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# Unicorn Horns - thinking about things that don't exist

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This is a development of 'Nobody's home' from The If Odyssey and is designed to get the class thinking about non-existent entities. These include fictional characters of all kinds, but they also include some more controversial examples such as Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. The problem is characterized in this statement 'The Tooth Fairy does not exist', which seems to say 'there is something that does not exist', but then if it does not exist then how can it be anything? (See 'Plato's Beard' quote below.) As an 8-year-old girl once said in answer to the Thoughting 'How To Know Everything' (see 40 lessons... page 45), 'If there is anything that can't exist, then it exists, so there can't be anything that can't exist.'

Equipment needed and preparation:

- \* Talk-circle ready
- \* A4 paper or a few small whiteboards, pens and erasers
- \* (Optional, see below) an image of a narwhal horn ready
- \* (Optional) an classic image of a unicorn
- \* An 'imaginary friend' (see below)

Starting age: 7 years

Subject links: Myths and legends, literacy (reference and meaning)

Key controversies: How can something that doesn't exist have any special features? To say that something does not exist seems to presuppose that it does?

Key concepts / vocabulary: existence, real, true, mythological, reference, being/non-being, meaning, sense.

Quote: 'This is the old Platonic riddle of non-being. Non-being must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not? This tangled doctrine might be nick-named 'Plato's beard...' Willard Van Orman Quine, philosopher 'On What There Is' 'Santa is real, because it's Christmas soon, so he must be real.' - Katie Worley (the author's daughter), aged 3½

Key facilitation tools: Absence - just as a fictional or mythical entity like a unicorn is, in a way, there and, in a way, not there, so too must you be, when you facilitate. I call this 'absence', but it is more a balance between presence and absence. Absent, in that you don't say what you think or lead the discussion to your own conclusions, but present, in that you help the children find their way around with effective and appropriate use of facilitation tools. A good facilitator, like a good waiter, is 'present and hidden'.

## Session Plan

Do: Begin by asking this task question:

### Task Question:

- How many horns does a unicorn have?

### Nested Questions

- What is a unicorn?
- Are there any special features a unicorn must have to be a unicorn?
- Are unicorns real?
- If they are not real then how many horns does a unicorn have?
- If they are real then how many horns does a unicorn have?
- How can something that is not real have any special features at all?

See 'Facilitating idea-diversity' on page 160 of 40 lessons to get children thinking to help with getting the discussion going around this simple question starter. Here's some structured guidance for on facilitating this particular session to a controversy if the class don't do so for themselves.

Imaginary Disagreer Dialogue

Say: Imagine two children, Robert and Aisha are arguing about how many horns a unicorn has. Robert says, 'Unicorns have \_\_\_\_ horn(s); everyone knows that!'

Task Question 1: How many horns do you think Robert said unicorns have?

Say: Aisha disagrees with Robert; she thinks something different. She says: 'I disagree, unicorns have \_\_\_\_\_ horn(s)'

### Task Question 2:

- How many horns do you think Aisha said unicorns have?

Do: If necessary, you could insert the following two positions to help engage the children with the controversy, though these are not the only positions that could be offered:

- \* Robert thinks that unicorns have one horn.
- \* Aisha thinks that unicorns have as many horns as you want.

Open up: ask the children to say why Robert and Aisha think what they think. (See 'Opening up' in 'Facilitating idea-diversity' on page 160 of '40 lessons...')

### Extension activities

Use the following simple story optionally as desired and where appropriate:

Story: The Unicorn Without a Horn

Once there was unicorn foal that was born different from all the other unicorns. She had been born without a horn. Her mother had named her 'Unique'. Do I need to say why?

Many of the other young unicorns nicknamed her 'Pony' because she looked like a horse rather than a unicorn. One day, when she was old enough, Unique asked her mother, 'Am I a unicorn?'

### Task Question:

- Is Unique a unicorn?

### Nested Questions:

- What is a unicorn?
- Is a unicorn just a horse with a horn?
- Is a horse a unicorn without a horn?
- What is a horse?
- According to legend unicorns are white, with one horn, with cloven hooves, sometimes with a goat's beard, wild, and can only be tamed by a young girl (a virgin), their horn was said to make poison water safe to drink and to be able to heal the sick. Is a dragon that can't breathe fire a dragon? (See 'Matilda the Fireless Dragon' in Once Upon an If)

### Sentence Magnets

Write on a piece of A4 paper or a small whiteboard the following sentence: 'A unicorn has one horn'.

Ask the class to stand in a position that indicates their agreement/disagreement with the statement (e.g. Stand on it if you strongly agree and stand by your chair if you strongly disagree or somewhere in between if something else). You may want to find out why students are standing where they are. Hint: this is a good way to find out where those with interesting positions (the ones more likely to create controversy) are located. It's also a good way for the children to get some idea of what the other children think.

Now repeat the process with the following sentence: 'A unicorn does not exist.'

Next, ask the following task question:

### Task Question:

- Can both of these sentences be true at the same time?

### Nested Questions

- Can it be true that a unicorn has one horn and that a unicorn does not exist?

More scenarios and ideas (all drawn from conversations with primary school children)

- \* Show an image of a Narwhal's tusk (see here: [https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=narwhal+tusk&espv=2&biw=1309&bih=683&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0CAcQ\\_AUoAmoVChMlivzQ4-eZyQIVwmkUCh2xEgAp](https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=narwhal+tusk&espv=2&biw=1309&bih=683&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0CAcQ_AUoAmoVChMlivzQ4-eZyQIVwmkUCh2xEgAp) ) and say that these are real and they belong to a real animal. Are they evidence that unicorns exist?
- \* Explain that the tusk is that of a Narwhal (show an image of one) and then say, 'If you were to somehow attach the horn of a narwhal to a horse's forehead would that be a unicorn?'
- \* If a creature identical to a horse with a horn on its forehead were to evolve on a distant planet unknown to us, would that be a unicorn? (Would it be a horse?)
- \* If a fossil were discovered on Earth that was a horse with a horn, would that be a unicorn? (Compare this to a sabre-toothed tiger)
- \* If a horse was born with a protrusion on its forehead that resembled a horn, would that be a unicorn?
- \* If a unicorn was born with a deformity so that it did not have a horn would it still be a unicorn? (It has unicorn parents)
- \* The word 'unicorn' means 'one-horned' (just as 'Cyclops' means 'one-eyed'). Does this mean that a unicorn must have one horn? (Here are some interesting confirming and disconfirming examples: 'bicycle' means 'two-wheeled' and 'unicycle' means 'one-wheeled' but 'centipede' means 'hundred-footed' though centipedes don't have exactly one hundred legs; 'brain' comes from a word that originally meant 'forehead' but now it refers to what's inside our head.)
- \* If 'unicorn' simply means 'one-horned' is a narwhal a unicorn?

## Ancient Greek unicorns

For the ancient Greeks unicorns weren't thought to be mythical but real, though very, very rare. (See here under 'History': <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unicorn>)

### Task Question:

- Does this mean that unicorns were real for the ancient Greeks?

### Nested Questions

- Can something like this be true for one person or group and not true for another?
- Were the Greeks simply wrong?
- Could we be wrong? (See 'More scenarios and ideas' above)

## Real and Not Real

Place a series of objects on the floor in the middle of the Talk Circle:

- \* A book with a picture of a mythological creature on the cover (E.g. Unicorn, cyclops, dragon and so on)
- \* A doll of some kind
- \* A cup
- \* A representative picture you've quickly drawn
- \* A very detailed and skilled portrait of someone such as the Mona Lisa
- \* A photograph of someone
- \* Light (maybe use a torch to project a light beam onto a piece of coloured paper)
- \* An imaginary friend (for this you can have a bit of fun: I usually say that I've brought with me my daughter's imaginary friend. Be careful you don't tread on her! Can anyone help me decide which category she should go?)

Place two pieces of A4 paper (or whiteboards) on the floor creating two categories: 'Real' and 'Not Real'

Ask the children to stand up one at a time and to place an item into a category. When they have placed their item the rule is they have to say why they placed it there. When another child has a go they can place any item in either of the two categories which includes items already placed in a category. However, if they replace an item in a new category they have to justify doing so (this helps to create healthy tensions).

To make this more nuanced you could have four categories (this idea I borrowed from Shapiro - see below):

- 1) Looks real but is not real
- 2) Looks real and is real
- 3) Does not look real and is not real

4) Does look real and is real

## **Links**

- \* The Philosophy Shop: 'Metaphysics: Fiction' section (pp.131-140)
- \* Plato Was Wrong! By David Shapiro: Section 4: 'What is Real?'
- \* The Velveteen Rabbit (or How Toys Become Real) by Margery Williams esp. first chapter.
- \* Philosophy For Young Children by Berys and Morag Gaut: 'Angus The Cat' (p. 110) in.
- \* Once Upon an If: Once Upon an If and Matilda The Fireless Dragon
- \* Thoughtings: Where's Mr. Nobody?