



Findings/Fall 2003

Naming the LD Difference

Dilemmas in Dealing with Learning Disabilities

*A report on Rival Hypotheses,
Options, and Outcomes
from the CARNEGIE MELLON
COMMUNITY THINK TANK*

This Think Tank explores the decisions that students, teachers, parents, counselors, and supporters face when they try to

- Name or explain what an LD “difference” really means
- Speak up for themselves or stand up for others
- Ask for and offer accommodations
- Understand and meet the needs of students who learn differently

The Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank
Carnegie Mellon University
in collaboration with
The Start On Success Transition Program
Pittsburgh Public Schools

*Intercultural Problem Solving for Learning
And the Transition to Working Lives*

The Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank

The purpose of the Think Tank is to create a cross-age, intercultural dialogue among people who solve problems—from students in Pittsburgh’s urban schools and adults in the community to representatives from business, regional development, social services, and education. All participants meet as collaborators.

The Think Tank seeks practical solutions to the problems of teaching students with learning disabilities and their learning process, and help them make the transition to meaningful working lives.

The Think Tank’s process has a structure and is solution-oriented. The process

- ◆ Organizes this talk into a problem-solving search for diverse perspectives, rival hypotheses, and collaborative solutions.
- ◆ Draws out untapped levels of expertise in youth and the urban community that help to create deeper intercultural understanding of problems and to construct community-tested options for action.
- ◆ Builds a framework that Local Action Think Tanks in individual schools and workplaces can use to develop their own dialogues.



Please visit our web site to explore the findings of other Think Tanks, research on intercultural problem solving, and our guide for developing your own dialogues as an educator, human resource developer, or community group.

www.cmu.edu/outreach/thinktank

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This Think Tank, held November 13, 2003 was a collaboration between Carnegie Mellon’s Community Think Tank and the Pittsburgh Public School’s Start on Success Program, which works with special education and mainstream teachers in four high schools, with the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Carnegie Mellon, University of Pittsburgh, CIGNA, and UPMC

Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank

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Why We Initiated This Think Tank

How might you respond to these comments, if you heard them from a peer, your teacher, or a student with a learning disability?

Why are you going to that Special Ed class? You stupid or somethin'?"
"I guess he is trying, but he just doesn't pay attention when I tell him what to do."
"Why do they all have to talk so much? If you'd just show me how to do it....."

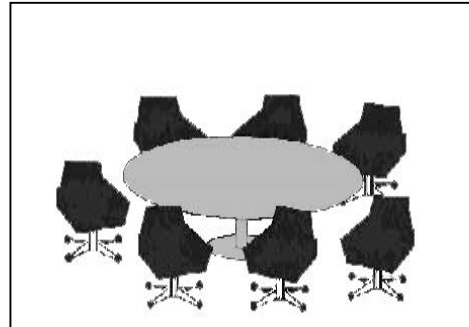
Such comments are only too familiar to people dealing with learning disabilities (LD)—a difficulty faced by students of average to high intelligence who do not process information or learn in conventional ways. We believe that new local, workable options for responding to—understanding and dealing with—LD could emerge from

- An intercultural, cross-age inquiry that draws on the expertise of multiple stake holders—youth and adult, and
- A problem-solving dialogue focused on a collaborative search for solutions

The People at the Table

In this Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank you will hear from

- ◆ High school students from Start On Success, Pittsburgh's nationally recognized transition program for students with learning disabilities
- ◆ Special education, transition, and mainstream instructors, principals, and academic officers from the Pittsburgh Public Schools
- ◆ Transition and rehabilitation counselors, facilitators and administrators from Pittsburgh schools and the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
- ◆ Human resource managers, workplace supervisors, and workforce developers from corporations, universities and state and local agencies
- ◆ Parents, legal and student advocates, Carnegie Mellon student documentors
- ◆ Published insights from PATTAN, NOD, LDOOnline, and clinical, educational, and student writers



How We Generated These Findings

The Think Tank process begins with intercultural, cross-level, and cross-age problem finding. We collect critical incident interviews, dialogues, and published work to 1) identify the key issues, 2) script a prototypical problem scenario around them, and 3) collect strong rival hypotheses about what is really “happening” and “why” in these familiar situations. We transform this portrait of a problem into a Decision Point Briefing Book organized around key decision points. At the Think Tank, students act out the

problem scenarios, and participants use the Briefing Book to focus their dialogue on generating options, outcomes, and good rivals.

How Does a Think Tank Dialogue Work?

A diverse set of participants join each other at round tables as problem-solving partners. Working with our representative problem cases, we use our differences

- To discover the “story-behind-the story” from different points of view
- To draw out alternative, “rival hypotheses” from each other
- To propose workable options for dealing with this problem



The Carnegie Mellon team documents this problem-solving dialogue and publishes the Findings on the Community Think Tank website (www.cmu.edu/thinktank)

What Can You Do?

Share these insights with your personal network. Hold a Local Action Think Tank with your personal network to consider and question these findings and extend the dialogue. You’ll find a Guide to the process at www.cmu.edu/thinktank

<i>Decision Point Briefing Book for Naming the LD Difference</i>	
The Classroom Confrontation Episodes	
Decision Point 1.	Exposed!
Decision Point 2.	Explaining LD
The Making Accommodations Episodes	
Decision Point 3.	Offering Accommodations
Decision Point 4.	Responding to Disruptions
Decision Point 5.	Meeting Extra Special Needs

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FINDINGS

Some Issues and Options Under Discussion

From The Classroom Confrontation Scenario

Exposed!

When learning disabilities become a source of public failure for a student, whose problem is it?

The student's, the teacher's or the school's?

- ◆ Option: Students need to learn to advocate for themselves.
- ◆ Option: Teachers can prevent these problems in advance.



Explaining LD

Special Education works with deficits—until high school transition plans suddenly require students to know their strengths and strategies for dealing with a disability. But have these been assessed or named? Do students with an LD know how to talk about themselves?

Option: Cover up. Going public only hurts you

Option: Teachers educate first themselves and then their students about the wrong perceptions of LD.

Option: Figure out a student's strengths, problems, and best strategies—collaboratively.



From The Making Accommodations Scenario

Responding to Disruptions

How can you accommodate, give extra attention, and still manage the class?

Meeting Extra Special Needs

Shouldn't teachers treat everyone equal? What about teachers who don't feel prepared and didn't sign on to teach students with learning disabilities?



From GIVE ME AN OPTION! Broader Options and Workable Ideas

- ◆ Option: Establish an informed and understanding classroom environment.
- ◆ Option: Design instructional self-evaluations that let students name, describe, and plan around their strengths and disabilities.
- ◆ Option: Innovate a workshop for mainstream teachers that explores how to teach to different learning styles.



To exist humanly is to name the world, to change it, but the world once named reappears to its namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Paulo Freire

The “Classroom Confrontation” Problem Scenario

The Decision Makers

Joel	Student with an LD and difficulty in reading, has a crush on Shauna
Shauna	Smart, cute new girl sitting next to Joel
Teacher	Teaches mainstream history
Billy the Bully	Mainstream student who likes to make rude comments
Narrator	Provides the inner thoughts of Joel, and narrates scene

In a Mainstream Classroom (Exposed!)

Scene

Students are given an assignment that requires them to read part of the William of Rights, and then work with a partner to complete a handout about the reading. Joel sits next to Shauna, as the teacher begins to explain the assignment.

Teacher

(Passing out sheets of paper) Okay, class, today we will be reading the William of Rights. Each of you needs to choose a partner and split up the reading. Then, once you have finished the reading, you will need to work with your partner to answer the questions on this handout.

Shauna

(Speaking flirtatiously to Joel, who is sitting next to her) Hey Joel, do you want to be my partner?

Joel

(Shy and hesitant) Umm...Yeah, sure.

Billy the Bully

(Laughing) Uh-oh, look who Shauna got stuck with.

Shauna

(Paying no attention to Billy) Okay, great, Joel! How about I read the first paragraph and you read the second one. Then we can work together to answer the questions on the handout?

Joel

(Not making eye contact) Whatever...that’s cool...

Narrator

Joel has had a crush on Shauna for three weeks... He doesn’t want her to know that he has a little trouble with reading.

Shauna

Okay, great! *(She begins to read)*

Narrator

A few seconds pass in silence... Shauna reads with great interest... Joel looks around the room, and taps his pencil; he is having a hard time. Joel doesn't want to read anymore, so decides to talk to Shauna...

Joel

So, Shauna, you going to the game on Saturday?

Shauna

(Looking up, confused) Um, I'm not sure yet... *(Goes back to reading)*

Joel

Oh, it should be a good one.

Teacher

(Interrupting Joel) Joel, shh! Do your work.

The Teacher Intervenes (Explaining Your Learning Disability to Teachers and to Peers)

Narrator

Joel picks up the paper and tries to read it, but gets frustrated and puts it down after a short while... the teacher notices him struggling and walks over to his desk. She takes him aside and tries to speak to him one on one, but the other students overhear.

Teacher

Joel, are you having a difficult time with the reading?

Joel

(On the spot and embarrassed) Umm... I was just...

Billy the Bully

(Laughing and sarcastic) Pffsht! Of course he is... You know Joel can't read.
(Everyone is shocked and speechless...while Billy laughs rudely...)

Shauna

What does he mean, Joel?

Joel looks around, then down at his desk, unable to answer.

End

Decision Point 1. Exposed!

In a Mainstream Classroom

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Narrator

Joel picks up the paper and tries to read it, but gets frustrated and puts it down after a short while... the teacher notices him struggling and walks over to his desk. She takes him aside and tries to speak to him one on one, but the other students overhear.

Teacher

Joel, are you having a difficult time with the reading?

The Story Behind the Story

What is Joel thinking?

A parent says:

- Sometimes my son tries to get out of a hard task by causing a disruption.

A student says:

- Personally, if I'm in this situation and I like the girl, I'm not going to tell her anything at all. I'll make up a lie or something... I'm not going to straight up tell her.

Whose Problem is This—the Student's, the Teacher's, the School's?

An administrator says:

- Teachers should know if they have a student with an IEP. They shouldn't have to ask the student, "Are you having trouble?" Like I said before: pre-planning!

A student says:

- The teacher didn't know that he had a disability, and she should have been told at the beginning of the year. I let the teacher know when I go in that class; they know I have an LD. Some teachers ask me, and I tell them to read my IEP or something. So then I can say it's the teacher's fault for everything!

An administrator says:

- I don't think this is Joel's fault, but I think it is a problem for Joel, because his teacher is not really engaging where she should. And really, the bottom line here is that you guys in school are the people we are supposed to take care of. The teacher is there to support you.

The Think Tank says:

- You can't just blame Joel. He might be inexperienced and new to this. He doesn't stand up for himself well, and he needs help along the way.

The Think Tank says:

- The problems are multiple, because the bully's problem becomes Joel's problem and that becomes the teacher's problem. Eventually, it's going to be the whole class's problem! The class won't be able to progress if it's dragging an anchor.

Options and Outcomes

Decision Point #1: Exposed!

Joel's standard strategies to avoid exposure have failed. He is suddenly marked as a personal failure and the teacher and students are forced to deal with an issue they too had avoided—naming the meaning of a learning disability.

Option #1: *The teacher manages the situation.*

A teacher says:

- She needs to tell him to hang in there and that she'll talk to him later. When a student is stuck like that, the stress can be unbelievable, but she needs to calm the other kids down as well.

A student says:

- The teacher probably didn't think she was talking loud enough so that other kids could hear, but that didn't help any.

A college student says:

- She needs to handle the problem removed from the situation. For example, she might take the bully aside to talk to him.

Option # 2: *The student takes responsibility to get his needs met.*

A teacher says:

- I think that Joel needs to advocate for himself. In high school, no one is going to do it for you. He needs to pull the teacher aside and say, "Look, I have a disability. These are the accommodations I need." Unfortunately, in high school, you pave your own road and it is sink-or-swim with a lot of things.

A student says:

- I don't think that all teachers really do know about students with LD's, because I had a situation kind of like that, but the teacher didn't know. He just didn't know and I had to give him my IEP paper so he could finally know. Not all teachers already know, being that they get a large amount of students in every single class. For every student, it's kind of hard to know everything about them. And also they might know that you have a learning difficulty, but they might not know what it is, how it affects you. It comes down to defining it and learning about it too.

A parent says:

- Is it really the student's responsibility to let the teacher know? There is a line.

Option #3: *The teacher prevents these problems in advance.*

An administrator says:

- There needs to be professional development. This is a teacher issue; this is not a student issue. This is something that could be captured, brought better to the classroom, if the teacher had more sensitivity and better strategies.

An administrator says:

- Teachers may know that you are on the list as having an LD, but they really haven't read the IEP, and sometimes quite frankly, the IEP's aren't written very well. They don't give you the information you need.

A parent says:

- If you're the teacher and you see this, you can partner a student willing to help with a student who needs help, in a positive environment. A lot of progress can be made.

A teacher says:

- A support aide would be useful, just to pass out papers and give attention to students so the teacher can deal with everything going on at once.

Option #4: *The school system takes responsibility for responding to the student's needs.*

A teacher says:

- My goal is to educate you about your disability, but I need supporting documentations. When students are on the move, a lot of the paperwork doesn't follow them like it should. It's an administrative issue, like getting the housekeeping together so that there is a paper trail with the kids.

A teacher says:

- I have been able to see the paper trail that follows, and it is amazing how it differs from school to school. In some of the schools, it's been really difficult to find the supporting documentation other than an IEP that explains the disability and really pinpoint where the student has trouble. In other schools, it's no problem whatsoever.

An administrator says:

- I think it's also important to remember that so many of our teachers, especially the ones that have been around for a while and are burnt out, really believe that this is not something that they "signed on for." They are saying, "I am really not interested in it, or I shouldn't have to make these accommodations because I am a science teacher, and teaching science is what I'm trained to do."

A teacher says:

- The problem is that control is being removed from the local level. It used to be that the principal set the tone for how the teachers should behave. But now, that control is being removed, and departments regulate everything. Because things are becoming so standardized, and the teachers are evaluated by how well their students do on standardized tests, the pressure is on the teachers to do everything by the book.

Decision Point 2. Explaining Your Learning Disability to Teachers *and* Peers

The Teacher Intervenes

Narrator

Joel picks up the paper and tries to read it, but gets frustrated and puts it down after a short while... the teacher notices him struggling and walks over to his desk. She takes him aside and tries to speak to him one on one, but the other students overhear.

(Everyone is shocked and speechless, while Billy laughs rudely)...

Joel

(On the spot and embarrassed) Umm... I was just...

Shauna

What does he mean, Joel?

Teacher

Joel, are you having a difficult time with the reading?

Joel looks around, then down at his desk, unable to answer.

Billy the Bully

(Laughing and sarcastic) Pfsst! Of course he is. . . You know Joel can't read.

The Story Behind the Story

What are the students thinking?

A student says:

- If she makes a big deal about you having a learning disability, it's probably not going to work out.

A student says:

- I think she shouldn't care. To me, I don't think he should care about how he's reading. It's about who he is.

A student says:

- Even though Billy the Bully makes fun of Joel's LD, Billy the Bully probably has one too.

Options and Outcomes

Decision Point #2: Explaining LD

Joel is on the spot. But so is the teacher. The confrontation has not only created a personal and an interpersonal problem, it has raised the issue of disability and difference. How do you understand, explain and deal with the LD difference?

Option #1: *Come straight out with it.*

Students say:

- You can't beat around with somebody. You gotta straight out come out with it
- I just say straight out: I have a learning disability. I'm above average but I have difficulty in certain areas.
- If a teacher says, "You can't read," I say "teach me."
- I personally went up to my teacher and, "This is my IEP, you know, I have a learning disability." So now every time I raise my hand, she's not like "Oh, there's [my name]."

Option # 2. *Cover up. Going public only hurts you.*

A student says:

- I told my teacher I had a learning disability and she treated me different than the way she treated the others and dumbed down the work.

An administrator says:

- He'll probably mumble nothing and quit talking to the girl. Or, if he had that kind of maturity, he could say, "Hey I'm not the best reader," but that's opening him up. That's a big risk.

A teacher says:

- With sensitive subjects, teachers are often afraid of getting in trouble with parents. The parents could call in and demand to know why the teachers are saying such things to their kids. It makes some teachers afraid to talk about anything personal.

Option #3: *Change perceptions: help people understand what it means to have an LD.*

A student says:

- He might say out loud to the class that people are different, and some need more help than others.

A teacher says:

- She could try to correct the perception of LD. She might give a little speech to everybody about how we all have strengths and weaknesses, nobody's perfect, and everybody needs help with something.

A counselor says:

- We need to educate mainstream students and teachers about IEP's. Most people don't understand that both gifted students *and* LD students have them.

The Think Tank says:

- The biggest misperception students fight is that a learning disability means you are stupid, when in fact, students with an LD are by definition students with an average to high IQ, with a difficulty learning or processing information—in certain areas (such as math, reading, listening) and in the certain ways school requires. But whose job is it to change misperceptions like this? Is it the students?

Option #3: *Figure Out a Student's Strengths, Problems, and Best Strategies—Collaboratively.*

A law professor/parent of an LD student says:

- Dealing with a learning disability in a positive way depends on being able to say what the problem is. On knowing what happens when my child doesn't seem to understand.

An administrator says:

- All the way through the school years, Special Education works on a diagnosis and deficit model, trying to define a student's weaknesses—that is, until high school. Then suddenly, when we shift the focus to the transition to work or post-secondary, we find we need to know their strengths. But nobody has been assessing that. And the students don't know how to talk about them either.

The Think Tank says:

- Teachers and students need to start with the fact that in too many cases no one has focused on how the learning process of a student with a given LD student is working—or what it takes for that student to succeed. So the most important task for teachers, students and parents is often building a functional working understanding of how that child learns. That means, the teacher and student need to be able to name not only weaknesses but also the student's strengths and the strategies that let this learner work around his or her individual problems.

The “Making Accommodations” Problem Scenario

The setting is a high school classroom. The teacher is proctoring an exam in an English class. William is a LD student in the mainstream class.

The English Exam (Offering Accommodations)

Mrs. Smith

Okay, that's the bell. Pencils down, put your exams on my desk as you leave, and have a good night. *A few seconds later, William is still working as the others file out.* William, pencil down. I need your exam now.

William

But?

Mrs. Smith

William, if you don't stop writing I'm going to have to give you a zero. This is an exam.

William

I just need a few more minutes, please?

Mrs. Smith

William, everyone else handed their exam in when I asked. If you studied, the time I gave you should have been plenty.

William

After William and Mrs. Smith are alone in the room. Mrs. Smith, you know I'm supposed to have extra time. I'll take the next bus home, please let me finish.

Mrs. Smith

I'm sorry William, I'm already going to be late for my daughter's appointment. I'm packing up my things. Am I taking your paper home to grade, or should I just enter a zero right now? *William trudges up to the desk, hands over his unfinished exam, and glares at Mrs. Smith's back as he leaves the room. Mrs. Smith finishes putting papers into her bag, then glances at her watch and sighs.*

The Next Day (Responding to Disruptions)

Mrs. Smith

The next assignment is going to be a two-page paper on the first five chapters of our book. The topic is themes. We've done themes before so it shouldn't be a problem for you. This will be due next Tuesday. Okay, open up to...*(William raises his hand)* Yes, William?

William

Uh, Mrs. Smith, can you explain more on the paper? What exactly do I need to write in it?

Mrs. Smith

Remember the paper we did two weeks ago on themes in *Catcher in the Rye*? Just like that, but with this book. It's only on the first five chapters, so it won't be that hard. Now as I was saying, let's open up to chapter seven.

William

Wait, Mrs. Smith? How many pages do you want it to be?

Mrs. Smith

It should be two pages, as I said before. Now turn to chapter seven. William, since you're so eager to speak, can you please read from the top of page 90?

William

(Reading) "Ma chuckled lightly and s... uh...ssss..."

Mrs. Smith

That word is "scrounged". Keep going.

William

(Reading) "...the clothes in the bucket. She wr...uh..."

Mrs. Smith

"Wrung." Does anyone else want to read aloud? (Jill raises her hand) Jill, go ahead... (Mrs. Smith looks over at William, then away.)

Mrs. Smith

That's all we have time for today; the bell is about to ring. Your homework for tomorrow is to read chapters 8 and 9, and answer the corresponding reading check questions on your worksheet.

William

(William apprehensively raises his hand) Mrs. Smith, which questions are we supposed to do?

Mrs. Smith

I'm not saying it again. You have the directions on the homework right in front of you. I wrote that worksheet so that the directions would be clear, and you should be able to understand it from my written explanation. *(Bell rings)* Goodbye, class.

The Counselor's Visit (Meeting Extra Special Needs)

Counselor

(The next day, in the teacher's lounge) Mrs. Smith, could I talk to you about William?

Mrs. Smith

Yes, he's been quite difficult lately.

Counselor

Yes, well, I've heard some concerns that he isn't receiving the accommodations his IEP calls for? I believe his IEP says...

Mrs. Smith

I know what his IEP says, because they all say the same thing. I can't always give him extra time on tests. His class is my last of the day, and sometimes I have other commitments afterward. He's not my only student with problems, you know? Besides, I have a family and my own life too.

Counselor

I understand your frustration. We have far too many demands placed on us. Still William does need some extra help. He's trying, but sometimes he's going to need extra attention.

Mrs. Smith

I do what I can. I can't possibly give every student all the time and attention they need. I'm only one woman.

Counselor

Well, it's not just that William wants extra *attention*. We do have a legal obligation to provide it. We need to find a way to meet his needs.

End

Decision Point 3. Making Accommodations

The English Exam

William

I just need a few more minutes, please?

Mrs. Smith

William, everyone else handed their exam in when I asked. If you studied, the time I gave you should have been plenty.

After William and Mrs. Smith are alone in the room

William

Mrs. Smith, you know I'm supposed to have extra time. I'll take the next bus home, please let me finish.

Mrs. Smith

I'm sorry William, I'm already going to be late for my daughter's appointment. I'm packing up my things. Am I taking your paper home to grade, or should I just enter a zero right now.

The Story Behind the Story

What is Mrs. Smith thinking?

- I wish William would try harder –he gives up too soon. I know he has trouble reading but that just means he needs to work harder. I know he doesn't like reading aloud, but it wouldn't be fair to treat him differently than my other students. I have to call on him sometimes, just like everybody else.
- Students do not realize that my teaching job is not my entire life and that I have other commitments.

What is William thinking?

- I'm probably going to get another bad grade. I asked if Mrs. Smith would help me write my papers but she just said she didn't have time to do my assignments for me. I didn't mean it like that. It says on my IEP that I'm supposed to get writing help. And she didn't need to embarrass me just because I asked a question. She knows I don't read aloud very well.
- Why isn't Mrs. Smith following the IEP?
- It's difficult for me to ask for extra time, and I wouldn't ask if it wasn't necessary. I tried to study, but I may have concentrated on the wrong points. I could have used extra help.

What is going on here? What is the problem?

- Making accommodations for students is time consuming for teachers.
- Asking for accommodations is difficult and frustrating for students.

Options and Outcomes

Decision Point #3: Offering Accommodations

William needs extra time, at a bad time. And this is not the first time.

Option #1: *The teacher could offer an alternative time to finish the test.*

Mrs. Smith rivals:

- That could be unfair for other students. And I have a very busy schedule and don't want to give up my planning periods.
- If I make a concession here, will I always have to? If I give him an inch, will he take a mile? He could have come to me earlier if he did not understand the material.

Mainstream student says:

- Giving William extra time seems unfair. Maybe William should not be in this class if he can't keep up.

Option #2: *William takes the zero.*

William says:

- I'm giving up. It is the teacher's fault, not mine. How can I learn if she won't even try to do her job correctly?
- This is my only form of protest. She is supposed to teach me. She must just want to fail me.

Mrs. Smith says:

- He gave up again. Why should I waste my time with him if he won't even try?

Option #3: *William tells his parents.*

William says:

- She is not listening to me, but she must listen to my parents. They have more credibility and they pay her salary.

Mrs. Smith says:

- The parents do not understand the time commitment of teaching. Moreover, they should be making sure that William is studying more at home.
- They shouldn't blame me; William's lack of effort is not the teacher's fault.

Decision Point 4. Responding to Disruptions

The Next Day

William

(William raises his hand) Uh, Mrs. Smith, can you explain more on the paper? What exactly do I need to write in it?

Mrs. Smith

Remember the paper we did two weeks ago on themes in *Catcher in the Rye*? Just like that, but with this book. It's only on the first five chapters, so it won't be that hard. Now as I was saying, let's open up to chapter seven.

William

Wait, Mrs. Smith? How many pages do you want it to be?

Mrs. Smith

It should be two pages, as I said before. Now turn to chapter seven. William, since you're so eager to speak, can you please read from the top of page 90?

(William struggles with the text until another student volunteers to read.)

Mrs. Smith

That's all we have time for today; the bell is about to ring. Your homework for tomorrow is to read chapters 8 and 9, and answer the corresponding reading check questions on your worksheet.

William

(William apprehensively raises his hand) Mrs. Smith, which questions are we supposed to do?

Mrs. Smith

I'm not saying it again. You have the directions on the homework right in front of you. I wrote that worksheet so that the directions would be clear, and you should be able to understand it from my written explanation.

The Story Behind the Story

What is Mrs. Smith thinking?

- William is really disrupting my class here. I have a lot of material to get through, and everyone else understands the assignment. Why couldn't he just wait until after class, or ask one of his classmates, instead of interrupting me every 30 seconds?
- Maybe he's just trying to get attention. Maybe if I call on him to read, he'll learn to stop being so disruptive. There's nothing wrong with asking him to read, right?
- My responsibility is to keep my classroom equal and not to isolate or differentiate students. I need to keep my authority over my students and not let them get out of control.

What is Jill (a mainstream student) thinking?

- Why'd she have to call on William to read? This is must be embarrassing for him and the slower we go here, the more work she's going to make us finish up at home.
- Maybe she'll let me take over if I raise my hand.

What is William thinking?

- I just wanted to make sure I knew the assignment so I can get a good grade on it, but the teacher thinks I'm trying to cause problems or something.
- Sometimes I really hate this class. Why is she always mad at me? Why'd she have to punish me by making me read? She knew I'd have problems. She just wanted to humiliate me.
- Now Jill had to show me up and show how much better she is. Mrs. Smith loves her.
- I keep trying to get extra help from her, but she doesn't want to help me. I've tried to ask for help so many times but she keeps brushing me off. I have difficulty working through directions. I hope Mrs. Smith knows that.

Options and Outcomes

The Decision Point #4: Responding to Disruptions

Giving a student additional help—when he or she needs it—is breaking up of the flow of the class.

Option #1 *Don't ask William to read out loud.*

Mrs. Smith says:

- I'd like to help him learn, but calling on him to read might not be the best method if it embarrasses him in front of the other students.
- I don't like making him miserable, however letting him out of reading isn't fair.

William says:

- Good, she isn't picking on me anymore. I can't read well and hate doing it.

Option #2 *Stop calling on William when he is asking redundant questions.*

Mrs. Smith says:

- The class period is too short for me to repeat myself. The rest of the class will get bored if I focus on him.
- William's questions disrupt the class. I've already answered them. If I keep calling on him, he will keep raising his hand.

William says:

- Her directions seem unclear and so why does she ignore me? If she won't answer my questions then why is she expect me to do it right? She wonders why I get bad grades.

Option #3: *Figure out what the student needs to succeed.*

A counselor says:

- Cutting a student like this out of reading and questioning is not smart because William needs to practice these things. William and Mrs. Smith cannot ignore the problem, or else what is the point of schooling at all? However, teachers often find ways to avoid setting a student up for failure based on his disability, such as letting the student anticipate what he will have to read and prepare, or giving more written information to students who have difficult processing oral instructions.

Story Behind the Story

Decision Point 5. Meeting Extra Special Needs

The Counselor's Visit

Counselor

Mrs. Smith, could I talk to you about William?

Mrs. Smith

Yes, he's been quite difficult lately.

Counselor

Yes, well, I've heard some concerns that he isn't receiving the accommodations his IEP calls for? I believe his IEP says...

Mrs. Smith

I know what his IEP says, because they all say the same thing. I can't always give him extra time on tests. His class is my last of the day, and sometimes I have other commitments afterward. He's not my only student with problems, you know? Besides, I have a family and my own life too.

Counselor

I understand your frustration. We have far too many demands placed on us. Still William does need some extra help. He's trying, but sometimes he's going to need extra attention.

Mrs. Smith

I do what I can. I can't possibly give every student all the time and attention they need. I'm only one woman.

Counselor

Well, it's not just that William wants extra *attention*. We do have a legal obligation to provide it. We do need to find a way to meet his needs.

The Story Behind the Story

What is Mrs. Smith thinking?

- This is completely impractical. The counselor waltzes in with all these extra requirements without even thinking about the teachers that are going to implement them.
- If they set these few kids apart from everyone else and give them preferential treatment, I don't think they will be able to progress.

What is the Counselor thinking?

- I don't know why these people get into education when they don't want to do the work. No one said that was going to be easy. You have to put some effort in—and how am I supposed to do my job with the teachers behaving like this?
- Why is she giving me excuses instead of trying to find ways to help these kids? Doesn't she understand that the IEP is not a suggestion? There are laws about this.

Options and Outcomes

The Decision Point #5: Meeting Extra Special Needs

Teaching students with learning disabilities requires special, adaptive teaching in addition to the other expectations teachers must meet. But if what students need is not simply extra “attention,” what is reasonable and possible to do?

Option #1: *Teachers receive extra training on students with learning disabilities.*

A counselor says:

- All teachers could benefit by learning how to interact with LD students in the class. A small amount of understanding could make a large difference in how teachers understand these students and could increase classroom morale and productivity.

Mrs. Smith says:

- Don't we have enough of these training classes already? Nobody takes them seriously. You can't solve all of these problems from training, anyway.

Option #2: *We consider “broader options,” like those, which follow, that respond to some of the bigger problems.*

GIVE ME AN OPTION!

Broader Options and Workable Ideas from Our Dialogue:

Classroom Options

Option# 1: *A teacher can remove some of the stigma attached to LD by blending their assistance to students with an LD, into helping all the students in their class.*

An LD student says:

- I like to just sit back and do my work, and maybe have the teacher come around to me. I don't want to have to go get her. 'Cause people see that. But I don't want her always coming around just to me, either. For the same reason.

A counselor says:

- One of the most difficult things that we confront is embarrassment, really. The children are really guarded with each other, with their teachers too, sometimes. They don't want to feel "different."

A teacher says:

- Normally I'm hesitant to spend a lot of time with each of the LD students in class because there is a marked effect on the amount of time and the quality of instruction which the mainstream students are then left with. Besides, I think the best thing for any student is to be treated as the equal of his/her peers.

Option #2: *The teacher matches up students to encourage peer support.*

Students with an LD says:

- Sometimes my classmates can make things clearer to me than the teacher does. They explain differently.
- When we work in groups, everyone has strengths they can contribute and weaknesses that others can help with.

The Think Tank says:

- Often teachers don't realize that saying the same thing the same way again, or louder, doesn't help. Students often depend on each other to explain what the teacher means.

College students say:

- My friends and I call each other for clarifications on assignments all the time. Sometimes explaining the assignment in your own words helps clear up your own thinking too.
- If students asked each other for help outside of class, instead of making the teacher repeat himself, the class could cover more material.

A teacher says:

- If I pair up students who need a little extra help with students who are patient and know the material well, they can help each other rather than depending on me so much. It takes some time to know the students well enough to know who will work well together, but the results are worth it. And it's really great to see the students supporting each other instead of cutting each other down.

Rivals say:

- Teachers have too many students to know who will work well together. Some pairings would be disastrous.
- It can be very difficult to tell whether students who are talking during a lesson are talking about something relevant to the material, or merely chatting and being disruptive.
- It's important for students to learn to depend on themselves, rather than letting others do for them what they find difficult.

Option #3: ***Establish an informed and understanding classroom environment at the beginning of the school year.***

Think tank says:

- The classroom needs to be established as an environment where students understand each other's learning differences and respect them. The teacher is responsible for explicitly laying out ground rules that explain tolerable behavior and foster civility and friendliness.
- The teacher can also create this environment by setting an example. When he pays attention to students' needs and respects them, other students will respect each other. She can make generalizations to make student feel more comfortable: "This is hard, anyone could have trouble."
- Teachers can make a special point of asking students who feel they may need academic accommodations for a physical or learning disability to see the teacher after class so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

Option #4: ***Adapt to the LD difference in students by teaching to different learning styles.***

Think Tank says:

Scientists doing research on "multiple intelligences" have identified eight modes of representation that define intelligence. These eight modes call for alternative learning styles that include tactile & kinesthetic, verbal, visual & spatial, and project based. For teachers, the use of teaching to alternative styles of learning and multiple channels for processing information turns out to be the "best practice" for teaching any student. It can be the difference between success and failure for students with an LD. For example:

Students who struggle to process written text may learn easily and quickly if

- A teacher communicates through other channels, such as: with outlines and summaries and visual highlighting of key points and relationships, oral explanations, study/discussion groups, books on tape.

Other students, who find it equally difficult to learn by listening, become quick learners with visual language. Teachers reach many more students

- When they use visual aids such as overheads, boards, videos and pictures to teach key information.
- When they make all their oral instructions also available in visual form (notes, flow charts, steps).
- When they let students learn by doing—giving visual, tactile, hands-on demonstrations of what is expected (including academic thinking tasks such as how to read a complex text or instructions, outline, take notes, or compose a response).

Students who are silenced by either the physical or conceptual/organizational act of writing can emerge as expressive contributors if teachers open up other channels of communication, such as

- By using oral presentation and exams, being interviewed, or conveying messages through videotapes, dramatization, art or charts.
- By teaching writers to manage their disability by using partners and/or software for brainstorming, outlining, dictating, editing & spell checking, Grade on content not errors.
- By not treating help for an LD as “cheating” any more than you would a wheelchair.

A teacher says:

- I like my teaching style, and if the student can't adapt to it well, how will they ever adapt in the real world? I'm actually not sure of all the different learning styles out there.

A workplace trainer says:

- Preparing instruction with different learning styles in mind is not as hard as some people think. We take this seriously when we train our new workers at my company, because we found out they become much more productive and we get results.

A college professor says:

- Teaching that accommodates different learning styles make teaching fun and much more interesting to do. So both the teacher and the students benefit.

Option #5: *If students with an LD are going to make wise decisions about learning, they need an extra measure of self-knowledge. That is, their program must focus on self-evaluations that let them name, describe, and plan around their strengths as well as their weaknesses.*

An LD student says:

- I don't even know what my IEP says. It's not like I can go to the teacher and say, “This is why I need this, and you already know, ‘cause it's in the IEP.” I don't know. So what am I gonna say?

A counselor says:

- The testing frequently employed in designating students as LD is so one-dimensional that it leads to IEP's that aren't as individualized as we would like. They tell us primarily about students' weaknesses, rather than their strengths.

A teacher says:

- The students won't come to you. I think that they're a little intimidated, a little embarrassed. But if that puts them in a situation where they can't tell you what they need to know, then how are you supposed to know? You may not even know that they're having any difficulties in the first place.

Rivals say:

- The testing that supports more explicit functional evaluation is unnecessary and costly.
- Students don't need to self-advocate—they're too young to be responsible for such an important part of their lives.

Teacher Research and Teacher Development Options

Option #6: ***Schools could create "Info Rooms" which contain information on learning disabilities that teachers, students, counselors, and others could readily access.***

The Think Tank says:

- Teachers would be more likely to read about learning disabilities and find out what their students are dealing with, if the information was readily available.

A CMU student says:

- It might help to have a set of checklists, designed to help teachers identify different types of learning disabilities. Give teachers access to a tool that helps them identify why some students might be having particular difficulty with something.

A Disability Resources manager says:

- What you really need access to isn't cold paper but an expert. The counselor should be the person to connect students, parents, and teachers with experts who could sit down with them, help them understand the student's particular learning disability, and give them strategies for enhancing the student's ability to learn by focusing on the student's strengths.

Option #7: ***Solve Problems Proactively, Not Reactively.***

The Think Tank says:

- Experienced teachers already know how to teach skills, rather than just facts, and how to create a culture of understanding, but in order to accommodate to learning disabilities, they may need to learn how to teach to different learning styles.
- If accommodations are in the IEP, a teacher needs to take them into consideration in her planning. For example, if you want to teach a student to read, then give him a reading assignment. But if you want him to learn the Bill of Rights, then have it read to him.
- The ideal way to deal with problems posed by different learning styles is to prevent them, starting with professional development and conferences for teachers.
- Teachers can partner a student willing to help with a student who needs help, and foster a positive environment.

Option #8: Plan a Workshop for Mainstream Teachers.

The Think Tank says:

- This option builds on the idea of proactive solutions with a workshop that is taught by a team of Special Education teachers and a pilot group of S.O.S. students with learning disabilities. These students go through a year-long preparation focused on how to name their LD, understand how it affects their learning style, define their unique needs, and communicate these needs to teachers, administrators, parents, and peers. In the workshop, students present their stories to the teachers and explain what they have accomplished by learning about their LD and by being accommodated according to their individual needs. The rest of the workshop will focus on professional development, showing teachers strategies for accommodating different learning styles and students with LD's.

Rivals say:

- Teachers will not really change their learning styles. Some teachers, especially those who have been teaching for a long time, do not feel that they “signed on” to deal with students’ individual needs and were never taught the importance of accommodating LD students. They should be updated about current thinking and teaching styles, but might have trouble changing. Perhaps attendance at this workshop would need to be a requirement?
- How can teachers accommodate all the needs of all the students? They teach hundreds of students a year. Where do you draw the line of what is reasonable to expect from teachers?
- Workshops don’t yield concrete results. There needs to be a constant implementation of the expectations in order for teachers to stay engaged.
- Teachers just need to be more caring and sensitive to students’ needs. Teachers should be hired with this in mind. But in order to attract better teachers, we need to be able to offer something in return. Teachers will need to be paid more if we are expecting them to cater to individual student’s needs. It will take a lot of work.
- It may be even more important to help students themselves learn about their learning disabilities. If a student knows these things, he can become his own advocate.
- **Student’s Rival: I am willing to put in as much time as teachers will give me: at lunch, after school. I want to succeed!**

Innovation Options from Administration

Option #9: The schools give the teachers a supplement to the IEP.

Counselor says:

- Is it really feasible? The government already mandates the IEP, can we extend ourselves for even more evaluations and labels?

Think tank says:

- Teachers can get involved in the IEP planning process
- Rivals:
 - There is a time issue for teachers
 - Teachers will need compensation and/or motivation such credits to certifications. School districts can’t afford much more of that.
 - If it is useful, teachers will go, even without compensation.

Option #10: *Divide the Responsibilities of the Special Education Department and Counselors.*

The Think Tank says:

- If one unit of the Special Education administration was responsible for the paperwork (filling out IEP's, tracking and organizing records, and maintaining an up-to-date library for students, faculty, and community members to learn about LD) then the counselors could put all of their energy into helping the students and teachers. The counselors would have time to check that teachers are providing the most appropriate accommodations and to spend with the students, determining their needs, communicating with their families, and devising programs to raise awareness about LD.

Rivals say:

- There is not enough money in the budget. As it is, we can barely hire enough teachers to staff the classes, never mind employing new secretaries to do all of the LD paperwork. It would take years to get all of the paperwork re-organized in a new format. In order to make it profitable for the school to bring in someone new, we would need to see results right away.
- It isn't fair that LD students get someone to advocate for them when mainstream students don't. Mainstream students have problems too.
- LD students don't want to be singled out by their counselors or their teachers. Having a teacher constantly making special accommodations for them, especially in front of the class, would make them feel or appear "retarded."

Option #11: *The district can create a magnet program for students with learning disabilities.*

A Disability Resource manager says:

- You can't have a school with only kids with learning disabilities, or you'd have a special ed center, and that's not what we want. A magnet would have to be a mostly mainstream school, with a few special classes related to the learning disabilities.

The Think Tank says:

- A big part of the problem kids with learning disabilities face, comes from the label. You can't label this a "learning disabilities" magnet school, because you'll be labeling the kids in it. You don't want to label the kids, but you can label the problem. The problem isn't "learning disabilities" but differences in how people process information. And you need to focus on peoples' strengths. Kids with learning disabilities need to know how they work best, and how they best process information.

A Disability Resource manager says:

- Teachers have different teaching styles just as students have different learning styles. If we could match students with a particular learning style to teachers who teach to that style, the students would be better off. Also teachers talk to each other about students, and the following year's teachers can figure out from listening to stories about a student, whether that student might be better off "matched" with a different teaching style.

Revised Option 1:

- We could have magnet programs that are not focused on a weakness, but on a particular strength. Thus we could have, for example, a magnet program for kids who do best when they process information visually.

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RELEVANT REPORTS, RESEARCH and TOOLS

Reports Available on the Carnegie Mellon Website www.cmu.edu/thinktank

Community Think Tank Brief #1. Urban employees in the new workplace. (Fall 2000). Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

Findings from the Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank

Negotiating the Culture of Work and Technology Spring 2001. 38 pages.

Healthcare: The Dilemma of Teamwork, Time, and Turnover Spring 2002. 44 pages

Respect and Communication in the Food Service Industry. Spring 2002. 15 pages

Working Partners: An Urban Youth Report on Risk, Stress and Respect. The Community Literacy Center and Carnegie Mellon University. 1996. 16 pps.

Related Research

Flower, L. (1998) *Problem-solving Strategies for Writing in College and Community*. Ft. Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Flower, L. (2002). Intercultural Knowledge Building: The Literate Action of a Community Think Tank. *Writing Selves and Society: Research from Activity Perspectives*. Ed. C. Bazerman & D. Russell. Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearinghouse <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/selves_societies/>

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Flower, L., Long, E., & Higgins, L. (2000). *Learning to rival: A literate practice for intercultural inquiry*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Young, A., & Flower, L. (2002). Patients as partners: Patients as problem solvers. *Health Communication*, 14 (1), 69-97, 2002.

Multimedia Educational Tools

The Decision Makers Asset Assessment and Journey Book. A Computer-Supported Assessment of Supporting Networks, Assets, Personal Plans and Progress. Software CD and Guide for decision makers and mentors for youth and staff development programs. L. Flower, 2004

Teamwork: Teenagers Working Through Community Problems. Video & Teaching Guide. Pgh PA. The Community Literacy Center. 1995.

Rivaling about Risk: A Dialogue Tutorial. An interactive HyperCard program that uses video, writing, reflection, and teen-authored texts to teach critical thinking, give voice to teen perspectives on issues of urban risk, and initiate dialogue. Deems, J., & Flower, L. (1996).

What's Your Plan?: Sexuality and Relationships.. Young, A., and L. Flower
A Multi-Media Dialogue & Tutorial for Personal Decision Making.

DECISION MAKERS ***ASSET ASSESSMENT and JOURNEY BOOK***

An On-Going, Goal-Directed, Computer-Supported Assessment
Of Supporting Networks, Assets, Personal Plans, and Progress

Carnegie Mellon University

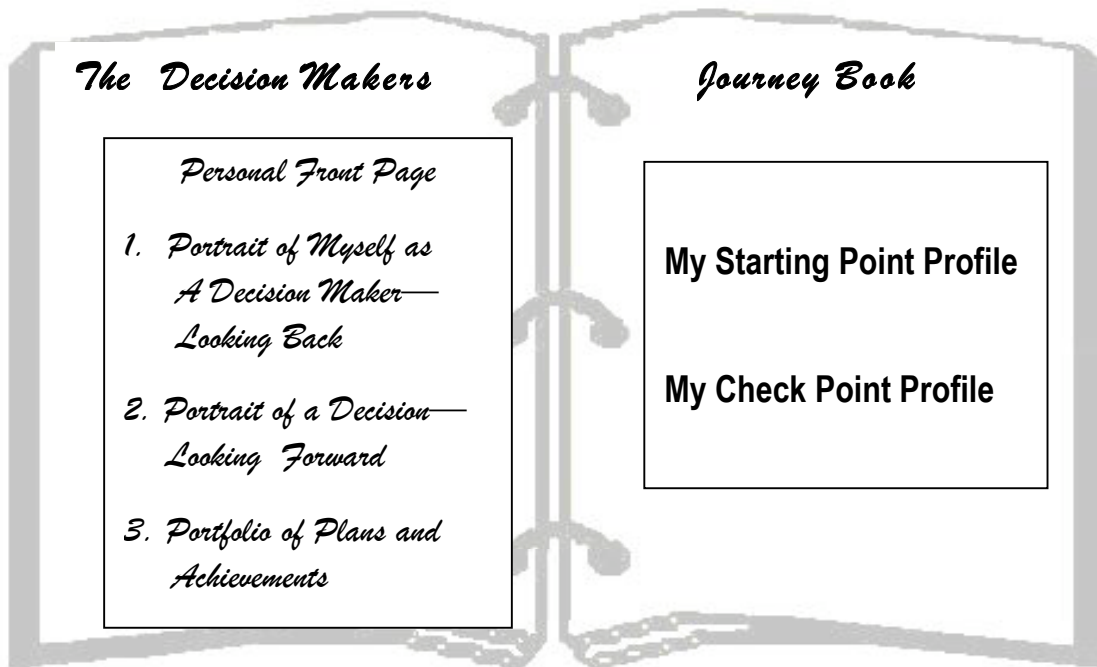
Why Should Youth Engage in Self-Assessment?

Teenagers are continually being assessed by schools, parents, and peers, but they are rarely asked to engage in a reflective, goal-directed self-assessment of their own actions or assets. To build an *identity as a decision maker*, a young person needs not only the opportunity to make meaningful decisions, but also the awareness that his or her own (sometimes unexamined) actions have reasons and consequences. To be a *reflective decision maker*, one needs, in addition, strategies for assessing one's assets and goals, for making plans, and for evaluating options and outcomes.

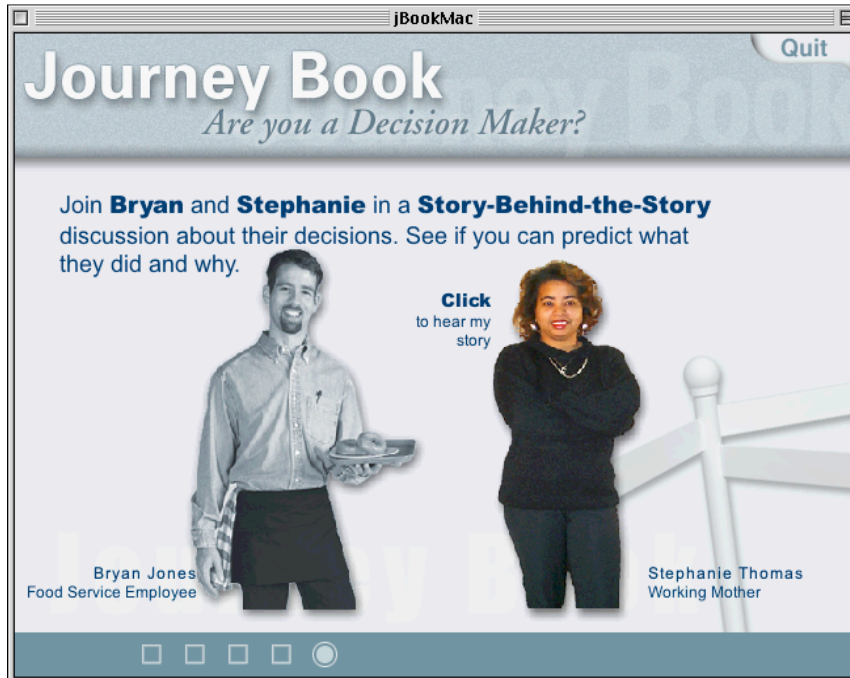
How Can You Support Decision Making?

Decision Makers provides a scaffold for building this problem-solving identity and strategies for reflective self-assessment. Carnegie Mellon supports the process with a seminar and support for teachers and mentors, computer tools, and a final formal analysis of growth and change. Together the Assessment and Journey Book function

- As a personal planning portfolio for youth
- As a placeholder for personal and problem-solving conversations with mentors
- As a tool for program assessment



The Journey Book CD



The CD lets users practice decision-making by:

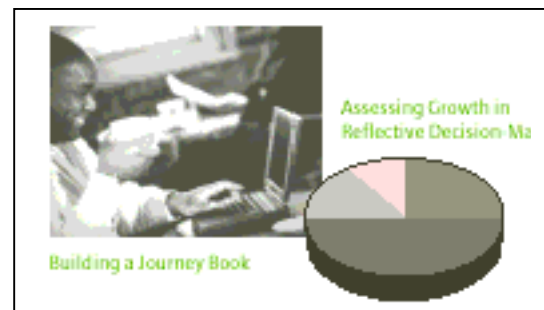
- Hearing about real problems
- Learning decision making strategies
- Comparing rival predictions of how they handled the problem.

Decision Makers use this same process to build their own Journey Book.

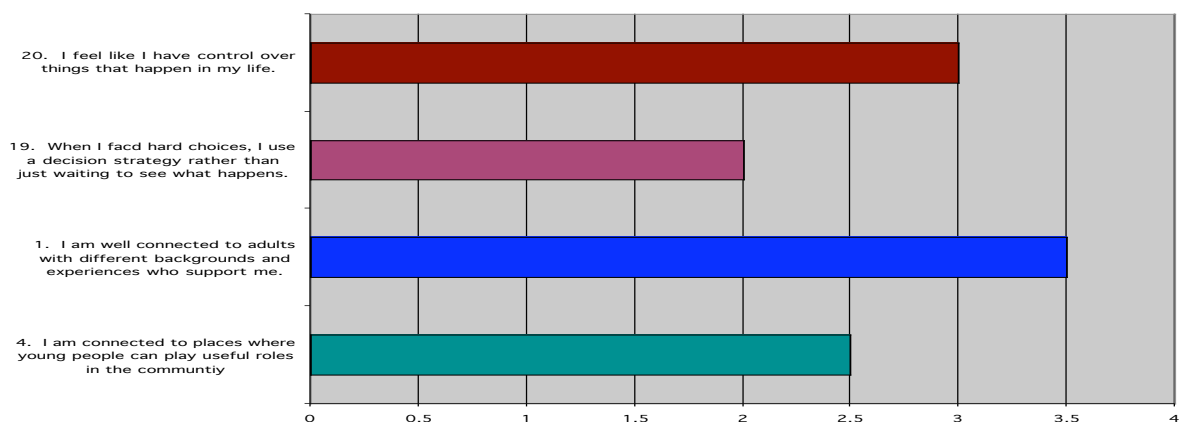
The Asset Assessment

The Carnegie Mellon Assessment gives a quantitative picture of the Decision Maker's

- Asset base (in terms of agency, motivation, decision making, support networks, and dealing with others)
- Networks of support and
- Level of reflective decision making



Level of Assets



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