

Silent Running (dir. Douglas Trumbull, 1972)

Lesson by Fabienne Crocket, Teach First

Religious Studies/Philosophy/Ethics,
Key Stage 5

This lesson provides a springboard for students to debate the core issues at the heart of environmental ethics. It encourages students to begin applying the normative ethics systems they have been studying to a real practical ethical problem in contemporary life. .

Lesson Objectives

- To debate the question of whether the environment should be valued in itself or because of its instrumental value to humanity.
- To apply this question practically using normative ethical systems

Curriculum links

- Application of normative ethical systems to a practical ethical problem (i.e. utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics as applied to environmental ethics)

You will need...

Trailer
Diamond nine template
(provided)

Main Attraction
Silent Running DVD

End Credits
Sugar Paper

Activities

TRAILER: What do humans need to survive?

Starter activity encourages students to discuss what we as humans value and how we justify this. Students must order the nine items below in order of what they think they need most to what they think they need least to make them happy. This can be done as a diamond nine. Students repeat this exercise a second time, but instead they must order the items from what they need most to survive to what they need least.

This activity can be done in a pair, square, share format. Students first of all work with a partner and agree on an order. Then they must join another pair, and reach a new agreement. Finally each group can share their findings with the class, highlighting which items caused deliberation or disagreement. The class as a whole can try and reach an agreement about the most and least important items. Which items cause the most contention and why?

MAIN ATTRACTION: Why does the environment matter?

In *Silent Running*, Lowell is a botanist tending to the last few forests that exist in the known universe. He does this on a spaceship because the Earth's climate can no longer support nature. Lowell's shipmates do not understand why he is so passionate about plants and flowers.

Watch the clip of Lowell's speech to his shipmates (14:32 – 18:05 min). Ask the students to summarise in their own words what is at stake.

Introduce the question at the heart of environmental ethics:

- **Does the environment matter in itself, or because it is of instrumental value to humans?**

Time can be spent deconstructing this question, and highlighting the key aspects:

- What would Lowell's answer be?
- What would his shipmates answer be?

In addition, you can also show the clip, where Lowell murders his shipmates to protect his forests (26:20 – 28:45). This could lead to discussion of whether it

would ever be right to take a human's life to protect a plant's life.

END CREDITS: Campaign poster

Students create a campaign poster from the point of view of either a utilitarian, a deontologist, or a virtue ethicist (this can be adapted according to specification). The aim of the campaign poster is to encourage the general public to take an interest in caring for the environment.

The three ethical systems can be viewed as political parties who each have the same goal, but different methods and justifications. For example, a utilitarian might think you should donate a certain proportion of your income, while a virtue ethicist might think you should set up a community meeting.

The posters must include:

- An image
- A slogan
- 3 reasons why we should be pro-active in caring for the environment
- What we can do to contribute

Extras

Read

- *Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham (1951)
- *The Year of the Flood* by Margaret Atwood (2009)

Watch

- *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (Nicolas Roeg, 1976)
- *Sunshine* (Danny Boyle, 2007)
- *Pumzi* (Wanuri Kahiu, 2009)

DIAMOND NINE HAND OUT

Beauty
Health
Technology
A job
Pets

Friends
A life partner
Trees, plants
and flowers
Good food

