



EduTrend Contents

P4C · REALITY AND IMAGINATION · HIGH SCHOOL

Could It All Be a Simulation?

Descartes, brains in vats and radical doubt

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

Could It All Be a Simulation?

Students compare two sceptical scenarios. In his *Meditations* (1641), René Descartes imagined an evil demon deceiving him about everything, and concluded that he could at least be certain that he exists while he thinks. Hilary Putnam described a brain in a vat fed electrical signals that create an experience of the world. Students test whether anything could show we are not in such a situation, and enquire into how sceptics can be answered.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session students can:

- explain sceptical scenarios;
- analyse Descartes' response;
- evaluate replies to scepticism;
- construct a reasoned position.

KEY WORDS

scepticism · Descartes · simulation
· certainty · brain in a vat · reality

CURRICULUM LINKS

Philosophy: epistemology and metaphysics. Computing: virtual worlds. Film and literature: simulation stories.

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)

- Scenario cards
- Reply 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

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

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	Present the evil demon and brain in a vat scenarios.	<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>"Could it all be a simulation?"</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 whether we can know the external world.

ACTIVITY 05 · FACILITATOR NOTES

The philosophy in brief

Descartes' phrase "I think, therefore I am" comes from his search for something that could not be doubted.

Putnam discussed the brain in a vat in Reason, Truth and History (1981) and argued that the hypothesis may undermine itself.

Common ideas to listen for

- "Sceptics believe we are in a simulation." They ask how we could know we are not.
- "Descartes doubted because he was confused." It was a method.
- "If we can't disprove it, it must be true." That does not follow.

Adapting the activity

Support

Use one scenario.

Stretch

Write a reply to the sceptic in your own words.

WORKSHEET 1

Our questions

Name: _____

Class: _____ Date: _____

Write questions the stimulus makes you wonder about.

Our questions

Question	Who asked	Votes

WORKSHEET 2

Answering the sceptic

Evaluate.

Answering the sceptic

Reply	How it works	Weakness

WORKSHEET 3

Last words

Before and after.

Is there anything you can be certain of? 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

Could It All Be a Simulation? is a sample activity from the EduTrend Contents P4C Reality and Imagination 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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