THINKING AND REASONING SKILLS

SKILL 7: DECISION MAKING AND ETHICAL REASONING

Being able to think clearly and reason through the available options skilfully is never more important than when reaching a judgement on an ethical matter. How morally and emotionally charged concepts such as fairness and equality are being used is crucial to understanding ethical debate, but terms like these can be interpreted in different ways. This unit will focus upon ethical concepts and how to apply criteria to reach a reasoned judgment in matters of right and wrong.

By teaching and assessing this skill, the aims and objectives are as follows:

IDENTIFYING DIFFERENT OPTIONS

Expose students to ethical debates in which there are various options e.g. punishment of criminals, abortion and euthanasia laws, testing on animals.
Guide students in recognising when there are options that may not have been considered or might be different from the norm.

STUDENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO:

Think about an issue where people have different views about what is the right and wrong thing to do, and think of more than one 'right' option that comes from looking at the situation in different ways.

IDENTIFYING AND APPLYING CRITERIA

Explain what is meant by the term 'criteria' and expose students to ethical judgements in which criteria play a part.
Guide students in recognising what criteria is being used in ethical judgements and in practising applying criteria to decide between the different options available.

STUDENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO:

See that different options in moral decision making are based on certain criteria, and identify what they are. Apply different criteria and consider available evidence to reach a decision in an ethical matter.

ETHICAL CONCEPTS

Teachers should aim to:

Expose students to key ethical concepts that can be defined in more than one way , e.g. fairness.
Guide students in using the context to clarify how a concept is being used in ethical debate.

STUDENTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO:

Choose the correct meaning of a key word used in ethical debate from a selection of possible meanings by looking at how it us being used in an argument.

IDENTIFYING DIFFERENT OPTIONS

An ethical matter is an issue in which there are different views on what is the morally right thing to do. For example, eating meat becomes an ethical matter because some people believe that it is wrong for humans to kill animals for food, whilst others believe that it is right to do so. Ethical matters are usually much more complex than this example suggests, though, because of the different reasons people have for thinking a certain way and the values they have that lie behind some of those reasons.

Sometimes it is difficult to see past our own beliefs about what is right and wrong, maybe because the way we think has been influenced by the way we were brought up, our own experiences and other beliefs we may hold e.g. religious beliefs. However, it is particularly important to able to think and reason clearly in an ethical matter. Why?

There are many reasons, which include:

- Emotion is usually involved in ethical debate, and this can cloud our judgement.
- The law is based on society's views about what is right and wrong.
- The decisions we make on ethical matters can have serious consequences e.g. life or death.

Consider the following people's views on the matter of abortion:

Harry

Abortion is wrong and it should be illegal.

Deliberately ending the life of an unborn child is murder.

Only God can decide who lives and dies.

Iris

Abortion is not wrong and it should be allowed.

It is not the same as murder, because an unborn child is not a person yet.

A woman has the right to choose what happens to her own life and body.

God might not exist, so we can't base our decisions on religious views.

Harry and Iris have completely different views on a matter of life and death, and their views are based on a complex set of reasons that have been influenced by religion and probably their upbringing and their own experiences.

In reality, though, they have only considered a limited number of options – Either abortion is wrong and illegal, or not wrong and legal. Another option is to say that abortion is acceptable until the unborn baby reaches the stage where it can feel pain, after which it is wrong and illegal.

Consider the moral dilemmas in this activity. Can you identify more than one option that could be taken in each case? What criteria are you basing your decision upon?

The following support materials can be found within the **Skill 7 pdf portfolio**.

7.01 Moral Dilemmas.ppt

IDENTIFYING AND APPLYING CRITERIA

The question '*What criteria are you basing your decisions on?*' in the last exercise is what we will now focus upon. When we make decisions, they are usually based on one or more criterion. The criteria that we base our decisions on are called criteria. For example, if I decide to close the window in a chilly classroom, then my criteria might be comfort and maximum learning. If my criteria were different, e.g. good health, then I might decide not to close the window so that there is a good flow of fresh air and less opportunity for germs and viruses to spread.

Consider the following decisions. Which of the following criteria might lie behind them?

1. Jodie has decided to study medicine at university.
2. Alice has decided to leave school at 16 and get a job.
3. Diana has decided to get married and start a family when she leaves school.

There could be one clear criterion driving a decision, for example, Jodie may only be thinking about how much she can earn as a doctor, but there are sometimes several different criteria lying behind a decision. For example, Alice wants to start earning money straight away (financial gain), but she also wants to please her family by getting involved in the family business (others' happiness) and she believes that she will have a job for life if she gets on the career ladder straight away, getting experience in the world of work (career security). If she changed her criteria, she may well make a very different decision – if she only considered her own happiness, for example, she may go to university to study her real passion for zoology!

When it comes to making ethical decisions, however, then it is crucial to recognise the criteria we are/should be using to reach a judgement on what should happen. Ethical decisions, by nature, are likely to affect other people, so we might want to use **happiness** as our criteria. On the other hand, what makes the most people happy might not fit with our own moral values about what is right and wrong, so we might want to use **rules** as our criteria.

In politics, ethical and practical decisions that affect lots of people are made all the time, and different people and groups have different views on what criteria should be applied. In the following activity, try to be aware of the criteria you are using in the decisions you make:

The following support materials can be found within the **Skill 7 pdf portfolio**.

7.02 Planet Utopia.ppt

There are many, many fascinating ethical debates to practice these skills on. Often, we have a strong emotional response to a particular debate. It would be very difficult to ignore our emotions when we are faced with a difficult ethical decision, particularly if it affects us or people we care about, but it is an important skill to be able to think and reason clearly so that we can justify our decisions. The following exercises will give you practice in considering different options, applying criteria and presenting reasoned arguments to justify your ethical decisions:

Punishing criminals

7.03 Punishment decisions.ppt

7.04 Punishment decisions printable worksheet.doc

7.05 Punishment criteria printable worksheet.doc

7.06 Punishment case study.ppt

Decisions about life and death

7.07 Making decisions on life and death.ppt

7.08 Ethical Committee case study worksheets.doc

Decisions about life and death

7.09 Charity Auction.ppt

7.10 Environmental Projects information sheets.doc

ETHICAL CONCEPTS

Words often have more than one meaning. Consider the following statement:

It's not fair!

The word 'fair' here could mean many different things. See how many separate reasons you can come up with to support this statement.

You might have come up with reasons similar to these:

A. I worked harder than he did but he got a higher grade than me.

B. I earn less money than she does but she got the bonus instead of me.

C. I got a detention and he didn't even though we were both as much to blame.

When we look at the situation, and the reason for saying something isn't fair, we get a better idea of how the word 'fair' is being used. See if you can link the following definitions of 'fair' to one of the three examples above:

Treating people equally ?

Getting what you deserve ?

Giving to those who need it most ?

Ethical concepts that can be used in more than one way include: justice, equality, freedom, happiness.

In the previous section, we looked at 'happiness' as one of the criteria we could use for making ethical decisions. But what exactly do we mean by happiness? It would make my dog happy, for example, if I gave him a bone, but that is not the same kind of happiness someone might feel if their football team won a match or a relative is cured of cancer. In ethical decision making and debate, then, it is important to clarify the meaning of the ethical concepts that are being used, as this can alter the meaning of the debate significantly.

The following support materials can be found within the **Skill 7 pdf portfolio**.

7.11 Word play printable worksheet.docx

7.12 Word play answers.docx

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