

# **The Individual in Society**

**Lesson Video: Grades 9-12**

# Overview

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**Teacher:** Brian Poon  
**Grade:** 12  
**School:** Brookline High School  
**Location:** Brookline, Massachusetts

**NCSS Standards-Based Themes: Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Power, Authority, and Governance; Civic Ideals and Practices**  
**Content Standards: History, Civics, Psychology**

## Video Summary

Questioning is a strategy that all teachers employ. In his philosophy elective, Brian Poon uses questioning to stimulate students' critical thinking about the complex—and sometimes competing—theories in philosophy.

In this lesson, Mr. Poon asks his students the following question: What role can an individual play in creating a just society? Then he sets up a dilemma for them to ponder. Fenway, a fictional nation, is on the verge of racial and ethnic strife and students must come up with possible solutions to Fenway's turmoil. The class is divided into five groups, representing the five philosophers they've recently studied: Plato, Thomas Hobbes, Mao Zedong, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Martha Nussbaum. Each group responds to Fenway's dilemma from the viewpoint of the philosopher they represent. Groups are given the opportunity to challenge the solutions of the other groups. As a concluding activity, students integrate the best ideas from each group in order to be of most help to Fenway.

## Standards

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*Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* defines what students should know and be able to do in social studies at each grade level. This lesson correlates to the following standards for high school students:

### **IV. Individual Development and Identity**

Analyze the role of perceptions, attitudes, values, and beliefs in the development of personal identity; work independently and cooperatively within groups and institutions to accomplish goals.

### **V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions**

Analyze the extent to which groups and institutions meet individual needs and promote the common good in contemporary and historical settings.

# Standards, cont'd.

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## VI. Power, Authority, and Governance

Examine persistent issues involving the rights, roles, and status of the individual in relation to the general welfare.

## X. Civic Ideals and Practices

Locate, access, analyze, organize, synthesize, evaluate, and apply information about selected public issues—identifying, describing, and evaluating multiple points of view.

## Content Standards: History, Civics, Psychology

# About the Class

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## Classroom Profile

“Philosophy is an excellent medium for getting kids to move beyond just the dates and timeline of history to the content. It forces them to think, to bring their own lives into a theory, critique it, and really think about how we should live—both as individuals and groups.” —Brian Poon

Brian Poon teaches a 12th-grade honors philosophy elective at Brookline High School in Brookline, Massachusetts, an urban-suburban community that borders Boston. While the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks don't require a fourth year of social studies in high school, Brookline High School offers 11 social studies electives, including two Advanced Placement courses. Most seniors take at least one social studies elective, and many take two.

Mr. Poon's honors philosophy elective focused on four fundamental questions in their most logical sequence: What is morality? What is justice? What is the role of the individual in society? and What is the good life?

The lesson shown in “The Individual in Society” addressed the third question of the semester. By the time the unit began, Mr. Poon expected students to be able to understand primary sources from the writings of different philosophers, participate in small-group and class discussions, and write a four- to five-page paper describing how different philosophers would answer a given question.

Mr. Poon engaged his students by introducing a dilemma about a fictional nation named Fenway, mired in racial and ethnic turmoil. Students worked in groups to come up with a solution to Fenway's problems, with each group representing one of five thinkers the class had recently studied. Students approached the dilemma from both a philosophical and a political point of view. And in solving Fenway's problems, each group answered the question: What is the role of the individual in society?

As the lesson concluded, each group presented their philosopher's approach to the class. Groups challenged or questioned one another's solutions, but in the end, the groups integrated the philosophies of all the different thinkers to offer the best possible solution to Fenway's troubles. Mr. Poon used this exercise to lead into the next question the class studied: What is the good life?

Semester at a Glance
What Is Morality?
What Is Justice?
<b>What Is the Role of the Individual in Society?</b>
What Is the Good Life?

# About the Class, cont'd.

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## Lesson Background

Read this information to better understand the lesson shown in the video.

### Content: Five Philosophers

**Plato**, a philosopher in ancient Greece (427–347 B.C.), established the Academy, where he and his students pursued philosophical and scientific research. Many of his early writings took the form of dialogues meant to encourage rational discussion and generate multiple solutions to a given problem. His treatise *The Republic* examines the nature of justice and sets forth an ideal society in which reason rules and citizens perform roles for which they are best suited.

**Thomas Hobbes** was a seventeenth-century English philosopher. He is most famous for writing *The Leviathan*, in which he proposes that human beings live in a constant state of conflict. Their lives, he writes, are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In order to bring peace, people enter into a social contract with a ruler (or assembly), who exercises absolute, unquestionable power and who is accountable only to God. The ruler cannot be unjust to subjects because they have authorized his power.

**Mao Zedong** was a Chinese political leader who helped found the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. He wrote “On New Democracy” in 1940, which outlined how Marxism would be adapted to conditions in China, and in 1949, established the People’s Republic of China. According to Mao, ongoing revolution was the mechanism to end class struggle and party differences on the way to the establishment of the ideal state. Much of Mao Zedong’s political philosophy appears in *Quotations from Chairman Mao*, also known as the *Little Red Book*.

**Reinhold Niebuhr**, a twentieth-century Christian theologian and political philosopher, believed that society was ruled by self-interest and that conflicting interests must be balanced. He put his hope in individual morality to offset the power of groups. Niebuhr, an activist, took a stand against Hitler during WWII. He once said, “The duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world.” Some of his works include *Christianity and Power Politics*, *Faith and Politics*, and *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

**Martha Nussbaum** is a twentieth-century and current classicist, professor of law, and a philosopher-advisor to international economic development projects. Drawing from the classic philosophers, especially Aristotle, she believes that in order to decide what is good for a society, one must begin by asking the question: What is the good life? She uses literature to raise life’s most important ethical questions, and believes language is crucial to being able to describe others and move beyond one’s own cultural narrowness. Nussbaum wrote “Aristotelian Social Democracy,” “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” and *Citizens of the World: A Classical Defense of Radical Reform in Higher Education*.

### Teaching Strategy: Dilemmas

Problem-based learning uses dilemmas and scenarios, either real or fictional. Used to stimulate interest, highlight conflicts, and feature abstract ideas in a more concrete setting, these devices pose a problem, such as ethnic strife, and encourage students to construct a course of action. Students learn to think critically as they question their own assumptions, their classmates’ assertions, and the references they consult. The actions they propose are based on facts, evidence, and the weighing of alternatives and consequences.

# Watching the Video

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As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

## Before You Watch

Respond to the following questions:

- What role do questions play in learning, and how do you encourage students to question you, one another, and the resources they use?
- What are the benefits and challenges of posing difficult questions as a teaching strategy?
- What questions do you think are important for students to consider in social studies?

## Watch the Video

As you watch “The Individual in Society,” take notes on Mr. Poon’s instructional strategies, particularly how he uses questioning as a strategy for teaching. Write down what you find interesting, surprising, or especially important about the teaching and learning in this lesson.

## Reflecting on the Video

Review your notes, then respond to the following questions:

- What struck you about the classroom climate, background information, lesson preparation, teaching strategies, and materials used in this lesson?
- What kind of preparation might have preceded this lesson in order for students to be successful in their work?
- What role did the use of a dilemma have in this class?
- What strategies did Mr. Poon use to encourage questioning and critical thinking?

# Watching the Video, cont'd.

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## Looking Closer

Here's an opportunity to take a closer look at interesting aspects of Mr. Poon's lesson.



### Using Dilemmas: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately three minutes into the video. Watch for about five minutes.

As the video begins, Mr. Poon asks a student to read the dilemma facing the nation of Fenway. He then asks students to work in groups to come up with a solution that represents viewpoints of a particular philosopher.

- What is the advantage of using a dilemma in this way?
- What is the role of the dilemma in engaging students in abstract thinking?
- How does Mr. Poon help his students succeed as they grapple with this assignment?
- What are the advantages to using a dilemma from a fictional nation (Fenway) as opposed to examining a dilemma from an actual nation?



### Questioning To Stimulate Thinking: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately 12 minutes into the video. Watch for about two minutes.

As students discuss their solutions to the Fenway dilemma, Mr. Poon checks in with each group and gauges students' understanding through questioning. Listen carefully to the exchange between the Reinhold Niebuhr group members and Mr. Poon as the group discusses their solution.

- How do Mr. Poon's questions stimulate thinking?
- What does his comment about what to do "when a kid is struggling" reveal about how Mr. Poon assesses his students' understanding?
- How might Mr. Poon's educational philosophy lead to more learning?

# Connecting to Your Teaching

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## Reflecting on Your Practice

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

- What are some questions or dilemmas that you can use in your own teaching or subject area?
- Consider how your class differs from Mr. Poon's. How would you encourage your students to recognize the value of questioning (teachers, other students, references) in their own learning, and what strategies can you use to support students in raising questions that lead to learning?
- What topics in your course lend themselves to teaching students how to be critical thinkers—for example, to question, weigh evidence and support for various answers, and think of the consequences of different courses of action?

## Taking It Back to Your Classroom

- Construct a dilemma or use an example from literature that lets students apply abstract ideas to a concrete example. One example that illustrates tensions similar to those in Fenway can be found in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a novel by Harper Lee about life and justice in Alabama during the Depression. Ask students to consider the issue of "justice" from the point of view of different characters in the novel.
- Then ask your students to construct a dilemma themselves based on something important to them. Have them raise questions, weigh evidence to support alternative points of view, and consider the consequences of choosing various courses of action. Have your students discuss the dilemma in class to extend their learning.

# Resources

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## Print Resources for Students

Kolak, Daniel, and Raymond Martin, eds. *The Experience of Philosophy*. 5th ed. Pacific Grove, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 2001.

Osborne, Richard. *Philosophy for Beginners*. Writers and Readers Documentary Comic Book. London: Writers and Readers, 1993.

Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945.

Swift, Adam. *Political Philosophy: A Beginners' Guide for Students and Politicians*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2001.

# Resources, cont'd.

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## Print Resources for Teachers

Evans, Ronald W., and David Warren Saxe, eds. *Handbook on Teaching Social Issues*. National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin 93. Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1996.

Kimble, C. *The Impact of Technology on Learning: Making Sense of the Research* [Policy Brief]. Aurora, Colo.: Midcontinent Regional Educational Library, 1999.

Magee, Bryan. *The Story of Philosophy*. New York: DK Publishing, 2001.

## Web Resources for Students

Department of Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University: <http://www.jhu.edu/~phil/links.html>

On this site, Johns Hopkins' philosophy resources are organized into three sections: guides and indexes, encyclopedias and databases, and organizations.

Philosophy Pages: <http://www.philosophypages.com>

This site specializes in the history of Western philosophical thought and features links, definitions, and study guides for students.

Philosophy Resources on the Internet: <http://www.epistemelinks.com/Main/MainClas.asp>

The Classroom Resources section of Epistemelinks.com connects students and teachers to hundreds of online resources on philosophy and related topics.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-evolutionary>

Continuously updated, the *Stanford Encyclopedia* provides definitions and usages of philosophical expressions.

## Web Resources for Teachers

Critical Thinking Consortium: <http://www.criticalthinking.org>

This site provides an educators' forum on facilitating student reasoning and offers critical thinking standards and lesson plans.

Socratic Seminar: <http://www.middleweb.com/Socratic.html>

This article addresses inquiry-based teaching models and encourages teachers to use the Socratic method in the classroom.

Teaching Strategies: <http://www.bsu.edu/burris/iwonder/strategies/strategies.html>

The Teaching Through Questioning site features articles, video samples, and teaching tools for educators interested in inquiry-based learning.