

Smart Moves Lesson 1

Making Choices 1: Basic Principles

"Children are quite willing to ask sensible, provocative questions until some cognitive and moral hunger is appeased – unless they figure out that the adults around them have no wish to hear what is on their minds."

Robert Coles

Overview:

Students examine core beliefs behind American values, including the thinking of philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau. Through dialogue, students define and develop their own principles around the concept of the common good.

Objectives:

Students will be able to

- Engage in dialogue that includes explaining and relating ethical ideas.
- Compare and contrast moral philosophies and draw conclusions.
- Evaluate moral philosophies.
- Define *freedom* and *common good*.
- Examine and describe their own values in relationship to the common good.

Time: 2-3 class periods

Materials:

- Student Handout: *What Do You Believe?*
- Student Handout: *What Is Right?*
- Student Handout: *Freedom and the Common Good*

Before you begin:

"Making Choices 1" and "Making Choices 2" are intended to be used together. The goal of these lessons is to help students explore the connection between what they believe and how they choose to act. By defining their principles, students can judge their own actions and determine whether or not they are living the visions they hold for their lives and their community. The abilities to judge and act are at the core of good citizenship.

Both lessons ask teachers and students to engage in dialogue with a spirit of inquiry. Write the rules for scholarly discourse on the board (in step 5, below) and refer to them whenever the discussion veers from a respectful process. Depending on the level of interest your students express for the dialogues, this lesson will take two to three class periods. Consider pairing poor readers with better ones during the individual reading time, or ask small groups to read the handouts aloud while everyone in the group follows along.

Procedure:**Day One**

1. Begin the lesson with a question for the class: What would you do if your whole class was being punished because someone in the class stole from another student and you knew who did it? Your class would get to go outside on a break right away if you told the teacher. Would you?
2. Encourage students to answer honestly and show no judgement in response to their reasoning (as hard as that might be).
3. After brief discussion, tell students that in this lesson they will be considering moral questions like this one as they define their basic principles or values that guide their lives.
4. Pass out the handout *What Do You Believe?* and ask students to respond to the statements quickly and to the best of their ability. Tell students that philosophers

have spent lifetimes pondering these questions, but you want students to choose the answer that comes to mind first. Give them five minutes to complete the handout.

5. When everyone has finished the handout, tell students they will have a chance to discuss the statements on it, but first a few rules of courtesy for scholarly discussions. Write these on the board:

There are no right answers, only answers with better reasons. Explain your reasoning.

Stick to the ideas and disagree respectfully – don't attack each other personally. Really listen to each other.

6. Invite students to discuss the statements on the handout. Point out that they responded to the statements quickly and that they may find themselves changing their responses once they've had a chance to discuss them. That's fine.

7. Use the following questions to encourage thoughtful examination of the issues behind the statements:

Why do you think that?

How so?

How did you get to that conclusion?

What assumptions are you working from?

Can you give an example?

8. Reinforce students who begin using the questions you have modeled: "Now you're thinking. That's just the kind of question a philosopher would ask."
9. After the class has discussed the statements, ask if anyone changed their viewpoint or developed a new reason for their belief. Tell students that what they have just done is participate in a philosophical dialogue. Dialogue is an excellent way to examine complex concepts.
10. Pass out the handout *What Is Right?*. Tell students they will now look at what some philosophers have reasoned is ethical or right behavior. Encourage students

- to look for ideas in the reading that are similar to those they expressed in their class discussion. Which philosophers do they agree with?
11. Ask students to read over the entire handout on their own and to jot a few ideas in response. Give students 15 minutes for this. For a class with poor reading and comprehension skills, you could either put students in pairs or have the whole class read and discuss the passages aloud and give time after each passage for the class to write responses.
 12. Next, have students get into groups and discuss the questions on the sheet. They should take notes and end up with a group response to each question.
 13. Lead a short class discussion to sum up the ideas students have discovered. After each question on the handout, ask if any other group came up with something different. Make sure every group shares their response to at least one of the questions.

Day Two

14. Write the word *freedom* on the board. Ask the students to define it as you write key phrases and words from their suggestions. They may not agree on the definition, which is fine. Ask, "What does freedom mean in our country? Are we free to steal? Are we free to pursue any job we want? Are we free to read what we want? Are we free to drive through a neighbor's yard?" Encourage students to begin to express the ideas of rights and responsibilities.
15. Ask students if they can recall the rules for courteous scholarly discussion. Write them on the board as students name them:
There are no right answers, only answers with better reasons. Explain your reasoning.
Stick to the ideas and disagree respectfully – don't attack each other personally.
Really listen to each other.
16. Pass out the handout *Freedom and the Common Good*. Request that students read it first by themselves and jot notes. After ten minutes of reading, put students into

small groups to read the handouts again, discuss, and sum up the group thinking in writing. Give the groups about 20 minutes to complete the handout.

17. When the groups have finished the handout, lead a class discussion. Make time for students to respond to other groups' comments. Discussion prompts may include:

Could you give an example?

What are you assuming?

What would follow from what you say? What would be some unintended consequences?

How are the ideas from this group alike or different from Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau?

How do these behaviors maintain the common good?

Reinforce students who exhibit higher order thinking skills: those who integrate ideas, assess, judge, and explain.

18. For closure, sum up which ideas were most prevalent. Ask students if they agree that these ideas represent a good system for judging right from wrong. For example, if students identified "helping others" as an important moral behavior for maintaining the common good, ask them which behaviors would then be judged as wrong.
19. Tell students that in the next lesson they will have an opportunity to act on their principles.

Assessment Opportunities:

- Large and small group discussions
- Written answers to prompts on handout

Extensions:

Writing Exercises

- Students could write short stories about a society that was missing one of their principles: What if no one in this society valued honesty? What would that society be like? What kinds of problems would arise? Or what if no one worried about the future? What if people consumed all the resources and fouled the environment? What would it be like for the people who came after?
- Show a movie like *Silkwood* in which the protagonist is faced with a moral decision. Ask students to discuss whether or not they think the character made the right choice. What principles guided the protagonist and do the students value those principles?
- Give students the format for a script or play and invite them to write and act out moral dilemmas involving good citizenship.
- Ask students to write about their first memory of a moral decision. For example, did they ever steal or tell a lie when they were younger? Did they ever do the right thing in the face of difficult odds? How do they judge that early action? Did they choose badly or well?

Other Cultures

- Encourage students to explore philosophies from other cultures. Do the Chinese hold the same values as Americans? What is their definition of the common good? How are their history and thinking alike and/or different from ours?
- Students could research values in other cultures and create a chart to show the similarities and differences of values worldwide. Can students come up with a global set of principles to maintain the common good of the world?

Benchmarks

Career-Related Learning

Personal Management

Exhibit appropriate work ethic and behaviors in school, community, and workplace.

- Recognize and explain the differences between socially responsible and socially irresponsible behavior.

Problem Solving

Apply decision-making and problem-solving techniques in school, community, and workplace.

- Use information to make decisions and solve problems related to family, school, and community situations.

Teamwork

Demonstrate effective teamwork in school, community, and workplace.

Use strategies to work effectively with team members (e.g., negotiation, compromise, consensus, conflict resolution).

- Examine one's own role and performance in family, school, and community team efforts, (e.g., leader, follower, team member, facilitator).

Organizations and Systems

Describe how individuals fit into organizations and systems.

- Compare and contrast simple systems and organizations, showing their common elements and relationships (e.g., families, schools, communities, and workplaces).

English

Reading

Demonstrate literal comprehension of a variety of printed material.

- Identify sequences of events, main ideas, facts, supporting details, and opinions in literary, informative, and practical selections.

Demonstrate inferential comprehension of a variety of printed material.

- Examine relationships, images, patterns, or symbols to draw conclusions about their meanings in printed material.

Draw connections and explain relationships between reading selections and other texts, experiences, issues, and events.

- Extend and deepen comprehension by relating text to other texts, experiences, issues, and events.

Writing

Communicate knowledge of the topic, including relevant examples, facts, anecdotes, and details.

- Convey clear, focused main ideas supported by details and examples in ways appropriate to topic, audience, and purpose.

Communication

Communicate knowledge of the topic, including relevant examples, facts, anecdotes, and details.

- Convey clear, focused main ideas with accurate relevant supporting details, including documentation of sources, appropriate to audience and purpose.

Social Science

Civics and Government

Understand the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizens in the United States.

- Understand citizens' roles and ways of participating responsibly in the political process.

Resources

National 4-H Council

7100 Connecticut Ave., Chevy Chase, Maryland, 20815-4999

Phone: (301) 961-2800

<http://www.fourthcouncil.edu>

Character Education Partnership

<http://www.character.org/>

Children Thinking with Matthew Lipman

<http://www.terrace.qld.edu.au/academic/learnsup/gregpaper.htm>

Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children

<http://www.philosophyforchildren.org>

The Common Good

<http://www.scu.edu/SCUCenters/Ethics/practicing/decision/commongood.shtml>

HANDOUTS :

Handout 1 - What Do You Believe?

This survey asks you to consider some open-ended questions. You won't be judged on your choices, but you might be asked to consider why you answered the way you did. You will probably discover something new about yourself in the process.

Circle the response that best describes your beliefs.

1. Humans are born basically good. Their natural condition is one of sharing, kindness, and peace.

Agree Disagree

2. Humans are born wild and uncivilized. They need to be trained to be good.

Agree Disagree

3. Humans are neither naturally good nor bad. It is their environment that makes them do good or bad things to themselves and others.

Agree Disagree

4. There is no absolute right or wrong. Right and wrong depend on the situation.

Agree Disagree

5. There are things we can always say are definitely right or wrong.

Agree Disagree

6. People should take care of themselves and not expect other people to help out.

Agree Disagree

7. We all need to help each other.

Agree Disagree

8. All people owe it to their community to be good citizens: to make and follow the laws, to participate in solving community issues.

Agree Disagree

9. No person should have to worry about the community. People should be able to do whatever they want, whenever they want.

Agree Disagree

10. It's our duty to plan ahead for future generations: to leave the water, air, and land clean, to leave plenty of fuel and food.

Agree Disagree

11. Let each generation solve its own problems.

Agree Disagree

12. I consider myself a moral person.

Agree Disagree

Handout 2 - What Is Right?

For thousands of years philosophers have pondered what it means to be human. They have questioned the notions of freedom, truth, and goodness. They have argued over what is real, what is wrong, and what is right. Many of our social behaviors and political processes have sprung from answering these and other questions. The Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution are based on some of the ideas from such eighteenth century philosophers as John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Read over the following descriptions, first individually and then in small groups. Discuss these ideas in your group and respond to the questions. Take the time to really listen to one another and arrive at conclusions that reflect your collective thinking.

Absolutism and Consequentialism

Ethics, or moral philosophy, deals with right behavior, with what constitutes good and bad conduct for a government, a group, or an individual. Moral philosophy can be divided into two categories: Absolutism and Consequentialism.

Absolutism

Absolutism states that there are actions that are so morally wrong that they should never be done no matter what the consequences of not doing such an action might be.

Example

An absolutist who believed that killing was *always* wrong would refrain from killing in any situation, even to defend himself against a threat to his life.

Questions:

What are the arguments for absolutism?

What are the arguments against it?

Consequentialism

Consequentialism states that the morality of an action can be determined by the consequences of the action. The Consequentialists believe further, that there is no act that cannot be justified by its consequences. The slogan "the end justifies the means" typifies Consequentialist philosophy.

Example

An **Absolutist** might say, "Dropping a nuclear bomb is so wrong that it should never be done no matter what the circumstances." A **Consequentialist** might say "Yes, 130,000 people died in Hiroshima, but it ended World War II and saved a lot more lives by doing so."

Questions:

What are the arguments for Consequentialism?

What are the arguments against it?

Consequentialism as Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory based on the idea that an *action affecting society* can be judged to be right or wrong depending on how good or bad the consequences. The English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was the founder of this theory, which is often condensed to the slogan "the greatest happiness for the greatest number."

Questions:

What are the arguments for using "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people" as the basis for organizing a society?

What are the arguments against it? What examples can you think of where creating a society based on the "greatest happiness for the greatest number" might not be good, just, or right? (Hint: Consider the situation of slavery in the early history of the United States.)

Handout 3 - Freedom and the Common Good

Americans vigorously protect their personal freedoms, but they also understand that freedom requires responsibility. People are not free to harm others, rather we agree as a group to behave in a way that benefits the *common good*. What is the common good? It means we create and manage social systems, institutions, and our environment to benefit all people. We strive for good health care for our citizens, public safety and peace, fair employment and education, clean air, water, and soil.

Below are some descriptions of philosophers who have influenced our thinking about the common good. See if you can find the roots of some of your own ideas about justice in these passages and think about what you believe is right behavior for a society and its individuals.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

Thomas Hobbes, a seventeenth-century English philosopher, believed that people should surrender their natural rights to their king and never challenge their leader once they have given him authority. To Hobbes, the leader's power is absolute and no one can change that, not even the Church.

Hobbes is most famous for his book *Leviathan*, in which he describes humans' natural state as, "No arts; no letters; no society; and, which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." He felt that it was fear of violent death that motivated people to form "the state" and surrender themselves to the absolute authority of a sovereign power (the king).

Questions:

What are some benefits of a government based on the absolute power of a ruler?

What are some problems with Hobbes' concept of absolute rule?

John Locke (1632-1704)

John Locke, another English philosopher, viewed the natural state of mankind in a less pessimistic light than Thomas Hobbes. Locke felt that humans were born with a natural goodness and innocence. Unlike Hobbes, Locke argued that the power a leader has is "on loan" and can be revoked through rebellion if the leader violates the agreement of the social contract.

In 1690 his two most famous works were published: *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises on Civil Government*. Locke thought that all people were created equal, and should be able to pursue "life, health, liberty and possessions." Locke argued that the social contract should be founded on reason and tolerance. His ideas for a system of checks and balances was incorporated into the U.S. Constitution. Locke believed that if a governing power violated the social contract, revolution could not only be justified, but in some cases, was an obligation.

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78)

A Swiss-French philosopher, Rousseau became one of the most influential thinkers of the eighteenth century, contributing his ideas to a period known as the Enlightenment, (sometimes called the Age of Reason). Building on the thinking of Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau wrote *Discourse on the Inequalities of Men* (1754) and *Social Contract* (1762), in which he stated that humans were essentially good, but were corrupted by class divisions, property and commerce. He wrote, "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." In Rousseau's vision, people entered into a social contract among themselves, creating a government and educational systems to correct the inequalities brought about by civilization.

Both Locke and Rousseau contributed to our modern idea of individual rights, a concept that serves as a foundation for the American democracy we have today. Most Americans hold strong convictions about their individual freedoms, far beyond what Rousseau would have imagined. But even here, in the "land of the free," individual rights must be

balanced with the rights of the group. For example, you are not free to run a red light while driving. To do so would take away the right of other drivers and pedestrians to be safe from collisions.

Freedom is often a balance between the individual's rights and the rights of others. Considering what you have just read and your own ideas on the subject, describe what you believe is a good system for ensuring the rights of individuals and the common good. Use the following questions to guide you.

Questions:

Describe the society that you would like to live in. What are the qualities of this perfect place? How do people behave and what kind of benefits do people get from this society?

In your perfect society, would you limit individual freedoms for the common good? If so, under what circumstances? If you would not limit individual freedoms, what would be the consequences of no limits?

How would you make sure that people followed the rules? Give examples. (Note: If you think like Hobbes – that humans are basically nasty and brutish – you will have a different plan for ensuring order than if you think like Rousseau.)

List what you consider are the five most important behaviors for people to have in order to maintain the common good. (For example, honesty or altruism.)

Do you believe that planning for future generations is part of maintaining the common good? For example, should people give up some of their freedoms now to make the planet cleaner or safer for the children who will come later? Why or why not?