

thinkers' games

making thinking physical

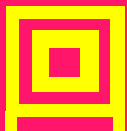
think



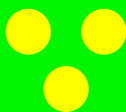
commit



reflect



justify



Jason Buckley

the
philosophy
man

The starting point for any Thinkers' Game is to ask players to consider a **quarrelsome question**.

By that, I mean a question on which reasonable, informed people give different answers for different reasons. These can be open questions which invite many different answers:

What is happiness?

What makes science different from other subjects?

How do we know if something is beautiful?

But "closed" questions with a limited range of answers can still be wide open to conflicting reasons on each side:

Should people keep pets?

Would you rather be rich, beautiful or clever?

What order should these go in, from most to least evil?

Avoid questions where you can reveal the answer they should have got. When players have committed publicly to an answer, it's demotivating to catch them out.

Also avoid questions that are just about taste. We can't argue about, "Do you like Brussels sprouts?" However, "Would you rather . . ." questions are fine, because they invite reasons for preferences which might sway others.

More on questions throughout and on pages 40-42.



Commit

After the players have had a chance to think, they need to **commit** to an answer, by **moving themselves or some stuff**.

Moving themselves could mean crossing the circle if their answer to a question is yes, or standing on one side or other of a dividing line; or standing next to one of a choice of answers laid out on the floor; or making a physical connection to another player.

Moving some stuff could mean placing pictures inside or outside a circle, or writing and then arranging a series of cards in a particular order to show the ingredients of a particular concept.

How the commit stage works is what makes each game distinctive. The important thing is that however the answer is represented, for each player or group, **the thinking is made physical** so that everyone can see it. This has several effects:

- Makes it easier to engage than to disengage.
- Builds in thinking time.
- You know when they're ready to give their reasons.
- Highlights disagreements.
- Enables collaboration between those who share opinions.
- Creates curiosity about why others think differently.
- Endorses diversity of opinion and individuality.
- Provides a visual focus and reference for the discussion.
- Uses physical energy positively.
- Leads to playful competition.
- It's fun.



In this stage, players justify their thinking with their best arguments, and respond to each other. If you are asking a series of questions, you won't necessarily progress to discuss each and every one. You might wait for a question which occasions disagreement, or which they found tricky, taking time to commit to their answers.

A variety of factors mean these games promote engagement from a wide range of pupils.

- Thinking time is built in.
- They may have already rehearsed their thinking with others
- Standing next to like-minded people makes them feel secure
- Because they are standing, it feels more like their social talk.
- They enjoy the contest of disagreeing with an "opponent"
- They may be looking at the previous speaker, not at you.

Hear from those who have decided they can't decide as well – or you will encourage shyer children to sit on the fence. Also quiz those who have "broken the rules" and shown their thinking in a way not specified in the game.

A fuller list of facilitation techniques can be found in the companion minibook to this one, Pocket P4C. The key overall judgement is expressed in Roger Sutcliffe's questions, "Are they thinking? Are they thinking for themselves?" - if not the former, prod them to defend their reasons and make connections. But don't intervene too much or they are merely filling in the gaps.

Teacher chooses, Question Captain, or Pass It On?

If you choose who speaks, you can retain control and run an efficient discussion; but it still revolves around you, so they miss out on building turn-taking and awareness.

To shift the focus away from you, and begin to distribute the simplest aspect of facilitation, have a different **Question Captain** for each question. He or she chooses who speaks.

Or have each speaker choose the next, in a **Pass It On** discussion. Slower, but feels very democratic.

Hands Up, No Hands Up, or Just Speak?

Because they have already committed to what they think, you can ask **“Why do you think...”** rather than a bald “What do you think? That’s a much gentler invitation to speak, creating an opportunity for **No Hands Up**, so that everyone is assumed to have something to say and anyone can be called on to speak.

No hands-up broadens participation, but it can lead to stilted dialogue. Starting this way and then hearing from a few players with hands up is a good compromise. Less confident players can make the easier points first, others can then build on to them.

With small groups, a **Just Speak** discussion taking turns naturally with no signal is an ideal. They have to be very aware of others and you must be alert to bring in less forceful players.



In debating, and by extension in political life, to change your mind is to lose. In a Thinkers' Game, it shows you respond to the reasons you hear, and are not tied by prejudice.

Players will often show a change of mind by moving themselves or stuff spontaneously as they hear an argument, or a new thought occurs to them. However, shyer children may not want to attract attention by being the only one to move - so it's best to ask the question again and ask everyone to show what they think now, as they reflect on what they have heard.

Make this one stage where the speaking is always opt-in –
“Who'd like to share why they changed their minds?”

The other aspect of the reflection stage is to look not just at the content of the arguments given, but to think about the kinds of thinking moves that were made, and introduce suitable vocabulary to help all members of the group add those moves to their repertoire. Thinking about the thinking (**metacognition**) is crucial to the success of any thinking skills program.

Varieties of thinking you might seek to highlight can be seen on the “bingo card” opposite, using the “4Cs” model from P4C.

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Opportunities for metacognition that tend to occur in particular games are highlighted in boxes like this. The symbol is part of a Japanese word for self-reflection and rather neatly illustrates the idea of thinking itself as the subject of thought.