

Designing Effective Projects: Using Knowledge Decision Making

Making Good Choices

Decision making is an important skill in life. We make hundreds of decisions a day. Most are trivial and have no lasting impact on our lives while others can be life-changing. All educators strive to help students become good decision makers.

Marzano (2000) describes the steps of good decision making:

1. Think of as many alternatives as you can.
2. Think about the good and bad points of each alternative.
3. Think about the likelihood of success of the best alternatives.
4. Choose the best alternative based on its value and likelihood of success.

Perhaps, the most important stage of decision making is the first one, coming up with alternative responses. People often fail to consider all the possible alternatives when contemplating a decision. They think, "I can do x or I can do y," never thinking that there might also be a possible z or a, or b or even a 1a or a 2b (Swartz 2000). Important decisions are rarely simple, and the best alternative may only come after careful deliberation. Brainstorming is one technique for generating a large number of alternative responses for decisions.

Once a group of reasonable alternatives has been collected, good decision makers must weigh the benefits and drawbacks to each one in order to make a sound choice. Knowledge plays an important role in this stage of making decisions. Having complete information is essential to making a good decision.

Immature students often focus on only short-term consequences and also may fail to consider the effect their choices will have on others. It is also a characteristic of human nature that once we come to a decision we think is reasonable, we are unlikely to seriously consider a better one that may come to our attention. We may in fact refuse to accept any evidence that does not support our decision, even if it is credible (Langer, 1989). "Premature cognitive commitments are like photographs in which meaning rather than motion is frozen" (Swartz, 2000, p. 55).

Teaching Decision Making

Traditionally, many teachers have claimed they were "teaching" their students decision making by giving them decision-type problems to solve. This method has been found to be the least effective in helping students learn skills for making good decisions (Swartz).

Effective instruction in making decisions involves specifying a skill to emphasize in a learning activity, or stage of a project. Many different skills may be appropriate, but teaching one skill at a time in depth will produce greater results. Swartz recommends asking oral questions as students work on decisions, having them work in small groups, making graphic organizers to guide them in the process, and asking them to describe and reflect on their strategies during and after making the decision. Skills taught in this way are likely to transfer to new situations if students are reminded of the strategies they have studied in the past when they confront new decisions.

Examples of Teaching Decision Making

In the Unit Plan, [Teacher's Pet](#), young children study different animals and their habitats in order to choose a new pet for the teacher. This unit provides many opportunities for a teacher to discuss aspects of good decision making. As the students propose possible pets, they can be prompted to think about the long-term consequences of choosing different pets.

- How big will the pet grow to be and how big of a pet can the teacher have?
- What kind of a habitat does the pet need? Can the teacher provide the right habitat? What would happen to the pet if it lived for a long time in the wrong habitat?
- What kind of care does the pet need? Can the teacher give it the right care? What would happen to the pet if it lived for a long time without the right kind of care?

Middle years students think about what makes a hero in the unit [Enduring Heroes](#). This unit gives students the opportunity to think about values and goals in terms of contemporary heroes. This unit can show how different people make different decisions based on their personal values and beliefs. Teachers can ask students to think about what values their proposed heroes represent and then give them explicit instruction in how to match those values to their own.

Senior world-language students choose a country to visit in the unit [¡Vamonos!](#) While students are working on this project, the teacher can highlight different aspects of their decision to select a country, emphasizing making decisions that involve a complex network of considerations, such as climate, recreation, dialect of the language, personal preferences, and so forth. Helping students remember to consider the wide range of factors and the short- and long-term consequences of their choices is a skill that can be transferred to other projects in school and in life.

A word of caution to teachers who want their students to be better decision makers. Some programs give students a list of specific steps to go through when making decisions. This may not be the best way to teach the skills. Decisions are not always linear, and some students, depending on their personalities or thinking styles, may reject a rigid process, which may cause them not to think about their decisions at all. Help students find a way that makes sense for them and that helps them take into account all the information that they need to make a good decision. The ways of doing this can be different depending on the learning and thinking styles of each student. Helping students devise methods that are flexible and practical makes it more likely that students will use them on their own.

References

Langer, E. J. (1989). *Mindfulness*. New York: Merloyd Lawrence.

Marzano, R. J. (2000). *Designing a new taxonomy of educational objectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Swartz, R. J. (2000). Thinking about decisions. In A. L. Costa (Ed). *Developing minds: A resource book for teaching thinking*, (pp. 59-66). Alexandria, VA: ASCD.