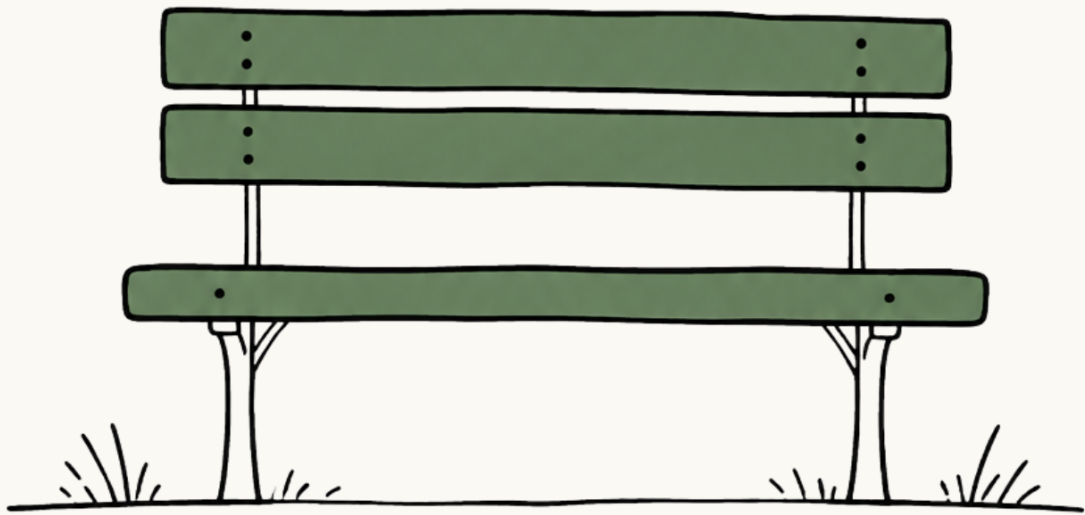


TEACHING GUIDE



TALKS ON A PARK BENCH

*Stoicism, friendship, and philosophy for
young people looking for something more*

MARÍA FERRER TARAZONA

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Talks on a Park Bench

Stoicism, friendship, and philosophy for young people looking for something more

Support material for the Philosophy and Ethics classroom
Ages 15–18 (upper secondary / pre-university)

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1. Foreword for Teachers

Talks on a Park Bench was built on a specific pedagogical bet: that philosophy is understood better when it shows up after the problem, not before. The four protagonists — Marc, Nora, Diego, and Vera — don't sit on the bench to study Epictetus. They sit down to talk about an exam, a breakup, a loss, a photo on social media nobody's looked at. And it's there, in the middle of the real problem, that the philosophical tool shows up.

For the classroom, this has a clear pedagogical advantage: students don't receive philosophy as a closed body of doctrine, but as a toolbox that gets tested, gets misapplied before it gets applied well, and sometimes doesn't quite work at all. The characters themselves get things wrong — Diego misreads Epictetus in the first chapter, Marc confuses Stoicism with total disappearance in the second — and it's precisely that mistake that opens the door to the theoretical explanation. That narrative device can become one more teaching tool: asking students to identify, in each chapter, where the starting error lies before reading the correction.

This guide doesn't claim to exhaust every possibility the book offers. It aims to give teachers a solid starting point — objectives, a chapter-by-chapter content map, activity proposals, and a few assessment ideas — that can be freely adapted to their group, their level, and the time available.

2. Learning Objectives

- Introduce students to philosophical thinking starting from recognizable life situations, rather than from abstract systems.
- Distinguish between arguing and asserting: identify when a character gives a reason and when they're simply repeating an opinion.
- Learn the central concepts of Stoicism (the dichotomy of control, prohairesis, oikeiosis) and place them in their real historical context, not their simplified social-media version.
- Widen the frame beyond Stoicism: Epicureanism, Cynicism, Skepticism, existentialism, and contemporary thinkers (Nussbaum, Arendt, Weil, Beauvoir).
- Exercise critical thinking applied to one's own life: social media, peer pressure, family authority, grief, career guidance.
- Spot the difference between a well-understood philosophical idea and its distorted or commercial version (the “Instagram Stoicism” the book itself explicitly questions).

3. Educational Levels and Curriculum Connection

The book works at different levels depending on how it's used:

Ages 15–16 (Ethics / Values Education):

full reading or reading by blocks, with an emphasis on the life dilemmas (Blocks 1 and 2) rather than the historical apparatus. Connects directly with curriculum strands on personal dignity and human relationships.

Ages 16–17 (Philosophy):

especially useful for introducing Hellenistic ethics (Stoicism, Epicureanism, Cynicism, Skepticism) in a less dry way than the textbook, and as a bridge toward contemporary ethics.

Ages 17–18 (History of Philosophy):

the Block 4 chapters and the epilogue-bridge (Descartes, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus) allow for an engaging review of syllabus authors, though they don't replace the rigorous study of their original texts, which the book itself recommends in its bibliographical appendix.

In any case, we recommend using the book as a complement and a motivating way in, not as a substitute for the rigorous study of primary sources — the book itself insists on this point, and the “For Further Reading” appendix is designed precisely to offer that next step.

4. Active Methodologies for Working with the Book

The book lends itself especially well to active methodologies: its own structure — a group that talks as equals before any “authority” arrives to tell them who's right — is, at bottom, a narrative rehearsal of egalitarian dialogue. This section proposes several ways of working with it in the classroom, starting with the one that makes the most of that structure: the dialogic literary gathering.

4.1 The Dialogic Literary Gathering

The dialogic literary gathering (DLG) is a dialogic learning methodology, developed within the framework of Learning Communities, which consists of reading a text individually and then sharing, as a group, the passages that struck each person as meaningful. It rests on the principle of egalitarian dialogue: every contribution is judged on the strength of its argument, not on who's making it — which makes it especially well suited to a book that argues, precisely, that “there will always be another philosopher ready to argue back at you.”

How to prepare the session

A chapter (or a whole block, if the group reads comfortably) is assigned for the week.

Each participant reads it individually, at home, and chooses a short passage — a line, an exchange of dialogue, a paragraph — that caught their attention for any reason: because they agree with it, because they don't, because it reminds them of something of their own, because they don't fully understand it.

Each person notes down their passage and a brief idea of why they chose it, to have on hand during the session.

How to run the session

The group sits in a circle. The circle matters: no one presides, no one is “at the front.”

There is a moderator — the teacher at first, later this can rotate among students — whose only job is managing turns to speak, without correcting or grading contributions.

Whoever wants to speak raises their hand; the moderator keeps track of the order of turns.

In their turn, each participant reads their passage aloud and explains why they chose it. The rest of the group may react, ask questions, or share a different reading of the same passage.

The moderator doesn't close the discussion with “the right answer.” If different interpretations of the same passage come up, both stay on the table: the goal isn't reaching consensus, but keeping the dialogue flowing.

Sample session: Chapter 1.1

For a first gathering, Chapter 1.1 (“The Exam That Didn't Depend on You”) works very well because it's short, self-contained, and has passages of very different kinds to choose from: Nora's anxiety, Diego's initial mistake, the theoretical correction, the toolbox. The first time, it's worth spending two minutes beforehand explaining the golden rule of the gathering: you can disagree with an idea, but you never dismiss the person who shares it.

4.2 Cooperative Learning

Several of the discussion questions in section 6 can be worked through with cooperative structures instead of open whole-group discussion, to make sure the whole class takes part, not just whoever raises their hand fastest.

1-2-4: each student thinks through their answer individually (1 minute), shares it with a partner and works out a joint answer (2 minutes), and then the two pairs join into a group of four to agree on a single answer (4 minutes) before sharing it with the class. Very useful for the comprehension and discussion questions in section 6.

Rotating sheet: in groups of 3–4, a single sheet of paper circulates around the group; each person adds one idea in turn, without repeating what's already been written. Works well for the “gratitude list” activity (Block 3) or for generating the group's own examples of the dichotomy of control (Block 1).

Pencils in the middle: in small groups, pencils or pens are placed in the middle of the table while a question is discussed out loud; no one writes until the group has a shared answer, at which point everyone picks up their own pencil and writes it in their own words. Prevents one person in the group from doing the task for everyone else.

4.3 Flipped Classroom

Since each chapter clearly separates the narrative scene from its theoretical explanation (“The Philosophical Turn”), the book allows the usual order of a lesson to be flipped: have students read only the scene at home (without getting to the theoretical part), and use classroom time for the group itself to try to work out, on its own, what philosophical idea might shed light on the problem they've just read about, before reading together how the book resolves it. The contrast between the group's hypothesis and the text's own tends to generate more discussion than reading the explanation outright.

4.4 Dilemmas and Problem-Based Learning

Some opening scenes work, taken out of their chapter, as classic moral dilemmas. Presented as an open problem — without saying which chapter it comes from or which philosopher will show up afterward — the group can debate in small groups

what each character would do and what they themselves would do, before reading the book's own resolution. Chapter 3.8 (parental limits and authority) and Chapter 3.11 (peer pressure) work best framed this way.

4.5 Role-Play

With groups that are comfortable with role-play dynamics, a scene from the book can be acted out by assigning a character to each student, including the option of changing the outcome: what would have happened if Diego had stuck to his first mistake? Another option is the “hot seat”: a volunteer answers, in the role of one of the four protagonists, questions from the rest of the class.

4.6 “The Classroom Bench”

Finally, the book's narrative structure can be replicated as an opening-of-session activity: sit the group in a circle (“the bench”), pose a real, everyday problem, let the group discuss it freely for a few minutes, and only then introduce the corresponding philosophical concept, reading it in light of what's already been discussed.

4.7 Other Ways to Organize the Reading

Regardless of the methodology chosen, the book allows for several different reading paces:

- Full reading, as a term-long book, at a pace of 3–4 chapters a week.
- Reading by blocks, tied to the point in the course when each philosophical school is taught in class (the content map in section 5 makes this selection easier).
- Standalone chapters as a trigger for a single session, without reading the whole book. Chapters 2.3 (grief), 3.8 (authority and control), and 4.12 (anguish and decision-making) are especially powerful used on their own.

5. Content Map: Chapter by Chapter

This table makes it easy to quickly locate which chapter corresponds to which philosopher, school, or concept, for anyone who wants to use the book as a one-off complement to a specific teaching unit.

Chapter	Philosopher/school	Key concept	Life theme addressed
Block 0 — Who These Guys Actually Were			
Block 0	Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Seneca, Hypatia	Biographies	Historical context of ancient philosophy
Block 1 — The Dichotomy of Control (Epictetus)			
1.1	Epictetus	The dichotomy of control	Exam anxiety
1.2	Seneca	Shortness of life / scatteredness	Social media, validation
1.3	Original concept of the book	Diligence vs. toxic productivity	Self-demand, teen burnout
1.4	Stoicism (adiaphora)	Preferred indifferents	Body image
1.5	Epictetus	The theater metaphor, prohairesis	Vocational guidance, the future
1.6	Epictetus	Dichotomy of control applied to love	Heartbreak, rejection
1.7	Musonius Rufus	Marriage as a partnership of mutual care	Healthy relationships, equality
1.8	Epictetus	Dichotomy of control on a large scale	Eco-anxiety, climate change
Block 2 — Time, Attention, and Loss (Seneca)			
2.1	Seneca	On the Shortness of Life	Time management
2.2	Seneca	Scatteredness	Phone addiction
2.3	Seneca	Consolations	Grief, loss (reference chapter)
2.4	Seneca	On Anger	Anger management, conflict between friends
2.5	Seneca / Marcus Aurelius	The view from above	Perspective on everyday problems
2.6	Seneca	Letters to Lucilius	Sleep, self-demand
2.7	Erich Fromm	Having vs. being	Jealousy, possessive relationships
2.8	Socrates	Maieutics	Generational clashes, real dialogue
2.9	Plato	The allegory of the cave	Social media as shadows
2.10	Simone Weil	Attention as a form of love	Real listening, presence
Block 3 — The Hive (Marcus Aurelius + Hierocles)			
3.1	Marcus Aurelius	We are part of a larger body	Competition vs. community
3.2	Hierocles	Concentric circles of belonging	Social circles, empathy
3.3	Zygmunt Bauman / Aristotle	Liquid bonds vs. solid friendship	Friendship in the digital age
3.4	—	The chosen support network	Chosen family, counselors
3.5	Marcus Aurelius (qualified)	The obstacle is the way	Resilience without the cliché
3.6	Boethius	The wheel of fortune	Luck, privilege, inequality

Chapter	Philosopher/school	Key concept	Life theme addressed
3.7	Marcus Aurelius	Meditations, Book I	Concrete gratitude
3.8	Epictetus (misused)	Control used as a form of abuse	Conflicts with parental authority
3.9	Marcus Aurelius	“Today I shall meet with meddling people”	Coexistence, group work
3.10	Kant	The categorical imperative	Ghosting, dignity in breakups
3.11	Aristotle	Courage as the middle ground	Peer pressure
3.12	Hannah Arendt	Power is born from acting together	Collective action, activism
Block 4 — Expanded Toolbox and Bridge to the Epilogue			
4.1	Epicurus	Simple pleasure, not indulgence	Consumption, expectations of pleasure
4.2	Epicurus	Hedonic adaptation	Money, consumerism
4.3	Diogenes, Hipparchia	Questioning conventions	Trends, social acceptance
4.4	Pyrro (skepticism)	Suspending judgment	Polarization, excessive certainty
4.5–4.10	Narrative synthesis	Closing the characters' arcs	Achievement, farewell, distance, humor
4.11	Sartre / Beauvoir	Bad faith, radical freedom	Social masks, authenticity
4.12	Kierkegaard	Anguish as the vertigo of freedom	Life decisions, choosing a path of study
4.13	Descartes	Methodical doubt	Critical thinking, misinformation
4.14	Martha Nussbaum	Emotions as carriers of information	Emotional intelligence
Closing of the Book			
Epilogue-Bridge	Spinoza, Nietzsche, Camus	Beyond stoicism	Autonomy in the face of any closed system
Closing	Synthesis of the book	Diligence, not productivity	Closing of the whole journey

6. Activity Proposals by Block

The comprehension and discussion questions that follow can be launched as a whole-group discussion, but they work especially well with the 1-2-4 cooperative structure described in section 4.2, and any of the four blocks also lends itself to a dialogic literary gathering session (section 4.1) using any of its chapters as the starting passage.

Block 1 — The Dichotomy of Control (Epictetus)

Comprehension and discussion questions

1. In Chapter 1.1, Diego confuses “it doesn't depend on you” with “it doesn't matter.” Why is this such a common mistake? Find another example, from your own life, where the same confusion could happen.
2. In Chapter 1.8, Diego first makes an “individualist” mistake applying the dichotomy of control to eco-anxiety. Where exactly does his first line of reasoning go wrong?
3. Do you think the dichotomy of control can be used to justify passivity in the face of injustice? Find the exact moment in the text where the book itself answers this objection (hint: Chapter 1.1, “Objections from the Bench” section).

Hands-on activity

Ask students to spend a week noting down, in two columns — “depends on me” and “doesn't depend on me” — a real worry of theirs (an exam, a relationship, a decision). Discuss as a group afterward: does simply writing it out this way change anything?

Block 2 — Time, Attention, and Loss (Seneca)

Comprehension and discussion questions

1. Seneca said life isn't short, we waste it. Do you agree? How is this idea different from a simple motivational-calendar “make the most of your time”?
2. Chapter 2.3 deals with grief without offering an easy solution. Why do you think the book avoids giving neat advice in this chapter, unlike others?
3. In Chapter 2.9, the use of social media is compared to the shadows in Plato's cave. How far does the comparison hold, and where does it stop working?

Hands-on activity

A mindful-attention exercise inspired by Chapter 2.10 (Simone Weil): in pairs, one person talks for two minutes about something that matters to them while the other only listens, without planning their reply or interrupting. Afterward, compare notes on how hard it is to listen without wanting to respond.

Block 3 — The Hive (Marcus Aurelius + Hierocles)

Comprehension and discussion questions

1. Hierocles's circles (Chapter 3.2) suggest that empathy is trained by “drawing” distant circles closer to the center. Which circle is hardest for you to draw closer?
2. In Chapter 3.8, the dichotomy of control is used as an excuse to restrict Vera's freedom. How do you tell apart a reasonable limit from an abusive use of the same philosophical idea?
3. Hannah Arendt states, in Chapter 3.12, that power is born from acting together. Can you think of a historical or current example that bears this out?

Hands-on activity

A gratitude exercise inspired by Chapter 3.7: each student writes their own “gratitude list,” Marcus Aurelius style, naming specific people and one specific quality they learned from each, avoiding generic phrases.

Block 4 — Expanded Toolbox and Bridge to the Epilogue

Comprehension and discussion questions

1. Chapter 4.1 corrects two opposite misunderstandings about Epicurus: that he was an unrestrained hedonist, and that he was an ascetic. Why do you think his philosophy has been misread in both directions?
2. In Chapter 4.13, Diego is about to share a badly edited video clip. What does Descartes's methodical doubt have to do with misinformation today?

3. The book closes with the idea that “there will always be another philosopher ready to argue back at you.” Is this a weakness of philosophy, or its greatest strength?

Final closing debate

Pose the group the same question the book itself plays with in its closing: “Are we Stoics yet?” Split the class into two positions — those who argue that committing to a single philosophical school gives one a coherent life, and those who argue that picking and choosing from several traditions (as the protagonists do) is more honest — and let the debate hold its own, without closing it down with a single answer.

7. Cross-Cutting Activities for the Whole Book

Philosophical journal

Keep, chapter by chapter, a brief notebook with three columns: the characters' starting situation, the initial mistake or doubt, and the philosophical idea that sheds light on it. A simple way to check whether students can tell the scene apart from the theory.

The expanded glossary

The book includes a short philosophical glossary as an appendix. As an extension activity, each student can choose a term (for example, ataraxia, amor fati, or parrhesia) and prepare a five-minute presentation that adds something the book's glossary doesn't say.

Research using the book's bibliography

The “For Further Reading” appendix is organized into primary, secondary, and contemporary sources. It can make an interesting starting point for a small research project: choose a philosopher quoted in the book and read a real excerpt of their work, comparing what the original text says with how the novel presents it.

Philosophical fact-checking

The book itself is careful with contested historical claims (for example, about the plague during Marcus Aurelius's reign, or about the indirect sources for Hypatia's life). A good opportunity to explain to students what it means for a historical source to be “fragmentary” or “disputed,” using these very examples from the book.

8. Suggested Assessment

Some criteria that can be adapted into an assessment rubric, depending on how the book is used in the classroom:

- Correctly identifies the starting life problem and the philosophical idea that sheds light on it in each chapter covered.
- Distinguishes between a well-argued philosophical idea and a simplification or distortion of it.
- Takes an active part in discussions, arguing their position rather than simply stating an opinion.
- Is able to apply, even in a simple way, some concept from the book to a situation in their own life.
- Shows curiosity to go beyond the book itself: checks the glossary, the bibliography, or looks up additional information about a philosopher mentioned.

9. Additional Resources

The book itself includes two appendices that work as ready-made classroom resources:

- A philosophical glossary with 18 key terms, linked to the chapters where they appear.
- An annotated bibliography organized into primary sources, secondary and historical sources, and contemporary philosophy — ideal as a starting point for any extension project.

Both appendices can be photocopied or projected independently as support material, with no need for the whole group to have the full book in front of them.