A SIX-LESSON UNIT · PHILOSOPHY, ETHICS AND CITIZENSHIP

Thinking About Democracy

How to discuss politics in class without indoctrinating: misinformation, doubt, dialogue, the common good and collective action. With photocopiable worksheets and a rubric.

For	Length	Format	Author
Students aged 15-18	4 to 6 lessons of 50-55 minutes, or stand-alone lessons	Project-based unit with a final product	María Ferrer Tarazona, philosophy teacher

Why this guide

Discussing politics in class can feel daunting, and for good reason: no teacher wants the classroom to turn into a rally, or a heated argument to damage the group. But avoiding the subject has a cost: students learn about politics anyway, just on social media, in fifteen-second clips and in arguments where nobody listens to anyone.

This guide offers another way: **instead of telling students what to think, it gives them tools to think with**. Checking before sharing, holding opinions with the confidence their reasons deserve, talking with people who disagree, understanding what we share, and discovering that we can act. These are tools philosophy has been refining for twenty-five centuries, and they serve anyone, whatever their politics.

Each lesson draws on a free article from the Clarua Books blog and on a chapter of *Talks on a Park Bench*, in which four teenagers, Marc, Nora, Diego and Vera, run into these problems in their everyday lives. You don't need the book: the articles contain everything you need.

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1. Principles for discussing politics in class

In 1976, a group of civic education experts from across the political spectrum met in the small German town of Beutelsbach and agreed on three principles that remain an international reference for teaching politics. They are known as the **Beutelsbach Consensus**:

Principle	What it means in practice
Do not overwhelm	Teachers do not impose their opinions or use their position to steer students' judgement. The aim is for each student to form their own view.
What is controversial stays controversial	If a question is open in society and in academic debate, it must also be presented as open in class, with its different positions.
Start from the students	Students should be able to analyse political situations in terms of their own interests and learn how to take part in them.

Ten practical guidelines

1. **Tools, not conclusions.** Assess how students reason, never what they think.
2. **Use invented examples.** Avoid videos, quotes or cases involving real parties or politicians. A single real example is enough for part of the class to feel their side is under attack. All the worksheets in this guide use fictional cases.
3. **Start close to home.** Begin with issues from school, the neighbourhood or online life before national politics.
4. **Agree on discussion rules at the start** and keep them visible throughout the unit (see lesson 3).
5. **Separate facts, values and predictions.** Well-established facts are not a matter of "everyone has their own truth"; questions of value do allow for reasonable disagreement.
6. **Nobody has to reveal how they vote** or their political views. Every activity works without anyone taking a public stance.
7. **If students ask for your opinion,** you can explain that your role in class is to help them think, not to decide for them.
8. **Look after minority views** in the group. If one position is left alone, present its strongest argument yourself.
9. **Let families know** about the approach if you think it helps: "we work on critical thinking and dialogue, without taking sides".
10. **During election periods,** avoid activities that could look like campaigning close to election day, respect any pre-election rules that apply where you teach, and rely on fictional examples even more.

> **If a discussion gets heated:** use "Seneca's delay" from lesson 3. Pause the activity, ask for one minute of silence to write down exactly what the other person said, and restart with the rule of restating before replying. Turning the moment into learning usually works better than shutting it down.

2. Skills and curriculum links

The unit is designed to fit courses in **philosophy, ethics, civics and citizenship, social studies, media and information literacy** and **tutor or advisory time**, as well as interdisciplinary projects. Rather than following one national curriculum, it is organised around transferable skills that appear in most secondary curricula. Map them onto the objectives of your own course and assessment framework.

Skill	What students practise	Lessons
Information and media literacy	Evaluating sources, recognising misleading or decontextualised content, verifying before sharing	1, 2
Argumentation and reasoning	Building and evaluating arguments; detecting fallacies, bias and dogmatic ways of holding opinions	1, 2, 3
Dialogue	Asking genuine questions, listening, restating other views fairly, disagreeing respectfully	3, 6
Understanding pluralism	Recognising that reasonable people hold different positions, and why	2, 3, 4
Ethical and political reasoning	Analysing ethical and political problems, the common good and shared responsibility	4, 5, 6
Civic participation	Moving from powerlessness to collective, peaceful action in their own community	5, 6
Self-management	Managing anger, intellectual humility, reflecting on their own learning	2, 3, 6

Key concepts

Argument and fallacy; scepticism and methodical doubt; opinion and knowledge (Plato's *doxa* and *episteme*); confirmation bias, filter bubbles and echo chambers; the common good and the tragedy of the commons; power, force and collective action; intellectual humility.

Thinkers

Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Pyrrho, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Montaigne, Descartes, John Stuart Mill, Hannah Arendt and Elinor Ostrom, with contributions from Amos Oz, Eli Pariser and Daniel Dennett.

3. Unit overview

The challenge. "Whenever an election comes round, or a controversial topic comes up in the class group chat, we end up arguing, sharing videos we haven't checked, or keeping quiet to avoid trouble. Can we learn to talk about what matters to us without falling apart?"

The final product. A **Democracy Survival Guide** made by the class: a poster, leaflet or digital document with the tools from each lesson, written for the rest of the school. Each lesson contributes one page.

#	Lesson	Guiding question	Philosophy	Page for the guide
1	Leaving the cave	How do I know whether I'm seeing reality or its shadow?	Plato	4 questions before you share
2	The certainty thermometer	How sure should I be of what I think?	Pyrrho, Socrates, Montaigne, Descartes	When to doubt, and when not to
3	Talking without fighting	Can we talk about politics without falling out?	Seneca, Socrates, Mill	Rules for dialogue
4	The beehive	What do people who disagree have in common?	Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Ostrom	What we look after together
5	Acting together	What can I do, if I can't change anything alone?	Hannah Arendt	A first collective step
6	The guide	What have we learnt, and how do we share it?	Synthesis	Putting it together and presenting it

Three ways to use this guide

Format	Lessons	When
Full unit (6 lessons)	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5 · 6	A philosophy or citizenship unit, or a tutor-time project
Short unit (4 lessons)	1 (with lesson 2's "verification pause" as homework) · 3 · 4 · 6	When time is short; keeps the final product
Stand-alone lessons	Any	Each lesson works on its own. Lesson 3 is the most useful during an election campaign or after a conflict in the group

General materials: projector or board, the photocopiable worksheets in section 6, card or a shared document for the guide, and access to the blog articles (printed or on screen).

4. The six lessons, step by step

LESSON 1 Leaving the cave: information, shadows and algorithms

Supporting article: the free blog article on Plato's cave and misinformation · ***Talks on a Park Bench*:** chapters 2.9 and 1.2

Objective: understand the allegory of the cave and use it to analyse how information reaches us; learn a verification routine. **Materials:** worksheet A (a news story in two versions).

Time	What happens
10 min	**Reading and drawing.** Read the allegory (summary from the article, or the passage from Plato's *Republic*, Book VII). In pairs, students draw the cave and label its parts.
10 min	**Today's cave.** Students map the drawing onto their online lives: what is the wall? who moves the figures? what are the chains? Share on the board. Introduce filter bubbles and echo chambers.
15 min	**Shadow and object (worksheet A).** First read only the headline, and each student writes their opinion; then read the full text. What changed? Why is the headline more shareable? Classify it: false, out of context or selective.
10 min	**Four steps out of the cave.** Present the SIFT method (stop, investigate the source, find better coverage, trace to the original) and confirmation bias. Each group writes its own "4 questions before you share".
5 min	**Exit card:** "One topic where I suspect I'm still looking at shadows is..."

For the guide: the page "4 questions before you share". **Assessment:** information literacy and reasoning, using worksheet A and the exit card.

LESSON 2 The certainty thermometer: doubt without "anything goes"

Supporting article: the free blog article on scepticism and fanaticism · ***Talks on a Park Bench*:** chapters 4.4 and 4.13

Objective: distinguish facts, values and predictions; match confidence to reasons; tell scepticism apart from denial and relativism. **Materials:** worksheet B (ten statements).

Time	What happens
5 min	**Hook.** Tell the story of Diego and the edited video (article). Ask: has anything like this happened to you?
10 min	**Individual thermometer (worksheet B).** Students rate their confidence in each statement from 1 to 10 and note the kind of reason they have: evidence, experience, intuition or "it's what people say".
10 min	**Brief tour:** Pyrrho and *epoché*, Socrates and knowing that you don't know, Montaigne's "What do I know?", Descartes and methodical doubt. Key idea: doubt in order to build, not to avoid ever committing to anything.
15 min	**Three columns.** In groups, students sort the ten statements into "doubting would be absurd", "doubting is reasonable" and "doubting is necessary". Compare results and discuss disagreements.
10 min	**Scepticism versus denial.** Using the table in the article, each group invents an example of each attitude on a non-political topic (for example, whether a home remedy works). Close: "What would make you change your mind about something you'd rate 10 today?"

For the guide: "When to doubt, and when not to". **Optional homework:** a week of "verification pauses". **Assessment:** reasoning and understanding pluralism.

LESSON 3 Talking without fighting: Seneca, Socrates and Mill

Supporting article: the free blog article on talking about politics without falling out · ***Talks on a Park Bench*:** chapters 2.4 and 2.8

Objective: practise philosophical dialogue with genuine questions, restating and anger management; apply the principle of charity. **Materials:** worksheet C (Socratic question cards).

Time	What happens
10 min	**The rules.** Drawing on the article's lessons (Seneca's delay, Socrates' questions, Mill on opposing views, the principle of charity), the class agrees on 5 discussion rules, which stay on display.
5 min	**Choose a topic.** An open, debatable question with no parties or people: should voting be compulsory? should phones be banned at school? is it fair for grades to decide university entry?
15 min	**Socratic round.** Groups of four. Rule: you may only speak by asking. Each turn is a genuine question (worksheet C) to another member, who answers it. Anyone who makes a statement without asking loses their turn.
15 min	**Summarise the other side.** Each student writes, in three lines, the position opposite to theirs, so well that someone who holds it would sign it (Rapoport's rules, as set out by Daniel Dennett). Read some aloud.
5 min	**Reflection:** was it harder to ask or to listen? What did you learn from a view you don't share?

For the guide: "Rules for dialogue". **Assessment:** dialogue and reasoning, through observation and the "summarise the other side" text.

LESSON 4 The beehive: the common good and the tragedy of the commons

Supporting article: the free blog article on Marcus Aurelius and the common good · ***Talks on a Park Bench*:** chapter 3.1

Objective: understand the idea of the common good (Aristotle, the Stoics) and experience the tragedy of the commons and its solution through agreement (Ostrom). **Materials:** counters or dried beans (20 per group), worksheet D (dilemmas).

Time	What happens
10 min	**The quote.** "What is not good for the hive is not good for the bee" (Marcus Aurelius). Agree? Always? First reactions, no debate yet. Introduce Aristotle's idea of humans as political animals.
15 min	**The pasture game.** Groups of five share a "meadow" of 20 counters that grows by 25% each round if 10 or more remain. Each student secretly decides how many to take. Three rounds without talking; three more where they may agree rules.
10 min	**Debrief.** What happened in each phase? Introduce Garrett Hardin and Elinor Ostrom: communities can look after shared resources when they organise themselves, with their own rules, mutual monitoring and ways to resolve conflict.
10 min	**Dilemmas (worksheet D).** Each group discusses one case and prepares an argument for and one against.
5 min	**Close:** "What hives are there in your life, and what do you do for them?" Remember: the common good does not settle which policies are best; it reminds us there is something shared worth caring for.

For the guide: "What we look after together". **Assessment:** ethical and political reasoning, and pluralism.

LESSON 5 Acting together: Hannah Arendt on power

Supporting article: the free Hannah Arendt lesson plan at claruabooks.com/en/teachers/ · ***Talks on a Park Bench*:** chapter 3.12

Objective: move from powerlessness ("I can't change anything on my own") to collective action; distinguish force from power, and taking a break from the news from looking away. **Materials:** sample chapter 3.12 and teacher notes (free download from the teachers' page).

Time	What happens
10 min	**Reading** the passage in parts: Diego, fed up with the news, convinced that what he thinks makes no difference.
5 min	**Two lists:** "What can I do on my own?" and "Who could I act with?", about a problem at school or in the neighbourhood.
15 min	**The smallest first step.** In groups, students design a realistic, peaceful first step they could take within a week.
15 min	**Sharing,** and choosing one class proposal to include in the guide.
5 min	**Exit card:** "Something I felt I couldn't change is… and the people I could act with are…"

Tip: choose problems from school or the local area rather than national politics, so that action is realistic and nobody feels singled out. **For the guide:** "A first collective step". **Assessment:** civic participation and dialogue.

LESSON 6 The Democracy Survival Guide

Supporting article: the five previous lessons · ***Talks on a Park Bench*:** a synthesis of the whole unit

Objective: synthesise and communicate what has been learnt to others in the school; self-assess.

Time	What happens
5 min	**Allocation.** Each group takes one page of the guide (one per lesson), and one more group does the cover and introduction.
25 min	**Production.** Each page must include: the philosophical idea in one sentence, the thinker, a practical tool and an invented example. Format: poster, leaflet, slides or digital document.
15 min	**Gallery walk.** Pages are displayed and other groups leave sticky-note comments, with one rule: each suggestion must be phrased as a question.
5 min	**Self-assessment** using the target in section 5.

Sharing: the guide can be displayed in a corridor or the library, posted on the school website or presented to another class. That way the learning leaves the classroom, which is exactly what Arendt asked for. **Assessment:** the full rubric.

5. Assessment

Unit rubric

Criterion	Beginning (1)	Developing (2)	Secure (3)	Excellent (4)
Information and verification	Accepts information as it arrives	Sometimes doubts, but without a method	Uses verification questions with doubtful information	Verifies independently and explains the type of misinformation
Argument and bias	States views without reasons	Gives reasons, but confuses facts and opinions	Argues and spots fallacies and bias in others	Also spots their own bias and matches confidence to reasons
Dialogue	Interrupts or dismisses others	Listens, but replies without understanding	Asks, restates, and criticises ideas, not people	Reconstructs the strongest version of the opposing view
Pluralism	Only recognises their own view	Acknowledges that other views exist	Sets out several positions with their reasons	Values what is reasonable in views they don't share
Judgement and engagement	Doesn't link ideas to real problems	Makes links with support	Analyses a shared problem and proposes an action	Proposes a realistic collective action and argues for its value

Remember: assess how students think and talk, never what they believe.

Self-assessment target (for students)

Rate each statement from 1 to 4, and compare with your answers from the first lesson.

Statement	1	2	3	4
Before sharing something, I check where it comes from				
I can tell when it makes sense to doubt and when it doesn't				
When I get angry, I take a moment before replying				
I can explain a view I disagree with well				
I understand what people who disagree have in common				
I know who I could act with to change something that worries me				

Other evidence: exit cards (lessons 1 and 5), the "summarise the other side" text (lesson 3), the sorting in worksheet B (lesson 2), observation of discussions and the guide itself.

6. Photocopiable worksheets

WORKSHEET A · Shadow and object (lesson 1)

Step 1. Read only the headline and write down in one line what you think.

> **"Eating breakfast boosts grades by 20%"**
> Headline posted on social media, with 12,000 likes. A fictional story written for this activity.

My opinion: _____

Step 2. Now read the full text.

> A study carried out at two secondary schools in the same city compared the grades of 180 students depending on whether or not they ate breakfast before school. Those who usually ate breakfast had grades that were, on average, 20% higher. The authors themselves warn that the study **does not show that eating breakfast causes better grades**: students who eat breakfast also sleep more on average and have more regular routines, and these factors may explain part of the difference. They call for a larger study to separate these factors.

Questions	Answer
Has your opinion changed? Why?	
Is the headline false, out of context or selective?	
What is missing from the headline that is in the text?	
Why does the headline get more likes than the text?	

WORKSHEET B · The certainty thermometer (lesson 2)

Rate your confidence in each statement from 1 to 10, and note the kind of reason you have: **Ev** (evidence), **Ex** (experience), **I** (intuition) or **S** ("it's what people say").

Statement	Confidence (1-10)	Reason	Column
1. Water boils at 100 °C (212 °F) at sea level.			
2. The Earth orbits the Sun.			
3. Pineapple on pizza is delicious.			
4. Lying is always wrong.			
5. In twenty years there will be no petrol cars.			
6. Teenagers today read less than teenagers thirty years ago.			
7. Exercise improves your mood.			
8. Freedom matters more than security.			
9. School should start later in the morning.			
10. Animals feel pain.			

Columns: A = doubting would be absurd · **R** = doubting is reasonable · **N** = doubting is necessary.

What would make you change your mind about the statement you rated highest?

_____

WORKSHEET C · Socratic question cards (lesson 3)

Cut out the cards and hand them out to groups. Every turn in the round must start with one of them.

What exactly do you mean by...?	**Can you give an example?**	**Why do you think that is?**
What experience led you to think that?	**What worries you most about this?**	**What would happen if everyone thought that way?**
Is there a case where it doesn't hold?	**What would it take for you to change your mind?**	**If I understand you, you're saying... Is that right?**
Where do you think we agree?	**How would someone who disagrees see it?**	**Where did you get that information?**

WORKSHEET D · Beehive dilemmas (lesson 4)

Read your case as a group. Prepare one argument for and one against before giving your opinion.

Case	Argument for	Argument against
1. The group project. In a four-person project, one person does nothing and everyone gets the same grade. What is fair?		
2. Saturday-night music. A neighbour wants to play loud music at home on Saturday nights. Where does her freedom end?		
3. Cheating. Cheating in an exam doesn't harm anyone directly. Or does it?		
4. The playground. The school can spend its budget on improving the playground or on new computers, but not both. How should it decide?		
5. The shared kitchen. In a student flat, nobody ever washes the frying pan because "someone else will". What rules would you propose?		

Exit card

Lesson ___ · Name: _____
The most important thing I'm taking away today is… A question I still have is…

7. Further reading

Supporting articles (free)

- Plato's allegory of the cave in the age of misinformation (lesson 1)
- Scepticism as an antidote to fanaticism, from Pyrrho to Descartes (lesson 2)
- How to talk about politics without falling out: Seneca, Socrates and Mill (lesson 3)
- Marcus Aurelius, the beehive and the common good (lesson 4)
- Hannah Arendt on power and the banality of evil: lesson plan and sample chapter (lesson 5)

All available free on the Clarua Books blog and at **claruabooks.com/en/teachers/**.

Classic texts

- Plato, *Republic*, Book VII (the allegory of the cave), and *Apology*.
- Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I (humans as political animals).
- Seneca, *On Anger*.
- Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*.
- Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*.
- René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*.
- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, chapter II.
- Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Contemporary reading

- Amos Oz, *How to Cure a Fanatic*.
- Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*.
- Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*.
- Daniel C. Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*.

> **About the book.** *Talks on a Park Bench*, by philosophy teacher María Ferrer Tarazona, brings together 44 chapters in which Marc, Nora, Diego and Vera take everyday problems to Stoic, Epicurean, Cynic, Sceptic and contemporary thinkers. Each chapter ends with a toolbox of practical exercises. More information and free resources at **claruabooks.com**.

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