



EduTrend Contents

P4C · BELIEF AND EVIDENCE · HIGH SCHOOL

The Ethics of Belief

Clifford and James on believing without evidence

Ages 15–18

Level: Advanced

60 minutes

Circle and pairs · up to
30

Activity 05

Inside: activity at a glance · step-by-step session plan · facilitator notes · 3 student worksheets · assessment checklist

ACTIVITY 05 · AT A GLANCE

The Ethics of Belief

Students read Clifford’s story from *The Ethics of Belief* (1877) about a ship owner who convinces himself his old ship is safe and it sinks. Clifford concluded that it is wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. William James replied in *The Will to Believe* (1896) that in some live choices we may have the right to believe before evidence is complete. Students test both views with invented cases.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session students can:

- explain Clifford’s and James’s positions;
- apply them to cases;
- evaluate the ethics of belief;
- construct a reasoned position.

KEY WORDS

belief · evidence · Clifford · James · responsibility · faith

CURRICULUM LINKS

Philosophy: epistemology and ethics. RE: faith and reason. Science: evidence.

1	2	3	4	5	6
STIMULUS	THINK	QUESTION	ENQUIRE	BUILD	REFLECT
Share something to think about	Quiet thinking time	Create and choose a question	Reason together	Agree, disagree, add	Last words

Materials (per class)

- Ship owner story
- Position cards
- Case cards
- Question and thinking-move cards
- Worksheets 1, 2 and 3

Before the session

- Read the stimulus and note possible concepts.
- Prepare question and thinking-move cards.
- Set out a circle so everyone can see each other.
- Print the worksheets.

SAFETY

Discuss the arguments, not the beliefs of individuals in the class.

ACTIVITY 05 · SESSION PLAN

Step by step

Stay neutral: ask for reasons, examples and counter-examples rather than giving your own view.

Time	What happens	Say or ask
0–10 min Stimulus	Read the ship owner story and the two positions.	<i>"What did you notice?"</i>
10–22 min Questions	Students create questions in pairs and vote on one.	<i>"Which question is most interesting to talk about?"</i>
22–52 min Enquiry	Enquire into the chosen question, building on each other's ideas.	<i>"Is it ever right to believe without enough evidence?"</i>
52–60 min Last words	Each person says one last thought or passes.	<i>"Has your thinking changed?"</i>

CHALLENGE CARD (print or copy onto the board)

Defend a view on believing without enough evidence.

ACTIVITY 05 · FACILITATOR NOTES

The philosophy in brief

Clifford argued that belief affects how we act, so careless belief can harm others.

James argued that when a choice is live, forced and important, and evidence cannot settle it, we may let our hopes guide us.

Common ideas to listen for

- “Clifford was attacking faith only.” His point was about all belief.
- “James said believe anything.” He set strict conditions.
- “Beliefs are private and harmless.” They guide actions.

Adapting the activity

Support

Use one case.

Stretch

Find a case where both thinkers would agree.

WORKSHEET 1

Our questions

Name: _____

Class: _____ Date: _____

Write questions the stimulus makes you wonder about.

Our questions

Question	Who asked	Votes

WORKSHEET 2

Clifford or James?

Apply.

Clifford or James?

Case	Clifford says	James says

WORKSHEET 3

Last words

Before and after.

Are we responsible for what we believe? Before the enquiry I thought... Now I think... because...

FOR THE TEACHER

Assessment checklist

Use during the session. One sheet covers up to eight students; copy as needed.

Student	Asks a philosophical question	Gives reasons and examples	Listens and builds on others

Suggested codes: W = working towards · E = expected · G = greater depth

ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

The Ethics of Belief is a sample activity from the EduTrend Contents P4C Belief and Evidence programme (high school, level: advanced). Every activity in the programme follows the same format: a practical challenge, a clear session plan, facilitator notes and ready-to-print worksheets, so that teachers, club leaders and parents can run it without extra preparation.

Full 15-, 20- and 32-week programmes are available from EduStore at edutrend.org.

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