

Tug of War

A routine for exploring the complexity of fairness dilemmas.

1. Present a fairness dilemma.
2. Identify the factors that “pull” at each side of the dilemma. These are the two sides of the tug of war.
3. Ask students to think of “tugs”, or reasons why they support a certain side of the dilemma. Ask them to try to think of reasons on the other side of the dilemma as well.
4. Generate “what if?” questions to explore the topic further.

Purpose: What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?

This routine builds on children’s familiarity with the game of tug of war to help them understand the complex forces that “tug” at either side of a fairness dilemma. It encourages students to reason carefully about the “pull” of various factors that are relevant to a dilemma of fairness. It also helps them appreciate the deeper complexity of fairness situations that can appear black and white on the surface.

Application: When and where can I use it?

This routine can be used in any situation where the fairness dilemma seems to have two obvious and contrasting ways of being resolved. Dilemmas can come from school subjects or everyday life: testing of medicine on animals, adding people to a game once it has started, censoring a book in a library, and so on.

Launch: What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

The routine works well as a whole class activity. Present the dilemma to the class. Draw or place a rope with the two ends representing the opposing sides of the dilemma and ask students to think about what side of the dilemma they would be on and why. Students can write their justifications on post-it notes. Encourage students to think of other reasons or “tugs” for both sides of the dilemma, and then have students add their post-it notes to the rope. Stand back and ask students to generate “What if’s:” questions, issues, factors or concerns that might need to be explored further to resolve the issue. Write and post these above the rope. Finish the lesson by asking students to reflect on the activity. What new ideas they have about the dilemma? Do they still feel the same way about it? Have they made up minds or changed their minds?

The display of the tugs and What if’s? on the rope helps to make students’ thinking visible. Most importantly, their ideas are displayed in a way that shows their interconnectedness. The collaborative thinking process of the group as a whole is represented through the “action” of the tug of war. This is a key point about making thinking visible: It shows the dynamic interaction of people’s thoughts in a context of a shared inquiry. Documenting thinking and making it visible in the classroom can facilitate this interaction in order to make the inquiry richer.

Share your experience with this thinking routine on social media using the hashtags #PZThinkingRoutines and #TugOfWar.