

Options Explosion

A routine for creative decision making.

1. List the obvious options. There would not be a decision unless there were at least two or three obvious options.
2. Now brainstorm all sorts of different options to find the “hidden” options. Often there are hidden options that are the real best choices. Be imaginative! Piggyback on ideas already up, combine ideas to get new ones, look for ideas of a very different kind, imagine you are in different roles and suggest ideas from the perspective of those roles, etc.
3. Ask: What have we learned about the situation from finding these options? This is a way of understanding the situation better.

You may want to go on to a routine for comparing and choosing among options.

PURPOSE

What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?

This routine fosters creative thinking. It helps explore “hidden” options in a decision making situation. Often people don’t make good decisions because they miss the hidden options. It is also relevant to understanding. It helps in building an understanding of decision-making situations even when you are not the real decision maker.

APPLICATION

When and where can I use it?

Students can use it for personal decision making or you and students can use it for classroom decision making. Also, you can use it with students as a way of exploring and understanding important decisions in the news or history or literature or science policy or medical policy, etc. You can ask students to make the decision personal by role playing, imagining that they were in the situation.

LAUNCH

What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

Emphasize that maybe there are good hidden options, maybe not – we have to find out by looking. Put the ideas on the blackboard or have students write them on Post-its and stick them up. Use an explosionlike diagram with radiating lines instead of a list if you want to emphasize the spirit, but a list is okay too. Remember, crazy ideas are okay – they are just part of the mix and they may lead to something else by piggybacking. In many classroom situations the point is to use creative thinking to understand the situation better, as in step 3. You don’t need a final decision. You can decide whether it’s a good idea to go on to another routine for choosing among the options. Or you can just take a quick vote on some of the likely options. If you want, you can do this before step 3, to give students a little more to discuss in step 3.

This thinking routine was developed as part of the Visible Thinking project at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Explore the full PZ Thinking Routine Toolbox at pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines.