**Ethical Capability**

**The role of context and experience in ethical decision making and actions**

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**Introduction**  
  
**Unit title: The role of context and experience in ethical decision making and actions (VCECD018)**

In this 50 minute session students are introduced to the impact that context and experience may have on ethical decision making and actions. They explore how experience can be used to predict consequences and overall outcomes. They consider how context influences the setting of priorities for example, in influencing how strong duties in social relationships (e.g. friendship) operate – what if the friend is sick and has no family? Students analyse the role that both experience and context can have in helping make an on-balance judgment about the significance of a particular consequence and overall outcome, and in selecting and interpreting ethical principles to guide decision-making.

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| **The role of context and experience in ethical decision-making and actions.** | **Term /date:** | **Duration:**  50 minutes (estimated) |

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| **Big ideas:**  *What is the main theme/s? What do you want the students to specifically understand? What misconceptions do you want to challenge?* | **Essential questions:**  *What will inspire /extend / support inquiry / challenge thinking?* |
| * In ethical decision-making, experience can be used to predict consequences and the overall outcome that is likely to result from proposed action/s. * Context can influence how priorities are set. * Both experience and context can help in making an on-balance judgment about:  1. the significance of a particular consequence 2. the significance of an overall outcome 3. which ethical principle/s should be used in a particular case to guide decision-making 4. what an ethical principle means in a particular case (for example if the principle is to minimize harm, what does harm mean in this case, and what does ‘minimise’ mean). | Do we change the way we act/make decisions depending on the context of any given situation? How so?  How does experience play a part in our ethical decision making? |

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| **Learning**  This sample unit targets Levels 7 and 8 Content Description: Discuss the role of context and experience in ethical decision-making and actions [(VCECD018)](http://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Curriculum/ContentDescription/VCECD018)  This is part of a learning continuum as shown below: | | |
| **Ethical Capability Strand and Levels** | **Dimension / Content descriptions** | **Achievement standards** |
| Decision Making and Actions (Levels 5 - 6) | Discuss the role of and significance of conscience and reasoning in ethical decision-making. | By the end of Level 6…  Students explain the role and significance of conscience and reasoning in ethical decision-making. |
| Decision Making and Actions (Levels 7 - 8) | **Target Content Description:**  Discuss the role of context and experience in ethical decision-making and actions ([VCECD018](http://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Curriculum/ContentDescription/VCECD018)) | By the end of Level 8…  Students analyse the role of context and experience in ethical decision-making and action. |
| Decision Making and Actions (Levels 9 - 10) | Investigate how different factors involved in ethical decision-making can be managed by people and groups. | By the end of Level 10…  Students explain how different factors involved in ethical decision-making can be managed. |

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| **Assessment Evidence / Activities** | | |
| **Pre-assessment:** | **Ongoing formative assessment/s:** | **Summative assessment/s:** |
| **Teacher observation during ‘introduction’ phase.**  Teacher determines if students understand what an ethical principle is and are able to give examples. | **Teacher observation during shared and independent learning phases.**  Teacher monitors consolidation of new learning introduced during these phases | **Student work completed in the independent phase.** |

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| **Learning Sequence Overview** | |
| **Session** | **Major focus / intention** |
| 50 minutes | Students are introduced to the influence that context and experience may have on ethical decision making and actions. They explore how experience can be used to predict consequences and overall outcomes. They consider when context has a bearing on how priorities are judged, for example, in strength of duties in social relationships (e.g. friendship). Students analyse the role that both experience and context can have in helping make an on-balance judgment about the significance of a particular consequence and overall outcome, and in selecting a set of principles to guide decision-making. |

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| **Resources** |
| **Shared practice phase:**  Student handout (included with this unit): Context and Experience Dilemmas  **Further teacher background reading for shared practice phase:**  The Golden Rule  Karen Armstrong’s TED talk explains the Golden Rule from a world religions perspective and mentions its acceptance from a secular perspective too. This talk and the humanist link below emphasise the Golden Rule as concerning recognition of the inherent dignity of the other, not that others would hold the same views as us.  <https://www.ted.com/talks/karen_armstrong_let_s_revive_the_golden_rule>  <http://www.thinkhumanism.com/the-golden-rule.html>  Utility Principle (4. Moral Philosophy)  <https://www.utilitarianism.com/jeremy-bentham/index.html#one> |

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| **Discuss the role of context and experience in ethical decision-making and actions.**  **(Lesson – Know, Understand, Apply) 50 minutes** | | |
| **Learning intention** | **Teacher explains:**  *“Today we are learning about the various influences that context and experience can have on ethical decision making and actions.”* | |
| **Focus/ inquiry question(s)** | * Do we change the way we act/make decisions depending on the context of any given situation? How so? * How does experience play a part in our ethical decision making? | |
| **Key teaching points** | 1. Experience can be used to predict consequences of proposed action/s and the overall outcome 2. Context can influence how priorities are assigned, for example in one situation it might matter that a particular person has a close friendship with me, while in another it may not matter as much. 3. Both experience and context help in making an on-balance judgment about the significance of a particular consequence and the significance of an overall outcome 4. Both experience and context can influence the selection of ethical principle/s to be applied to a particular situation. 5. Both experience and context can influence what an ethical principle means in a particular case (for example if the principle is to minimise harm, influencing what ‘harm’ might mean in this case and what ‘minimise’ might mean). | |
| **Success criteria (for students)**  **based on the achievement standards** | * I can compare and contrast the ways context and experience guide and develop ethical decision-making. * I can explain the role and significance of context and experience in decision-making using evidence from specific examples. * I can explain how to manage decision-making when there are many factors involved. | |
|  | **Activities** (considering different levels) | **Resources** (considering different levels) |
| **Assumed prior learning** | * Discuss how ethical principles can be used as the basis for action, considering the influence of cultural norms, religion, world views and philosophical thought on these principles [(VCECU010)](http://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Curriculum/ContentDescription/VCECU010) |  |

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|  | **Activities** (considering different levels) | **Resources** (considering different levels) |
| **Introduction**  **pre-assessment of assumed prior learning** | Explain to students that they will be thinking about some of the factors influencing ethical decision-making, including what ethical principles are selected. It is therefore important to first understand what an ethical principle is.  Pose the following question to the class:  *Have you ever said or heard someone say, “What they did wasn’t fair!’?*  Assess students’ prior learning through observation of responses to appropriate prompts, for example:   * When someone says this, what can we see is important to that person? * What ‘rule’ do they think the person should have been guided by in making their decision on how to act? * If someone thinks this ‘rule’ is important a lot of the time, what do we call this? * Can you give more examples?   If necessary, assist students to consolidate their prior learning. |  |
| **Explicit teaching phase \*\***  **Know** | 1. Lead class discussion. This can be an open discussion or more structured and each is illustrated below.   **An open approach to the class discussion:**  Ask students if they can find exceptions to the following claims as they relate to ethical decision-making.   * Lying is always wrong. * Caring is always good.   Students contribute responses. Listen for the influence of context in making an exception as well as reasons that might draw on past experiences. Note that the student is not required to reflect on their own past experiences, but could instead draw on experiences of characters in fiction, well known non-fiction historical cases and so on.  Reflect students’ observations back to them, explicitly highlighting when context and experience were used to help identify and justify an exception. |  |

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|  | **Activities** (considering different levels) | **Resources** (considering different levels) |
|  | **A more structured approach to the class discussion:**  Present the following scenario:  It’s time to vote for Student Council year level representatives. Two friends, Lily and Ahmed, are on the ballot. Alex thinks Lily is the better candidate and voted for her in the secret ballot. Ahmed, Alex and Lily are all friends. Ahmed asks Alex who she voted for.  Guide class discussion:   * Is this a situation where telling the truth to Ahmed would harm Lily, Ahmed or Alex herself? * What about lying? Would this result in more or less harm than telling the truth? * Do any of the anticipated harms matter very much? * What if the context of the scenario were different? For example, Ahmed and Alex are close friends, but Lily is not friends with them. What if Ahmed and Alex were friends, but not very close friends? * What if in Alex’s experience lying to friends has usually turned out badly/well? What if Alex had never experienced lying to a friend before? * How would Alex know what the consequences and overall outcome might be from lying or telling the truth?   Following the open or more structured class discussion, develop the teaching points (above), by working with students to analyse their responses in order to identify the influence that context and experience have on ethical decision-making in general.  **Extension:**  Students may notice that more than one factor will come into play in making an on-balance judgement. Different ways to manage these factors can be introduced as part of the discussion. |  |

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|  | **Activities** (considering different levels) | **Resources** (considering different levels) |
| **Shared practice phase \*\***  **Know** | Introduce two common ethical principles:   * The Golden Rule: Treat others as you would want to be treated (an example of a principle from duty-based ethics) * Act only in a manner which will minimize harm and maximize happiness (an example of a principle from consequentialist ethics)   Use the first dilemma from the **Context and Experience Dilemmas** handout as stimulus to facilitate class discussion on what decisions would be made in response to this dilemma when using either of the two principles.  Explore if decisions change depending on the different contexts and past experiences given:   * What action/s could be taken if the Golden Rule were followed? * What action/s could be taken if the other principle were followed? * Is it possible to apply either one without thinking about context or experience? * If someone knew of both principles and could select either or both to apply to this dilemma, would context and/or experience influence which principle/s were selected? Would it influence the meaning given to the ethical principle in this case? How so?   Draw on student responses to further develop the fourth and fifth teaching points (above). | Handout: **Context and Experience Dilemmas** |
| **Independent practice phase \*\***  **Apply** | Each student chooses one of the other two dilemmas on the **Context and Experience Dilemmas** handout, and completes the analysis writing task on the handout. | Handout: **Context and Experience Dilemmas** |

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|  | **Activities** (considering different levels) | **Resources** (considering different levels) |
| **Reflection/ evaluation**  \*\*  **Understand** | Students verbally share their point of view offering examples from the dilemmas and justifications of their position. |  |
| **Assessment and Feedback** | Students self-assess using Success criteria  Provide individual/group feedback throughout lesson.  Assess each student’s written analysis from the **Context and Experience Dilemmas** handout. |  |
| **\*\***  Phases may be interchangeable at the discretion of the teacher. | | |

**FOR DISCUSSION**

**The hurt school bully**

John is a Year 9 student. He’s a classic bully to all of the Year 9 girls, and everyone knows that he particularly picks on Anna. One afternoon after a rainy morning, Cara spots John playing football on the oval at lunch time. Just as the last lunch bell rings and all the other students run for their lockers, she notices that John slips on the muddy, wet grass and appears to be injured. There is no one to help him because his friends have left.

**What should Cara do?**

**Applying Ethical Principles:**

1. The Golden Rule: Treat others as you would want to be treated.
2. Act to minimize harm and promote the greatest happiness.

**Compare the actions and thinking for different contexts:**

1. Anna is Cara’s best friend.
2. Anna is a girl Cara does not know.

**Compare the actions and thinking based on different past experiences:**

1. Cara remembers that when her sister had been mean recently and afterwards Cara refused to help her with her homework, her sister had apologised for being mean.
2. Cara and John used to be good family friends before attending the same school. Cara thinks that deep down John knows what he’s doing is wrong, but he has to keep up the bully act in front of his friends.

**Writing task**

1. Select one of the dilemmas below.
2. Consider the given contexts and experiences. Are there any that would make the person want to pick one ethical principle rather than the other?
3. For each of the two contexts write a scene for the scenario which shows the person thinking through what to do. Write a brief ending.
4. For each of the two past experiences write a scene for the scenario which shows the person thinking through what to do. Write a brief ending.
5. Combine a context and one or more of the past experiences and write a scenario which shows the person trying to reach an on-balance judgement.
6. Then, in a reflection piece pick one set of scenarios and compare them. Explain what influence, if any, either the different contexts or past experiences made to the decision-making. Explain why the decision-making was similar or different, drawing on what you have learnt in class. Optional: Reflect on the complexity of making ethical decisions when there are many factors to take into account.
7. In general, when people try to predict consequences and work out their priorities as part of their decision-making, what might they take into account?

**DILEMMA ONE**

**Not all friends are on the guest list**

Johan and Kyle were part of the same small friendship group in primary school. Now in high school, they are part of a big group of friends from different schools. Well, sort of.

One day Kyle overhears Mikail talking about Johan.

“He keeps going off on people who eat meat – Mum’s already stressed about the party and if she had to cook for him too! … and we’re having a BBQ. I don’t want another stupid rant about meat. Mum’ll go ballistic and the party will basically be over. As if I’m inviting him! I’ll make something up and tell him tomorrow.”

**What should Kyle do?**

**Applying Ethical Principles:**

1. The Golden Rule: Treat others as you would want to be treated.
2. Act to minimize harm and promote the greatest happiness.

**Contexts:**

1. Kyle and Johan have been close friends for years.
2. Kyle knew Johan at primary school, but they are not close friends at high school.

**Past experiences:**

1. Kyle remembers warning a friend about something someone else said once back in Year 5. It ended up with that friend confronting the person and naming their source as Kyle even though they had promised not to. Kyle was then shut out by that group for ages.
2. Mikail and Kyle were at Johan’s rock climbing birthday party earlier in the year and Kyle has come to know Mikail quite well since then. He has seen over that time that both Kyle and Johan seem to care a lot about what is and isn’t fair.

**DILEMMA TWO**

**Telling it like it is**

Jason: Are you going to Quan’s party on the Sunday?

Paul: Yeah, my last Bio exam is Friday, so it’s kind of something to look forward to. The car’s broke though, so it’s gonna take forever on the bus. Anyway, who cares? Do you know if Ruby is going?

Jason: Ahh, I knew it! Ruby?

Paul: Shut up, I don’t know... I like her. I mean, I like being around her. You know, because we’ve all been friends since forever, but, I don’t know. I kind of want to tell her I wanna be more than just friends maybe… I thought I might ask her out at the party. Like… I could find a quiet place to just ask, right?

Jason: I don’t know…

Paul: Yeah… Hey don’t tell anyone about this, alright?

At that point Paul walks away and Ruby happens to come up to Jason.

Ruby: Are you both going to Quan’s?

Jason: Yeah, probably. It supposed to be huge.

Ruby: Supposed to be… I don’t know if I can even bother going. Like Paul has been so weird around me lately. He’s been avoiding me! I can’t even with him lately. I’m thinking of going to Nicola’s...

**What should Jason do?**

**Applying Ethical Principles:**

1. The Golden Rule: Treat others as you would want to be treated.
2. Act to minimize harm and promote the greatest happiness.

**Contexts:**

1. Jason knows that Ruby is interested in Paul too and he promised Ruby he would keep it a secret.
2. Jason knows that Ruby has lately become interested in a guy from another school and he promised Ruby he would keep it a secret.

**Past experiences:**

1. Jason remembers his older brother talking about two friends going out together a couple of years ago. After they broke up the whole friendship group broke up as it was very awkward. His brother still misses some of those friends.
2. Jason has confided in Ruby in the past, and over the years Ruby told some of those secrets to her best friend. Sometimes it hasn’t really mattered, but other times he felt angry and upset. He doesn’t tell many secrets to Ruby anymore.