

## Decision-Making Activities

### Making decisions in 1381: Will you pay the poll-tax?

Tax collectors are visiting every village. There's lots of talk of people not paying the Poll Tax.

Will you:

- pay the tax – that's 12 pence for you and 12 pence for your wife
- hide – the tax collectors will never find people in the woodland near the village
- rebel – attack the tax collectors to show the King's advisers how angry everyone is.

*An extract from The Decisions of a Kentish villager in 1381*

### Introducing decision-making activities

It's all too easy for students to assume that the decisions made by people in the past were straightforward and predictable, not realising that they frequently had to choose between several possible courses of action and that choices were often far from easy to make. One teaching moment I remember with a real thrill was when a student turned to me and said:

“I have to make a decision but none of them are going to help me”

which led to a discussion about the fact that sometimes people had to settle for the least-worst option, not the obvious best option.

Helping students realise that the decisions taken by people in the past were often complex and difficult is one of the great advantages of decision-making activities. Students really do have to think and then you can unpack why students' decisions may be different from those taken by people at the time, a process that helps diagnose students' misunderstandings and misconceptions about the period and people they're studying.

The example at the top of the page is a decision that often surprises students. They're most likely to opt for the third choice, to attack the tax collectors, as this fits a common perception that the Middle Ages was a very violent time but when the first news of the arrival of the tax collectors broke very many people chose to hide i.e. they put off making a decision if they could, a very human thing to

do. Understanding this is very important for building an understanding of the nature of the 1381 Revolt and how its nature changed over the course of events.

This 1381 activity is one of my favourite decision-making activities. In constructing it, Ian Luff and I were able to build in:

- the unfolding story and pattern of the revolt across the sequence of decisions
- opportunities to identify students' misconceptions and misunderstandings
- some recent research to present a balanced picture of those involved which challenges most contemporary narratives by identifying the intelligence and organisation of many participants
- a strong sense that many of the decisions required thought and were by no means certain.
- a sense of respect for the people of the time because many of them had to grapple with difficult choices and thought carefully and intelligently about their choices.

### **How many decisions make a decision-making activity?**

Like most techniques, decision-making activities can vary greatly in scale. You can devise activities that focus on just a couple of decisions or create activities that take students through a dozen or more decision points. As an example, way back in 1993 I included four decision-making activities in my A level book *The Tudor Century*, each one acting as an introduction to the events of a reign, or two reigns in the case of Edward VI and Mary. The activity on William Cecil's decisions contained only three decisions, that on Henry VIII included 12 decisions and those on Henry VII and on Elizabeth both involved 16 decisions.

### **Why use decision-making activities as introductions to topics?**

I've always used decision-making activities as introductions to topics – the very first thing you do on a new topic – because then students are having to think about the options facing them, not trying to recall what they've learned before. At A level the decision-making activity I've called *Henry VII – the Survival Game* is a good example of the value of decision-making as an introductory activity.

My main reasons for devising and using this activity were to give students:

- a first layer of information and familiarity about the major names, events and issues of the reign

- confidence so that when they started reading their books they would already be familiar with those names, events etc and so they would get more out of their reading
- the understanding that Henry VII faced a series of difficult decisions and options and that his survival as king was often under threat
- experience of focussed and constructive discussion when they're choosing options

What also works well is the competitive nature of the activity! Each student or, better, pairs or trios of students, start the activity with six crowns. If they make poor decisions (which may or may not be the same as Henry's choices) they lose crowns and if they lose all six they're deposed. Keeping score, even though some groups build up 'minus totals', is great for group dynamics and building a sense of a class working together and discussing together. And they realise that Henry would have lost crowns too!

### **Open ended decision-making tasks**

*What's on the agenda?* is a decision-making activity of a more open kind. It's also used at the start of a new topic (I'm assuming at A level though not necessarily – maybe it could be used for William the Conqueror post-Hastings). The task involves groups of students in role as a new regime (king/queen and councillors, government etc) deciding on the agenda and priorities in the period about to be studied, using what they know from their work on the previous period or topic. Imagine, for example, students in role as Mary Tudor and her councillors deciding on their priorities in 1553. They can then check how good their predictions have been when they start reading – and thus may be better motivated to undertake that reading – before you discuss what they got right and what they didn't and why historical reality differed from their choices.

### **Concluding thoughts on the value and impact of decision-making activities**

For teachers, crafting effective decision-making activities is very satisfying and creative – yes, it takes quite a while to do but you can use an activity over and over again and they're easy to adapt and improve with experience.

The focus of building an activity has to be three-fold:

1. covering the key issues in a topic that students are about to study (in effect, telling the story of the topic)
2. focussing decisions not just on events but, where appropriate, on the things students are likely to misunderstand

3. and, finally, making the choices challenging – only rarely should they be obvious though occasional obvious choices can help give students confidence.

The value of these activities is that they're very effective in helping students learn – and then remember what they've learned. Central to this effective learning is the role of decision-making in identifying students' ideas about a topic and period explicit through their choice of options, which then gives you the chance to discuss and correct those misunderstandings. Other benefits in my experience are that the decisions prompt constructive discussion – something students need experience in developing – and also more focussed and confident reading. The activity has introduced names, events and other issues so that students don't 'bounce off' a textbook because every detail is new – what they're reading about is already semi-familiar.

Finally, as with all the techniques in this section of the website (and all teaching!) I can't overstate the importance of effective debriefing of students on what they've learned when they finish the activity. The fact that the activity has been enjoyable can appear to be an end in itself – but it's not. What is important is discussing and making explicit what students have learned, what they misunderstood and what you want them to take away and use in the rest of their work on the topic. Do explain to them the reasons why you're using this kind of activity – especially with older students because this helps them understand the kinds of things you want them to take away.

### **Some examples of decision-making activities on ThinkingHistory**

King John: the decision-making game

Decisions of a Kentish Villager, 1381

How can you spend less time in purgatory?

Henry VII – the Survival Game

What's on the agenda?

Dilemma-based learning: an example from the Holocaust

See the activities [HERE ...](#)