What does it mean to be free?

Levels 7 and 8,   
Ethical Capability,   
sample unit of work

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Contents

[Introduction 4](#_Toc34828749)

[Overview of the unit of work 4](#_Toc34828750)

[Links to the Victorian Curriculum F–10 4](#_Toc34828751)

[Unpacking content description VCECD014 5](#_Toc34828752)

[Session 1 6](#_Toc34828753)

[Learning sequence 8](#_Toc34828754)

Introduction

Overview of the unit of work

**Title:** What does it mean to be free?

**Timing (approximate):** 1 × 100-minute session or 2 × 50-minute sessions

**Description:** Students explore two different ways of defining freedom and some barriers and enablers linked to these two concepts of freedom. They investigate how the value of freedom is represented in human rights and visual artworks.

**Assessment:** Opportunities for assessment are detailed in the [the assessment section](#Assessment1) in this document.

Links to the Victorian Curriculum F–10

**Curriculum area and levels:** Ethical Capability, Levels 7 and 8

**Content description:** Explore the contested meaning of concepts including freedom, justice, and rights and responsibilities, and the extent they are and should be valued by different individuals and groups. ([VCECD014](https://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ethical-capability/curriculum/f-10#level=7-8&search=aa5a00d5-8b53-4e35-b2a9-913d8c22ec04))

**Achievement standard extract:** … students explain different ways ethical concepts are represented and analyse their value tosociety, identifying areas of contestability.

Unpacking content description VCECD014

Key concepts and ideas

There are two common ways to define the concept of freedom:

* Freedom is the lack of external impediments or coercion, that is, the lack of outside interference. This is known academically as negative liberty.
* Freedom is having self-determination, that is, being able to act in accordance with what you judge to be right for you to do. This is known academically as positive liberty.

People value their own and others’ freedom for many reasons. One common reason is that the ideas associated with the concept of freedom reflect the equality and dignity of humans. The valuing of freedom is reflected in how human rights have been conceived historically.

There are a range of barriers to and enablers of freedom, including physical, psychological, social, educational, environmental and economic factors.

When thinking about whether a factor is a barrier or an enabler, some issues can arise. Two of the main issues are:

* Where is the line between constraints that might make it harder to do something and constraints that make someone unfree?
* To what extent should coercion or an intentional placement of a barrier matter, and to what extent should this be taken into account when deciding if someone is unfree? For example, does creating a rule still leave someone free to act, or does it go as far as making them unfree? Consider, for example, that voting is compulsory in some countries and not in others. In Australia there are penalties associated with not having a valid reason for not attending an electoral centre and having your name crossed off on the electoral role. Does the rule about voting and the associated penalty for breaking it make someone in Australia unfree in respect to voting, or is it just merely harder to exercise a freedom not to vote?

Key teaching points

The key concepts and ideas (above) are the key teaching points that should be covered in the explicit teaching phase.

Further reading

If you would like to know more about the key concepts and ideas for this content descriptions, refer to the following resources.

[Ethics](http://www.iep.utm.edu/ethics/), James Fieser, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

[Positive and negative liberty](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative/), Ian Carter, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

[Freedom of speech](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freedom-speech/), David van Mill, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Focus questions

The following focus questions are used to support inquiry and inspire, challenge or extend student thinking.

* What is the distinction between positive and negative liberty?
* Why is freedom so important to us?
* What are some of the barriers to and enablers for being free? What do people disagree about when it comes to these?

Session

**Learning intentions:** Today we will be exploring what it means to be free. We will be looking at two different views on the definition of freedom and discussing the barriers to and enablers of freedom. By the end of this session:

* you will be able to explain two different ways the ethical concept of freedom is represented
* you will be able to analyse the value of these concepts to society
* you will be able to identify areas of disagreement.

**Focus questions:** What is the distinction between positive and negative liberty?

Why is freedom so important to us?

What are some of the barriers to and enablers for being free? What do people disagree about when it comes to these?

**Success criteria:** I can distinguish between positive and negative liberty.

I can explain generally how much freedom is valued.

I can explain the barriers to and enablers of freedom and identify the major areas of disagreement.

**Resources:** [Freedom2014: Your art and paintings](https://www.bbc.com/news/in-pictures-26517457), BBC News

[Victoria’s Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities](https://humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/human-rights/the-charter/rights-under-the-charter), Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission

**Asse****ssment:** Opportunities for assessment include:

* teacher observation during shared practice and independent practice
* student responses during the explicit teaching and shared practice phases (can be used formatively, with teacher feedback used to progress student learning towards the achievement standard)
* student self-assessment using success criteria (can be used formatively during shared practice and independent practice)
* submission of work during independent practice, reflection and evaluation (can be used summatively, assessing against the achievement standard)
* self-assessment using the success criteria at the end of the session.

Learning sequence

Explicit teaching

*Refer to the* [*Key teaching points*](#KeyTeachingPoints) *in this document.*

The teacher suggests the following definition of freedom to the class: ‘Freedom is being able to do whatever you want.’ They ask students if they agree with this definition and to elaborate on why or why not.

The teacher uses one or more of the following discussion prompts to help progress student thinking:

Who gets to decide and when (at what age, in what circumstances) should you be able to decide on:

* getting your ears pierced
* screen time used each week
* whether to get a car licence or not?

As students give answers and reasons for their answers, the teacher divides the students into two groups based on the reasons given – those that concern positive liberty and those that concern negative liberty – but not labelling the reasons as such at this stage.

The teacher asks students if they can see a link between the reasons given in each of the groups and then develops with students the definitions of positive and negative liberty, labelling each set of reasons accordingly.

The class discusses areas of disagreement between students on why and when freedom should be constrained. They develop a list of factors involved in these disagreements, such as the age of the individual (and assumptions about self-determination), the health of the individual and the perception of harm.

The teacher could change the original definition of freedom in response to student comments – for example, adding ‘… as long as you don’t harm anyone else’.

The teacher works with the class to examine the original and revised definitions for ambiguity; for example, ‘Freedom is being able to do whatever you want as long as you don’t harm anyone else’ is ambiguous in that it could be interpreted using a positive or negative liberty perspective or both. The teacher assists students to see that making a distinction between two types of freedom can be useful.

Shared practice

The teacher introduces a selected work from [Freedom2014: Your art and paintings](https://www.bbc.com/news/in-pictures-26517457) (BBC News) to the class, discussing with them whether positive or negative liberty (or both) is represented and what the artwork portrays about the barriers to and enablers of freedom (for example, education as an enabler).

Students work in small groups to discuss two other artworks and share their responses with the class. The class develops a list of barriers to and enablers of the two different types of freedom – positive and negative.

The teacher explains to the class that clearly freedom is valued highly by people. They assist students to see that when it is valued, a common reason is the underlying regard for the dignity and equality of humans. They explain that we will now consider what kinds of freedom (positive, negative or both) are valued. The teacher introduces [Victoria’s Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities](https://humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/human-rights/the-charter/rights-under-the-charter) (the Charter) and works with the class to consider an example of a right and the kind of freedom/s it protects (positive, negative or both).

Students work in small groups to investigate other rights in the Charter and identify what kind of freedom/s they protect and whether the rights are concerned with any of the barriers to and enablers of freedom. The groups share their responses with the class, and the teacher prompts the class to reflect on their findings. The class reflects together on what the wording of different rights tells us about the kinds of freedom valued by individuals and society.

The teacher briefly notes that rights cannot be protected in practice unless everyone perceives they have an obligation to protect each other’s rights and that protecting rights may mean at times constraining individual freedom for the sake of enabling the freedom of others, for example, individuals paying taxes that are then distributed to the sick.

The teacher assists students to identify that there are disagreements about actions such as government funding decisions or law changes and to make links to barriers to and enablers of freedom.

Independent practice, reflection and evaluation

Students represent the concept of negative liberty and positive liberty in text and/or through a multimedia work. They annotate their work to show their response to the focus questions.

If required, students could use one of the following quotes as inspiration (noting that ‘man’ should be interpreted as ‘humankind’):

* ‘Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains.’ (philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau)
* ‘My childhood memories are amazing; I had freedom in every way – but I see everything from a different perspective now that I live outside.’ (Cuban-Spanish actress Ana de Armas)
* ‘I don’t like it when a player says, “I like freedom; I want to play for myself.” Because the player has to understand he is part of a team with 10 other players.’ (football manager Pep Guardiola)