Teaching Strategy: Who Gets the Parachute?

This activity is a variation of many philosophical exercises placing participants in a hypothetical dilemma, which will reveal ethical perspectives, diversity issues, and value systems. This exercise is intended to help students to understand their judgments in order to help them understand why they ultimately take their respective positions. There are no right/wrong answers, although, students need to reflect on the criteria used for decision-making, as well as their reasoning that leads to their decision(s).

Context to Provide Students:

You are on a plane, but unfortunately it is having serious engine trouble and is headed for disaster. There will be no survivors... Fortunately for you, you were able to find a stash of parachutes on the plane. The problem? There are only 5 available for distribution—not even close to being enough to save everyone on the plane.

Since you were the one who found them, you are now also the one in charge of distributing them. At first you decide to randomly distribute to those close to you, but you quickly realize there are 10 passengers who now know about the parachutes and are asking to be saved.

You will decide which FIVE other passengers will get a parachute, and survive this pending catastrophe. You will be provided with 3 bits of information about each passenger, but only one piece at a time. Click to give them a parachute at any time, or to remove it.

Each person will return to their lives as they are described—they will not change who they are or how they are. You also won't need anyone's skills to be rescued in any way; having the parachute guarantees each survivor will return safely and quickly back to family, friends, and communities.

Additional Strategies

To maximize the conversation and debate, we suggest doing this as a class activity. The ten people offered as character choices should vary, and provide challenge to the ethical value systems that are known and established within the student's environment.

- o Have students complete this activity individually first—no conversation, no sharing of answers.

- o Present the attributes of the characters in chunks of information, and allow time for students to revise selections.

- o Place students in groups of 3-4 and ask them to reach consensus about who is and is not saved.

- o From small group, move to large group to discuss selections, criteria used for selections, value systems revealed, biases, the process of gaining consensus, and persuasive techniques used to reach consensus.