

# Get them thinking

*Yourtake.org* helps students sharpen decision-making and other skills

by Sandra Wozniak



On the *yourtake.org* website, SCAN is an acronym that helps students organize their thinking and develop their own “take” on a situation.

“What were they thinking?”

How many times have you thought this in response to the choices kids make? The fact is, middle and high school students make life-altering choices every day. As dedicated educators, we know that the true goal of education lies beyond grades and tests. The real aim we share is to equip our students for life in a complex world. We strive everyday to make our lessons relevant and applicable to our students’ lives and the world around them. Teaching our students to engage in thinking processes can help them consider different perspectives, assess priorities, and avoid catastrophes.

## Can you be taught how to think?

Today’s youngsters are faced with many complicated issues. At the same time, the Internet provides them with information at their fingertips. They exist within a community of learners around the globe. This generation is expected to be able to assess complex issues, sort through vast amounts of information, collaborate with others and develop and implement comprehensive and innovative solutions. But that doesn’t mean they always get it right.

Our students can be better decision makers given the proper tools. The key is to get them to organize their thinking through a step-by-step process. Educational leaders and corporate executives use simple processes to help them make good choices and handle tough issues. Why not give those same skills to the kids?

Even the State of New Jersey recognizes this need. According to the Standards for Teaching adopted by the State Board of Education, we are

required to teach our students to “appreciate multiple perspectives and promote the development of critical and creative thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills.”

The Tregoe Education Forum (TEF) has developed an instructional website, [www.yourtake.org](http://www.yourtake.org), which capitalizes on our children’s skills and enthusiasm for online communication to engage them in meaningful conversations about current and historical issues. TEF is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping K–12 educational leaders and students resolve difficult issues.

It has worked with teachers from across the nation to develop activities that can bring important skills into the classroom. TEF believes good thinking is not just a matter of good luck or good genes; it’s actually a skill that can be learned just as you would learn to play the guitar.

The *yourtake.org* website helps kids learn what contributes to effective problem solving and what gets in the way. Using scenarios and role-playing, students learn a simple approach for seeing, understanding and addressing tough situations by working through a simple process called SCAN.

## What is SCAN?

SCAN is an acronym for a framework that helps students to organize their thinking and develop their own “take” on a situation while considering relevant data,

information and the perspectives of others. Much like the brainstorming process, SCAN helps kids work through complex issues in steps.

1. STOP and think things through.
2. CLARIFY the key issues.
3. ASK yourself what’s most important.
4. NOW, what’s your next step?

The process, one of four, was developed by Kepner-Tregoe, an international management consulting firm. The firm’s critical thinking strategies are used in some of the world’s most influential organizations, including NASA, SONY, Johnson & Johnson, and Honda.

Applications of these processes have ranged from using them to develop a deeper understanding and analysis of content to engaging students in thoughtful debate. They will also help students appreciate different points of view and give them a simple yet powerful practical approach to complex issues.

The Woodbridge Schools have been using the Decision Analysis process in their high school history classes for years to help students get a better understanding of decisions made in history. The process allows them to analyze the alternatives, risks and benefits of decisions for our citizens and political leaders.

Students at Mt. Olive Middle School have used the SCAN process in their success skills classes to develop language arts, social studies and technology skills. The simple acronym helps students learn a four-step process so they can examine complicated issues, understand

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others' points of view, and determine what should be done next.

"The SCAN process gives students steps to follow for conflict resolution," notes Barbara Marvel from Valley View Middle School in Denville. "Working on the website allows students to take on roles requiring them to see and defend other points of view on the specific issue presented. I love the scenarios as they are all issues facing our students, parents and schools. Activities like this develop skills necessary for our students to analyze and compromise when working with those of differing opinions to achieve productive results."

### Using *yourtake.org*

There are over 100 scenarios available on the *yourtake.org* website. The topics cover the curriculum areas of history, civics, health, current events and life skills and can be used to teach writing skills, communication, tolerance, etc.

One scenario has students explore whether cell phones should be allowed in schools from the different perspectives of parent, students, teachers and administrators. Students read through the scenario and take on the predefined points of view or make up their own. They then follow the SCAN process to develop a plan for cell phones that will consider all issues and points of view.

A short video on the website shows teachers and students how to work through the site. Throughout the process students can read and comment on issues, assess what is important, and decide what should be done next. Students love to feel that they have a voice. You may have to remind them to write in English, as many fall into their "txt msg" skills. (Ah the irony—some of us may remember when we used to teach our students "shorthand," and now we are trying to "unteach" it!)

With regard to assessment, teachers can choose to have their students complete the follow-up exercises provided or develop their own. The questions provided ask students to write recommendations, suggest issues that were not raised but should have been, or ask if there are additional points of view that should be considered among others. Students have shown great insight using this with historical issues such as desegregation, health issues such as student drug testing, and common social issues such as teasing and bullying.

Employing this process does far more than stimulate engaging classroom debate; it creates a generation of confident and informed problem-solvers.

"SCAN provides a great tool for both students and teachers as it gives them structure in the decision-making process," said Suzanne Cadwalader, a supervisor in the Bridgewater-Raritan School district.

"Learning to respect other people's perspectives helps our students with their social decision-making," says Christine Torre, guidance counselor in Mt. Olive.

Teachers have used the SCAN process to help students:

- examine complex issues in depth
- understand and develop points of view
- prepare for tackling big problems or assignments
- draw connections between historical lessons and current issues
- read for understanding
- write persuasively.


"I enjoyed that my students saw a viewpoint other than their own. It made them think about taking other points of view into consideration," proclaimed Robert Koroski, a teacher in Randolph Township.

### The Blog—writing "their take" on current issues

Wikis, blogs, social networking sites, and twitter are new web tools that are changing the way our students use the Internet. Our students are now producers instead of just consumers of the vast amount of information on the Web. *Yourtake.org* features a blog that takes advantage of those skills by asking kids for their

opinions on current issues that affect their lives. Using this protected venue, (student identities are protected by screen names and all writing in the blog is screened by the moderator), we can capitalize on their the use of the Web in order to teach them personal and civic responsibility, persuasive writing, as well as keeping them informed on relevant current issues.

Let's face it: technology is changing everything. As Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change." Our instructional methods and expectations need to evolve. We need to give students the tools to be critical thinkers and problem solvers in a complex and diverse world.

The teacher-friendly *yourtake.org* website allows educators to combine the power of a simple thinking process with a web tool that allows children to communicate with each other. Learning thinking processes can help our students sort through their complex lives and prevent the all too prevalent question of "What were they thinking?" 

*Sandra Wozniak has taught science, technology, communication, and critical thinking processes for 30 years at Mt. Olive Middle School. She also is a certified trainer of Analytical Processes for Educational Leaders. Wozniak served as a consultant on the yourtake.org website and applies her analytical processes serving as her local association's president. You can reach Wozniak at sanwoz@gmail.com.*

## Free subscriptions for NJEA members until June 30

Using the *yourtake.org* website is free, however a subscription opens a library of over 100 lessons for grades 6–12 in the areas of social studies, current events, civics, health, character education, life skills, guidance and diversity. TEF is offering all NJEA members free subscriptions until June 30. Normally, an individual subscription costs \$79 a year; school subscriptions are \$299 a year. For a customized quote for your district, call 866-268-3980.

### To use the interactive SCAN tool and activate your free subscription:

Go to [www.yourtake.org](http://www.yourtake.org).

1. Go to top right and click on Register.
2. Register with name, e-mail and school information. Submit.
3. Check your e-mail and click on link.
4. Click on Activate a Subscription.
5. Sign in with the user name and password you created.
6. Click on Activate a Subscription.
7. Put "teffriend" in the space for the activation code. Submit.
8. Click on Start Using Scan.
9. Sign in using name and password you created.
10. Select Tips or Start a Scan Session.
11. Select the curriculum area or "all" to select a scenario.