

## Lesson Plan 1

### The Civic Knowledge Project: Winning Words

Time: 1 hour

SWBAT: Become familiar with their teacher, and the basic format of the class; Discuss and share current understanding of the term wisdom”; Become acquainted with one sort of question with which philosophy concerns itself, and carefully consider a few such questions together.

#### **The meanings of ‘wisdom’; student/teacher introductions (15-20 minutes)**

Seat students around a large table if possible. If the classroom contains many desks and chairs facing the front of the room, have students arrange chairs into a large circle for discussion. Introduce yourself, and inform the students that you are yourself a student at university who studies and discusses something called “philosophy,” and that philosophy means, literally, “the love of wisdom.” Students may have heard these words before, but will likely not be able to produce concrete definitions of them. Inform the students that, in order to see what they know, and to become acquainted with them personally, you would like to discuss the matter of ‘wisdom’ with them. Be certain to inform students that this activity requires that all be willing to listen carefully to one another without disruption, and that, before saying anything, each student must first carefully think about what he or she wishes to say, and raise his or her hand.<sup>1</sup>

Choose a student to begin, and proceed through all, inquiring as to name, grade in school, and opinion regarding the question “what is wisdom?” Invite each student, after sharing his or her opinion, to write it on the board next to his or her name.

#### **Discussion**

After sharing, begin a seminar-style discussion.<sup>2</sup> Point out which definitions agree with one another, and which conflict. Ask students with conservative definitions to elaborate, and attempt to cull clarification from students with vague ideas. Avoid constructing a consensus, and do not supplant even wacky student definitions with a dictionary definition, or your own definition. A further point: do not hesitate to hasten students away from tedious hypotheticals. Remind them that they are discussing ideas and word definitions—not specific real-life situations.

#### **Agree/Disagree (25 minutes)**

The goal of this exercise is to see how students respond to questions that do not have easy answers, and to demonstrate why philosophers concern themselves with such questions.

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of elementary and middle school students, I have found hand-raising to be absolutely necessary in order to prevent repressive discourteousness. As time goes on this may become unneeded, and I once encountered a class small enough to not require it from the start.

<sup>2</sup> By this I mean a seminar-style class discussion with the teacher as aggressive moderator. Do not hesitate to politely jump in and welcome the student to the class before raising a question or reservation about part of his or her definition. Invite students to address each other, etc., but do not permit tangential chatter to overtake the initial question. If I seem pesky in saying this, it is only because such distractions were a constant problem in my classes and classes I observed. The goal is discussion-based classes for young people made possible by insistent and thoughtful guidance from a teacher.

Inform students that discussing what wisdom is can be very difficult, and that such difficulty is experienced often by philosophers—people who think about it all the time. Now that the question “what is wisdom” has been asked, the class will see how its definitions of wisdom work in practice. Place two signs at opposite ends of the room, one reading “agree,” the other “disagree.” Place a third sign in the center, “not sure.” Tell students that they should run to the sign expressing the opinion of a wise person in response to each of the statements that you put to them.

*This school's principal is named [insert name of principal].*

*This school is in Toronto.*

*Chicago is a city in Illinois.*

*The floor of this room is [insert color of floor].*

Are the answers to such questions easy or difficult to find? If somebody didn't know whether these were true or false, how would they go about looking for that information—this is to say, what method of inquiry would they use? Continue with the statements, moving further from empirically ascertainable claims and toward ethics. Have students explain their positions.

*It is dangerous to go outside alone late at night.*

*It is wrong to kill someone.*

*It is right to help others when they are in trouble.*

*It is always wrong to tell a lie.*

Hopefully some students will have placed themselves in the “not sure” area. Encourage some discussion about this, and draw out their explanations for “not knowing” the answer. Is it bad to “not know,” or is it good? If we do not know the answer, do we have to find one, or should we be content not knowing?

### **Not knowing** (15 minutes)

Distribute paper to students and ask them to choose a statement to which their response was “not sure,” or make up a statement or question to which “not sure” is the wisest response. What, according to their view of wisdom, makes this the wisest response, and why do they think this? Ask them to take their time and carefully explain *why* this is their opinion. Remind them that their spelling, writing quality, or eloquence is not of concern—that you are only trying to understand what they think about the question of wisdom, and that willingness to share is essential for the class to be successful.

### **Closing**

Collect sheets and offer students thanks for attending a session of Winning Words. Ask for a show of hands to see how many students may wish to return. \*\*Hand out permission slip forms to students who are considering returning. Inform students that next class, they will be starting notebooks and talking learning more about philosophy.