

## Fact, Faith, Fallacy and Fiction

Aim

To help students to distinguish between the various criteria for belief, thereby:

- (a) Helping them towards the time when they will formulate their own beliefs
- (b) Encouraging tolerance towards people with different opinions and faiths.

Before you begin, make sure the class knows the difference between fiction and non-fiction.

(1) Ask each member of the class to write down a fact that he or she could prove to the rest to be true at that very moment (e.g. it is raining / the clock is ticking / the book is blue / so and so has a big nose ...). Allow one minute then everybody listens to each person giving a fact. The teacher will find that opportunity arises to show that all these facts are based on the evidence of the five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. There will also be opportunity to explain that we're having to start by taking it for granted with a little jump of faith that we are all really here in the first place as we can't prove that it isn't just a dream. Other points to be prepared for: we may not all be seeing the same colour of a thing as everyone else; and, if someone has used the time on the clock as a fact, it will already be past the moment when that fact was true. With these reservations in mind, our conclusion is that in everyday life we accept certain facts as true on the evidence of our five senses.

We can call these empirical facts.

(2) Now ask each member of the class to write down a maths fact that each one could prove to the rest (e.g.  $2+2=4$ ).

Then ask for a maths fact that each one knows is true but can't actually prove personally. (This will vary according to the ability of the class but let's for example say the circumference of a circle is  $2\pi R$ ). Now ask each to write down a scientific fact that each one could prove, imagining having to demonstrate it to, say, a younger brother (e.g. boiling water evaporates).

Then ask for a scientific fact that each member accepts as true but hasn't a clue how to prove.

Don't take too long on this section. Select a few from the examples given. Ask if the class thinks that their Science and Maths teachers can prove every single fact they need to use. Ask about space rockets. Can every expert involved do all the calculations necessary for producing such a thing? Show that they rely on other people's expertise.

(3) We'd never learn anything if we waited until we could prove every single thing for ourselves; we have to accept what others have proved.

Thinking about our own class again, how would members find out what had happened in the music class during this lesson? How would they find out what their own families had been doing today? They would ask the people involved. Do they always believe what is said? This brings us into historical fact.

Now ask members of the class to write down a historical fact.

Collect samples on the board trying to acquire a selection such as: Henry VIII had six wives / my granddad fought in the war / 1066 was the Battle of Hastings / the Romans conquered Britain / England won the World Cup in 1966 / there used to be prehistoric monsters ...

Ask the class how they get historical information: media (internet, TV, radio, papers), history books, fossils, archaeological remains, etc.

How far do they believe such evidence?

We often take steps of faith with historical facts, e.g. in believing that Napoleon existed yet we all consider this to be a reasonable assumption. (N.B. Jesus was crucified in Palestine is a historical fact of this sort. That he is the Son of God is in a different category.)

(4) Now for Opinion.

Ask the class each to complete a list such as this:

My favourite colour is ...

My favourite pop group/singer is ...

My favourite football team is ...

My favourite TV programme is ...

My favourite actor/actress is ...

My favourite book is ...

My favourite girl's name is ...

My favourite boy's name is ...

My favourite food is ...

etc. (Ask the class to suggest additional items for the list.)

Let them compare with their friends.

These are opinions; they are not facts but we think people are entitled to their opinions; though we feel it is better if they can justify them.

Ask what is prejudice.

(5) Beliefs.

Ask each member of the class to write down something each one believes: i.e. something they cannot prove but they feel is true.

Hopefully, someone will have put a religious belief—about God or life after death, etc. This is what religion is all about. We can't expect to prove it.

That is why faith has such an important part in religion.

and then, teacher, it is up to you ...

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