# **Designing Great Team Activities**

READING

# Paradoxical relationship between freedom of inquiry and restriction of choice

Great activities can inspire student curiosity, drive learning, and foster powerful discussions. How can we best do this? Our instincts might tell us that the best way to lead students toward a full exploration of an important concept/issue is to start discussions with a wide-ranging, open-ended question that promotes many possible avenues of inquiry. Our hope is the collective, focused wisdom of the group will eventually emerge. The problem with this approach is that disciplinary novices can often take the conversation in non-productive directions.

One way to provide greater focus is to frame the conversations more intentionally using specific, explicit choices. The combination of a specific question leading to specific choice(i.e. choice of the most reasonable course of action from a list of reasonable courses of action) is a important design element. By constraining the possible choices you can focus the team analysis on what you think are the most salient concepts/issues/data sources/proceedures. Another benefit of the specified choices is that teams can more easily compare and contrast their thinking and decision-making processes.

**Imaging a Tight-Loose-Tight Activity**

It can be helpful to think I theses activities following a tight-loose-tight approach. We start an activity by orienting students to the problem and specific decision(s) that needs to be made (tight).



Next, during the analysis stage the teams experience relative autonomy to pursue the goal however they deem appropriate (loose). The instructor’s careful wording of the question prompt has both determined the scope of action (range of analysis) and where that action needs to lead (specific choices). Within these constrained ends - students are free to exploit whatever is at their disposal to find and evaluate all relevant possibilities to reach an appropriate, defensible decision/conclusion. By constraining the decision space to specific choices which forces students to examine trade-offs, what-if’s, and imagine the consequences of each possible decision.

In the closing stage – teams must commit to one of specific choices (tight) by publically declaring their specific decision. This public commitment to a specific decision leads to visible contrasts and can fuel a powerful reporting discussion where intense give-and-take dicsussions have teams examine and respond to each others’ rationales and specific analysis processes used in arriving at their specific decision.