Concept Games - a method of philosophical exploration

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One of the main aims of philosophy for children is to get students to analyse, explore and understand the concepts we use to make sense of the world. Let me call this process conceptual analysis. Concept games, when used in the philosophy classroom, are a particular tool for enabling students to engage in conceptual analysis at a very sophisticated level.

I will explain what conceptual analysis is in more depth, explain how concept games enable this process and look at the virtues of this approach to conceptual analysis. Finally I will give a example of a concept game using excerpts taken from the book *In the Spirit of Socrates.*

The key feature of conceptual analysis is exploring concepts that are, in Laurance Splitter's phrase, 'common, central and contestable'. Examples of such concepts are knowledge, culture, mind and responsibility. The concepts are common in that they are familiar ideas we use or refer to almost everyday. The concepts are central in that they are important to our understanding of the world and ourselves. They are also central in that they provide the foundation for all the disciplines and subjects, as well as being links and connections between them. Finally, the concepts are contestable in that, ultimately, exactly what these concepts mean is controversial. There is no set definition that covers all possible cases, which has no possible faults or which cannot be revised. True conceptual analysis only occurs when dealing with such concepts and it leads to a sense of wonder, intellectual excitement and a deeper appreciation of the world and our place in it.

What are we trying to do when engaging in conceptual analysis of common, central and contestable concepts?

Basically we are trying to understand what a concept means and what it applies to. In other words, we are trying to define the concept.

It is hard to be more specific about what conceptual analysis is as there is a lot of controversy and debate around this issue. Also, I will not look at the complexities involved with the issue of what concepts are. Nevertheless, we need some sort of common starting point we can use to allow us to define concepts which does not force us into only one way of engaging in conceptual analysis. I think the concept game provides this starting point. Students can use concept games to do conceptual analysis and to answer the question of what it means to understand a concept.

A standard task of conceptual analysis since the time of Socrates has been to make how we define a concept and how we use the concept to be consistent. The problem conceptual analysis is dealing with is that what we say or think our concepts mean and how we use these concepts are often are in conflict. Sometimes we may even have several contradictory definitions or we might use a concept in several mutually exclusive ways. This problem shows conceptual analysis to be the process of removing the contradictions and inconsistencies in our thinking and our way of conceptualising the world.

The process of conceptual analysis is thus first to set up a definition of the concept. Then, test the definition to see if it is adequate. If it fails the test, suggest a new definition and test this also. Keep going with suggesting definitions until we find one that passes the test.

What counts as an adequate definition?

We are trying to get a consistent definition, so an adequate definition is one with no inconsistencies or contradictions. Second an adequate definition must describe all the characteristics of the concept but should not describe anything that is not covered by the concept. We are trying to get a definition that is neither too broad nor too narrow.

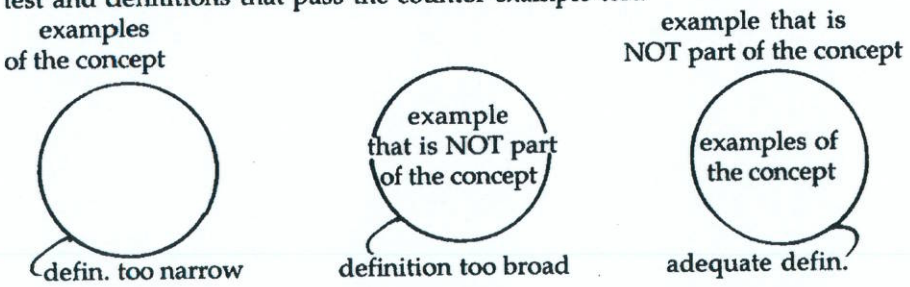
A definition that is too narrow would not describe everything about the concept and would leave out some essential aspects. A definition is too narrow when there are examples of the concept that are not described as part of the definition. For example, we could show the definition of courage, 'acting with no fear', was too narrow by pointing to examples of courage that are not of people acting with no fear. The terrified Mother who jumps in the raging stream to save her child is courageous but it is not covered by the suggested definition.

A definition that is too broad would equally apply to other concepts and so is not really a definition of the concept we are interested in. A definition is too broad when there are examples described as part of the definition that are not examples of the concept. For example, we could show that the definition of courage, 'acting with no fear', was too broad by pointing to examples of things that are not courageous but are acting with no fear. The person who gets out of bed in the morning is acting with no fear but we wouldn't say they are courageous.

How do we test whether a definition is too broad or narrow?

We suggest counter-examples to it. A counter-example is an example used to knock down an idea or definition rather than to support it. A counter-example could show a definition was too narrow, too broad or both too narrow and too broad. We have a definition that can pass the counter-example test when we cannot come up with any examples that show it is too broad or too narrow. If we run out of counter-examples we have found an adequate definition.

If I use a circle to represent a proposed definition of a concept, the following diagrams represent definitions that fail the counter-example test and definitions that pass the counter-example test.



This process of offering a series of definitions, each of which turn out to be too narrow or too broad, can seem to be pointless. However, progress is being made. It is similar to the process used by a sculptor. They slowly chip away the useless bits of rock until the perfect form remains. In a similar way, by rejecting incorrect definitions we come closer and closer to an adequate definition.

Another way of looking at this is as dialectical progress. A definition is suggested (the Thesis). A counter-example then shows that definition does not work (the Antithesis) and a new definition is suggested that takes into account the flaws and the good points of the old definition

(the Synthesis). For example, the thesis might be that courage is 'acting with no fear'. However, counter-examples, the antithesis, were suggested that showed the definition was both too broad and too narrow. So, a new definition, the synthesis, 'acting in the face of fear' is developed. This would then be tested with new counter-examples.

How does a concept game enable students to engage in this process of conceptual analysis?

Concept games include a large number of examples students can use to build and test definitions. Each is either an example of a particular concept, an example of something that does not fall under that concept, or a borderline case. The students must grapple with categorising these cases, and in the process they explore and refine the concept. The process swings easily between the concrete and the abstract. The students construct general definitions and test them with concrete examples, and then they can modify, accept or reject the definitions. The students agree and disagree with each other, leading to the group building up their own detailed understanding of the concept under investigation.

How would you use a concept game?

The standard process of a concept game involves putting each example on a sheet of card or paper. Also put on paper or card is a label for the categories the examples could be put in. The categories are: examples of the concept, not an example of the concept and '???' or 'borderline'. For example, if Mind was the concept being explored, the categories would be 'has a mind', 'no mind' and '???'.

Explain to the students that we are using a concept game to explore and understand a particular concept. Tell them: "You will be given some cases and you have to figure out which category these cases belong in." Explain that some cases are examples of the concept ('Some things have a mind'), some cases are examples of the contrary of the concept ('Some things don't have a mind') and some things we are not sure about ('They go in the '???' category'). As you decide where the cases go, you should work out what you think the best definition of the concept is. Agreeing and disagreeing with others is great, but the main point is to try to build on what others say and work together to construct an accurate definition."

Give out the cards with the examples on them to students after explaining how the examples are to be used and what they are supposed to do with them. Cards can be given out to individuals or shared in pairs, threes . . . Each person or small group should be given at least one case. The more cases that are given out, the longer the concept game lasts. When they have their case, the students are to discuss which category it should be placed in and, most importantly, their reasons for placing it there. Even if each person has a case of their own, they must discuss where their case should go with at least one other person.

Once they have decided where their cases should be placed, ask the students to place their cards down. Once all the cases are placed, invite the students to walk around and read all the different cases. Again say that they are not to move anyone else's case, but they are to note the cases they think are in the wrong place or are interesting.
Start the discussion by asking someone to pick a case that they found interesting or in the wrong place and begin discussing whether this case really is in the right place. Make sure you ask the people who placed the case why they placed it there and then invite the rest of the class to

comment and challenge. Keep focusing on the case until the ideas seem exhausted, as a detailed examination of a case is necessary to give a satisfying and deep discussion. However, allow students to make comparisons with other cases. When the ideas about a case seem mostly exhausted invite someone else to pick another case to focus on.

More categories can be added during the process if the class want to make finer or different distinctions. Also, the class might suggest that it would be better to have a continuum or another way of defining the concept rather than discrete categories. If students suggest new cases, write them on pieces of card and include them also. Their own cases are likely to be even more meaningful to them. Try out any ideas about how the process should change that the class suggests.

During the discussion note on the board any ideas given about the definition of the concept. This is important to focus the discussion and to give a sense of progress and moving forward. For example, while discussing the case of whether chickens have minds, someone might say chickens don't have minds because anything that can't speak doesn't have a mind. Another student might argue that language isn't important, being able to feel is enough to have a mind. Yet another student might add that a chicken can do things by itself, so it must have a mind. List these ideas on the board as part of a tentative definition of what it means to have a mind and what it means to not have a mind. Every time a point is made that adds to the definition, note it on the board.

Finish a concept game at the end of a session by reconsidering the definitions listed on the board. Do we agree with everything that has been written? Is what we have written consistent with where we have placed our cards? The cards can be collected in and used again to explore other aspects of the concept next period or an extension activity used.

Why use a concept game for conceptual analysis when students raise conceptual analysis questions all the time when doing philosophy for children?

I think there are a number of virtues that concept games have that supplement what we normally do in a philosophy classroom.

Concept games are easy to use and quickly get students doing high-level conceptual analysis. Most teachers, even if they knew how to do conceptual analysis themselves, would find it difficult to get their students to do it also. Because concept games are designed to automatically bring out problematic areas for consideration and clarification, you don't need to be a Socrates to enable students to form a much better understanding of a concept. The philosophical problems are made obvious in a concept game because of the example used. These are deliberately chosen to bring out all the controversial features of a concept so that students will be able to easily see the problems for themselves.

Second, the concept games are fun and engaging to use. It is sometimes difficult to maintain student attention on tricky abstract problems like conceptual analysis. Because the concept games are full of interesting and problematic concrete cases this attracts and keeps the students' attention. There is enough diversity to keep them interested for long periods while actually focussing on one problem ñ what does this concept

mean. The students also enjoy being able to see their concept develop as they move cards around and to physically be able to control where the cards go.

Third, a concept game fits the model of a community of inquiry well. Although the teacher might choose the concept to be examined, the students are doing all the actual conceptual analysis themselves. They construct and test their own definitions. The examples are there to help the students to find all the major problems, but they have to figure out how to deal with them. As well as this, concept games develop all the skills we value from philosophy for children. In using a concept game, the students explore a concept, but they also look at their own thinking and the thinking of others in this process. In particular, they learn to give and evaluate reasons, question, consider examples and counter-examples and self-correct. They learn to share relevant ideas and develop a sense of intellectual confidence. They learn to understand and respect the views of others while not necessarily agreeing with them, defend their views and build on what others have said.

Example of a concept game: The Mind

The major question explored in this concept game is: 'What has a mind?' The students are basically investigating what they think counts as having a mind by dividing up the world into things that do and things that don't. Some of the criteria they are likely to appeal to in deciding what has a mind are:

free will, consciousness, awareness, can think, has a soul, natural vs. man-made and capable of action.

The labels for categories need to be: 'has a mind' 'no mind' and '???'
Examples of cases to use:

A dolphin. A dog. A bird. A worm. A bacterium. A rock. A car
An answer phone. A personal computer. A chess-playing computer.
An artificial person (Commander Data from Star Trek, C3P0 from Star wars, or the Terminator). A Martian whose brain is made of Silicon. A human whose brain is dead, and has to be kept alive on life support. A brain that has been taken out of the body but is still kept alive. A person who is paralysed
A tree. A human cell. An unborn baby. A new born baby
An ant colony or termites' nest

Some questions that could be asked of students to help them to investigate what the concept 'mind' means:

Do all living things have a mind? Does anything with a brain have a mind? Can something with no brain have a mind?
Does a thing have to be able to do something in order to have a mind?
Is any sort of movement or reaction enough to count as having a mind?
Does something have to be free to have a mind? What does it mean to be free? Can something man-made have a mind?
Can something that isn't flesh and blood have a mind?
How can we distinguish between something that looks like it has a mind but doesn't and something that really has a mind?
Where in the development of a human do we get minds?
Do sperms or eggs have a mind? Is it the same mind as the grown human?

Reference

Clinton Golding: *In the spirit of Socrates.* $20: avaiable from the author