

How to... Conduct a 'thought experiment'



Why do it?

The overwhelming problem with trying to raise awareness about asylum issues is that many people do not approach the topic in the same sympathetic manner that they may approach similar topics that involve human suffering. The aim of this discussion is to get people to think about asylum issues without the usual stigma, prejudices and misconceptions that many people carry. We do this by introducing people to a story that has many parallels with asylum issues but is set in a fresh context (there will also be features that are quite different, but these too should be used as a basis for discussion). The following story is meant to draw out issues surrounding *refused asylum seekers*.

The thought experiment

You're on a ship crossing an ocean. A day into the journey a stowaway reveals himself. He says he is escaping persecution and had no choice but to sneak out of his country. The captain allows the stowaway to stay on board but after consulting with his superiors decides that the stowaway must leave the ship at the next port. But when the ship docks the stowaway has hidden again. When the ship leaves dock he once more reveals himself and goes to the captain explaining that he did not believe he would be safe in the country they wanted to leave him in.

The ship is not due to dock again for another month. What should the captain do with the stowaway?

If you have time, then you may want to split up the story and structure the discussion in the following way to address particular issues.

Stage one: The basic scenario

You're on a ship crossing an ocean. A day into the journey a stowaway reveals himself. He says he is escaping persecution and had no choice but to sneak out his country.

How should one treat a stowaway? Issues you might raise, if they don't come up, include:

- How do you know if his story is true?
- Why not just throw him overboard?

Try to reach agreement on

- What principles should govern your treatment of the stowaway
- What specific actions these would entail

Stage two: A decision is made

The captain allows the stowaway to stay on board but after consulting with his superiors decides that the stowaway must leave the ship at the next port.

How should one treat the stowaway before he can leave at the next port?

- Is it better to make him contribute to his passage or keep him confined?

Stage three: The plot thickens

When the ship docks the stowaway has hidden again. When the ship leaves dock he once more reveals himself and goes to the captain explaining that he did not believe he would be safe in the country they wanted to leave him in.

The ship is not due to dock again for another month. What should the captain do with the stowaway?

How should one treat the stowaway now that he has hidden again?

- Does his hiding a second time suggest that his fears are real?
- Is it still better to make him contribute to his passage or keep him confined?

You might also ask what difference it makes

- If the stowaway is a woman, a child, pregnant, sick or highly distressed
- How the stowaway behaves after a decision is made
- If there is a group of stowaways
- If the stowaways are there because they paid someone in good faith to obtain passage for them

Stage four: Drawing out the similarities and differences

Suggest that asylum seekers are in many ways in the same position as the stowaway. Look at the stowaway at **stage one** first, and discuss the similarities and differences, which include:

Similarities	Differences
Very difficult to establish facts and find evidence	Only one stowaway/many asylum seekers
Probably took large risks when seeking sanctuary and may have done so illegally	Very limited space on ship/no real problem of space with asylum seekers, despite popular myths
Stowaway/asylum seeker does not start with same rights as others on ship/citizens	People on ship have probably chosen and paid to be there/citizens in the UK are there by accident of birth and only start paying taxes when they can afford to

Then consider **stage two**. Here we consider the parallels with a refused asylum seeker who can't leave the country immediately through no fault of their own (just like the stowaway who can't jump overboard and swim to shore!).

Similarities	Differences
It is not possible for them to leave straight away (many refused asylum seekers cannot be removed due to practical reasons)	There is not a clear future date when the refused asylum seeker can leave (like landing at a port), it is usually very uncertain.
There is a choice between allowing them to contribute (work), detaining them, or leaving them to fend for themselves.	Very limited space on ship/no real problem of space with asylum seekers, despite popular myths

Then consider **stage three**. Here we consider the parallels with a refused asylum seeker who does not try to leave the country voluntarily (like the stowaway who hides rather than leaves).

Similarities	Differences
They don't make efforts to leave voluntarily	Stowaway only onboard for limited time
They may have "evaded the system"	There is not always a simple and safe route to leave the UK, even if it is possible
There is still a choice between allowing them to contribute (work), detaining them, or leaving them to fend for themselves.	Everyone on ship either works or has paid/many UK citizens do not work or pay taxes.

See how far people agree with these. Invite the group to suggest their own similarities and differences and think about how their principles and actions would translate to the asylum-seeker case. If people want to argue that the asylum seeker should be treated more strictly/leniently than the stowaway, insist they justify this. Ask what are the *morally relevant differences* between the two cases?

Stage five: Conclusions

The discussion should have thrown up many questions and ideas. Try to wrap it up by asking:

- Has the thought experiment made you view the situation of asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers differently?
- What do you think the policies should be towards both?