Ethical dilemmas for classroom discussion

Explore three low-stakes fictional choices involving fairness, honest information and keeping a promise. Compare defensible reasons, identify what is missing and explain when a decision should change.

TEACHER NOTES

Learning objective: justify a decision using relevant facts and values, compare a serious alternative and explain a condition that could change the judgement.

Planning detail	Suggested use
Audience	Approximately ages 11-16; adapt vocabulary and complexity.
Duration / preparation	40 minutes / 10 minutes. These are planning estimates.
Prerequisites	Pupils can distinguish a factual statement from a proposal about what ought to happen.
Materials	The three fictional cards and reasoning sheet; paper for comparison notes.

Introduce the task

Explain that an ethical dilemma can involve competing considerations rather than an obviously kind and an obviously cruel choice. The supplied cases are modest classroom-style decisions. Pupils analyse the cases; they do not need to recount family conflicts, personal mistakes or private beliefs.

Useful vocabulary: **value** (something treated as important), **consequence** (a result of an action), **duty** (an obligation), **fairness** (a judgement about just treatment) and **trade-off** (giving up some benefit to protect another). The ethics guide provides background.

Run the activity

1. Frame the question (5 minutes): what makes a reason relevant to this decision? Agree the discussion ground rules.

2. Read and clarify (5 minutes): groups choose a case and list the facts actually supplied.

3. Compare two decisions (15 minutes): complete the sheet, including a genuine alternative and a question for each option.

4. Test the judgement (10 minutes): exchange sheets. Change one relevant fact and ask which reasons become stronger or weaker.

5. Reflect (5 minutes): explain whether the decision changed and why. Keeping a view can be reasonable when the objection has been answered.

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Read the dilemma cards

These three situations are fictional. Work with the facts given. Mark questions as questions rather than inventing convenient extra facts.

A. Two new markers

An art club has six members, two new broad-tip markers and ten minutes left. Older markers still work, but take longer to cover a large area. Two members are finishing a display needed first thing tomorrow; the other four are exploring designs for next week. Nobody has used the new markers yet.

Decision: should everyone have equal turns now, or should the urgent display get priority? Consider access, need and whether a clear rule would be fair in another session. **Missing information:** how much new-marker time would complete the display? Could the others do a useful task with the older markers?

B. The incorrect poster

A club is about to display a poster saying its paper-reuse project saved forty sheets. A final check shows the correct total is fourteen. The event begins in twenty minutes. The team can add a large, readable correction label now, or print a corrected poster using another sheet. Both options can be ready before visitors arrive.

Decision: use a clearly labelled correction or make a clean reprint? Consider honest communication, clarity and waste. **Missing information:** will the correction be as easy to notice as the original figure? Is the poster being reused for future events?

C. The promise to help

A pupil has promised to spend the last ten minutes of a club session helping a friend put away board games. Another group asks for help watering newly planted pots during the same ten minutes. The pupil cannot finish both tasks alone. An adult is present to help organise a solution. Neither task is an emergency.

Decision: keep the original commitment or ask to change the plan to help with the pots? Consider reliability, need and the effect on the friend. **Missing information:** could another helper join either task? Would the friend agree to a different arrangement?

Question for every case

What makes the strongest alternative reasonable, even if you do not choose it? Do not make it look foolish just to strengthen your own answer.

PUPIL RESPONSE SHEET

Compare two defensible decisions

Choose case A, B or C. Complete the prompts on this sheet or use them as headings on paper.

Case letter and the decision to be made:

Facts we know; information we still need:

Option 1: the decision, who is affected and the strongest supporting reason:

Option 2: a serious alternative and its strongest supporting reason:

My judgement, including the most difficult objection and my reply:

One change of fact or condition that could change my judgement:

Useful structure: 'I favour ___ because ___. The strongest objection is ___. My answer depends on ___.'

TEACHER RESPONSE GUIDE

Explore different lines of reasoning

A. Access and urgency

Equal turns: shared resources should provide everyone with an opportunity, and a predictable rule avoids favouritism. Test it: would strict equality make an urgent shared display fail even when a short exception would complete it?

Limited priority: urgent work may justify a short, explained exception, followed by protected turns for others. Test it: what prevents 'urgent' becoming a recurring excuse, and how much priority is actually needed?

Either approach needs details. A defensible compromise might allocate a few minutes to finish the display, then rotate the markers. This is not automatically available: the amount of work remaining is a real missing fact.

B. Accuracy and resources

Visible correction: a prominent and unambiguous label can make the information honest while using fewer materials. Test it: will a quick reader still walk away with the false figure?

Clean reprint: a corrected poster may communicate the figure more clearly, particularly if reused. Test it: is the extra sheet needed for clarity, or would a good correction achieve the same result?

Both positions require the false figure to stop misleading readers. Leaving a known error uncorrected because it makes the project look better fails that shared aim. Ask pupils to explain the relevant standard of clarity rather than simply choosing the tidier poster.

C. Reliability and helping

Keep the promise: the friend has planned around the commitment, and reliability gives others a reason to trust future agreements. Test it: could a mutually agreed change protect that trust?

Renegotiate: explain the new request, ask the friend and adult about sharing help, and change the arrangement only if it can be made workable. Test it: does the friend have a real opportunity to decline, or is the promise being set aside unilaterally?

Finding a third option can show good reasoning. It should not depend on inventing a helper who is not available. Keep the supplied distinction between requesting a change and silently breaking a promise.

TEACHER NOTES AND USE

Reflect, adapt and extend

What a strong response contains

- A decision that is clear enough to act on.

- A relevant reason, connected to the facts and to people affected.

- A serious account of an alternative, including its best reason.

- An identified unknown or condition that could change the answer.

- An explanation of how the chosen rule might work in another similar case.

Common misconceptions

'Different answers are possible' does not mean every answer is equally well supported. Check consistency, relevant facts and responses to objections. 'It helps the most people' needs an account of whose interests are counted and what is being compared. 'A rule is fair' needs a reason for the rule and attention to exceptions.

Adjust the demands

For support, select one case, read it aloud and supply the two possible decisions while pupils explain reasons. Let them use spoken responses, a scribe or short bullets. For extension, change one fact: more time for the markers, an unreadable correction label, or a friend who freely agrees to swap tasks. Ask which reasoning changes and which does not.

Pupil reflection

Finish these sentences: 'The strongest reason against my first answer was ___. I changed or kept my judgement because ___. A fact I still need is ___.' No personal disclosure is necessary.

Source and use notes

All dilemmas, questions and possible responses are original. Hwb and RE Council materials provide background on enquiry and considering perspectives; they do not approve these choices or prescribe an answer. The IPO source explains limits on reuse of third-party works.

All classroom examples and figures in this pack are original fiction, not findings from a study or accounts of real pupils. Timings are planning estimates. Teachers should adapt the material to their learners and curriculum.

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Welsh Government Hwb: Humanities, designing your curriculum
https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/areas-of-learning-and-experience/humanities/designing-your-curriculum/ - checked 3 November 2026.

RE Council: Religion and Worldviews Approach - FAQs (professional guidance)
https://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/resource/worldviews-introduction-faqs/ - checked 3 November 2026.

Intellectual Property Office: Exceptions to copyright https://www.gov.uk/guidance/exceptions-to-copyright - checked 3 November 2026.