

The Actor Process: Using Effective Decision-Making to Develop Characterization

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Introduction

One of the major responsibilities of education and educators is to help students learn to think and reason for themselves—and to make effective decisions—in school, at work and in life. As the world grows more and more complex, and students face increasingly complicated choice sets, this task becomes ever more difficult. Teenagers, typically, are impressionable, easily influenced, and have a tendency to make snap judgments and "heroic" decisions. "Jumping into the dark" and not knowing where you may land can be very enticing, however, adolescents are on the threshold of making some very important life decisions, and learning to make appropriate and effective choices could be very beneficial to them.

This unit is based on the use of tools and strategies of economic decision-making to help students learn to make better decisions. However, we are not going to look in a particularly conventional place—say an economics class—to approach the unit. This unit is intended for use in a drama class—an acting class, to be more specific. This particular acting class is in an inner-city public school in Albuquerque, New Mexico, but this unit has application across economic and cultural lines, as does the concept of decision-making itself. Acting, like economics, is about making choices. Developing a character in a play is basically a series of decisions, or choices, made by playwright, the actor, and the director. What we see as the audience is the result of that decision-making process. By looking at the choices of another (a character in a play) and trying to decipher how and why this person makes a particular choice in a particular situation, students can examine decision-making in a more "hands on" way. On stage we all have the ability to "see" the decision as it is being made. We can see much of the process that goes into that decision, and, finally, we have the ability to objectively discuss the process and the choice after it has been made and we've seen the result.

In this unit we will use the play *A Doll's House*, by Henrik Ibsen as a foundation for our work. The class will examine the decisions that are made by the characters in the play, how and why the students perceive those decisions to have been made, and what could possibly have happened had the characters made different decisions. The unit will include rehearsal and performance of scenes from the play, and, possibly, as a culminating exercise, the student actors could perform the scenes for an outside group of students, and a discussion could follow regarding the decisions that were made by the characters. The unit will take 4-5 weeks to complete.

Objectives:

- To develop student awareness of their own decision-making process
- To encourage students to use this awareness as well as tools and strategies discussed to begin to make more effective decisions
- To foster student understanding that seemingly non-related fields of study have a connection and real life application
- To develop student understanding of
- The process of character development
 - The importance of script and character analysis to this process
 - The possibility of alternative ways of playing a character

Background

Traditional Economic Theory

Economic thinking, whether we realize it or not, affects each of us in a variety of ways. Because our world is one of scarcity—we want more than we have—we continually have to make choices. Therefore, we as human beings, on a daily basis, are faced with a multitude of decisions--and economics is the study of how people choose among the alternatives available to them. (Tregarthen 2) Traditional economic theory insists that people will make rational decisions in order to better themselves or their situations. In other words, rational decisions are those that are in our own self-interest. We will search for sufficient information upon which to make a decision (i.e., examine the set of choices that we have, determine the costs and benefits involved, look carefully at our alternatives) and then make the appropriate decision.

Types of Decisions

Giesbrecht and Clayton, in their book *A Guide to Everyday Economic Thinking*, organize decisions into three basic types: heroic, threshold, and incremental (or marginal) (Giesbrecht and Clayton 1) *Heroic* decisions "... require one to make a bold, daring and largely irreversible choice, often on the basis of very little information" (Giesbrecht and Clayton, p. 2). They are "in many ways unique decisions, with profound and long-lasting outcomes. And, once we've acted, it is extremely difficult to go back on the decision" (Giesbrecht and Clayton 2). Heroic decisions can be enticing and exciting, the stuff of which movies are made, but they have very little to do with economic thinking. They are not rational. Decisions that could be grouped into this type include the decision to marry, decisions made in war on a battlefield, or the decision to interfere in an in-progress crime such as a rape or hold-up.

The second basic type of decision listed is a *threshold* decision. This is described as a much more rational approach. Businesses use this type of decision when they may be considering expansion: "The firm gathers all useful and relevant information to the situation—including the impact of the decision on the future costs and revenues of the firm. Next, the profitability of the proposal is estimated and then compared with some threshold requirement. All proposals that fall below the threshold return are rejected; all proposals that meet or exceed the threshold are accepted" (Giesbrecht and Clayton 2). Threshold decisions are popular with the business community; however, they tend to group alternative pathways into very broad categories, and they tend to be inflexible where a changing environment or situation is concerned.

The third basic type of decision listed by Giesbrecht and Clayton is *incremental* or *marginal*. This type is considered the most rational and therefore the most effective in terms of economic thinking. "As much useful information as practicable should be gathered so that it can be thoroughly and accurately analyzed. Then, the resulting decision should be as incrementally small as possible, so that, if it turns out to be bad, it can be reversed, and not too much will be lost" (Giesbrecht and Clayton 3). This type of decision-making is central to economic decision-making because at any point along the line, a different decision can be made without losing too much ground. Sequential decisions can be made which are based on what has been learned previously.

Strategies

Obviously in this complicated world, we all need strategies with which to make effective decisions. How do we make the "best" decision based upon what we know about a given situation? Rational economic thinking requires awareness of the opportunity costs of every decision. We cannot have everything, so, according to economists, there are times in our lives when we must face "trade offs" (Miller, Benjamin and North 1). For example, a person has \$10.00. He can spend it for entertainment (i.e., going out to eat with friends) or for some more essential item like gasoline for the car. He has to decide whether going out and having a good time with friends is going to be more beneficial than having enough gasoline for the car for the week. The concept of a trade-off is a basic principle of economics. And the only trade offs that matter are the incremental ones, the ones you can change (Miller, Benjamin and North, p. 6). An example of this is a common one to all of us. You have been waiting in line at a restaurant for thirty minutes (a "sunk cost" – i.e., one that has

already been incurred). What do you do – wait longer or leave? Among the things that must be considered in this equation is the future wait at another restaurant, but the "sunk" cost of having waited already should not be considered. By measuring cost against benefit, we can begin to make a decision.

The laws of supply and demand control the global market system. The higher the price of a good, the less that good will be demanded, and, conversely, the lower the price of a good, the more that good will be demanded. A good example of this is given in *The Economics of Public Issues* in a chapter concerning ticket scalping (Miller, Benjamin and North 6). Obviously tickets to any event are limited to the available space. Tickets to a Paul McCartney concert, for example, will have a particular face value, but if their worth is greater in the marketplace than this price would reflect, there will be scalpers who will buy up tickets at the lower price and offer them to those without tickets for what is called a "market clearing price." We must consider how essential we consider a product or a good to be. Are we willing to buy tickets to the next Paul McCartney concert no matter what the cost? "The more eagerly people want to buy a commodity, the more they will pay for it. And the more eagerly people want to sell a commodity, the lower the price will be that they will accept for it" (Giesbrecht and Clayton 38). Economically speaking, the decision based on this truth is made marginally and rationally.

Another economic truth is that environments and situations are constantly changing. The law of diminishing returns states "as more and more of a thing is encountered, a point is reached where each additional unit of that item gives us less positive utility (satisfaction) than the preceding item" (Giesbrecht and Clayton 9). Incrementally, we derive less and less pleasure from a slice of pizza, for example, with each additional piece that we eat. Therefore, we must learn to get the most utility from each experience. This may become more and more difficult as we become more and more experienced or sophisticated and our choice set becomes bigger and bigger: "it may be in our best interests to move from one to another (alternative) fairly often...so that we never have to settle for significantly diminished marginal returns in any one activity" (Giesbrecht and Clayton 16).

Finally, economists encourage us to look at the risk involved with making a decision. We can use statistical information and probabilities to make a better judgment, if only for the simple reason that more information is better. But, we must learn to judge the information correctly. "Many people tend to underweight or ignore fundamental background data...and overweight anecdotal information...or the most recent information received at the expense of earlier information" (Salop 158). For example, a story about how a car dealership took advantage of a friend may carry much more weight than actual statistics concerning the number of times customers were treated fairly. We must also consider the source of the data. A poll taken by a marketing company hired by Ralph Lauren to discover which button-down collar shirt men prefer will hardly be without bias. Independent research collected by *Consumer Reports* might be more worthwhile. And, we must consider how the information is "framed." Two statements expressing the exact same set of circumstances can be made in two totally different ways, and the decision based on those statements will be totally different. Kahneman and Tversky cite an example of this in their article "The Psychology of Preferences" (Kahneman and Tversky 160). Scenario #1: You are on your way to the theatre with a pair of tickets for which you paid \$40. Upon arrival you discover you have lost the tickets. Would you pay another \$40 to replace them? Scenario #2: You are on your way to the same play, but you haven't bought the tickets yet. Upon arrival, you discover that you have lost \$40. Would you still buy the tickets? Objectively, the two situations are exactly the same, however, a person's reaction to the first scenario will be different from his/her reaction to the second one.

Real-World Behavior

Irrationality and Emotions

Behavioral economists believe that there are human reasons why we sometimes don't seem to do the perfectly rational thing. Emotion often plays a key role in our decision-making process. In his book

Passions Within Reason, Robert Frank seeks to show how material self-interest -- rational behavior -- in other words, must take second place to noble human tendencies where emotion is the order of the day. (Frank, p. ix) People frequently behave, particularly in the throes of a "heroic" decision, with full knowledge that their actions are irrational. These people know that they would be better off not to have made such decisions, but they make them anyway. About this, Frank says, "We face important problems that simply cannot be solved by rational action. The common feature of these problems is that to solve them we must commit ourselves to behave in ways that may later prove contrary to our interests." (Frank, ix).

The self-interest model, espoused by many strategists and scientists assumes that people act purely for themselves and what will make their own situations better—in other words, selfishly. These people are said to have preferences, but emotions play no part. Frank's "commitment model," by contrast, emphasizes the role of emotions in behavior. In fact, Frank also states that someone who always pursues self-interest is doomed to fail. Irrational behavior motivated by emotion is not necessarily outside the scope of someone who is guided by his own self-interests (Frank, ix). Many emotional factors may affect the decisions that people make—envy, conscience, honesty—and many people may adopt a less self-interested behavior when they see that it may bring them advantages in other areas. When we begin to examine what people care about and why, we begin to have a better understanding of why they make the decisions that they do.

Many people who see themselves as rational will, with fair frequency make decisions driven by emotion or will make seemingly irrational decisions which will be a result of interactions with the world around them. Consider purely altruistic behavior, for example. Why do people give anonymously to charities? What is rational about giving your money away without acknowledgement? Consider revenge. More often than not, revenge garners no material gain and is often costly to accomplish. A person takes revenge because anger or a sense of injustice drives him to that point. And, finally, consider those who make cooperative decisions to limit personal gain. Is it rational to give up what you know you could have for the betterment of a whole group?

Knowing that emotion drives many decisions, how do we learn to make those decisions in a more effective manner? It helps to know and understand three questions that form the basis for economic decision making:

1) *Who is the decision maker?* Who is responsible for this decision and what do they bring with them to the decision-making table? What is their background? Culture? Education? Environment? Intellectual level?

2) *What is their goal?* What does this person or group want from this decision? Material gain? Emotional satisfaction? Safety? Time?

3) *What is getting in their way?* What is the conflict that they are facing? What are the issues being raised? What are the "opportunity costs"? The "trade-offs"? What, in other words, is being given up to get something else?

Signaling

Knowing how to decipher "signals" benefits us in our efforts to make more effective decisions regarding interactions with others. Signaling is an interaction tool, a way of indicating something significant about us and how we want to be perceived. For example, if someone spends a great deal of money to drive a flashy sports car, a message is certainly being conveyed. According to Frank there are three properties of signals: "(1) **the costly to fake principle** – a signal that is difficult if not impossible to pretend to have (i.e., a Harvard Law Degree); (2) **the derivation principle**—applies

only to passive signals, particularly those achieved by natural selection, not those achieved by conscious choices; and (3) **the full-disclosure principle**—states that if some individuals stand to benefit by revealing a favorable value of some trait, others will be forced to disclose their less favorable values" (Frank 99). Fremling and Posner in their paper, "Market Signaling of Personal Characteristics" say that signaling is a self-interested behavior (Fremling and Posner 1). For example, by paying a higher price for an item rather than seeking out a lower price, perhaps we are signaling that we have lots of money and the time saved is more important to us than the money saved. Signaling is a valuable tool in the effort to understand why individuals make a particular decision.

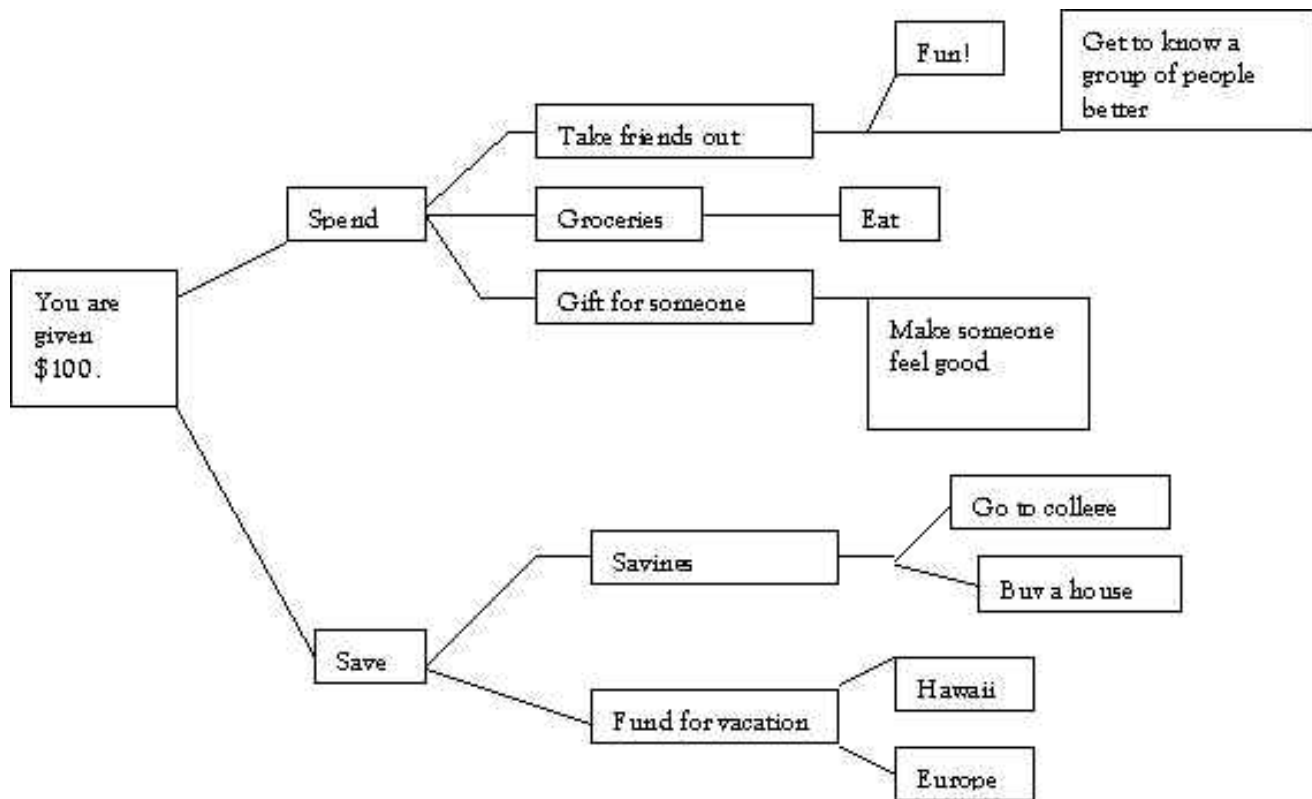
Signals affect decision-making in two ways—through messages we decide to send others, and messages we receive from others. Many of the signals that we send are conscious decisions on our part to send a specific message. The clothes that we choose to wear can create a firm impression of what we are like personally—the woman who chooses to wear dresses as compared to the woman who chooses to wear jeans or shorts perhaps wants to be seen as being more feminine. We decide how we want others to perceive us. Likewise, we make decisions in our interactions with others based on how we perceive them. Store clerks may decide to wait on the woman with the diamonds and gold jewelry before they wait on the teenagers wearing baggy clothes. Other signals that may affect perception include gesture, body language, choice of words or phrasing when speaking, and other such behavioral signs.

Game Theory -- Interaction and Cooperation

Because we exist in a society, one person's decision, of necessity, affects others and, conversely, others decisions affect him or her. It doesn't necessarily follow that each person pursuing his or her own best interests results in the best outcome for all. "Game theory provides a natural way to think about social interactions of individuals. Every person has his own aims and strategies; we bring them together and examine the equilibrium of the game in which these strategies interact"(Dixit and Nalebuff 223). Sometimes a decision results in one person's or one group's dominance over another, and sometimes an "equilibrium" is reached. Equilibrium simply means that "each person's action is the best response to that of the other. Given what the other is doing, neither wants to change his own move" (Dixit and Nalebuff, p. 76). So, it becomes evident then that our strategy here is to learn to try to anticipate or predict what the action of another is going to be and adjust our decision accordingly. And, we should act in a way that provides an incentive for the other people to behave in ways that are consistent or compatible with our own goals (i.e., bribes, rewards).

According to Dixit and Nalebuff in *Thinking Strategically*, there are two kinds of strategic interaction--*sequential* and *simultaneous* (Dixit and Nalebuff 33). It is beneficial when making a decision to determine the kind of interaction with which you are dealing. In sequential interactions, people make alternating moves. Each person must learn to look ahead and anticipate what the next move of the other person will be, or in Dixit and Nalebuff's "Rule #1" for strategic thinking, "Look ahead and reason back" (Dixit and Nalebuff 34). "Decision trees" or visual charts of decisions made can be particularly helpful here.

(Figure #1)



Diagrams of this type show what decision was made at each junction or "node" and the outcome to which that decision could eventually lead. We can use the information to more effectively predict what someone might do in the future. We can use "backward induction" to figure out what the best possible decision, or series of decisions might be. Backward induction essentially says to choose the best outcome at the last (right-most) node. What is the best second-to-last decision that must be made to get to the correct outcome? The third-to-last? Obviously, life is quite complicated and decisions can be affected by many other factors along the way. The assumption here is that the decision-making entity is making a rational decision at each node.

In simultaneous interactions one must consider the moves of all others involved at the same time. Each person must try to put him or herself in the place of everyone involved and try to figure out the outcome. To be successful, one must figure out the best moves for *both* sides. In simultaneous decision-making there are two ideas to understand, according to Dixit and Nalebuff: 1) Dominant strategies--one strategy will leave you better-off in some circumstances and not worse in any, and 2) Equilibrium—given what the other person is doing, neither wants to change what he is doing. Many simultaneous situations do not have a dominant strategy or an equilibrium. For example, in playing the old children's game "rock-paper-scissors," playing "rock" leaves you better off only if your partner plays "scissors." You are worse off if he plays paper.

Three more rules apply when thinking about a strategically sound decision:

- If you have a dominant strategy, use it;
- Eliminate any dominated strategies from consideration;
- Having exhausted any expectation of dominant strategy, look for the equilibrium"(Dixit and Nalebuff 56-76).

Acting and Decision-Making

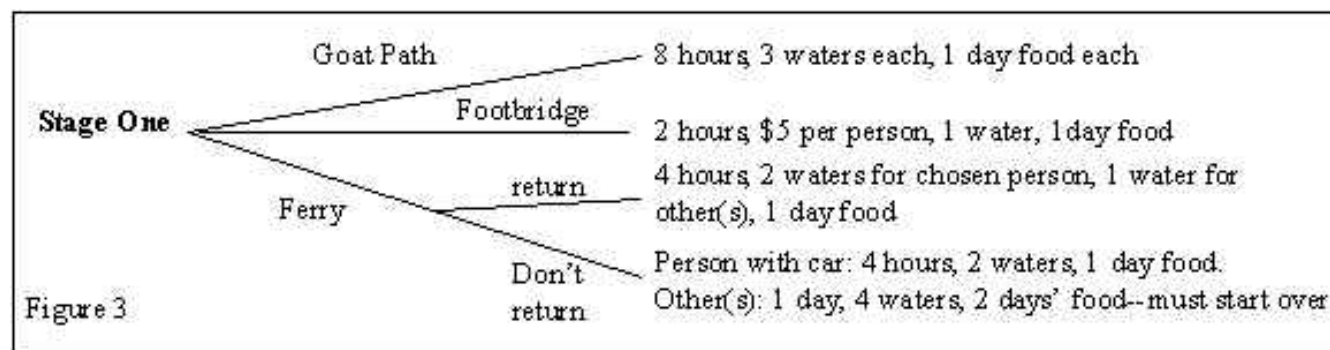
The art of acting is about making choices—or decisions—just as is the science of economics. What an audience sees onstage is a series of decisions that the actor has made to portray a character as believably as possible. If the actor has really done his or her work, even the most minute gesture or

facial expression has been examined and chosen carefully. These choices must be made if for no other reason than they are on stage in front of an audience, and, therefore, are amplified. Chosen thoughtfully, physical, vocal, mental, and emotional expressions greatly heighten the believability of the character in the play.

"The playwright has provided activities that are natural or 'organic' extensions of the character's inner action. It is your job, therefore, to work back from the given externals communicated by the text, through an understanding of your character's decisions and choices, all the way back to the original stimuli that motivated the action" (Benedetti, p. 197). Clearly, the most important jumping off point is the play itself. To begin to create any character you must understand the character you are creating. Understanding the character includes, first of all, identifying all of the decisions that the character makes during the course of the play. This is called a "through line of action." From the beginning to the end of the play we see how our character develops through the decisions that he or she makes. Once the decisions have been identified, one must explore the decisions and try to discover why a character behaves the way he or she does. A key to understanding these decisions comes in the form of script analysis. An actor must learn to take into consideration a number of facets including time period of the play, background of the author, character relationships, and perceived intention of the author.

When the actor has examined the entire script, it then becomes useful to create a separate character analysis. What does the character say about him/herself? And what "signals" does he/she send? What can we infer from his or her dress, physical description, education, values, and intelligence level? What do the other characters say about him/her? What factual information can be gleaned from what is stated clearly by the playwright? Additionally, though, what information can we "assume" from the script analysis. This character has a background—a family, perhaps, or a past that may not appear as a part of the actual script, but can be imagined from what we do know. Once this "background" has been created, both factual and imagined, an actor can begin discovery work on the various decisions that the character makes.

Robert Benedetti defines "process of action" as, "a purposefully focused energy arising in response to a stimulus, which, through a process of choice, results in directed activity toward an objective, creating an event" (Benedetti 198). Perhaps the following chart would help depict how a choice resulting in an action occurs. It can be likened to the decision tree used in sequential decision-making with the stimulus representing the "payoffs" that game theorists speak of in economics.



(Figure #2)

As an actor can readily realize, each action requires a stimulus (a thought, an idea, or an action), interest in reacting to the stimulus, a decision making process, finally resulting in an action. We are assuming here that the decision "not to act" is also an action. Each time a character makes a choice, he is presented with various alternatives, just as we all are in everyday life. The actor must identify those alternatives for himself, make the choice and live with the consequential action.

The importance of "process" in this decision-making cannot be stressed enough. Benedetti says,

"You must relive the character's process of choice each time you perform an action. Too often, actors...will rush pell mell through the whole process of decision-making and leap directly to the resultant activity" (Benedetti 204). This process of decision-making is what actors do during the course of any rehearsal. The process is what is referred to as character development.

***A Doll's House* - The ultimate economic decision**

In 1878–79 Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen wrote a play based on the true-life story of a friend of his. In 1872 his friend, Laura Petersen married, and her husband subsequently contracted tuberculosis. His doctors suggested that he and Laura go to a warmer climate, but they were poor, and Victor became hysterical at the mention of money. Laura arranged a loan without telling her husband. A friend put up the security and Laura and Victor were off to Italy where Victor made a complete recovery.

Two years later, however, repayment of the loan was demanded. Laura did not have the money herself, dared not tell her husband and, worse, the friend who had provided the security had fallen on hard times. Laura attempted to pay off the loan by forging a check. The forgery was discovered, the bank refused payment, and Laura was forced to tell her husband the whole ugly truth.

Despite the fact that Laura had done what she had purely to save her husband's life, Victor treated Laura like a criminal. He claimed that she was an unfit wife and mother, and when she suffered a nervous breakdown, he had her committed and demanded a separation so that the children could be removed from Laura's care. She was discharged after a month, and managed to persuade Victor to take her back for the children's sake, which he did, but grudgingly.

In September 1878, only a couple of months after hearing about Laura, Ibsen began work on *A Doll's House*.

So many important and exciting choices have to be made in the playing of this piece, particularly by Nora (Laura's alter-ego) and her husband Torvald (Victor). However, the conflict between Nora and Torvald is certainly not the only source of decision-making study in the play. The characters of Kristine Linde (Nora's friend), Nils Krogstad (the man to whom Nora owes money), and Dr. Rank (a family friend of the Helmers) also make some very interesting decisions. It is an excellent vehicle with which to study decision-making in the actor's world.

Because *A Doll's House* is set in the 1890's, it has always been perceived as the story of a woman's attempt to free herself from an oppressive, very structured, patriarchal society. Women in that time period were considered to be ineffectual in any world outside the home. Throughout the majority of the play, Nora and Torvald have the traditional relationship. She is his "squirrel", his "skylark", his "little bird" chirping about the days' events. Nora and Torvald are the "perfect" couple for the time period—that is until Nora's "secret" is revealed. The Nora of the play, much like Ibsen's friend, Laura, decides to borrow money to save Torvald's life. In order to borrow the money, she has to forge her father's signature as a guarantee for the loan. She can't tell Torvald what she's done because she doesn't want to appear to be taking care of him—a situation completely inconceivable in society of that time period. Still, this decision is the one thing in Nora's life of which she is ultimately proud. This life-altering decision is made prior to the beginning of the play.

The play itself concerns Nora's struggle to come to terms with her relationship with Torvald. A visit from Kristine reveals a number of decisions made by both women prior to the beginning of the play and sets in motion much of the action that takes place afterward. A subsequent visit from Nils Krogstad reveals the entirety of Nora's plight and creates in her the anxiety that forces many of the choices that she then makes. The story line follows a series of other decisions that each of the characters make to achieve their own goals—Kristine's effort to support herself, Krogstad's effort to keep his job at the bank, Nora's effort to save her marriage and ultimately herself, and Torvald's effort to save the status quo. Finally, Nora comes to a point in the play where she is willing to give

her own life to spare Torvald and her family the embarrassment and ruination of society knowing what she has done. It is at this point that Nora discovers that Torvald is not prepared to save her life as she did his. He is not willing to risk sacrificing his reputation. He never once acknowledges her sacrifice and bravery in doing what she has done for him. He accuses her of treachery and says she is an unfit mother. His solution is to sweep it all under the rug, admonish Nora appropriately, and pretend nothing has ever happened. Nora is devastated to learn that he is not the man she thought he was.

In the final minutes of the play, Nora makes an attempt to talk to Torvald, to explain her feelings, to be honest with him, and to get him to understand why she did what she did. Slowly she realizes that he won't, or perhaps more correctly, doesn't know how to listen to her. Based on their past relationship, her input just isn't important. She feels at the end that she has only two choices: Accept that the relationship is over and leave, or stay in a marriage where there is no understanding or communication and be miserable forever. For her sake, and the sake of her children, she chooses to leave. She faces the truth, in her perception, that this relationship cannot be saved—try though she might. She is willing to face the alternative, that being alone is better than not being allowed to be who you are. To make this decision at all would be difficult, but to make it at this particular time in history would have been traumatic.

The play is traditionally thought to be one of the first "feminist" rallying calls—a woman in search of her identity. It certainly in many ways is this, but in the words of Janet McTeer who recently played Nora on Broadway, " (It is)...in fact a *humanist* play...*A Doll's House* is a portrait of a marriage...it is very much the story of two people together"(McTeer, p. viii). It is about how overwhelmingly difficult it is to make these psychological and emotional decisions that affect the very lives of two people.

Implementation

Overview

This unit seeks to allow students to do an in-depth examination of the decision-making process through the study of acting. The assumption will be made here that the students in this particular class already have a relatively good foundation in character building. After an introduction to some basic concepts of economic decision-making, the students will read *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. The reading will be done aloud in class, possibly as a staged reading with actors on their feet, as this is an acting class. Discussions will take place regarding the decisions made by various characters as the reading progresses. Through these discussions students will try to decipher whether the decisions made by the characters were the best, most effective decisions the characters could have made. Discussion will also include ideas about what might have happened if a particular character had made a different choice. Each student in his or her acting journal will record personal reactions to both reading and discussion.

Once the reading is completed, students will choose partners and will be assigned a scene from the play to prepare for performance. The rehearsal process should take approximately three weeks. Students will prepare for an in-progress performance after one week of rehearsal. During this in-progress time, students will be asked to improvise alternate endings based on some of the different choices we had discussed previously for decisions that the characters make.

Other decision-making facets of this unit will include common decisions that actors must make as to how to play a character including: physicalization, vocalization, gesture, movement, and mannerisms. Though these aspects of character development will not be the focus of the unit, they will be included as they sometimes may affect how the actor portrays a particular decision that a character has made.

This unit will seek to address several of the content standards for the state of New Mexico. Following are the content standards for theatre arts:

- 1) Learn and develop the essential skills and technical demands unique to theatre
- 2) Use theatre to express ideas
- 3) Integrate understanding of visual and performing art by seeking connections and parallels among art disciplines as well as all other content areas
- 4) Demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of the creative process
- 5) Observe, discuss, analyze, and make critical judgments about artistic works
- 6) Show increased awareness of diverse peoples and cultures through visual and performing art
- 7) Demonstrate knowledge about how technology and invention have historically influenced artists and offered new possibilities for expression
- 8) Contribute to communities by sharing expertise in theatre by participating in the activities of cultural institutions (New Mexico State Standards)

Through the study of the play *A Doll's House*, the discussion and exploration of economic decision-making, and the performances of scenes from the play, many of these standards will be addressed. Through the creation of the characters in the scenes, we will address aspects of both content standards 1 and 4—understanding the creative process and learning and developing the skills that are essential to theatre. Through the use of economic strategies for decision-making we will show how there is a connection between theatre and economics, thereby addressing content standard 3. By carefully studying the decisions made by both playwright and character in *A Doll's House* we will address standard 5. Of necessity, in the examination of the play, we will need to focus some attention on the time period during which it takes place. Many of the decisions that are made have their foundation in the society of the time. Therefore, we will be showing an awareness of a particular people during a particular time period, Content Standard #6.

Sample Lessons and Activities

Lesson one

This unit will begin by doing an experiment to introduce the idea of "economic" decision-making. A variety of experiments could be used; however, for our purposes, I have chosen an experiment used by James Andreoni and Lise Vesterlund in their paper, "Which is the Fair Sex? Gender Differences in Altruism" (See Appendix A.).

Once the experiment has been completed and a discussion regarding the outcomes has taken place, a more formal introduction to some of the basic concepts of economic decision-making will take place. Specifically, the focus will be on the concepts of rational and irrational behavior, opportunity costs, trade offs, signaling, and sequential and simultaneous decision-making. In the week or so that this material should take to examine activities will include:

- Additional experiments and/or acting games and exercises will be used to demonstrate each of the concepts above
- Discussions of students' experiences with certain types of decision-making strategies resulting from these games
- Readings from various materials (both acting and economics related) stimulating or supplementing daily discussions

Lesson Two

The second week will begin with an oral reading of *A Doll's House*. An introduction to the author, the time period and the society will be made. One effective way to make such an introduction is through a video or slide presentation on Henrik Ibsen and the late 19th century. Once the initial media presentation has been made, a discussion will follow to explore aspects of the era and the society, which are particular to *A Doll's House*. For example, the roles of the male and female in the family unit will be explored, as well as the female's place in society. We will discuss what would be considered socially inappropriate behavior for each sex.

Once the introduction is made, and the reading will begin. A brief description of the remainder of the project here would be helpful. Students should be looking at the play for character traits and through line as the reading is being done. Because this is an acting class, the reading of this work should be done orally, perhaps even as a loose version of a "staged reading" with the students on their feet. This makes the reading of any oral material much more interesting and students tend to stay connected to material better. Discussions and explanations could happen before and after each scene to either set up what is about to happen, or to explore what has just happened and why. During these discussions many of the decisions that the characters make can be discovered and explored. For example, why does Nora decide to tell Kristine what she has done for Torvald? This staged reading of the play should take approximately a week to complete.

Lesson Three

The third week of this unit will begin with assigning roles and scenes to various student pairs. The students will be allowed to choose partners with which to work and will be given a scene based on the make up of the pair. There are numerous scenes in this play from which to choose, but obviously not enough for all pairs to do a different scene, so we will choose to use only four scenes from the play. Those scenes will include:

- Nora/Kristine (Act I) —Nora explains to Kristine what she has done for Torvald.
- Nora/Krogstad (Act I) —Krogstad comes to see Nora regarding his job at the bank. He promises blackmail if she doesn't help him.
- Nora/Torvald (Act II)—Nora begs Torvald to keep Krogstad on at the bank.
- Nora/Torvald (Act III)—Nora tells Torvald that she is leaving.

At least two pairs will be working on the same scene. This will be beneficial in the sense that the students will be able to easily see how a scene can effectively change in the playing. This method will also provide the actors with others who are playing the same roles in the same scene someone with which to discuss various actor choices.

Once partners are chosen and scenes are assigned, work can begin on character development. A reading of the scene between the two partners should take place immediately. They can then discuss initial ideas about the characters and the playing of the scene. This can happen on the first day of this first week of the rehearsal period. A written character analysis will then be assigned to be completed as homework. This should be placed in their actor journal so that they can look back at it from time to time and change it if necessary. This analysis can always serve as a guide for discovering why a character makes the choices he/she does. (For a sample outline of the written character analysis, please see Appendix B).

The development of the characters in these scenes will take place during the rehearsal period over the next three weeks. Various activities and exercises will be employed to help the students explore all aspects of character including: intention, choice, vocal and physical attributes, emotion, and relationship.

Lesson Four

During the course of the three-week rehearsal period it is often helpful to schedule an "in-progress" performance. This performance is fairly informal (no costumes, few props or set pieces), but actors should have their lines memorized and should have worked out what the setting is and their movement patterns (blocking). At this time the class will watch the other scenes and do fairly in-depth discussion regarding the decision-making process of both actor and character. Following the performances and some discussion of each scene, a suggested change in choice for a particular character could be made, and the actors could be asked to perform the scene again using the alternate choice. This improvisation would serve to show the students what the effect of making a different decision would have made in the final outcome. Then a discussion could follow regarding which decision would be better.

As an example, suppose two students are performing the scene at the end in which Nora finally decides to leave Torvald. Discussion would follow the performance and would include the reasoning behind that final decision. Then, perhaps the suggestion would be made that Nora decide at the last minute not to leave because she simply can't leave her children. The students would play the scene as written up to the point that she makes that final choice and then the remainder of the dialogue would have to be improvised. Following that performance, discussion would follow to explore what changes happened in the thought processes of the actors and how the beginning of the scene would have to change to accommodate the change in the final outcome. This could be a very interesting device to examine the validity and reasoning behind certain choices. This device could be used with each of the scenes, or you might choose to use it with only a couple of scenes so as to give the students the idea of "what would happen if...".

Lesson Five

The last portion of this unit will be the polished, final performances of the scenes. Students should be prepared to perform the scenes complete with costumes, props and set pieces. All aspects of characterization should have been addressed, and all decisions should have been explored. What the audience should see at this point will be much like what would be presented in a public performance of the play. These performances will be videotaped and the tape use as a final assessment tool. As each scene is viewed, the others will fill out a "critique" sheet (see Appendix) as a guide to final evaluation of the scenes.

It is at this point that an outside audience might be beneficial or enjoyable. If other classes are invited to watch the scenes, that viewing might be appropriate stimulus for discussion within these groups regarding decisions made by the characters. This would be especially beneficial if the classes in attendance were studying the play as literature concurrent with the scene performances or if the classes were studying economic decision-making.

Documentation

Annotated Teacher Bibliography

Abel, Lisa, ed. *Theatre-- Art in Action*. Chicago: National Textbook Company, 1999.

One of the best theatre production texts on the market. It is very complete and includes a Teacher Resource Book and a Teacher Manual.

Akerlof, George A. "Procrastination and Obedience." *AEA Papers and Proceedings* 81 (1991): 1-17.

Article with good information concerning why people procrastinate and how procrastination will affect future decisions and behavior.

Andreoni, James and Lise Vesterlund, "Which is the Fair Sex? Gender Differences in Altruism." forthcoming *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2001.

The authors devise and report the results of an experimental test of willingness to share, comparing the behavior of males with that of females

Benedetti, Robert L. *The Actor at Work*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1981.

Excellent acting text covering a multitude of areas from relaxation, to script analysis, to character development. It also has numerous exercises that are very effective.

Dixit, Avinash K., and Barry J. Nalebuff. *Thinking Strategically: The Competitive Edge in Business, Politics, and Everyday Life*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991.

Book based on the science of strategic thinking. Many examples and illustrations from various situations regarding how to best "out do" an adversary.

Frank, Robert H. *Passions Within Reason*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1988.

Exploration of the "self-interest model" vs. the "commitment model" and how emotions and irrational behavior often affect decision-making.

Fremling and Posner, "Market Signaling of Personal Characteristics".

Giesbrecht, Martin Gerhard and Gary E. Clayton. *A Guide to Everyday Economic Thinking*. Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill, 1997.

A very good definition of "economic thinking".

Hagen, Uta. *Respect for Acting*. New York: Macmillan, 1973.

---. *A Challenge for the Actor*. New York: Macmillan, 1991.

Both of these books are used as texts for many acting classes of various levels. They discuss, at length, actor goals, actor technique, and actor relationship to the physical and psychological senses. And both have useful exercises for use in a more advanced classroom.

Hine, Thomas. "The Rise and Decline of the American Teenager." *American Heritage* September, 1999: 71-82.

Exploration of teenage behavior and the adolescent's place in society.

Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. Frank McGuinness, adaptor. Garden City, New York: Stage and Screen, 1997.

Play that will form the basis of this curriculum unit. Written by Ibsen in 1897.

Kahneman, Daniel and Amos Tversky. "The Psychology of Preferences." *Scientific American*. January, 1982: 160-172.

A discussion of risk averse and risk seeking behavior and how some people do not act in a particularly objective way.

Krause, Kate Lecture Notes and Experiments 2000.

Excellent information and explanations of basic economics--not available, but well worth taking a class.

Miller, Roger LeRoy, Daniel K. Benjamin and Douglass C. North. *The Economics of Public Issues*. 11th ed. Reading, Massachusetts:

Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers, Inc., 1999.

Economic principles as they apply to various social issues. Very accessible. Would be an excellent source for high school or perhaps even middle school students.

Salop, Steven C. "Evaluating Uncertain Evidence with Sir Thomas Bayes: A Note for Teachers." *Economic Perspectives* 1 (1987): 155-160.

Discussion of how even an eyewitness can be biased and how we weigh evidence.

Shurtleff, Michael. *Audition: Everything an Actor Needs to Know to Get the Part*. New York: Walker and Company, 1978.

Excellent source for learning how to make choices as an actor in an audition.

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theatre*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963.

The foundation of theatrical improvisation. Many, many exercises used to develop a multitude of actor skills. Particularly good for making choices spontaneously.

Stanislavski, Constantin. *An Actor Prepares*. Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1936.

---. *Building a Character*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1949.

Stanislavski is the "father" of modern acting. Almost every actor living uses some method or other based upon his theories. These books have very little in the way of exercises that can be used in a daily class; however, they include a very interesting discussion of how he conducted his own classes.

Tanner, Fran Averett. *Basic Drama Projects*. Caldwell, Idaho: Clark Publishing Company, 1987.

An invaluable variety of lessons and projects in all aspects of theatre.

Tregarthen, Timothy. *Microeconomics*. New York: Worth Publishers, 1996.

An undergraduate economics text. Very useful for a basic understanding of principles and terminology.

Student Readings

Benedetti, Robert L. *The Actor at Work*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1981.

Selected readings.

Ibsen, Henrik. *A Doll's House*. Frank McGuiness, adaptor. Garden City, New York: Stage and Screen, 1997.

Appendix A:

Experiment for Lesson One (Script)

Instructions

This is an experiment about decision-making. You will be "paid" for participating, and the amount of money you will earn depends on the decisions that you and the other participants make. If you make good decisions you stand to earn a considerable amount of money.

The entire experiment should be complete within an hour. At the end of the experiment you will be paid privately and in cash for your decisions. A research foundation has provided the funds for this experiment.

You will never be asked to reveal your identity to anyone during the course of the experiment. Your name will never be recorded by anyone. Neither the experimenters nor the other subjects will be able to link you to any of your decisions.

In order to keep your decisions private, please do not reveal your choices to any other participant.

At the top of this page is a number on a yellow piece of paper. This is your "Claim Check". Each participant has a different number. You may want to verify that the number on your Claim Check is the same as the number on the top of page 4.

You will present your Claim Check to an assistant at the end of the experiment to receive

your cash payment.

Please remove your claim check now and put it in a safe place.

This Experiment

In this experiment you are asked to make a series of choices about how to divide a set of tokens between yourself and one other subject in the room. You and the other subject will be paired randomly and you will not be told each other's identity.

As you divide the tokens, you and the other subject will each earn points. Every point that subjects earn will be worth 10 cents. For example, if you earn 58 points you will make \$5.80 in the experiment.

Each choice you make is similar to the following:

Example: Divide 50 tokens: Hold _____ @ 1 point each, and pass _____ @ 2 points each.

In this choice you must divide 50 tokens. You can keep all the tokens, keep some and pass some, or pass all the tokens. In this example, you will receive 1 point for every token you hold, and the other player will receive 2 points for every token you pass. For example, if you hold 50 and pass 0 tokens, you will receive 50 points, or \$5.00, and the other player will receive no points and \$0. If you hold 0 tokens and pass 50, you will receive \$0 and the other player will receive 100 points, or \$10. However, you could choose any number between 0 and 50 to hold. For instance, you could choose to hold 29 tokens and pass 21. In this case you would earn 29 points, or \$2.90 and the other subject would receive 42 points or \$4.20.

Important Note: In all cases you can choose any number to hold and any number to pass, but the number of tokens you hold plus the number of tokens you pass must equal the total number of tokens to divide.

Please feel free to use your calculator, or one provided by the experimenter, to calculate points and to assure that all of the tokens have been allocated.

Earning Money in This Experiment

You will be asked to make eight allocation decisions like the examples we just discussed. We will calculate your payments as follows:

After all your decision forms have been collected, we will shuffle the forms and randomly pair your form with that of another subject in this experiment. Using a table of random numbers, we will select one of your decisions to carry out. You will then get the points you allocated in the "hold" portion of your decision, and the other subject will get the points you allocated on the "pass" portion of your decision. You will then be paired again with a different subject in the experiment. This time we will randomly choose one of the other subject's eight decisions to carry out. The other subject will get the points in the "hold" portion of the decision, and you will get the points in the "pass" portion.

We will then total the points from these two pairings and determine your monetary earnings. These earnings will be placed in your earnings envelope. The monitor chosen at the beginning of the experiment will verify that these procedures are followed.

After all the calculations have been made, another experimenter who was not involved in the experiment until this time will ask you to bring your claim check and will hand you your earnings envelope. This will again help to guarantee your privacy.

Following are the eight choices we would like you to make. Please fill out the form, taking the time you need to be accurate. When all subjects are done we will collect the forms. Thank you very much and good luck!

Decision Sheet

Please fill in all the blanks below. Make sure the number of tokens listed under "Hold" plus the number listed under "Pass" equals the total number of tokens available. Remember, all points are worth \$0.10 to all subjects.

1. Divide 40 tokens: Hold _____ @3 points each, and Pass _____ @1 point each.
2. Divide 40 tokens: Hold _____ @1 point each and Pass_____ @ 3 points each.
3. Divide 60 tokens: Hold _____ @2 points each and Pass_____ @ 1 point each.
4. Divide 60 tokens: Hold _____ @1 point each, and Pass_____ @ 2 points each. 5. Divide 75 tokens: Hold _____ @ 2 points each and Pass_____ @ 1 point each.
6. Divide 75 tokens: Hold _____ @ 1 point each and Pass_____ @ 2 points each.
7. Divide 60 tokens: Hold _____ @ 1 point each and Pass_____ @ 1 point each.
8. Divide 100 tokens: Hold _____ @ 1 point each and Pass_____ @ 1 point each.

Appendix B:

Character Analysis Worksheet (Abel, p.20, Teacher Resource Book)

- Background
 - What kind of family did I come from??
 - How did I interact with my family?
 - Was it a well-adjusted home life or were there many conflicts?
 - Of what social status and how much wealth did my family have?
 - How have health issues influenced my life?
 - How intelligent am I, and how much education do I have?
 - What do I do for a living?
 - How old am I?
 - What are my religious or spiritual beliefs?
 - What kind of clothes do I prefer?
 - Am I an emotionally expressive person? In what ways do I express my emotions?
 - How would I describe myself--temperamental? Moody? Explosive? Calm? Passive? Quiet?
 - What is my sense of humor like?

- What is my best trait? My worst trait?
- What is my relationship to other characters in the play? How do I treat them?
- Status Quo
- Where am I today?
- What am I doing?
- Who is with me?
- What do I want to do?
- Who or what is preventing me from doing it?
- What am I going to do about it? How?
- What do I stand to gain or lose?

Appendix C:

Performance Critique Rubric

(Figure #3)

Project Criteria	Excellent	Proficient	Competent	Adequate	Unsatisfactory
Scene Analysis	Meets criteria for proficient and shows evident appreciation of theme, mood and style of entire play	Meets criteria for Competent and demonstrates understanding of individual beats and overall pacing	Shows understanding of dramatic structure of scene, including building to climax	Shows incomplete understanding of dramatic structure; lacks sense of climax	Lacks understanding of dramatic structure; has no climactic build
Character Development	Meets criteria for Proficient and shows understanding of subtext and of character growth and change.	Meets criteria for competent and demonstrates course of action and strategies for overcoming obstacles.	Demonstrates understanding of character, including choices, objectives and relationships to other characters. Communicates character's emotions.	Demonstrates limited understanding of character choices and relationships to other characters. Character's emotions are unclear.	Demonstrates little or no understanding of character choices or relationships. Emotions are not communicated.

Movement	Meets criteria for proficient and uses movement to show subtext and shifting relationships.	Meets criteria for Competent and motivates all moves and business. Has clearly thought through choices for expressing character through movement.	Expresses basic actions and conflicts of scene	Performs mere business, with limited understanding of basic actions and conflicts.	Moves in unmotivated ways, unresponsive to actions or conflicts.
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