How do we know what animals are thinking?

Philosophy Smash with Henry!

Lesson plan

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Introduction for teachers.

This is a discussion of a topic in the philosophy of mind and psychology. It discusses how humans can understand the mental states of other animals. Animals' minds are very different from ours, so it looks really difficult to find out what they might be thinking. But on the other hand, clearly we do know what they are thinking sometimes (you can tell when a dog is excited, or when a cat is scared, for example).

It can be used at Key Stage 2 or Key Stage 3, and it can also be used for philosophy lunchtime clubs in schools. Since it discusses scientific and philosophical issues, it can be used as a philosophy, RE, science or biology lesson. The lesson is intended to promote discussion about our relationship with animals, our knowledge of them, and their own knowledge of us.

This plan may take two lessons to complete.

The lesson is designed to be done with the help of the *Philosophy Smash with Henry!* video on the same topic. It's also meant to be used with the handout and activity sheet. These are all available on the Philosophy Smash website (link above).

You may like to pair this lesson plan with the *Philosophy Smash* video on how we should treat animals, which talks about the ethics of zoos, and meat eating (also on the link above)

Learning Outcomes.

Emerging:

Reflect on why it is difficult to know what an animal is thinking, but also appreciate that we clearly do know (or think we know) what an animal is thinking, at least sometimes.

Expected:

Engage in a sophisticated philosophical discussion. Be respectful of other views, and recognise alternative ways of looking at philosophical questions, whilst at the same time supporting one's own view with evidence and/or argument.

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Devise own experiment to test the mental states of animals.

Exceeding:

Engage in respectful critique of others' opinions and views. Alter own views in response to criticism.

Devise own experiment to test the mental states of animals, and modify that experiment in response to the constructive criticism/feedback of others.

Ground Rules.

Start by setting some ground rules for discussion. These can be varied based on the style and ability of the group, but they might include:

1) Remember to always be respectful of other people's opinions. Everyone's opinion is equally valuable.
2) You can give your own beliefs and opinions if you like, but you don't have to. If you don't have an opinion on the question, then just think about what a sensible opinion might be, and think about why someone might hold that.
3) Try not to just give 'yes' or 'no' answers, remember always to back up your opinions with reasons and arguments.
4) It's fine to disagree with other people!
5) It's fine to change your mind! Changing your mind when someone else makes a good point is a sign of maturity, and good thinking.

Sentence stems:

Depending on the ability and age of your group, you may like to use the following sentence stems to encourage children to think:

Questions:

'Why do people think…? '

'Does anyone disagree that….?'

'Do people from other cultures think that….?'

Statement of views:

'I think that… because…'

'One view I think is wrong is … because …'

'Someone else might think …because …'

'Someone in my group thinks …, but I think that …'

'It's difficult to know the answer to this question because….'

'I think there's another sensible view, which is…'

'In order to answer this question, we would need to know….'

Changing your mind:

'On reflection, I've now realised that…'

'At the beginning, I believed…., but now I'm not sure. I now think that…'

'I'm not sure about… because of….'

Teaching Activities.

There are two teaching activities here: a large group Q and A, and a 'design your own experiment' game.

The video is an interview between a presenter (Henry) and an expert in the field of animal minds. The expert is Dr Ali Boyle, a philosopher at the London School of Economics.

Part one: introduction and initial group discussion.

Start off by watching the first few minutes of the video. The presenter will outline the main topic of the interview, and then ask the children what they think about the question. There will then be a cartoon of a bear thinking, with the line 'what do you think?'. Pause the video at this stage.

Do a large-group Q and A, and get them to offer their opinions on how we can know what an animal is thinking.

Make a note of the important points on the whiteboard. It is likely that some of the children's contributions will be similar to the ones by the expert in the video, so it may be helpful to have some of these contributions on the whiteboard to refer back to, and congratulate the children who were able to come up with similar ideas to the expert.

Depending on the confidence and ability of the group, you may find it helpful to give the children something to think about when they contribute. For example, it might be helpful to ask the children the following questions:

- Do you think that animals could ever trick us about what they're thinking, in the way humans can? For example, could they pretend to be sad when really they're not?
- Lots of people think that humans are just animals as well. Do you think that maybe we understand animals' minds in the same way that we understand other humans' minds?

Part two: Design an experiment.

Watch the rest of the video, including the 45 second summary of the topic by the presenter, the subsequent discussion between the presenter and the interviewee, and the 'goodbye' section by the presenter.

Now, distribute the handout and the activity sheet for the lesson (a link to both of them is on p.1 of this lesson plan). The handout summarises the main points of the video, for children who have forgotten or who naturally learn in a written format. The activity sheet contains four questions that are important for the game.

Then, divide the children into small groups (we find that groups of 3-4) work best. Ask each group to design their own experiment (for presentation to the class). The experiment should work out what an animal is thinking. In the course of designing the experiment, they should take on board what the expert on animal minds has said, and they should answer each question on the activity sheet.

The activity sheet questions are reproduced here, for reference:

1) What is the animal you're testing on?
Is it a dog, a cat, a chimp? Some animals might be harder to test on, like octopuses, snakes, or bees, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try!

2) What are you trying to test?
For example, are you testing whether the animal can feel jealous? Or whether it can remember specific events like its breakfast? Whether it can feel pain, etc.?

3) What is your research question?
This should summarise the answers you gave to (1) and (2).
For example: 'can a dog remember its breakfast?' 'could a snake ever know what I'm thinking?' 'is it possible for an octopus to get bored?'

4) How will your experiment work?
Outline in a step by step way how your experiment could work. This should include the equipment you would use, and what the animal is expected to do. Think also about what potential problems there might be (what if the animal misbehaves?). How are you going to get round these problems?

After this, each group should present their experiment to the class as a whole, and take questions on how their experiment works from the others in the class.

Additional Resources

Here are some extra things by this interviewee that teachers may find helpful:

One of the expert's articles has been adapted for an educational setting. It's available here:

https://reader.activelylearn.com/authoring/preview/3382647/notes?_gl=1*1fp30p2*_ga*MTM2MTM2NDA3OS4xNzM5MzgwOTY1*_ga_C05KL0SE8D*MTczOTM4MDk2NC4xLjEuMTczOTM4MTAwOC4xNi4wLjA

Another of her articles aimed at a public audience is here:

https://theconversation.com/horses-can-recognise-themselves-in-a-mirror-new-study-158447

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