



EduTrend Contents

P4C · THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS · MIDDLE SCHOOL

The Happiness Machine

Would you plug into a machine that gave you a perfect happy life?

Ages 11–13

Level: Intermediate

50 minutes

Circle and small groups
· up to 30

Activity 03

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

ACTIVITY 03 · AT A GLANCE

The Happiness Machine

Students consider a thought experiment adapted from the philosopher Robert Nozick: a machine can give you any experiences you want, such as winning, friendship and adventure, and while plugged in you would not know it was not real. Would you plug in for life? Students vote, give reasons and then enquire into what else matters besides feeling happy, such as reality, achievement and relationships.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session students can:

- analyse a famous thought experiment;
- identify values beyond pleasure;
- give reasons for a choice;
- consider objections.

KEY WORDS

experience · happiness · real ·
pleasure · value · machine

CURRICULUM LINKS

PSHE: wellbeing. Computing:
virtual reality. RE: meaning of life.

1**STIMULUS**

Share something to
think about

2**THINK**

Quiet thinking time

3**QUESTION**

Create and choose
a question

4**ENQUIRE**

Reason together

5**BUILD**

Agree, disagree,
add

6**REFLECT**

Last words

Materials (per class)

- Machine description card
- 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

Everyone may pass. Discuss ideas, not people,
and use the story or invented examples rather
than personal situations.

ACTIVITY 03 · 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
0–8 min Stimulus	Describe the happiness machine.	<i>"What did you notice?"</i>
8–20 min Questions	Students create questions in pairs and vote on one.	<i>"Which question is most interesting to talk about?"</i>
20–44 min Enquiry	Enquire into the chosen question, building on each other's ideas.	<i>"Is feeling happy all that matters?"</i>
44–50 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)

Decide whether you would plug in and defend your choice against a friend's objection.

ACTIVITY 03 · FACILITATOR NOTES

The philosophy in brief

Robert Nozick described an “experience machine” in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974).

Many people refuse to plug in, which some take as evidence that we value more than pleasant feelings.

Common ideas to listen for

- “Everyone would plug in.” Many would not.
- “Virtual reality is the same.” We know VR is not real.
- “Happiness is simple.” Philosophers disagree about it.

Adapting the activity

Support

Use a yes/no vote first.

Stretch

Ask: would it be different if you could unplug any time?

WORKSHEET 1

Our questions

Name: _____

Class: _____ Date: _____

Write questions the stimulus makes you wonder about.

Our questions

Question	Who asked	Votes

WORKSHEET 2

Plug in?

Reasons.

Plug in?

For plugging in	Against plugging in

WORKSHEET 3

Last words

Before and after.

Does it matter if our experiences are real? 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 Happiness Machine is a sample activity from the EduTrend Contents P4C Thought Experiments programme (middle school, level: intermediate). 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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