



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

REFLECTING ON MORAL DILEMMAS WITH PRACTICAL WISDOM

"Don't exercise your freedom of speech until you have exercised your freedom of thought."

—Tim Fargo

OVERVIEW

Students will develop practical wisdom by reading and reflecting on a moral dilemma with a set of guiding questions. Question sets prompt students to draw on past knowledge, understand the current context, and weigh various options up against guiding principles in order to determine next steps.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To encourage greater self-awareness
- To cultivate practical wisdom in students
- To encourage empathy
- At the start of the school year

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤1 hour

LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- Paper
- Pencil/pen

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Practice working effectively in groups
- Reflect on what they have learned from other students
- Practice sharing their own thoughts, feelings, and/or life stories

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Practical Wisdom
- Empathy
- Fairness

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused Attention
- Non-Judgment
- Open Awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Consider a moral dilemma that you and/or a friend may be trying to address. As you think about the actions to be taken, consider the following questions: What past knowledge might inform your response to this situation? What might a friend or person you respect do in this situation? What emotions are you experiencing and how might they be clouding your thinking about next steps? What other factors might be influencing your thinking about the situation?
- Consider the potential actions you could take and what the consequences would be. Is there a solution or action that might best meet the needs of all individuals involved? What virtues might be relevant to this situation?

INSTRUCTIONS

Introduce students to the concept of practical wisdom by sharing the following definition with them:

“Practical wisdom refers to your ability to [know what the right thing to do is](#), know how to do the right thing, and to have the will to actually do the right thing across various situations.”

Explain to students that practical wisdom is important because it can help them navigate difficult decisions in ways that support their longer term goals and their ability to maintain strong, positive relationships. Thus, the goal is to practice the skills that can facilitate the development of practical wisdom by reflecting on the provided questions below as they decide how to respond to a moral dilemma.

Present students with a few moral dilemma scenarios. For examples of specific dilemmas look at the following links:

- <https://www.theclassroom.com/moral-dilemma-scenarios-children-8434575.html>
- <https://studylib.net/doc/7725442/ethical-dilemma-scenarios-for-students>

Have students break up into groups. Assign a dilemma to each group, or invite students to choose one dilemma to address.

Ask each group to read the dilemma and discuss the questions from each of the three categories below:

- Activating and drawing on existing knowledge:
 - What lessons have your parents or teachers taught you that could help you think about how you might respond in this situation? What values have they encouraged you to develop?
 - Think of your closest friends, what qualities do they display, which you admire and how might they respond to this situation?
 - Have you or a close friend ever encountered a similar situation? How did you or your friend respond to the situation? What was the outcome? What did you learn from your or your friend's experience?
- Being influenced by factors within the immediate context:
 - Have you ever responded to a similar situation without much thinking? Was that useful? Why might taking some time to think through your response be helpful?
 - What are some contextual factors that might influence your response?
 - How might you work to process your emotions, so that they don't override your thinking and completely sway your decision?
 - Who might you turn to, to get some input on the situation? What might that person say to you?
- Weighing consequences against guiding principles to judge the best course of action:
 - Consider what actions you might take, write down what would be the consequences of each of those actions for all individuals involved in the situation? How severe are the consequences? Is harm being caused?
 - Are there virtues that you value which are relevant to this situation? What are they and how might they be applied?
 - Take a moment to consider why each person involved is engaged in a particular behavior.
 - Is there a solution or action that might best meet the needs of all individuals involved?
 - What might be the impact of your decision in the short-term? What about in the long-term? How might you take this into account?

After the discussion, and if time permits, have each group present their dilemma to the class and discuss what they will do and why. End the activity by having students write a short reflection about what they learned through this process.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- aWs there anything that surprised you as your students shared influences to their thinking and potential responses to the dilemma (e.g., cultural values that were unfamiliar to you)? How might their responses inform your capacity to better support them in developing practical wisdom?
- Have you noticed a difference in student's behavior, particularly in their responses to moral dilemmas?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Social cognitive theories](#) suggest that character develops through our day-to-day lived experiences, which are stored in our brains, providing us with helpful information that informs our responses to dilemmas as they arise. Such theories suggest that giving adolescents' opportunities to develop reflective thinking skills can increase their practical wisdom. Practical wisdom refers to one's ability to know what the right response is at the right time, particularly when faced with difficult situations.

In one [study](#), researchers interviewed students between the ages of 12-15 to better understand how they approach decision-making, particularly when faced with moral dilemmas. Researchers were particularly interested in understanding what kinds of thinking skills needed to be developed and practiced so that they become more internalized and intuitive to students—or how students develop "practical wisdom."

Researchers found that there are three interrelated processes that occur as students decide how to respond to a moral dilemma. Specifically, students activate and draw on existing knowledge, they pay attention to factors within the immediate context, and they weigh consequences against guiding principles to judge the best course of action.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Often, teachers focus on developing virtues in students like honesty, generosity, and forgiveness. Yet, many of the decisions we face in life are complicated and can often pit virtues against each other.

For example, a student may wonder whether to tell the teacher that his friend cheated on an exam or whether to remain loyal to his friend. Practical wisdom allows students to navigate dilemmas like these more thoughtfully, helping students understand what action is best in a particular situation—for all individuals involved. Thus, as students develop practical wisdom, it will help them navigate moral dilemmas with greater attentiveness to all the factors in play so that they can make values-based decisions that are responsive to a given context and the people involved.

SOURCE

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