

A Short Story of Decision Making

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Academic Setting and Rationale for Unit

West Mesa High School serves a largely minority population with a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Approximately 67% of our students are Hispanic. We also serve a number of Native American students, and we have a small percentage of Asian students. About 20% of West Mesa students are of Anglo or Caucasian background. The unit is intended for a creative writing course, but could be adapted to virtually any English or humanities classroom. In my school, Creative Writing is a multi-level, non-tracked class. Students sign up for all sorts of reasons, including credit recovery, and their reading abilities range widely.

This unit will ask students to consider overtly the decisions and choices that appear in the fiction they read and write. Many student stories are action-packed, but have very little, if any, character motivation. Young writers also do not always see that stories carry social messages, both explicit and implicit. The conflicts students present can be more complex and demonstrate a more sophisticated understanding of the world they live in. Using an interactive role-playing game and traditional analysis of stories, students will learn and apply fundamental aspects of both story structure--plot, setting, character, point of view--and of decision making--self-interest, commitment, heuristics, risk assessment. In the process, students' own rationality may be strengthened.

Intellectual Background

What do the studies of economists have to do with the craft of fiction? Plenty. Both economics and fiction have human behavior as their subject. Both are concerned with choices people make in certain situations. The short story writer could even be accused of preparing case studies for economists interested in decision making. Stories provide examples of characters acting in their own self-interest, of characters making choices based on commitments, of characters interacting to resolve a problem. Perhaps the economists could be accused of searching for a new critical method, for by examining the choices a character makes we can often achieve a clearer understanding of the context of the story. In any case, theories of decision making provide a convenient way to objectify our observations of behavior. Through them, we can examine choices in a rational way--even those choices that appear irrational--in order to better understand both the options available and the motivators--reason, emotion, culture, strategy--that lead to a particular choice. Consciously or not, fiction writers use knowledge of how people make decisions to build more realistic characters. Being able to articulate those processes may help a writer achieve greater realism, both in plotting and in characterization.

Reason

Some economists argue that choices are motivated by self-interest, that each person weighs the options and then chooses what will most benefit herself. This model of decision making assumes that the decider has the ability to calculate, the ability to plan ahead, and the incentive to do the best he can with what he has. The model requires decision makers to consider the costs and benefits before choosing--price, quality, urgency of need, investment of time and effort, and so forth.

Of course, this type of decisionmaking applies to human behavior outside of the financial market place as well. An individual making a choice all by herself may indeed consider what will serve her best. We often weigh the amount of time we are willing to invest in a particular project. We may consider whether a friendship benefits us relative to the amount of effort invested. Students may choose classes based on the expected investment and benefit ratio. Costs and benefits appear in

many ways: money, time, effort.

Two of the most significant costs commonly overlooked are opportunity cost and transaction cost. Opportunity cost is the cost of giving up all the other possible choices, a function of scarce resources. Small children learn about opportunity cost early on when they spend their allowance on candy and later want to buy a toy. Later if a student chooses an easy course of study, he may not be able to get into the college of his choice. Most likely we have all had an experience where the opportunity cost turned out to be greater than we expected. The only way to avoid an excessive opportunity cost is to consider all available alternatives.

The other cost frequently unnamed in the cost-benefit analysis is transaction cost. These costs may be financial, as in the transaction fee applied to withdrawing money from an ATM, or they may be psychic or emotional, as in the cost of ending a marriage. Transaction costs may also be measured in time. While students may not have thought explicitly about transaction cost as an element of their decisions, they are likely to be familiar with the concept. Perhaps it is this implicit awareness of transaction costs that causes us occasionally to keep what we have rather than switch to some unknown, untried product or situation.

This model of rational decision-making has been the primary driver of business decisions in the past. It is a model often held up to us as ideal. "Be logical," we hear our parents say. "Don't let your heart run away with your head." We are scolded for relying on emotion—passion is the undoer of great fortunes. In our society we value reason, logic, self-sufficiency, independence—and money. All of these values support the rational decision making model. Interestingly, in literature the villains are often those who are all head and no heart. The calculating crook does not modulate his greed or self-interest, and others pay the price. So, while we may admire the profits of entrepreneurs like Bill Gates, we scold them when they do not show human compassion by sharing his wealth.

Emotion

Observation indicates that not everyone makes decisions using the rational optimal choice model. We do sometimes use our hearts and not our heads. People who risk their lives to save strangers, folks who stay married through a spouse's illness, people who restrain their selfish incentives to cooperate for the communal good: each of these cases presents a problem for the economist who believes our behavior is motivated by self-interest. Some thinkers may see these cases as anomalies, but they occur frequently enough to suggest a gap in the theory of rational choice.

Robert H. Frank's *Passions Within Reason* examines the role of emotions in decision-making. Frank suggests that, rather than operating against our self-interest, emotions have evolved to help us when reason may not be adequate to our long term good. Frank argues that "being able to experience certain emotions enables us to make commitments that would otherwise not be credible" (5). An honest person is more likely to attract other honest people who will cooperate fairly with him. All of us benefit from the level of trust that factors into our decisions. Frank suggests that we have evolved to feel these emotions in order to facilitate cooperation. His "commitment model" of human behavior considers the role emotions play in our transactions with one another. This commitment model of behavior, like the rational self-interest model, suggests that "material incentives ultimately govern behavior" (258). Frank's model asserts that people who clearly pursue their own self-interest will not be able to establish relationships that will serve them well in the long term, while those who behave in a trustworthy, conscientious manner, with no immediate thought of gain, are able to establish cooperative relationships that bear more fruit in the long term.

Successful cooperation is built on signals sent by the participants. To be effective the signals must be hard to fake; we must be able to detect sincerity accurately before we commit our trust to another. Writers (and readers) understand this, either intuitively or explicitly. The best kind of characterization relies on signals--a writer would call them details--sent and received within the context of the story. The details of living are what Frank would call "costly-to-fake" (110).

The irony inherent in this model is that altruistic, moral behavior turns out to be self-serving, but only if it is pursued selflessly. A classic example of this unopportunist behavior is found in O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi." Della and Jim, out of love for each other, voluntarily give up their most precious possessions to buy the other a gift. She sells her hair to buy him a watch chain; he sells his watch to buy her hair combs. In terms of material gain, they both would have been better off if neither one had made such a choice. Frank would argue, however, that they both have sent a powerful signal to the other about their level of commitment--their future is bright even if the immediate return seems poor.

Common Errors in Decision-Making

While we may have the incentive to do the best we can with what we have and while our moral behavior may open up cooperative opportunities that rely on our ability to commit, we may not always maximize our gains. The decision-making model that relies solely on rationality is often frustrated by human error. The explanations for these failures to maximize may be due to limited calculation abilities--the miscalculation of conditional probability or the miscalculation of time needed to complete a task--or the failures may result from other, less rational sources. For example, we may have different attitudes toward "earned" and "unearned" income even though both are spendable. We tend to remember our past experiences and apply them to situations where, in fact, the historical information has no impact. For example, a student who had a bad experience with a math teacher may carry a dislike for mathematics into the future, even though that one teacher has no impact on the true nature of the subject of mathematics. When making decisions, we are likely to ignore some options. Sometimes our choice set is limited by culture, personal values or economic status.

Perhaps another reason we do not always choose the most objectively rational option is that, for the sake of saving time and energy, we may rely on decision-making heuristics, or rules of thumb. These rules of thumb may grow out of personal experience or they may be products of our cultural heritage. Investment advisors may suggest that a good rule of thumb is to have no more than 30% of your portfolio in any single investment. First-year college students are often advised not to take more than fifteen hours of courses. Even the length and number of phone calls a teen makes to a potential dating partner can be subject to some decision-making heuristic. While these rules of thumb may not always yield the optimal choice in every situation, over the long run they often prove beneficial because of the time saved in the decision making process. Heuristics may lead to or may explain what economists call path dependency: because I've made a decision in a certain way one time, I will likely make it the same way the next time.

One more error in decision making that is especially relevant to the fiction writer is time inconsistency. Simply put, time inconsistency occurs when we underestimate the cost of doing something in the future. We imagine that it will be easier to write that thank you note tomorrow. In fiction, the reader's awareness of time inconsistency creates suspense. The readers may know that the eviction notice is in the mail--we saw the landlord seal and stamp it--but the renter, excited finally to have a paycheck, may decide to splurge on gifts for his family, figuring that he has another week to pay the rent. We readers shake our heads in dismay at such foolishness . . . and then we decide to do the dishes later. Great stories are made from time inconsistency.

Game Theory

Game theory governs strategic behavior. Given that we may act out of reason, emotion, some cultural or personal pattern, game theory considers how humans interact. How and whether people choose to cooperate, how they respond to signals, how they choose their best option when another player may ultimately influence the outcome: these are all aspects of game theory. Faced with the same situation, two players goals may be completely different. The successful player will be able to predict how the other(s) will behave. Sometimes, players may have to make a decision at the same

time, sometimes they may have the chance to observe the other's moves or choices. The classic example of a simultaneous decision is the "prisoner's dilemma." Frank renders the dilemma this way: "Two prisoners are held in separate cells for a serious crime which they did, in fact, commit. The prosecutor, however, has only enough hard evidence to convict them of a minor offense, for which the penalty is, say, a year in jail. Each prisoner is told that if one confesses while the other remains silent, the confessor will go scot-free while the other spends 20 years in prison. If both confess, they will get an intermediate sentence, say 5 years. The two prisoners are not allowed to communicate with each other" (Frank 29-30).

The problem in this dilemma is a matter of trust--what does each prisoner think the other will do? They each must make a decision without knowing for sure what the other is thinking. A sequential game means the players take turns making choices. The players each try to reason what the other player's future moves will be. From that information, they can determine their own best course of action. Trust and commitment are essential elements of this kind of interaction as well. Repeated interactions may help us to understand the other participant and so bring more successful cooperation. For an opportunistic, self-interested person, such repeated cooperation could be used to set up the other player in order to take advantage of him at great cost--thus the con game where trust is built up only to be exploited. For the writer, a well-plotted detective novel neatly illustrates strategic behavior. The detective follows a sequence of clues while simultaneously trying to predict the culprit's next move.

Character, Setting, and Plot

Having looked at several aspects of decision making in the jargon of economists, now we will see more specifically how they apply to the process of writing fiction. We may think of a story as a game in the sense that game theorists would use the term. One or more characters confront a problem--internal or external--and the problem moves toward an outcome that may or may not be beneficial to the player(s). The choices may be constrained by setting, culture, emotion, or principle.

A character's emotions and reactions are crucial to the development of a good story. The writer has the power to convince the reader to trust or distrust a character based on how that character is presented. These details of character come, as Jerome Stern says in *Making Shapely Fiction*, "out of a dense cultural, social, and psychological matrix." The more of all these elements that a writer can include, the more convincing the character. We may not remember exactly all the adventures Huckleberry Finn had, but we certainly remember his character--well enough to predict his response to a new situation. Great characters from literature are flesh and blood to us. They not only think and act, they feel. The details that a writer offers as signals of a character's personality must be carefully chosen if the reader is going to accept a character's actions as plausible. As students see the importance of signaling through the details included, their characters may gain depth and reality.

Both writers and economists consider the constraints on the choices. For the writers this comes as part of that "dense matrix" that Stern identifies. The cultural background of the character, the cultural and physical setting in which the story occurs, the values of the parties involved, all bear on the action of the plot and on the point of view. Characters behave differently in the desert Southwest than they do in a fishing village in Maine. In fact, authors often exploit the power of setting on behavior by placing a character in unfamiliar surroundings. Readers are disappointed when the plot turns in an implausible way--and they intuitively sense when someone is "out of character." For some characters, there may be some salient event in their past that urges them to make a less than optimal decision. A writer can build sympathy for her characters by revealing these salient details, by showing the character's struggle to overcome the emotional triggers of poor choices. Conversely, showing a character choosing an altruistic option, despite the prediction of less than favorable consequences can also build sympathy--and reveal a truth about human behavior.

Stern asserts that "in a good plot, cause and effect interlink. Each situation sets up the next situation" (180). In the best stories the external conflict mirrors an internal conflict and the character grows or

changes by the end of the story. If a writer knows where she wants the story to end, she can reason backward to consider the events/choices that must occur to get there. Plots often begin with a choice or with a character on the brink of a choice. Hester Prynne decides not to reveal the father of her child. Ishmael decides to share a bed with a "cannibal." Gatsby decides to get Daisy back no matter the cost. The plot is driven by the constraints placed upon the characters and the results of other characters' decisions.

Applying game theory and decision-making models to the reading of a story or two may illuminate how a story bears inexorably toward its end under the forces of character, setting, and plot. John Updike's "A & P" makes one comment on our economic culture while Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game" makes an entirely different observation. These different themes result not only from the choices made by the characters in each story, but also from the very culture that is portrayed. If we ever need a reminder that there is more than one kind of valid decision-making, all we need do is read a few stories.

A Reading of John Updike's "A&P"

An often-anthologized story, "A&P" shows us the heroic choice of a young adult who decides to follow principle rather than his own self-interest. The nineteen year-old, slightly disdainful narrator works at the local A&P (Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company) in a middle class neighborhood, and he is led to quit his job as a protest against a perceived insult to a young woman he admires. This dramatic gesture is largely a result of what economists would call signaling.

The store, we are told, is "right in the middle of town" (1542) and metaphorically stands as the center of culture: "if you stand at our front doors you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real-estate offices" (1542). That the church, symbolic of moral values, is surrounded by bastions of commerce reveals much about the attitudes and culture of this town five miles from the beach. Three young women come into the store in swim suits and bare feet, clearly breaking a norm in this neighborhood. The narrator is glad for the diversion, mentally names the most beautiful girl "Queenie" and watches every move the trio make. The detail with which Queenie is described shows how carefully the narrator is looking for signals of her status. He tells us that "her hands are empty, not a ring or a bracelet" and that she purchases "Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream." The purchase reveals something about Queenie--at least to the narrator's way of thinking. Her choice shows that she comes from a different social and economic class. The narrator imagines that "her father and the other men were standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties and the women were in sandals picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big glass plate and they were all holding drinks the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them" (1543). This sophisticated scene contrasts with the narrator's own experience: "When my parents have somebody over they get lemonade and if it's a real racy affair Schlitz in tall glasses with 'They'll Do It Every Time' cartoons stencilled on" (1544). All that from a jar of herring.

We already know that the narrator feels disdainful toward the patrons of the store, those unthinking people who are only concerned with their purchases, who never imagine anything noble or pure in the world. He refers to the store's customers repeatedly as "sheep": "The sheep pushing their carts down the aisle. . . were pretty hilarious" and later "All this while, the customers had been showing up with their carts but, you know, sheep, seeing a scene, they had all bunched up" (1542, 1544). When the store manager, Lengel, enters and scolds the girls about their attire, explaining that the "policy" requires them to have their shoulders covered, Queenie is embarrassed, and we can predict that the narrator will take offense. He rings up the purchase, described so that we see how people are viewed in economic terms: "it's more complicated than you think, and after you do it often enough, it [the register] begins to make a little song, that you hear words to, in my case 'Hello(*bing*) there, you (*gung*) hap-py *pee-pul* (*splat*)!'"(1544).

The narrator sees Queenie's blush and gallantly says "'I quit' to Lengel quick enough for them to hear, hoping they'll stop and watch . . . their unsuspected hero" (1544). His gesture goes unnoticed

by the girls, but he follows through nonetheless because "once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it" (1545). The narrator looks back once he's outside the store and feels "how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter" (1545).

Commentary

In many ways this story is an economic parable that serves to point out the faults in both the rational optimal choice model and the emotion-driven commitment model of decision-making. The world Updike has constructed leaves little room for principles or values not tied to commerce. The store manager's encounter with Queenie reveals that even ideal beauty (for so the narrator views her) must bow to market forces. The profit motive is clearly seen in the manager's response to the situation. He does not shoo the girls from the store without their purchase because they have offended his sense of decency. He allows them to make their purchase, raising his own profit, but he reminds them of the standard for buying and selling, thus appeasing the "sheep" who have gathered around to see the scene. From the rational view, the manager optimizes his choice--he is able to appear to uphold certain standards while at the same time making money from those who do not meet them.

Sammy, the narrator, who makes his decision based on principle, loses entirely in economic terms. He gives up a job, he damages his relationship with his parents ("'Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad,' he tells me. It's true, I don't"), he gains no admiration from the girls for his sacrifice (when he goes outside, "they're gone, of course"). In fact, by the end of the story, Sammy has only gained insight about how hard it will be for him if he chooses to maintain a moral stand in a world driven by the profit motive.

Clearly, both the character of the narrator and the world in which he lives place constraints upon his decision. The story serves to highlight the ongoing conflict between money and morals that is at the heart of so much American literature.

A Reading of Ralph Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game"

If "A&P" hinges on signaling and the conflict between morals and profit, then "King of the Bingo Game" offers a view of game theory in action and the tragic result of divergent goals. A Southern black man finds himself in a Northern movie theater watching a movie for the fourth time so he can take a chance on the bingo game held at the end of the show. He plays five cards at once and makes a bingo. He earns the right to spin the wheel and possibly win the jackpot of \$36.90. He is motivated by thoughts of his sick wife and the need for money so she can receive treatment. When he steps on stage to spin the wheel, he plans to give the button a quick burst and release. He has observed that players get closer to the winning number, 00, if they use this strategy. But when he actually presses the button he knows that only then is he in control of the outcome. He refuses to release the button and allow the wheel to stop. Security is called in and he is forced to release the button. The wheel magically lands on 00, but all the player receives is a whack on the head before he is dragged out. He receives, as we are told, "what all the winners received."

Commentary

Through details in the setting we learn of the constraints upon the black man's decision-making--not just in the context of the movie theater, but in all of life. We learn in the first paragraph that he is hungry, he is out of his familiar communal culture ("folks down South stuck together"), he's broke, has no birth certificate and thus cannot get a job, and Laura is "'bout to die 'cause we got no money for a doctor" (Ellison 257). The man believes, but with a "pinpoint of doubt," that he is not crazy, that circumstances have pushed him down.

The opening focuses on a scene in the movie where a woman is tied to a bed, her clothes in rags and "her legs and arms spread wide" (258). Two movie patrons consider the opportunity:

"Wouldn't I like to have her tied up like that . . ."

"Hey! That fool's letting her loose!"

"Aw, man, he loves her."

"Love or no love!"

This small exchange makes it clear that in the context of this story, love is not a sufficient motivator to overcome self-interest and exploitation.

Because the protagonist is seeing the picture for the fourth time, he knows that "Everything is fixed" (258), that the plot will go along just as it has before. Nevertheless, he imagines what would happen if a movie "got out of hand" and the characters did not play their predicted parts. But such a thought is ridiculous. In this game everyone knows his part, and any deviation from the expected pattern of behavior is impossible.

In the next section of the story this idea of predictability is reinforced in the man's dream of walking by a train trestle back home, of jumping off the trestle just in time only to look back and see "that the train had left the track and was following him right down the middle of the street" (258). He wakes up screaming. This terrifying vision foreshadows what happens when something leaves the track or comes "unfixed" in this game. We can guess that he is doomed no matter what choice he makes.

At first glance these two episodes may seem extraneous, having nothing to do with the bingo game, but they provide important background information. Our player has beaten the odds by having five cards, but as he knows, "even with five cards he didn't have much of a chance" (259). As luck would have it, our player beats the odds again and gets a bingo. So far, the man in the story is optimizing his choices, beating the objective probability of winning. With his win, he earns the right to spin the wheel. This is a jackpot that is extremely difficult to win, and for the size of it, \$36.90, we wonder if it's worth it. But we know that Laura is home sick and needs the doctor--we know where the man would be if he didn't try. Sadly, because of the opening scenes with the movie scene and the train, we also suspect where he will be even after his attempt to win.

Because of repeated observations, the man has a strategy for winning: "He would give the wheel a short quick twirl. Just a touch of the button. He had watched it many times, and always it came close to double zero when it was short and quick" (260). It is worth noting that we do not know that the man had actually seen anyone win, only that the wheel had come *close* to the winning number with this strategy. At the moment of this decision, our protagonist feels "a profound sense of promise, as though he were about to be repaid for all the things he'd suffered all his life" (260). He's come so far, gaining every step, that this last step seems to hold promise too. But of course, his earlier successes will have no influence on this outcome. He has fallen prey to the error of saliency--thinking that because he has been winning, he will continue to win.

When he finally presses the button he cannot let go because "he knew . . .that as long as he pressed the button, he could control the jackpot" (260). This man lives in a world where at every turn the probability of winning is infinitesimal if it exists at all. The only way he can be sure of not losing is by not reaching the final outcome. The scene that follows his decision to hold the button down indefinitely is tragic--he is mocked, he becomes sick from the alcohol he has drunk, he plays a sad game of cat and mouse with the men called in to subdue him.

Even as he is forcibly restrained he says, "I can't give it up . . . Boys, I really can't give it up." He knows his only chance of winning is when his turn at the button goes on forever. He knows he'll never be able to get to that spot again. The great irony of the story comes after the white men wrest the button from his control: "he watched the wheel spin slowly to a stop. Without surprise he saw it rest at double zero." He wins.

But of course, the train follows him off its track, and he will be run over: "he did not see the man's slow wink, nor see the bow-legged man behind him step clear of the swiftly descending curtain and set himself for a blow." He realizes as they knock him out, that "his luck had run out on the stage" (264).

The choices in this story are constrained at every turn. If he does not play bingo, the man has no chance of helping Laura. If he plays, he is unlikely to win. If he wins at bingo, he is unlikely to win the spin. And, as we see, even if he wins the spin, he will not get the payoff. So, even winning every "subgame" does not guarantee a payoff. In this white-dominated world "everything is fixed," and our player is not in control. So. How does one respond to a game with life and death consequences where you have no chance of winning?

Ellison, like Updike, has illustrated the conflict between the profit motive and human decency. It is certainly not in the best interests of the white people running the game to let a black man win--especially not in this bizarre way. It is not in the best interests of Laura if our protagonist refuses the ultimatum. He is motivated by love, more than by self-preservation. Those in charge of the game are motivated by a desire to retain their superior power. The result of these opposing goals is tragic.

In each story, the comment on our profit system is grim. There must be room for emotion and for moral principles. Perhaps we can take small comfort from Frank's commitment model--that Sammy and the unnamed black man have benefited society as a whole by their rebellion against the norms, but as readers we cannot help but feel the injustice of their situations.

Teaching the Unit

Essential Question: How does my knowledge of human decision making inform my fiction?

By participating in the role playing decision game, students will be introduced to three models of decision making, and they will have hands-on practice with strategic thinking. The game will also reinforce the importance of character in development of plot and the significance of point of view in determining meaning. The hands-on decisionmaking experiences will then be applied to the reading of two stories. Finally, students will be asked to produce a short story that incorporates what they have learned from the reading, discussion, and practice.

The unit will take approximately four weeks to complete. Playing the decision game and writing the quest story will take a week. Reading, analyzing, and discussing the stories will take another week. Students will then have an additional two weeks to create and complete their own stories.

Objectives

- Students will read two short stories, write a quest story, and discuss the factors that influence the decisions in each story: self-interest, commitment, cultural or other constraints (LA 2d, 3c, 4a, 4c, 5a, 5b, 5c, 5e, 6c, 7b, 7d, 9a).
- Students will be able to identify direct and indirect characterization (LA 5e).
- Students will use terminology of economics to discuss the choices characters make (LA 3c, SS 10f).
- Students will be able to develop a character indirectly--through dialogue, action and detail (LA 4b, 5e).
- Students will plan and write a short story that reflects their knowledge of how people make decisions (LA 5b, 5e, 6c; SS 6c, 10f).
- Students will be able to articulate what type of decision making model best applies to their own stories (SS 10f).

The list below corresponds to the parenthetical citations which follow the objectives listed above. For the purpose of clarity and conciseness, I have labeled the benchmarks with sequential letters. The full standards and all benchmarks are available online at <http://sde.state.nm.us/resources/index.html>.

Language Arts 9-12 (LA): The students will

- 2d—refine critical thinking skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing
- 3c—increase and refine the use of vocabulary appropriate to specific purposes
- 4a—develop and use active, critical listening skills for a variety of purposes in a variety of contexts
- 4b—analyze and evaluate knowledge of structural elements including rhetorical devices, figurative, descriptive, and visual language
- 4c—apply and evaluate knowledge of culture and context to aid comprehension
- 5a—evaluate and choose the most effective strategies to organize and to deliver oral communication
- 5b—use the most appropriate writing skills to fit a particular purpose by writing on a regular basis
- 5c—express facts, ideas, and opinions clearly, articulately, and appropriately for a specific purpose or audience
- 5e—analyze, develop, write, and participate in drama, music, poems, and stories
- 6c—independently, use correct grammar and spelling
- 7b—analyze how language is used to present differing perspectives
- 7d—recognize, analyze, and respond critically to propaganda, marketing campaigns, and other persuasive messages
- 9a—analyze language and literature for contributions to understanding self and others as appropriate

Social Studies 9-12 (SS): The students will

- 6c—analyze how perceptions, attitudes, values and beliefs affect the development of personal identity
- 10f—analyze and apply influences of economic concepts and reasoning on contemporary issues

Materials Required

- One copy of *Hunches in Bunches* by Dr. Seuss
- Copies of "Muddy Road," a Zen parable
- Copies of John Updike's "A & P"
- Copies of Ralph Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game"
- (teacher may substitute other stories that reveal the process of decision making)
- Copies of handouts for decision game
- Deck of cards
- Props for decision game: calculator, glasses, book of wisdom, cross necklace, backpack (optional)
- Grab bag of odd personal items (for character building activity)

Lesson Plans

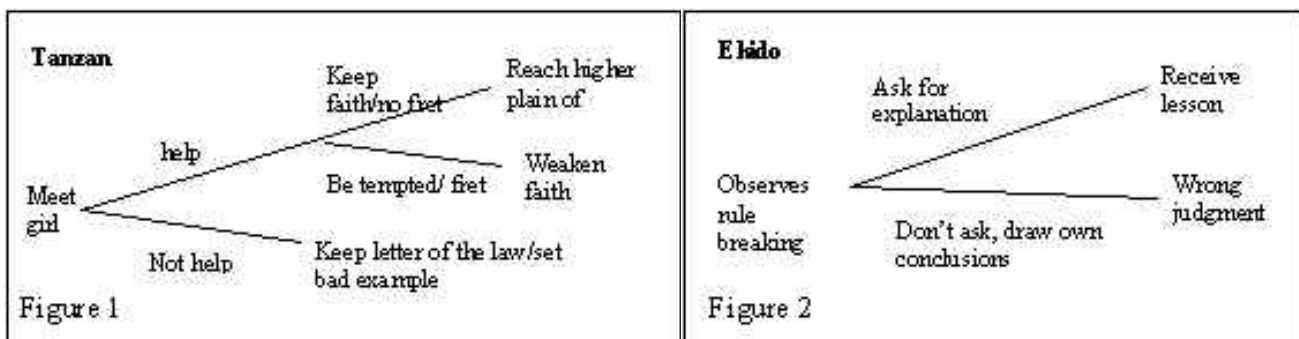
Day 1-6—The Decision Game: A Quest Story

Purpose: To introduce students to the concept of decision-making, decision trees, and to recall the story elements of plot, character, setting, and conflict.

Day 1 Procedure: Read aloud *Hunches in Bunches* by Dr. Seuss. Use newsprint to record the issues/problems in the story. Allow students to discuss the benefits and costs of having choices. Introduce the ideas of opportunity cost and cognitive dissonance. Have students write for 10 minutes in their writer's notebook on either or both of the following prompts: How do you go about making up your mind when faced with several choices? Describe a time when you felt the pain of opportunity cost.

Once students have considered the concept of decision making, have them read the Zen parable "Muddy Road." Ask them to do the following: Circle every word or phrase that reveals something about the setting--the constraints upon the choices. Underline every word or phrase that reveals something about character--who is making decisions in the story. Place sequential numbers next to each event in the story--the choices made that create the plot. Discuss.

Introduce decision trees by creating a diagram for "Muddy Road" that reflects the choice(s) each character makes in the story (Figures 1 and 2).



Assign reading of "A&P" and "King of the Bingo Game" to be done by Day 7.

Day 2— Introducing the Decision Game

Procedure: Review previous lesson. Begin the decision game by grouping students in threes and having them draw for their characters. Ask students to read carefully about their character, to give their character a name and to spend at least ten minutes making up a childhood story for their character--some small vignette about a significant event from the past. They may add information such as a name and place of birth to round out the character, but they may not change the given facts. This work should be done independently. Once the role play begins students must reveal visible aspects of their character, but they may choose what else to reveal. Emphasize that it is important students allow themselves to think as if they were this character—they should guard against their own predispositions as much as possible and be faithful to this character when they write and when they talk to the other players in each stage of the game.

The three characters in this game personify three types of decision-makers, though students need not know this until the whole game is debriefed. It will be most interesting if the students play the role using the description and their imaginations. Character A relies on the rational self-interest model, Character B relies on the commitment model, and Character C relies on heuristics. All students need to know about their assigned characters is the information provided below.

Character A

You are rational and self-interested. You generally make decisions based on what will benefit you most, without regard to how they affect others. You have a lean face and intelligent eyes. You dress conservatively. Your glasses occasionally slip on your nose and are you never without your handy

pocket calculator. You were an business major in college. You have \$500 in your wallet for this adventure. Some people think you are cold and unfeeling, but you carry a photo of your parents in your wallet--the memory of how they were killed while crossing a footbridge in Guatemala still brings tears to your eyes. You are tall, and your back hurts quite often. The doctor has told you not to do any heavy lifting, pushing, or pulling. You love the smell of the sea and hate the fact that you get seasick so easily--the faster the boat, the less you're likely to be ill. You seek this treasure so you'll have the money to start up your own business offering loans to low income people. Fortunately you speak the language of this country well and can often get a seller to go down as much as 50% in his prices. Your favorite saying is "Opportunity knocks but once."

Character B

You are loyal and have found that being trustworthy usually brings positive results in your interactions with others. You are an extremely private person and are horribly embarrassed that you only recently have worked your way out of bankruptcy. Despite your personal shyness, you have a strong sense of right and wrong. You are not afraid to speak up when you see an injustice being done. You have an intense fear of heights. You are a moral, decent, faithful soul who wears a cross as a symbol of that faithfulness. You were an art history major in college. You've reached the stage where you buy sensible shoes and comfortable clothes. You have \$500 in your wallet and another \$500 hidden in a money belt. You seek this treasure to pay the medical bills of your ailing parents. Your favorite saying is "In for a penny, in for a pound."

Character C

You have returned to your cultural heritage after a few years of walking in the mainstream of American culture. You value socializing, community, traditional beliefs and methods, feeling that the wisdom of many years must be better than any one person's thoughts. A signal of this faith in your cultural forebears is the fact that you carry a book of folk wisdom with you almost all the time. You have a strong sense of fairness and relish a good confrontation. You also have a strong sense of adventure, even though you prefer not take risks alone and you like to be prepared for anything. In fact, you take your backpack almost everywhere, including on this trip--though you don't know whether you'll need it or not. You have \$500 dollars in your wallet. The only thing bad about this trip to the near-tropics is the claustrophobic feeling you get when the growth is thick and the air is humid. You have left your two small children at home with their grandparents. You hope to use the money to publish an authoritative text on the collective wisdom of your culture. Your favorite sayings are "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," "Better safe than sorry," and "Don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today."

Day 3—Stage One Preparation and Journey

In this stage of the quest, students will have to decide what to purchase as preparation for their journey—without knowing exactly what lies ahead. They will also be introduced to the idea of cooperative decision making. One or more characters may experience cognitive dissonance resulting from the saliency of certain memories. For example, Character A may not want to cross the footbridge even though it is the most direct path because he remembers that his parents died on just such a bridge.

Procedure: Only after the players have finished this preparation stage are they allowed to see the handout for Stage One Journey. The handouts contain all the information students need to play. If tape recorders are available, students could turn them on to record their dialogue. To help students step into character, props may be provided by the teacher. To determine the outcome of any risky situation, the teacher should have a set of cards that includes only the ace through the ten of one suit. Students will draw a card from this shuffled set to find out what happens. For example, if the probability that someone will fall is 80% then if the card drawn is 1-8, someone fell. If a 9 or 10 is drawn, no one fell. When the journey part of this stage has been completed, allow time to debrief the

students. Ask them why they chose as they did. Use this time to offer the relevant aspects of decision making. Ask them to consider how their character may have felt. Have them describe the scenery as they imagined it. All this and more, including their rendition of the negotiations and dialogue, should go into their write up of this part of the journey.

For teacher only: Probability of not returning from ferry: Character A=70%, Character B=0%, Character C=20%

Introduction to the Decision Game (handout) Name_____

This is a simple role-playing game, much like a simplified Oregon Trail (a game you may have played on a computer). The game will allow you to see how plot and character are intertwined, how choices come from people in the story. After each stage of the game you will record your version of the story using the voice of your assigned character. This reflective narrative will help us understand how point of view influences the story and how the theme of a story depends on who tells it. You are encouraged to write your reflection in story-style, using dialogue and description rather than a journal-like record of events. Try to imagine what is going on in the other characters' heads and hearts.

Background

You and these two other people are all making a journey to claim a treasure worth \$250,000. You may choose to travel together or alone. You may decide to strike off on your own at the beginning of any stage. It is up to the group to determine whether you may rejoin them at the next stage (provided you begin it on the same day as they do). You have never traveled through this region before, but you know that there will be a river and a desert to cross before you get to the ocean. At the seashore you will have to find a way to the island that holds the treasure. Then you may search for the treasure itself.

If all goes well, your journey will take about four days. (Each stage of the journey begins in the morning of a new day). If one of your decisions goes awry, you may be delayed or you may not make it at all. To prepare for the journey you may take some time to decide which items you wish to purchase with your traveling money. You may choose these items independently, cooperatively, or using some combination of independence and collaboration.

Stage One Preparation (handout) Name_____

Before beginning your journey you have this opportunity to get some supplies. Some may be essential, some may be extras. You will have to use your own judgment about what to buy. Below is the list of items in the store along with their prices. Please record your purchases on this page.

Your
purchases
for Stage
One

<i>Item</i>	<i>Cost</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Cost</i>
*Cars	\$600.00	_____	_____
**Water	\$ 1.00/bottle	_____	_____
***Food	\$ 20.00/day	_____	_____
Hats	\$ 10.00	_____	_____
Sunscreen	\$ 5.00	_____	_____
Camera	\$ 20.00	_____	_____
Backpack	\$100.00	_____	_____
knife	\$ 10.00	_____	_____
		Total spent	_____

Money left _____

*If you decide to buy a car and split the cost, record your share of the purchase price. You can store up to three more days' food (in addition to the two you can carry) and up to fifteen extra bottles of water.

**You can only carry five waters without a backpack. With a backpack you can carry fifteen waters.

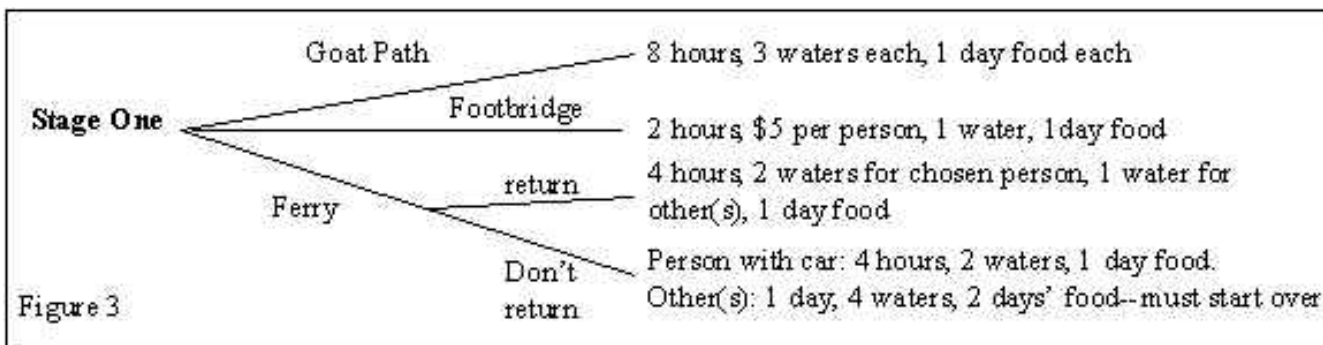
***You can only carry two days' worth of food without a backpack. With a backpack you can carry four days' worth.

Write your impressions of your traveling companions and how you are feeling about the trip. Explain why you bought the things you did.

Stage One--Journey (handout) Name_____

There is a river you must cross. The river lies in a deep ravine full of vegetation. There is a road that winds down the canyon to a ferry which you can use to pick up your car if you purchased one. There is a rickety-looking footbridge that swings high above the river and takes you straight across to the main road. Finally, you could walk on the goat path down the canyon and cross to the other side on a bridge made of two huge split tree trunks. Of course, each of these choices has costs and benefits. Below are a chart of the risks and costs and a decision tree (figure 3) to help you visualize your choices.

	Goat Path	Footbridge	Ferry
risks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 95% chance of total safety ● 5% chance of someone falling ● 40% chance it will be you--you'll lose one day's food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 60% chance of total safety ● 40% chance of someone falling ● 20% chance it will be you ● 90% chance you'll be able to catch yourself--lose five waters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 80% chance of someone falling and losing one day's food. ● Only one person may go on ferry and return with the car ● Risk of the chosen person not coming back varies based on character traits. See teacher for outcome after you have selected the person who will take the ferry.
costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 8 hours travel time ● \$0 ● 3 waters each ● 1 day food ● cannot get car if you bought one 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 2 hours travel time ● \$5 toll per person ● 1 water per person ● 1 day food per person ● cannot get car if you bought one 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 4 hours travel time ● 2 waters for chosen person, 1/2 water for the other two ● 1 day food for each



Stage One Results

Money left _____

Time spent _____

Notable events _____

Supplies left _____

food _____

water _____

equipment _____

Day 4—Stage Two Preparation and Journey

Begin the day by making sure that everyone has written up the events of the day before using dialogue and description. Once again, students must complete the preparation section before they see the journey section of this stage. In this stage students will encounter the law of supply and demand in the higher store prices. They will also have to decide whether to continue cooperating or not. They may also experience the results of time inconsistency when they discover that they need a hat or sunscreen, but none are available. It’s also possible that they will feel the opportunity cost of not having purchased a car and now not having enough money to buy one. As before, save time to debrief the students, introducing relevant aspects of decision making and encouraging them to flesh out their account of the day’s progress. They might want to imagine where they sleep at night, whether they are worried about one of the others stealing their stuff. If they left the group and are traveling alone, do they regret that choice?

Stage Two Preparation (handout) Name _____

Before beginning the next part of your journey you have this opportunity to get some supplies. Some may be essential, some may be extras. You will have to use your own judgment about what to buy. Below is the list of items in the store along with their prices. Please record your purchases on this page.

Your purchases for Stage Two		Item	Cost
Item	Cost	_____	_____
*Car	\$800.00	_____	_____
**Water	\$ 5.00/bottle	_____	_____
***Food	\$ 30.00/day	_____	_____
		Total spent	_____
		Money left	_____

*If you decide to buy a car and split the cost, record your share of the purchase price.

**You can only carry five waters without a backpack. With a backpack you can carry fifteen waters.

***You can only carry two days’ worth of food without a backpack. With a backpack you can carry four days’ worth.

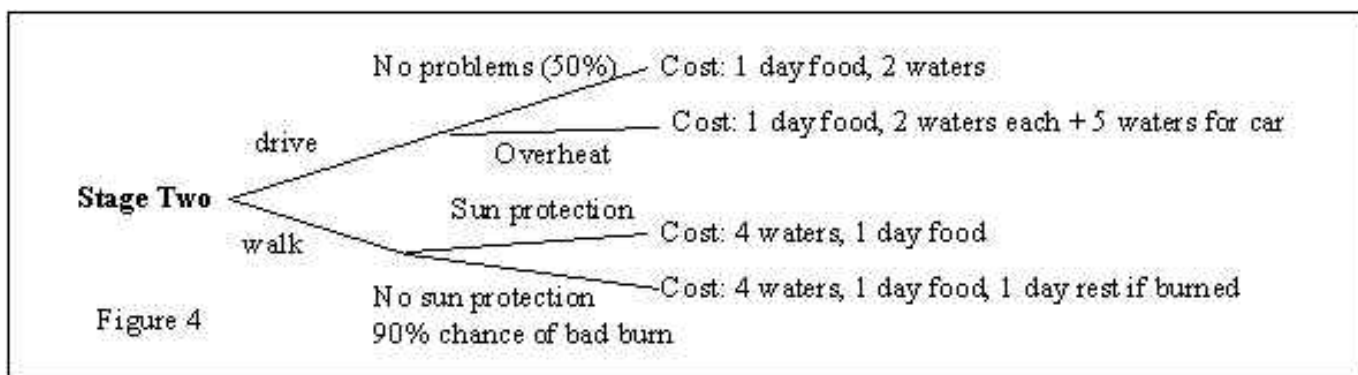
(When you have completed this preparation, ask for the Stage Two Journey handout).

Stage Two Journey (handout) Name _____

Now that you have bought your supplies, you must cross a desert. If you have a car, you may drive. Without a car, you must walk through the desert. As usual, each course carries some risk and some

costs. Remember that your characters determine how you make your decisions. The decision tree (Figure 4) for this stage of the journey is below along with a chart of risks and costs. If you do not have enough food or water now that you've seen the decision tree, you must work one day at day labor to earn \$50.00. Cost: 24 hours, 1 day's food, 2 waters.

	Drive	Walk
risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is a 50-50 chance that your car will overheat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If you walk and have sun protection there is no risk (as long as you have enough water). ● If you're short water, you suffer dehydration and need one day's rest
cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If you make it across without incident the cost is 1 day's food and 2 waters for each person and 4 hours travel time. ● If your car overheats, add five waters to the cost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Without sun protection there is a 90% chance you will suffer a bad burn and need one day's rest. ● 4 waters and 1 day's food for each traveler. ● 12 hours travel time.



Stage Two Results

Money left _____ food _____
 Time spent _____ water _____
 Notable events _____ equipment _____
 Supplies left _____

Day 5—Stage Three Preparation and Journey

As usual, students must complete the preparation task before they see the journey choices. At this stage of the game, more players are likely to defect since the end is so near. The decision tree (figure 5) shows that it is still better to cooperate at this point in the game. Some players may be out of money and thus may be prevented from continuing on with their group. The altruistic character may decide to dig into her extra cash to rescue the group, or she may not. The cost of noncooperation goes up at this stage. If a solo player ends up with a leaky rowboat or a motorboat whose engine dies, she will be stranded. Be sure to save time at the end of play for students to debrief their choices and record their negotiations. Remind them to include the sensory details that will make their story interesting.

Stage Three Preparation (handout) Name _____

Before beginning the next part of your journey you have this opportunity to get some supplies. Some may be essential, some may be extras. You will have to use your own judgment about what to buy. Below is the list of items in the store along with their prices. Please record your purchases on this page.

Your purchases for Stage Three

Item		Item	Cost
*Car	\$800.00	_____	_____
**Water	\$ 5.00/bottle	_____	_____
***Food	\$ 30.00/day	_____	_____
Hats	\$ 20.00	_____	_____
		Total spent	_____
		Money left	_____

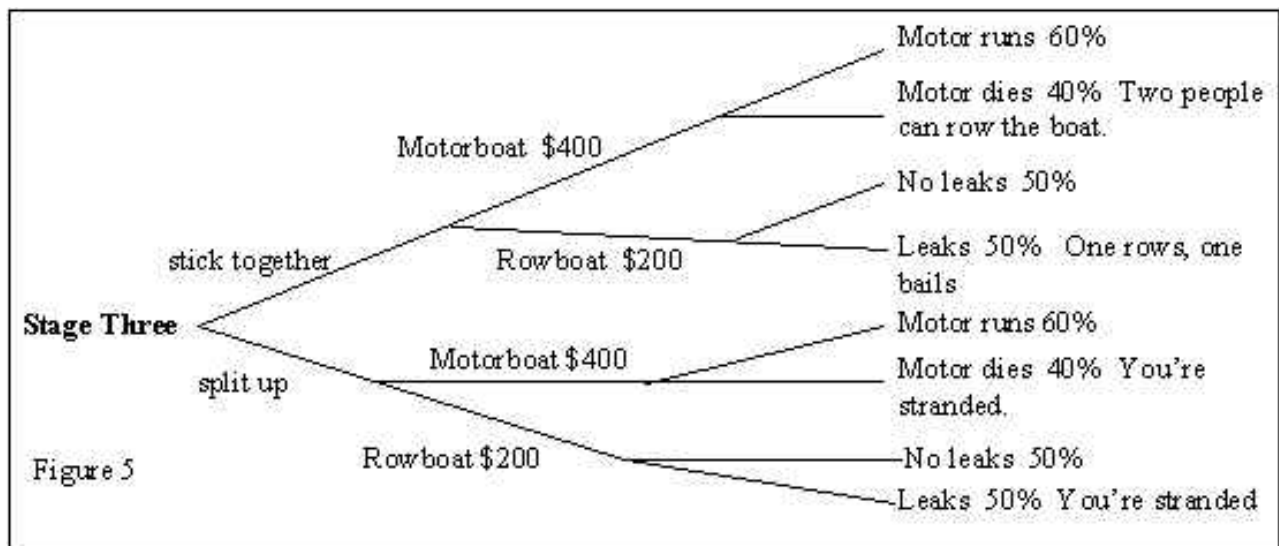
When you have finished this preparation worksheet ask for the Stage Three Journey handout.

Stage Three Journey (handout) Name _____

Congratulations! You (or your group) have reached the sea. All that remains is to find a way to the island that holds the treasure. Of course, now that you are very close to your goal, you may wish to travel alone. That will be your first decision. Then you may decide to hire a motorboat or a rowboat. The motorboat costs a little more and has a mostly reliable motor. The rowboat is less expensive, but looks a little old and thin on the bottom. If you are out of money, you may work at day labor to earn \$100 each day. The cost for this is 24 hours travel time, 2 waters, and 1 day's food.

Below are the decision tree (figure 5) and the risk/cost chart for this part of the journey. Remember to stay in character and to keep track of your costs.

	Motorboat	Rowboat
risk	There is a 60% chance that the motorboat engine will quit. Alone, you will be stranded because the boat is too heavy for one person to row. With one or more partners, you can row the boat to the island.	There is a 50% chance that the rowboat will spring a leak. Alone, you will not be able to bail and row at the same time. You will be stranded. With one or more partners, one can bail and the other(s) can row.
cost	\$400.00 one day's food 2 waters 4 hours if engine runs 10 hours if engine dies	\$200 one day's food 2 waters 6 hours if no leaks 7 hours if leaks



Stage Three Results

Money left _____ food _____
 Time spent _____ water _____
 Notable events _____ equipment _____
 Supplies left _____

Day 6—Stage Four Journey

Procedure: Once again, check to see that students have written the previous day’s adventure into their story draft. Praise the sensory details and description of the events where appropriate. Today’s stage requires no preparation. The stakes go up since the treasure is now within reach. Some players may be tempted to leave the group. One player has a comparative advantage--a map showing the location of the treasure--and he may be especially likely to defect from the group (if he is still with a group).

Stage Four Journey (handout) Name _____

You have made it to the island and there is no place to buy supplies. Once again, this close to the \$75,000 goal, you may be tempted to split up if you haven’t already done so. That will be the decision you must make in this stage. Will you search for the treasure with your partners (if you have them) or will you continue on your own? The vegetation on this island is extremely thick and close, the air is heavy. Fortunately the island is small--you can search it thoroughly in a day--if you have food and water. You will need one day’s water--at the very least-- to get back to the mainland.

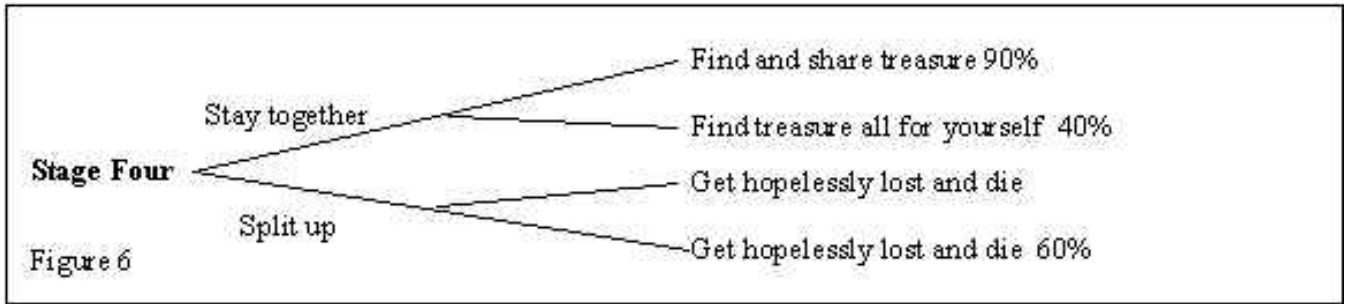
Below are the decision tree (figure 6) and the risk/cost chart for this stage of the journey. What will you do?

	Stick together	Split up
risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is a 90% chance that you will all survive to find the treasure and share it. ● There is a 10% risk that you all will get hopelessly lost and die on the island 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is a 40% chance that you will find the treasure on your own. There is a 60% chance that you will get hopelessly lost and die on the island. ● One character has a map. This character’s chance of finding the treasure alone increases to 80%, and the risk of getting hopelessly lost is 20%.

cost

- one day's food
- 2 waters

- one day's food
- 2 waters



Stage Four Results

Money left _____

food _____

Time spent _____

water _____

Notable events _____

equipment _____

Supplies left _____

Treasure _____

Take time now to write up the this final stage. Remember to stay faithful to your character's point of view and to add dialogue and details of setting to make this into a story. What was unexpected? What did you learn about the other treasure seekers? How many of your decisions were voluntary? Did you ever feel compelled to take a certain path? When and why? What was the most crucial point of the journey for your character? Did he/she ever have to face an internal conflict while solving the external problem? When? How?

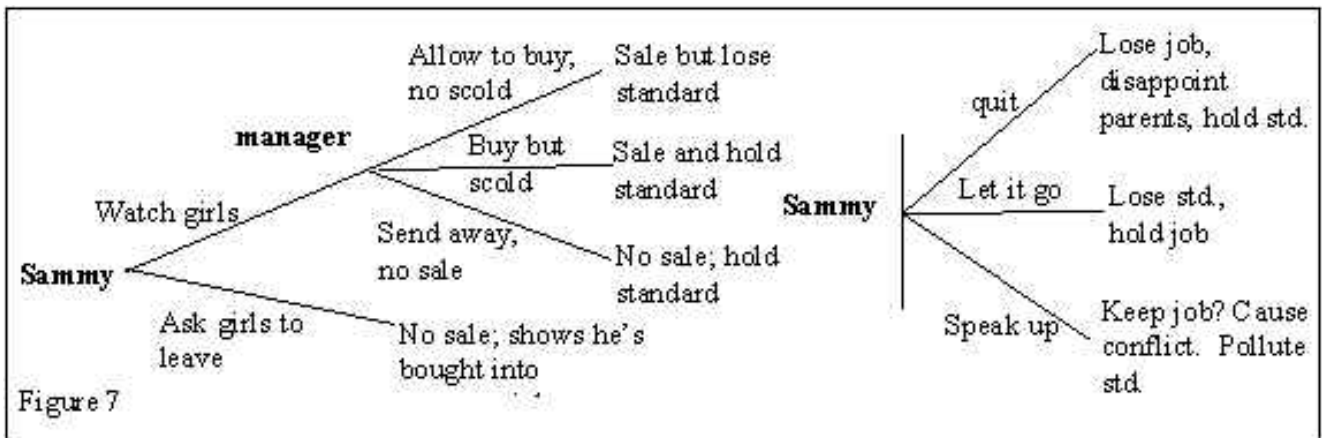
Congratulations!!! You have finished the game . . . and you should have a rough draft of a story in hand as well.

Day 7—Learning from Story Models

Purpose: Students will apply their newly gained knowledge of how people make decisions to problems in two stories. By asking why and how the protagonist makes his decision in each story, students should be able to close in on the meaning of the story as a whole.

Review decision trees as tool for examining sequential decisions. Have students examine one of the trees in the decision game and/or bring out the decision tree the group made for "Muddy Road." Discuss how decision trees are similar to and different from plot diagrams. They both move through time in a linear fashion; they both show sequence; decision trees show the roads not taken while plot diagrams do not.

Finally, have students review Updike's "A&P" and construct a decision tree for that story. Consider giving students a partially completed diagram. It may look like this with some information missing (Figure 7):



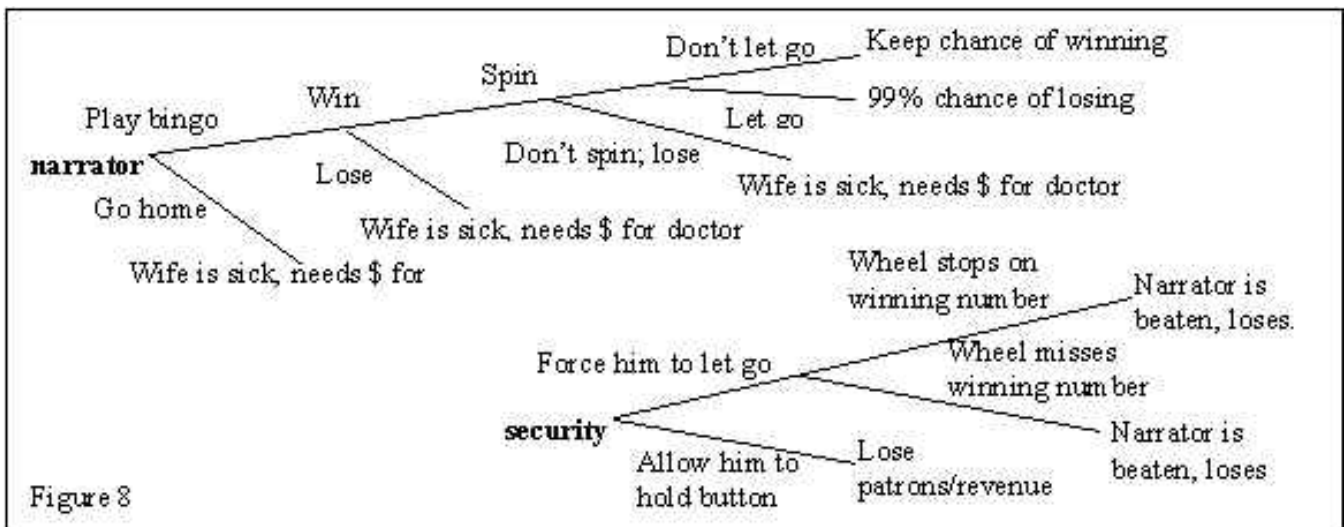
Day 8—Share decision trees for "A&P."

Procedure: Discuss how character and setting contribute to the outcome of the story. Discuss the nature of Sammy's decision. Was it in his self-interest to quit his job? Was it a heroic or altruistic choice? What factor outweighed everything else?

Remind students to review "King of the Bingo Game" for tomorrow. Ask them to begin thinking about their own story that involves some crucial decision or lost opportunity.

Day 9—Continue Practice with Decision Trees and Analysis of Model Stories

Procedure: Have students review Ralph Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game." Allow them to work in teams to prepare a decision tree for this story as well. Again, consider providing a partially completed decision tree pattern for students to use as a guide (Figure 9).



Day 10—Share Decision Trees for "King of the Bingo Game"

Procedure: Discuss how cultural constraints leave few options for the narrator. Why is the bingo game the only apparently viable alternative for the narrator? Does this story illustrate characters acting cooperatively, altruistically or in their own self-interest? How do you play a game you're doomed to lose? Would you play at all? What would be the alternative then?

Allow students to consider the role of money and the power it brings in the lives around them. Ask them to write a comment on this story in their writer's notebook.

Day 11-12—Jump Start on Original Stories.

Procedure: Begin by reminding students that indirect characterization is most persuasive and most

authentic for the reader. Let them know that today they will have to create a complete character. Have each student choose the sex and age of a character. This may be a character they've already thought about or they may be starting from scratch. Ask students to label the dominant trait for this character. They may refer to their decision game character descriptions to see what this means. Before going on with the internal characteristics, students should then acquire three objects that this character might carry or own. The teacher will have brought in a number of usual and unusual items that student may choose from. Students must choose objects from those offered. The students should flesh out their characters by giving them a speech habit, habitual gesture and a hobby.

Homework: Write a *description* of your character that reveals all the significant details. Your description should have NO "telling." Show, don't tell.

The next day, students may begin writing their own stories. If they are stuck for a conflict or problem, they may refer to a creative writing text for story starters. Students may also borrow the opening line from another story to help them get started.

Days 13-20—Independent Practice

Assign students the task of writing a short story using the character they have already developed and a conflict of their own choosing or a the list. During this composition time, schedule individual conferences and feedback sessions for students. Stories should be assessed using a rubric including plot, character, and writing techniques.

Assessment

In their writer's notebooks, students will comment on the decisions in the selected stories for study and will construct both plot diagrams and decision trees that reflect the action in two stories--either two that we study in class or one of their own choosing and one that we study together. They will also have a complete draft of the treasure quest story that was written during the first week of the unit.

Students will create a decision tree for their own stories, either as a planning or evaluation activity.

Students will produce a short story which meets the criteria on a teacher designed rubric. They will be able to discuss the choices they and their characters made in the process of writing the story.

Student Resources

Ellison, Ralph. "King of the Bingo Game." *The Creative Writing Guide*. New York: Longman, 1998. 257-264.

A man plays bingo after a movie and wins a chance to spin the wheel for the jackpot.

"Muddy Road." Online. July 11, 2000. <http://www.interlink-bbs.com/koans/14muddyroad.html>

Two monks meet a woman in distress on a muddy road. One helps her in spite of the law against going near females. The other monk is troubled by this choice.

Suess, Dr. *Hunches in Bunches*. New York: Random House, 1982.

A young boy is attacked by a multitude of desires urging him to make up his mind. Some of the hunches turn out to be false or bad; others are just confusing. This book shows that making a decision can be difficult when many opportunities are available.

Updike, John. "A&P." *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*. Fifth Edition. R. V. Cassill, ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995. 1540-1545.

A young man quits his job because he believes the store manager has insulted three scantily clad girls.

Teacher Resources

Akerloff, George A. "Procrastination and Obedience." *AEA Papers and Proceedings*. Vol. 81 No. 2 (May 1991): 1-19.

Akerloff considers errors in decision making that result from time inconsistency, undue salience, and incremental shifts in normative behavior.

Dixit, Avinash K. and Barry J. Nalebuff. *Thinking Strategically*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1991.

Uses game theory to examine strategies used in interactive decision making.

Frank, Robert H. *Passions within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1988.

Develops the "commitment model" of behavior, arguing that our emotions have evolved to enable us to make commitments that might be hard to keep on a purely rational basis and that help us achieve long term goals.

Harvey, John. "Heuristic Judgment Theory." *Journal of Economic Issues*. Vol 32 (March 1998): 47-65.

Our collective behavior is a result of cultural forces, and rules of thumb govern many decisions we make. Harvey argues that rational choice

theory is a good theory of how "decisions should be made, but it does not reflect how decisions are made."

Schaefer, Candace and Rick Diamond. *The Creative Writing Guide*. New York: Longman, 1998.

A creative writing text with sample readings and exercises.

Stern, Jerome. *Making Shapely Fiction*. New York: Laurel Books, 1991.

A highly readable introduction to the structures and forms of fiction. Combining Literature and Economic Theory as a Tool for Teaching

Behaviorally and Emotionally Disturbed Students Better Decision Making Skills