and told them that all they had to do was to tell him what was inside the tent. "That will be easy," said the wise men.

The King replied, "Well, of course it will be easy, if you know all there is to know." The King then explained how the test was to be conducted. The tent was as big as a house and around the outside were six doorways into the tent. The wise men would each go into a different doorway but they would all be blindfolded when they entered. They would only be able to discover what was inside the tent by touch. "But this should not be a problem for you," said the King, "As you all know everything there is to know."

"Indeed!" Replied the wise men.

The first wise man was blindfolded and he entered through the first door. Inside the tent he suddenly bumped into something large and flat that stood in his way. He reached with his hands to discover that whatever it was stood as far as he could reach in either direction. He came out of the tent and said, "I know what's in the tent. It's a wall."

The second wise man then entered through the second door. He could feel something very different. In his hands he held something long and thin and flexible that felt rough to the touch with a frayed end. When he emerged from the tent he declared: "It's rope in the tent!"

Upon entering the tent through the third door the third wise man felt something long, thin, smooth and hard that bent slightly as it came to a sharp point. "It's a bent spear!" He told the King.

The fourth wise man came out and said, "I found something large and flappy that felt leathery and was high up off the ground so it must have been a flag on a pole."

The fifth wise man disagreed. When he came out of the tent he said, "It was solid and cylindrical and came up out of the ground and was very hard and rough. It is a tree trunk, or maybe a tree."

Finally, the sixth wise man went into the tent. He felt something long and slippery and bendy. He came running out of the tent and screamed, "It's a snake! I hate snakes! Aaagh!"

So the first wise man thought it was a wall in the tent, the second wise man thought there was rope in there, the third wise man thought the King had put a bent spear in the tent, the fourth wise man thought there was a flag in there, the fifth wise man thought it was a tree growing out of the ground and the sixth wise man thought he had met a snake in the tent.

Write the list on the board:

1. A wall
2. A rope
3. A spear
4. A flag
5. A tree trunk
6. A snake

Task Question 1:

- ✓ How many things do you think are in the tent?

Nested questions and extension questions:

- ✓ Does it have to be six things or could it be one thing?
- ✓ If there is a wall, a rope, a spear, a flag, a tree trunk and a snake in the tent all tied together then would that be one thing or six things? (From a Year 2 child)
- ✓ If you build a robot you begin by having lots of different bits but when you have finished there is a robot. So, is the robot one thing or many things? (From a Year 2 child)
- ✓ If you have a man holding a spear how many things are there? If you have a statue of a man with a spear, then how many things are there?
- ✓ If there were six different types of tree in the tent could that be one thing, because they are all trees, or six things, six types of tree?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY ON THE PRECEDING POINT

Write four number 2s on the board:

Then ask the class how many numbers there are on the board. (See Plato and particulars and universals)

Stimulus Continued

The six wise men stood there arguing about what they thought was in the tent for a long time before one of them said, "Hey, maybe the King is trying to trick us and maybe there are six different things in the tent." They all turned to the King and said, "Are there six different things in the tent?"

"No," replied the King. "There is only one thing in the tent and you have all touched the same thing. So, tell me what it is to pass the test."

The six wise men all looked at each other quite puzzled as to what was in the tent. 'What one thing could it be,' they thought to themselves, 'that would fit all the descriptions they had given?'

Task Question 2:

- ✓ What one thing do you think is in the tent that would fit all the descriptions given?

Nested Questions

- ✓ Could it be a changing thing?
- ✓ Is it possible that it is one thing that does not change or would it have to change?

Stimulus Continued

Once all the wise men had said what they thought was in the tent the King gave the order for the tent to be raised. A host of soldiers pulled on some ropes at the side and the tent slowly began to rise. When the tent had risen a few feet off the ground they could all see what appeared to be four tree trunks, two at the front and two at the back, standing under the tent, like this: [draw an illustration of a tent rising with four 'tree trunks']

If none of the children have guessed that it is an elephant so far then allow them to have another guess by anchoring them with TQ 2 again. As the tent is lifted you could give them another clue if necessary and/or draw another illustration on the board that reveals a little more information. If someone does say that they think it is an elephant then get the class to check it against the six descriptions, writing each thing next to the original claim:

1. A wall - body
2. A rope - tail
3. A spear - tusk
4. A flag - ear
5. A tree trunk - leg
6. A snake - trunk

Eventually the tent was raised and it was revealed that inside the tent was... an elephant! None of the wise men had guessed that it was an elephant so the King said to them that this test had proved that they did not, after all, know all there was to know.

Task Question 3:

- ✓ It was an elephant that was in the tent. So, was it one thing in the tent or six things?

Nested Questions for further discussions:

- ✓ Is it possible to know everything?
- ✓ Is it wise to think you know everything?
- ✓ If they had worked together, could they have discovered what it was in the tent?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

If you lose one of your five senses (i.e. smell, touch, sight, taste or hearing) Task Question: Can you still know things? If so, how? Carry on in this way, removing one sense at a time until, eventually, all the senses have been removed. TQ: Can you know anything if you have no senses?

Poem: How do you know that you know? By Steve Turner in 'I Was Only Asking'

If you knew everything about how to ride a bike, but you had never ridden a bike, would you be able to ride a bike when you tried for the first time? (See Frank Jackson on Mary and The Black and White Room)

If you have a 'stick man' made up of five pencils, ten bolts and a bowl, then how many things are there? Is it 16 things (all the parts added up)? Is it three things (all the kinds of things used, i.e. pencils, bolts, bowl)? Or is it one thing (the stick man)? Or is it 17 things (the 16 things it's made of plus the one thing they make) Or another number of things?

Good simple TQ: How many things am I?

(Particularly good for younger children: nursery to Year 3) Feeley-bag game: One child puts their hand into a bag with an object in it. They have to get the class to guess what's in the bag but they can only describe how it feels. E.g. 'It's hard and curvy. It's long and thin...' etc.)

Two teams: a variation on the above game where a table is placed in the middle of the classroom and the class is split into two. Each group sits on either side of table and they can see an object the other team cannot see. They have to get the other team to guess what it is but they are not allowed to say what it is only describe it. You could award points for the number of guesses it takes. The least number of guesses getting the highest reward, but this optional.

Poem: Can You Know Everything?

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Can you know everything?

Can all things be known?

Can you know anything?

Hidden from view?
Or will some things remain
Forever unseen?

Always in darkness,
If we count every number
Where we'll never have been?
How many are left?

If we read every book -
Can another be written
Including the best -
With something new in?

Can we make-up new words
If we turn every stone
Can we keep questioning?
Is there naught to discover?

If we find the first person:
Then where do we go
Humanity's mother,
If there's nothing to know?

And what shall we do?

Will we no longer grow?

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