



Innovative Education: Peer-to-peer decision training

By Ali Abbas, Scarlett Herring, Matthew Robbins, Karen Simms and Chris Spetzler



Karen Simms, Elizabeth Bozek, Scarlett Herring, Matthew Robbins ambassadors and Ali Abbas (far right).

Have you heard about coaching teen mentors to teach decision skills to troubled teens? Well, that is exactly what a group from the University of Illinois (U of I) is doing in collaboration with the Decision Education Foundation (DEF). The program is led by Ali Abbas, associate professor of Industrial and Systems Engineering at the U of I. Together, they have teamed up with the Peer Ambassadors (PAs) and the Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) of Champaign County (Ill.) to develop a curriculum to teach JDC teens not only what a decision is, but how to align their decisions with their values and identify possibilities and alternatives for each decision they face. The goal is to engage both the PAs and the JDC residents in decision-making using socially relevant methods.

The Peer Ambassadors Program, led by Karen Simms, is a youth leadership and social intervention initiative program designed to empower and educate African American youth in Champaign County. Funded by the Champaign County Mental Health Board, the PA program's primary mission is to develop young leaders who are able and willing to mentor their peers who are at-risk for school failure or have had some involvement in the juvenile justice or mental health

systems.

The PAs are peer educators, leaders, advocates and peer counselors. In addition, the PAs host community dialogues, family outings, health and wellness events and educational meetings that are open to other youth and concerned adults.

The ongoing effort has involved weekly training sessions at the U of I. During the sessions, decision-making fundamentals were taught to a core group of PAs so that they could in turn instruct the youth at the Champaign County JDC. About five PAs attended the weekly meetings, which were used not only to train the PAs but also to get feedback and refine the material.

Members of the U of I group included Ali Abbas, Elizabeth Bozek, Scarlett Herring and Matthew Robbins. Chris Spetzler from DEF also participated in some of the earlier sessions.

Feedback obtained during the training sessions and interactions with the PAs helped make the material more socially relevant to the JDC residents. For instance, Figure 1 shows examples describing the distinction between thought versus a decision in a context that is more relevant to the JDC residents.

Figure 1: Activity used to understand the difference between a thought and a decision.

The need for an icebreaker to grab the attention of the target audience at the JDC became essential with the first training session at the U of I. The PAs were enthusiastic and motivated when left to facilitate and role play at their own pace, but when they delivered presentations using power point they immediately lost eye contact with the audience and went into a monotonous voice. It was explained to them that if students are not actively engaged at the beginning of the presentation, it is unlikely that students will participate further.

After two semesters of decision training, curriculum development and role plays, the Peer Ambassadors were ready to present decision skills to their peers at the JDC.

The PAs started the JDC session with an icebreaker activity, the story of Bernard [1]. In addition to the icebreaker, it was important to have other active learning situations, so the PAs taught the JDC students about the difference between decisions and outcomes and how to formulate decision alternatives. Other role-play scenarios dealt with skipping school, a fight after school, shoplifting and deciding to graffiti a building. All of the scenarios were based on situations that typically land teens in the JDC, so the activity not only allowed students to participate but actively learn.

Which of these is a decision?

I have decided that exercise is good for me.	I have decided to leave school now and hit the gym.
I don't want to have kids	I will always use protection
I don't like the JDC	I've decided to follow all the rules of probation
I'd like to have perfect attendance at school	I have decided to make sure I get to school every day by going to bed early and catching the early bus.
I like to make my mom proud	I decided to go home and study for my exam
I made my friend go ask him out	I decided I like this boy

Decisions vs. thoughts

Decisions and thoughts are very different concepts. Based on the definition of a decision, we know that decisions result directly in an action. In order to better understand the difference between a thought and a decision a list of both are presented below. Identify the decisions out of the group by placing a circle around them.

I love pizza I don't like school

I hate studying I decided not to fight

I want to graduate I like to party

I'm not going to class I will practice safe sex

I will be his girlfriend

Circle the situation where a decision was made:

- A. I don't want to go to school today
- B. I like my friend, so I skipped class to hang out with him
- C. I don't like the JDC, so I decided to follow all the rules of probation
- D. My friends wanted to steal candy from store and I had to go with them

The role-playing aspect in the curriculum proved to be one of the most important teaching tools as it allowed students to not only understand the concepts (i.e. what is a decision, what are the consequences, how to generate alternatives, etc.) but also to learn how to apply these techniques in everyday life. By utilizing examples that are familiar to the students (fighting, truancy, etc.) the students are more engaged and more apt to learn the material. In addition, these techniques also allow students to experience making poor decisions by playing a certain character and experiencing the consequences within the scenario without real-world repercussions.

The ultimate goal of the project is to allow senior PAs to teach junior PAs the fundamentals of good decision-making, following a mature curriculum

without input from the U of I. As the junior PAs are taught, they will also witness the senior PAs teach the JDC youths so as to experience the full extent of the program. The junior PAs are folded into the process, maturing in their conceptual understanding of the material and the effective presentation of the material to the JDC youths. As the senior PAs pass out of the program, the junior PAs step up to continue the program and teach a new class of junior PAs.

Ali Abbas (aliabbas@illinois.edu) is an associate professor with the Department of Industrial and Enterprise Systems Engineering, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where Scarlett Herring and Matthew Robbins were former graduate students (Herring is starting as an assistant professor at Penn State this fall, and Robbins is an assistant professor at the Air Force Academy in Ohio). Abbas is also the director of the department's Information Systems and Decision Analysis Lab. He has practiced and taught decision analysis with business executives, graduate students and high school math teachers. Karen Sims is the director of the Peer Ambassadors program in Champaign County. Chris Spetzler is a senior program director with The Decision Education Foundation and has practiced and taught decision analysis with teens, business executives and pharmaceutical companies.

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Reference

1. Abbas, A., N. Hoffman, R. Howard, C. Spetzler, 2007, "Teaching decision skills to troubled teens," *OR/MS Today*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 48–53.

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