

Exploring how and why teenagers make decisions

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I'm sitting in the computer lab with Damien, a 10th grader from the local high school. He's in a program that helps learning disabled students get a start on their careers and learn from mentors in the community. We're discussing decision-making and the choices he and his peers make. I ask him, "Do teenagers make good decisions?" And he replies straight away, "No. They just don't think." Maybe he doesn't understand what I mean by a decision, I think, and I try again. "But what about big decisions? What do you think about before you make a decision?"

I'm getting frustrated. After extensively grilling Damien about his decision-making strategies, it just appears that he has none. His decisions just seem to come about. And he makes no secret of the fact that he thinks teenagers just don't take agency whatsoever. He doesn't think that they consider the effects of their actions, and after listening to some of the decisions that he has made, I'm beginning to believe him. Maybe teenagers are just incapable of forming well-thought-out decisions.

I am reminded of myself as a high schooler when we had to create a Career Portfolio in 11th grade. We had to make a list of three jobs we would like to have and research the skills we would need for each of the three. Supposedly at the end of the project, we would have learned how to become a strong candidate for a job position. I remember thinking it was kind of stupid. I got a low grade because I didn't read directions and that was the end of that.

Back in those high school days, I wanted to become a pop star. Every week, I would bring my music to my voice teacher's house, and every week she would teach me the piece and I would sing it with her. In between lessons I scarcely touched my music. And yet singing was one of the most important things in my life. I always thought I was a very good singer, and never thought that my lack of practice might affect me later.

When it came time to apply to college my voice teacher advised against applying in music, maybe because she knew how difficult it would be for me to be diligent in practicing. But I was convinced. I wanted to be a singer, and I was good! So I applied to the voice department at Carnegie Mellon University and was rejected. Slowly my dreams of becoming a pop star died.

If anyone had asked me why I made the decision not to practice, or if I were thinking about my future, I would have said no, I definitely didn't think it was even a decision. It just seemed more convenient at the time to talk online or read books or whatever else I did in high school. And now I wish that I'd thought about it more. But maybe teenagers just don't think about the effects of their choices. Maybe that's all there is to it.

But maybe the teens do think about their decisions - they just don't know it. We were having a class discussion about making decisions in school, and the subject of cutting school and misbehaving in class came up. We talked a little about the reasons that people would cut school or misbehave, and we found out that they were thinking, taking things into consideration. I was shocked to find out that they only thought it was a bad decision to cut school if they got caught. Otherwise, it was a good decision. One student told how the school allowed 5 unexcused absences before they took disciplinary action. They would count absences, make sure that they still had some to go, make sure their parents wouldn't find out, and then they would cut school. Wryly, we (their mentors) conceded that though we didn't agree with it, this was still a decision-making strategy. One student commented, "I didn't even know that was decision-making!" And yet they (and we all) do it constantly. We weigh options, look at consequences, think about what would turn out better. In his essay, "The Adult Literacy Process," Paulo Freire speaks of man

attaining 'critical consciousness' so he can teach himself to read and write. When he develops a way of looking at himself as an agent of change in his life and in his world, he has attained a kind of freedom. Those who haven't been taught to regard themselves in this manner are still dependent on a teacher to guide their thinking.

Perhaps decision-making springs out of the ability to think for oneself. When a student memorizes words of formulas, he is just taking what the teacher gives him and spitting stuff back. Education is being *done* to him. Yet when man becomes the *Subject* of his education, he becomes aware of how his decisions and actions affect his world. Then he will be able to say, as did a subject in one of Freire's literacy debates: "I am cultured... because I work, and working, I transform the world." (622) Maybe the teenagers that Damien is thinking of don't see their actions as transforming the world, so they don't feel the need to agonize over making a perfect decision.

Back to Damien. I'm hoping so desperately that he can tell me that teens really do have good decision-making strategies. So when I ask him about the big things, he says, "Yes, in the big things we think a lot." He tells me that the big things are choosing a school, a career, etc. He's currently making a big decision about what to do after high school, whether to go to college or pursue other plans. So I ask, "Don't all the little decisions you make add up to big decisions? What if you cut class too many times, and so you fail the class which means you can't graduate, and then you can't go to college?"

"We [teens] don't think about that," he says. "At least, not until right before -like if you have one absence left. "I feel so helpless; it doesn't seem to matter if youth care about the big decisions if their little decisions don't reflect that.

However, maybe it's natural that teenagers -who are immature adults -make immature decisions. Maturity is a subjective term, which exists mainly to divide objects into two categories; the emphasis being that maturity is superior. And yet, as with every part of life's journey, it makes sense that one must be immature at some point on the way to becoming mature. All that is to say, teenagers must go through a stage of immature decision-making to get to a stage where their decisions will become more solid and effective.

James Paul Gee, writing about literacy and Discourse, states that every person is born into certain Discourses -"ways of being in the world," integrating "words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body position, and clothes." (526) However, acquiring a new Discourse is only possible through "enculturation" or "apprenticeship" (527) into the Discourse. Perhaps Gee would say that the Discourse of an adult decision-maker is different from that of a child's. Therefore a teenager who is learning to be an adult can only make wise, informed decisions by watching it done successfully by an adult. Gee doesn't say if it's possible to "mis-learn" a Discourse, but suppose it is. Suppose that someone who never really mastered the decision-making of a mature adult is the role model for a teenager? That teen will probably end up with poor decision-making skills. So in the case of Damien and his peers, perhaps they haven't acquired the certain Discourse of adult decision-making yet - or they have acquired it wrong.

And yet when they have a voice, these scholars can come up with amazing answers. Sitting around a table, the scholars brought up decisions that they had made in the past. After setting up the situation, they asked for feedback. What do you think I did, or I should have done? they asked their peers. Suddenly everybody's opinion counted - the more vocal ones and those who barely opened their mouths. Suggestions flowed freely and they were understanding as well as critical of each other's thoughts. In this case, each decision discussed became important, worthy of their time and consideration.

Anne Ruggles Gere talks of "kitchen table" communities where participants share their writing, critique and encourage one another. She tells how the women of one workshop "take strength from finding that their experience is worth expressing." (276) Gere also says that "some of the women are hesitant because nobody ever asked them their opinions about anything." (276) When they have given their opinions, the women feel stronger and better about themselves and their writing. Let's extend that

effect. Writing is, after all, just one mode of communicating a feeling or experience. But talking together is another way of communication.

The students who participated in our discussion not only communicated their experience but their decisions. Their peers not only encouraged them by listening and understanding, but they offered their input for making better choices. Maybe, after all, students need to have affirmation or critique from their peers about their decision-making. And the reverse; it is also a time for them to listen to others and appreciate other people's choices and reasoning.

I spent many sessions with Damien talking about his decisions and strategies. We also got somewhere but it was such slow work. I asked questions after question and almost had to drag his reasoning for his decisions out of him. Then one day we sat down and I asked him about his experiences as a learning-disabled student. Slowly at first, and then like a flood, his answers came. And I began to piece together a view of a very able decision-maker making very difficult choices.

Imagine being in a regular classroom (not special education) and the teacher calls on you to read a passage from the textbook. For many of us, this wouldn't be a problem, but what if you can't read out loud that well? It's like one of those Choose Your Own Adventure books where you choose what you want to do and usually end up dying a horrible death if you don't get it right. So go on, choose your adventure:

A. You read the passage. You're really nervous and you get to the second paragraph where you don't know the word. Maybe you stumble over it. Maybe you completely stop. Somebody snickers and some other kid makes a smart remark about you being in 'special ed.' Embarrassed and frustrated, you stop reading...

B. You refuse to read, or you say, "I quit." The teacher thinks you're being rebellious so you and she get in a verbal fight, which ends in detention - yours of course.

C. You decide to solve the problem before it starts. You put your head down and pretend not to be listening. After all, if she thinks you're just "mean," she'll leave you alone. Hey, while you're at it, why not even go to sleep. Then she'll know for sure you're not listening.

This is only a little taste of how it feels to be Damien sometimes. You see how it seems much easier and smarter to just mentally check out of class. These kinds of situations can lead to what teachers call 'behavioral problems' and the students just get more and more frustrated.

After some discussion, we came up with another set of solutions to this situation. Some of these involved talking to the teacher ahead of time, asking peers for help or reading ahead. It is at this point that Damien tells me that teens don't think before they make decisions. But having just been through this example of a decision, I think perhaps he and I don't share a definition for the word "decision."

Jonn'e: *What decisions do teens make?*

Damien: *They make decisions about drugs, smoking and alcohol.*

Jonn'e: *Anything else?*

Damien: *And how to fit in. And teens will think about whether to go to college or trade school. [His current decision]*

Jonn'e: *What kinds of things do teens consider before making a decision?*

Damien: *They weigh pros and cons and talk to adults. Adults get shocked; they don't think kids ever listen to them. I ask my uncle and my dad about whether I should go to college or do music. My uncle was in a*

band and my dad went to college. And I sit by myself and think. Sometimes I write down my thoughts in this book, it's like a journal.

One thing that finally began to clue me in was when Damien told me about a decision he had made last summer. The decision was whether to stay with his mother during the summer vacation or with his older brother. We compiled the pros and cons for each side and then I asked him what he had done in the end. He said, "Well, I chose to stay with my brother, because it was going to be fun and he gives me money, and I don't have to watch my little brother. But my mother didn't let me go."

At first I said, "Okay Damien, so that really wasn't a decision you made; because in the end you didn't make it." But later I thought about it. He had made a decision, weighing the options, and he had decided to go. Then his mother overruled and put her foot down. In the end, Damien never got to put his decision into practice. He never got to find out if it was a good idea to be with his brother partying and having fun all summer.

So often teens have to submit to a higher authority in their lives. They have their parents at home, their teachers and principals at school, their bosses at work, and at every turn, someone tells them what to do and how to do it. Most of the time, from childhood through teenage years, and often afterwards, we wait for others to make our decisions, to nudge us to do something. Our parents provide for us and reward or punish us when we don't behave, our teachers make us turn in work by penalizing us. Many times when others take responsibility for helping us achieve, we don't push ourselves to achieve it.

And remember that Damien's big decision was choosing whether to go to college for music or graphic design, or whether to work at a auto shop, or go to trade school? *I asked him, "Are your parents going to let you make your own decision?"*

"Yes," he said. "They want me to go to college, but in the end they say it's my choice."

It's a decision he was actually thinking about. Well, of course he's taking it seriously. It's his own decision, and it will be his own outcome. There won't be anyone to impose suspension or pull rank on him. His choice will bring about consequences and no one else will be responsible.

Thinking about this, I realized how it all fit together. For the students in Damien's class, skipping school wasn't making an important decision, because there would always be an authority figure there to enforce the punishment. If they did get away with it, then it was a good decision; the outcome was left in their hands. If not, it was bad; they got punished and told they had no right to make that decision.

On the brink of acquiring the adulthood Discourse, they still have to practice decision-making. Not even adults are perfect decision-makers; in some cases they are far from it. So why would you expect an adult-in-training to be perfect?

Yet when their input is valued, as in the case of the discussion group, they realize how important it is. Sharing their decisions, thinking about whether they were good or whether there could have been another solution makes them stronger. Next time they may think more. And this is all on the road to becoming an adult.

Teens do think about their choices and they do consciously use strategies such as talking to adults or thinking about pros and cons. But they only do this when they think their decisions are important. And the decisions can only be important if they think it's really in their hands, that the consequences really are theirs. For those other times when they know that an authority figure will step in, or they'll get punished or rewarded, the decision is still in their hands, but the consequences aren't. So the responsibility isn't theirs.

Maybe as adults we can't see this way of thinking as legitimate. We say that anybody can make a difference, or that kids should just use their brains. But decision-making is a lesson learned over time, maybe with help from adults, maybe with practice among peers. Just because I don't recognize Damien's strategies as "good" doesn't mean that he isn't making good decisions. In time, his definition of good may change as may his definition of decision. But for now, he's choosing his own adventure as best as he can.

This paper written as part of an ongoing Carnegie Mellon University Community Literacy Project.
Decision Makers Project: A Web-based Assessment Tool for Reflective Decision Making Based on
Writer's Planning and Self-reflection, 2006

Visit @ <http://english.cmu.edu/research/inquiry/decisionmakers/index.html>

If you would find this tool useful for your projects, contact Linda Flower, lf54@andrew.cmu.edu

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