The *Big Questions* philosophy mentoring program

The *Big Questions* philosophy mentoring program ("*Big Questions*") is a community-based learning initiative of The Philosophy Club, a social enterprise dedicated to the practice of collaborative philosophical enquiry with children.

Big Questions is the only community-based learning program in Australia that is (a) designed to widen participation in philosophy to primary school students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds; and (b) designed specifically for senior undergraduate philosophy students, who have traditionally had little or no opportunity to undertake community-based learning as a complement to their formal studies.

Program aims

Big Questions has two sets of aims, reflecting its two cohorts of participants: students from primary schools in low socio-economic status communities ("students"); and senior undergraduate philosophy students ("mentors").

To benefit students, *Big Questions* aims:

(1) to develop students' capacity for critical and creative thinking;

(2) to improve students' oral literacy;

(3) to build students' collaborative skills; and

(4) to ignite students' curiosity.

To benefit mentors, *Big Questions* aims:

(5) to engage mentors in meaningful experiential learning;

(6) to improve mentors' communication and facilitation skills;

(7) to build mentors' confidence; and

(8) to broaden mentors' philosophical practice.

Program structure and scope

Twelve mentors are selected and trained in the art of facilitating collaborative philosophical enquiry among children. Subsequently, for two hours per week over eight weeks, the mentors visit a disadvantaged primary school to facilitate philosophical enquiry with 50 students in Years 4–6. Working in pairs, mentors are assigned to small groups of 8–10 students.

Throughout the program, mentors are offered ongoing training, support and debriefing opportunities.

Course outline

This section outlines the twin courses that constitute *Big Questions*: the training course for mentors, and the philosophical enquiry course for students.

Training course for mentors

Mentor training comprises an introduction to purpose, theory and practice of facilitating collaborative philosophical enquiry (as endorsed by the international Philosophy for Children movement, which has philosophical roots in the American pragmatist tradition).

Mentors complete 45 hours of training, philosophical practice, dialogue facilitation, experiential learning and reflection, as detailed below.

Prior to their first school visit, mentors complete:

- 12 hours of training (seminars, workshops and masterclasses with experts in the field of Philosophy for Children);

- 2 hours of observation, participation and reflection as a Visiting Philosopher in a primary school philosophy classroom; and

- 5 hours of independent learning based on a tailored curriculum of curated written and audio-visual materials. Sample materials are:

    Bowker, M. H. (2010). Teaching Students to Ask Questions Instead of Answering Them. *Thought & Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal*, 127–134.

    Goering, S. (2008). Finding and Fostering the Philosophical Impulse in Young People. *Metaphilosophy*, *39*(1), 39–50.

    The Philosophy Shop (2010, January 26), *Knowledge – Justified, true belief theory and the Gettier problem* [video recording]. Retrieved 22/03/2014 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ldGT2R-pJM

    Sowey, M. (unpublished), *Facilitated philosophical dialogues among children* [audio recordings], The Philosophy Club archives.

    Worley, P. (2009, Autumn). The Philosophy *In* Philosophy in Schools. *Think*, *8*(23), 63–75

Then, during their weekly school visits, mentors practise facilitating philosophical enquiry in a classroom setting during:

- 16 hours of face-to-face work with school children; and

- 10 hours of debriefing and further training.

Philosophical enquiry course for students

The philosophical enquiry course is composed of eight in-school sessions which elicit critical and creative thinking about a broad range of philosophical ideas and promote scaffolded collaborative learning.

Sessions are selected from a tailor-made and tested curriculum which includes rich stimulus materials to provoke thinking and philosophical questions to guide enquiry and dialogue.

Engaging multimedia stimulus materials – including thought experiments, visual stories, short films, dramatic role-play, audio soundtracks, inventions, drawings and puppetry – present ideas in ways that are entertaining and accessible to students of all ability levels.

Participating schools are invited to select eight sessions from the following *Big Questions* curriculum:

Session title	Philosophical themes
Who's the boss of me?	Self-control and decision-making; free will and determinism; fate
Getting away with it	The point of being good; praise and blame; rules and laws
To boldly go where no child has gone before	Space travel; colonising other planets; encountering alien life; extra-terrestrial intelligence
What is it like to be a bat?	Communicating without a common language; sensory perception and experience; animal minds; empathy
Who, me?	Criteria for selfhood; continuity of personal identity; the role of memory
Me, myself and I	Cloning; individuality; ends and means; the risk of creating an underclass
Not fair!	Justice, surveillance and moral responsibility; ethical judgements and moral ambiguity; values
Living in the Matrix	The Experience Machine; reality and simulation; the value of authenticity
Ghost in the machine	Philosophy of mind; being conscious; the mind-body connection; knowledge of other minds
When things start to think	Real-life robots and artificial intelligence; Rube Goldberg machines, purpose and intention
My brother, the ape	Evolution, biology and culture; scientific and magical thinking; the dinosaur-and-egg paradox
Anyone could draw that!	Art and authorship; beauty and subjectivity; aesthetic judgements; art forgery
Whadd'ya know?	Ways of knowing; belief and superstition; truth and justification
Just lucky, I guess…	The existence of luck; destiny; coincidence; probability
Pobody's nerfect	Human perfection; collective moral responsibility; moral bio-enhancement.
Where's my jetpack?	Speculative futures; social evolution; utopias and dystopias; immortality.