

VAPS

Ethical Decision Making Toolkit

ETHICAL CAPABILITY RESOURCES



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Ethical Decision-Making Tools



This document by no means covers, and cannot possibly cover all aspects of ethical decision-making in the world. However, it will attempt to describe the Victorian Curriculum across the levels; provide an explanation of the different ethical positions students are being asked to explore; and consider, evaluate and provide some conceptual guidance and instructions for the activities included in this toolkit to help explicitly teach the ethical capabilities decision-making strand within the context of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) pedagogy.

Although treated separately here (and in the curriculum), ethical decision-making cannot be separated from conceptual understanding, as one's understanding of concepts are the reference point for ethical decision-making.

For example, when exploring concepts, the question "Is action X fair?" is not so much about the ethical decisions behind action X, but about how we define 'fairness'. Once (through the CoI) students have developed a shared working definition of 'fairness', ethical decision-making can be explored.

This is what is covered through the Understanding Concepts strand. Students are asked to construct criteria to judge and evaluate concepts. In the Ethical Decision-making strand students are asked to explore 'Action X' in light of their criteria, and evaluate whether 'Action X' is appropriate in the situation, when considered against students' shared definition of 'fairness'.

The aim of this strand of the curriculum is for students to identify, consider and evaluate their own, and others, reasoning behind ethical decision-making through reflecting and organising their own experiences, assumptions and ways of making meaning in the world.

The following materials set out to support educators to facilitate this to happen in Victorian classrooms.

The Ethical Decision-making strand, like Understanding Concepts, is developmental through the levels, though students may function across the spectrum depending on their experiences and the maturity of the Community of Inquiry that has been established. The tools outlined in this document have also been considered in light of the developmental stages of thinking, understanding concepts and especially the Ethical Decision-making strand.



Ethical Decision-Making Tools



LEVEL F-2

EXPLICIT ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING CONTENT

At Foundation to Level 2 students explore types of acts that may be considered right or wrong. At this level, students also start to provide their own reasons for why certain acts may be considered right or wrong. Students further explore the effects that personal feelings can have on how individuals think about and act on ethical issues.

Activities/Tools*

- Put yourself on the Line,
- Fold the line, the Sun Shines upon (Fruit Salad),
- Mini Col – follow the pattern of inquiry.

LEVEL F-2

ACHIEVEMENT STANDARD IN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING*

Students have achieved Level 2 standard when they can identify and explain acts and situations that have ethical dimensions and can use examples to illustrate ethical dilemmas.

For example: if students can describe the act of lying and then make claims that rationalise the right or wrongness of lying in given situations, for examples, they may decide that white lies are ok if they don't hurt anyone, this demonstrates a Level 2 standard.

Students also demonstrate achievement in this strand by explaining how personal feelings may influence the way they or other people behave when ethical issues and concerns are involved.

For example: You can use the “Put yourself on the Line” activity to ascertain student preferences and encourage students to generate reasons for their decisions, such as in the example above they may prefer the truth over white lies.



Ethical Decision-Making Tools



LEVEL 3-4

EXPLICIT ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING CONTENT

At Level 3 and 4 students start to think about consequences and outcomes of certain ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ actions, and are therefore starting to explore the theory of *consequentialism*. This requires students to weigh up competing outcomes or consequences of actions and decide which consequence or outcome is preferable and provide an explanation for why. Students also discuss how personal values and dispositions, or character traits, influence ethical decision-making. At this level, students are asked to make decisions about how they would act in given situations.

Activities/Tools

- Put yourself on the Line ,
- Three heads are better than one,
- Fold the line, the Sun Shines upon (Fruit Salad),
- Mini Col – follow the pattern of inquiry.

These activities and tools can be adapted to focus responses towards consequences. For example if you use the “Put yourself on the line” activity ensure that the options on the spectrum are related to consequences. This might include: “Would you rather tell a lie now to not upset a friend or would you rather never lie to ensure that you have their trust into the future?”. The ‘Three heads are better than one’ activity also helps students to consider the outcomes of an act by considering if the act is harmful or not.

LEVEL 3-4

ACHIEVEMENT STANDARD IN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

At the conclusion of Level 4 students can demonstrate the ability to explain and identify different ethical considerations within a problem. In doing so they are exploring their own and others reasoning behind ethical decisions as well as the process of ethical decision-making.

For example: Through weighing up different outcomes and/or intentions behind acting students consider consequences and intentions. Use the “Three heads are better than one” activity here.

Students also use examples, either self-generated or provided by the teacher, to evaluate ethical actions in relation to their outcomes. For example, students may show how two examples produce two different types of outcomes depending on who is in the situation, the relationship of participants, context, circumstance, etc.

For example, two people sharing a pizza. If the two people in example one are two adults and in the second example one person is an infant and the other is a growing teenager, the idea of sharing (and fairness) may change depending on the needs of the individuals concerned.

Or perhaps a friend tells a secret and asks the other friend not to tell, however, the secret may be something ethically compromising. Students may like to come up with secrets that would make them feel compromised.

Students are required to demonstrate that they can explain the role of personal values and dispositions in ethical decision-making and actions, recognising areas of contestability.

For example: students consider to what extent they value honesty or being considered an honest person by others and how this may influence decision-making. Recognising that this may prove problematic (contestable) in certain situations when acting dishonestly may produce a better outcome such as telling white lies to keep the peace.

If a student can acknowledge their own values and/or dispositions as well as locate and describe times or examples when this is problematic then they have achieved this level.



Ethical Decision-Making Tools



LEVEL 5-6

EXPLICIT ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING CONTENT

Throughout Level 5 and 6 students explore the distinction between means and ends, asking questions such as “Does the means (how we act) justify the ends (the outcome of our actions)?” Students are asked to explicitly explore this through contrasting problems that privilege one over the other.

For example: it may be considered okay to steal (the means) when you are starving because it will prevent starvation (the end), in contrast to the view that it is never ok to steal.

Students discuss the role and significance of conscience and reasoning in ethical decision-making. They weigh up their own and others feelings (conscience) such as guilt, versus evidence or data related to making an ethical decision.

For example, stealing lollies from your little brother may prevent them from getting rotten teeth (evidence), which produces what may be considered an objectively good outcome versus feeling guilty about stealing her little brother’s lollies.

It is also important to note that at Level 5-6 students should be introduced to the concept of ethical principles (see ‘*List of Ethical Principles*’, VCAA document). One such principle that may have been explored is never use others as a means to an end i.e. making friends with someone because they have a pool (the friendship is a means to getting access to a pool, the end). So students should explore the merits of such principles using conscience and reasoning as tools for evaluation.

Activities/Tools

- Would you rather,
- Put yourself on the line,
- Fold the line, the Sun Shines upon (Fruit Salad),
- Mini Col – follow the pattern of inquiry,
- Three Heads are better than one (this activity introduces the idea of evidence/truthfulness to help evaluate decisions based on conscience or evidence.

These activities and tools can be adapted to focus responses towards consequences and/or certain ethical principles.

For example: if teachers use the “Would your rather” activity ensure that the options on either side are related to consequences, competing consequences or consequences that may come into conflict with values or dispositions. This might include statements such as: “Would you rather cheat on a test now so that you don’t get in trouble at home/avoid embarrassment over your lack of understanding of the test content, or would you rather know that you acted honesty or with integrity?”



Ethical Decision-Making Tools



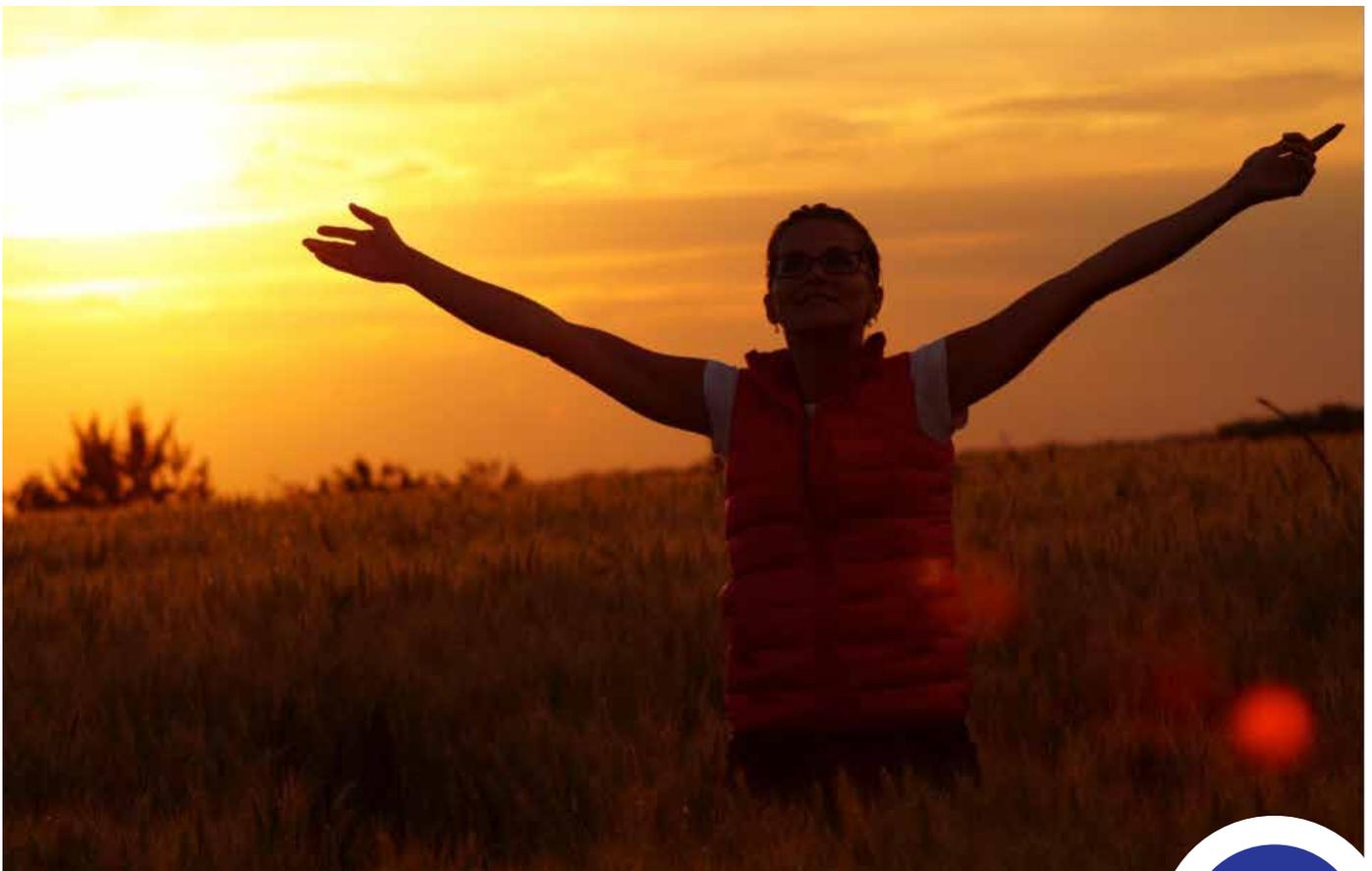
LEVEL 5-6

ACHIEVEMENT STANDARD IN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

Students have achieved Level 6 in Ethical Decision-making when they can explain different ways to respond to ethical problems and identify issues related to these, explaining how different ethical positions are contestable. Students can identify different ethical issues associated with a particular problem through presenting competing positions and evaluating the merits of each, or by providing examples and counter-examples to demonstrate the problems faced by differing positions in different circumstances.

To achieve Level 6 students demonstrate that they can identify the basis of a range of ethical principles (see 'List of ethical principle', [VCAA Document hyperlink](#)) and can explain, verbally or in writing, the role and significance of conscience and reasoning in ethical decision-making.

For example: by using the 'Three heads are better than one' activity to explore the 'truthfulness' of moral and ethical claims, evaluate the harm certain actions create, or consider competing intentions or motives, as well as explore and describe the range of ethical principles or ethical responses to a problem then they have achieved level 6 in Ethical Decision-making.



Ethical Decision-Making Tools



LEVEL 7-8

EXPLICIT ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING CONTENT

In Level 7 and 8 students explore ethical obligations and the implications of these on our thinking about consequences and duties.

For example: obligations to family may be prioritised over other people; or if we see someone in danger we have a duty to help them; or we may even have obligations to a faith-based set of beliefs. These obligations may produce implications for our ethical decision-making and students should consider diverse concepts of ‘family’, ‘faith’, ‘danger’ and what obligations and implications these concepts bring in different circumstances.

Teachers should facilitate discussions and opportunities for students to explore the role that context and experience plays in ethical decision-making. This may be done through exploring personal lived experiences or the lives of characters in texts (novels or films) being studied.

Questions such as:

- *To what extent does the situation influence the ethical decision made by this person?*
- *If I were in the same situation would I make the same decision or do something differently? and*
- *What previous experiences shaped this decision?*

Activities/Tools*

- Would you rather,
- Put yourself on the line,
- Fold the line, the Sun Shines upon (Fruit Salad),
- Mini Col – follow the pattern of inquiry,
- Three Heads are better than one (this activity introduces the idea of evidence/truthfulness to help evaluate decisions based on conscience or evidence,
- Four ways of thinking about ethics,
- Argument Analysis tool.

As with previous levels the examples and statements for these activities should be adapted to reflect the focus level. This should include how experiences and contexts inform decision-making. Activities such as ‘Put yourself on a line’ could use statements like:

- *My ethical decisions are informed by my family/friends/community/society, or*
- *Emotions are more important when making ethical decisions; or more concrete examples,*
- *Giving to others makes me feel happy, or*
- *The majority of my family believes ‘X’ so it would be disrespectful to not also believe ‘X’.*



Ethical Decision-Making Tools



LEVEL 7-8

ACHIEVEMENT STANDARD IN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

At the conclusion of Level 8 students can explain different ways that ethical concepts are represented, such as the distinct way different groups of people may define social concepts such as ‘freedom’ and how this is represented in media, advertising or by the government.

Students demonstrate an ability to analyse the value these representations have to society, asking and answering questions such as:

- *Does the freedom offered by consuming certain products really exist?*
- *Do Australian’s value freedom of speech or freedom from bigotry?*

Through this kind of questioning and analysis of responses, students identify areas of contestability of concepts (Understanding Concepts). Students should also be able to articulate how criteria (the reasoning people use to justify an ethical position) can be applied to determining the importance they or groups of individuals place on ethical concerns.

For example: if a group or individual is opposed to freedom of speech students should be able to identify the reasoning, such as the group believes that some kinds of speech i.e. hate speech, are harmful to society. The criteria of harm has been used to justify the position.

The analysis of criteria above should also support students to demonstrate that they can further analyse the differences in principles between individuals and groups. As the above example demonstrates, some groups believe that free speech can be harmful (applying the harm principle, that authorities have the ability to exercise their power over individuals if it prevents harm, or perhaps a consequentialist view – see VAPS Compendium, or libertarians who believe that the government should intervene as little as possible and hence believe in total freedom of speech. At Level 7-8 students demonstrate that they can analyse and evaluate the merits of each claim (Argument Analysis Tool, Three heads are better than one tool).

Students explain how ethical decisions and actions are influenced by different points of view. They can explain how ethical obligations are supported by different views and to what extent the implications of such obligations have consequences on ethical decision-making.

For example: as in the above case on freedom of speech, students may consider to what extent being a member of a group that experiences, and may even suffer from, hate speech influence a person’s views on freedom of speech, and should it. Through examples like this students should be able to further demonstrate their ability to analyse the role that context and experience play in ethical decision-making and action.



Ethical Decision-Making Tools



LEVEL 9-10

EXPLICIT ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING CONTENT

Throughout this level students are explicitly introduced to the distinction between consequences and duties. They discuss issues raised by thinking about consequences and duties when evaluating different ethical decisions. At this level students discuss the arguments for and against using consequences and duties to evaluate and make decisions.

For example: is it more important to consider the consequences of actions over personal duty or obligation? An example of this may include weighing up the consequences of euthanasia (consequences may be the reduction of suffering) versus a duty to protect all life.

At this level, students investigate how various people and groups can manage competing positions in ethical decision-making.

For example: students may consider the ways religious groups evaluate ethical considerations in contrast to governments, to identify and evaluate different priorities.

Activities/Tools

- Would you rather,
- Put yourself on the line,
- Fold the line, the Sun Shines upon (Fruit Salad),
- Put yourself on a Triangle,
- Mini Col – follow the pattern of inquiry,
- Three Heads are better than one (this activity introduces the idea of evidence/truthfulness to help evaluate decisions based on conscience or evidence,
- Four ways of thinking about ethics,
- Argument Analysis tool.

As with previous levels the examples and statements for these tools and activities should be adapted to reflect the focus level. In exploring consequences and duties, activities like ‘Put yourself on a triangle’ allow for students to link their justifications to consequences, duties or character/virtue; this activity is designed for students to reflect upon their reasoning and connect it to principles or values that inform their own ethical decision-making.



Ethical Decision-Making Tools



LEVEL 9-10

ACHIEVEMENT STANDARD IN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

Students have achieved Level 10 in Ethical Decision-making when they can demonstrate an ability to analyse and evaluate the contested approaches to ethical decision-making, and describe the thinking that influences those who value the consequences and outcomes of actions over those that place greater value on our duties and obligations. Students justify their own preferences by making evaluations of these schools of thought.

Students demonstrate their knowledge of complex issues, such as euthanasia, same-sex marriage, property/land rights, and freedom of speech by identifying the ethical dimensions of these. They further analyse different positions held ([Argument Analysis tool -hyperlink](#)), identifying the similarities and differences between positions and why these differences may exist.

For example: advocates and opponents of euthanasia agree that people shouldn't suffer, however, they differ on how this suffering should be mediated.

In addition, students can explain the various factors involved in managing ethical decision-making. An example of this may include a student inquiry into how their school manages big ethical decisions, identifying who the stake-holders are, to what extent stake-holders are involved in the decision-making process, to what extent duty, obligation, consequence and outcome are influential, and how the school gathers evidence.



Ethical Decision-Making Tools



These tools support teachers to collect a variety of types of evidence of student progress and achievement for the purposes of formative and summative assessment. They can have a variety of purposes and can occur at various stages of the CoI, from conversation starters, to kinaesthetic experiences, to simple getting students thinking and talking.

Put yourself on the line

Students are asked to respond to an ethical statement (start with any statement to warm up) and put themselves on a line (a spectrum). One end of the line represents total agreement, the other total disagreement.

Fold the line

Using the above example, once students have decided where on the line they think they belong, students from each end join up to share their response and reasoning.

The Sun Shines upon, sometimes call fruit salad

Students sit in a circle of chairs, one chair is removed so one student starts in the middle. The student in the middle says: “The sun shines upon anyone who...has long hair / has a pet dog”. Anyone who this statement applies to must get up and find another chair (it can’t be the one next to them). After a few rounds with any kind of general statements students are asked to find out the views of their classmates on ethical issues. The person in the middle says: “The sun shines upon anyone who...believes we should never steal / believes euthanasia is wrong”. This activity not only asks students to start thinking about an issue, it can also be used to shift students in the CoI who are distracted by the other students around them (usually their friends), see Community Building for more suggestions.

Would you rather

Students are asked to stand in the middle of the room. They are asked to respond to a set of statements starting with “Would you rather...”. Two options are presented and students are asked to move to either side of the room that corresponds to the statement, i.e. “Would you rather your school purchase new sports equipment or purchase recycling bins?” An additional aspect is to ask students on either side to provide a reason for going to that side. However, this task can be used as formative assessment to gauge if students are in agreement, in which case it would be prudent to provide some counter-examples to demonstrate the contestable nature of an ethical problem. If the group are not in agreement then teachers can use the students themselves to highlight the contestable nature of the problem.

Put yourself on a triangle

This activity is an advanced version of ‘Would you rather’ or ‘Put yourself on a line’. Instead of having two options, there are three. Each option corresponds with an ethical position that aligns with those explored in the Ethical Capabilities curriculum. The three main theories presented are: consequentialism, duty ethics or virtue ethics (see glossary for further explanation of their theories -[hyperlink to glossary](#)). Students are asked to move to the corner that corresponds with their point of view or set of values, and then provide reasoning for their decision. Students are free to change where they sit in the triangle throughout the discussion and provide a justification for changing their mind.



Ethical Decision-Making Tools



Three heads are better than one

This activity asks students to consider and record their thinking about the ethical problem under consideration through three different lenses – truth, harm and intention. Particular actions can be considered ethical or unethical based on the extent to which students consider these tools for decision-making helpful and/or accurate. Students complete the think sheet.

Four ways of exploring ethical decisions

This activity asks students to consider and record their thinking about the ethical problem under consideration through four different lenses – outcomes/consequences, principles, agreements, and character/virtue. Actions can be considered ethical or unethical based on the extent to which students consider these tools for decision-making helpful and/or accurate. Students complete the think sheet.

Argument Analysis Tool

This tool helps students to differentiate reasons, evidence or claims that support or deny a position. It also helps students to identify the kind of issue under exploration (economic / environmental / social, etc).

*These sets of tools will be added to in coming months. To get access to additional tools you will need to be a member of VAPS. <http://vaps.vic.edu.au/>

**It must be noted that while this achievement standard describes the ethical decision-making aspects as separated from the Understanding Concepts strand they cannot be separated when taught.

***This document is an elaboration of the Victorian Curriculum. To see the whole curriculum and other supporting documentation to go: <http://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/curriculum/>

