

## **Lesson Plan 2: Knowing and not knowing** The Civic Knowledge Project: Winning Words

Time: 1 hour

SWBAT: Discuss last week's assignment to contrive questions without easy answers, inaugurate a class journal for each student in which students will record the first two words of the week, discuss the relationship between wisdom and communication.

### **Recapitulation of wisdom; discussion of questions** (15-20 minutes)

Again, seat students in a configuration that promotes discussion. Remind them that discussion is the most important part of the class, and that it is important for all to listen to others, and share their ideas. Produce the result of last week's assignment, and write particularly astute answer-less questions on the board. Ask their creators to explain them to the class, and foster a class discussion about why some questions are harder to answer than others. Is there something similar about all of these questions?

### **Know-it-all** (15-20 minutes)

Select questions from those created by the students, and find one student willing to provide an answer. Have him or her come to the front of the class and offer an argument, attempting to convince other students that his or her answer is correct, and is the sort of answer that a "wise" person would give. Act as an insistent moderator, telling students to sharpen various points, or explain further insufficiently explicated arguments. Do not hesitate to tell students that they've made an illogical point, or strayed too far into a specific story or anecdote. After the argument has been made, ask all students to take a vote: is the student's argument perfect, or could it be proved wrong in some way? Pick one of the students voting in the negative and ask him or her to come to the front and highlight the problem with the first student's argument. The point of this exercise is of course not to find answers, but to get students used to making serious arguments, being coached, advised, and corrected by a friendly and consistent teacher, and being politely proven wrong by their classmates.<sup>1</sup>

### **Starting a notebook; the first two terms: *wisdom* and *aporia*** (20 minutes)

Distribute a notebook or notepad to each student. Remind students that they must bring their notebooks to each class. Students will use their notebooks to record noteworthy topics that the class discusses, and appealing or thought-provoking comments made by classmates. Remind students that another good use for notebooks is mapping or planning out complicated ideas while they prepare to say them out loud. Additionally, the notebooks provide a place for students to record two new philosophical vocabulary words taught each class period. The purpose of this weekly practice is two-fold. It is first to equip the students with a small reserve of words on which to draw when expressing philosophical ideas. Second, it is to provide students with a working understanding of a number of abstract philosophical concepts on which they can build for their final presentation.

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<sup>1</sup> My students took a very tolerant approach to conflicting arguments, often chalking differences in reasoning up to differences of taste or personal opinion. For this reason, I urge insisting from the start that a good argument is good because it is true for everyone. A philosopher, I had often to remind my students, admits that he is wrong rather than resorting to "my argument is true for me."

**Wisdom.** Compile a nice jumble of student definitions and tell students to record these as possible definitions for wisdom in their notebooks. Contemplate again, as a class, a few of the definitions' merits. Why do they deserve a place in our class's definition?; What are their shortcomings?

**Aporia.** If the discussion of wisdom has proceeded judiciously, this word will serve nicely to describe the circumstances in which the class finds itself. We seek an understanding of this idea, but are met with a range of partially satisfactory answers. For younger students, describe aporia as a word for philosophical bewilderment, confusion, or lack of knowledge about a subject. Older, more capable students might benefit from a reading of Aristotle's methodological statement in the *Metaphysics*:

*"The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, we do not collectively fail, but every one says something true about the nature of things, and while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed. Therefore, since the truth seems to be like the proverbial door, which no one can fail to hit, in this respect it must be easy, but the fact that we can have a whole truth and not the particular part we aim at shows the difficulty of it."*<sup>2 3</sup>

Emphasize, either way, that many of the earliest people who practiced philosophy thought that aporia was the first step in "loving wisdom." Why could this be? Is aporia a good thing to feel, or a bad thing? Why would someone who "loves wisdom" feel good about being confused? Younger students might benefit from the chance to record in their notebooks times in their lives at which they were confused, and their response to these circumstances. Always permit and encourage discussion if it seems to assist in student understanding.

### Closing

Collect all permission slips. Check in with students as to what they think of the class so far, and inform them that next class, they will discuss conversations that they have had, and make plans for class conversation in the future.

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<sup>2</sup> W.D. Ross, trans., *Aristotle's Metaphysics, Book II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

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