The ship of fools

Age: from 10 years

Suggested prop:
A picture of the ship of fools

Stimulus:
Place the picture in the center of the circle or on a screen in the background and tell the following story:

The Greek philosopher Plato who lived more than 2000 years ago told a story in which he compared the state to a ship:

Imagine a sea voyage on which all that are travelling feel entitled to claim the helm. Even if the captain is a good navigator, the crew doesn't understand what he does—they call him a "star gazer". The sailors are quarrelling with one another about the steering—every one in the crew is of the opinion that he has a right to steer, though he has never learned the art of navigation. The crew throng about the captain, begging and praying him to commit the helm to them. When the captain doesn't give in, they get him drunk, mutiny and take possession of the ship. They take helm and make free with the stores; thus, eating and drinking, they proceed on their voyage in such a manner as might be expected of them.

So, in this story, Plato likens the governance of a city-state to the command of a ship on the sea. He argues that it takes expertise to be captain of a ship – common people without this expertise are unfit. And it would be madness, for instance, to put decisions about how to sail the ship up for vote. It is like if you are ill and let ordinary people in the street take a vote on whether you should have an operation or not. In a democracy, the people rule, but the people are not experts. This makes democracy irrational.

Anchor question 1: Does it take expertise to govern a country? (Why/why not?)
Follow-up question: If yes, what kind of expertise could be relevant to have to govern a country?

Anchor question 2: Should everyone be allowed to vote regardless of whether they have governing expertise? (Why/why not?)

Socratic question:
What is democracy? Expertise? Skills? Voting? Rights? Responsibility? Equality? Justice? Knowledge? Foolishness? Rationality? Sense? Leader(s)? Decisionmaker(s)?