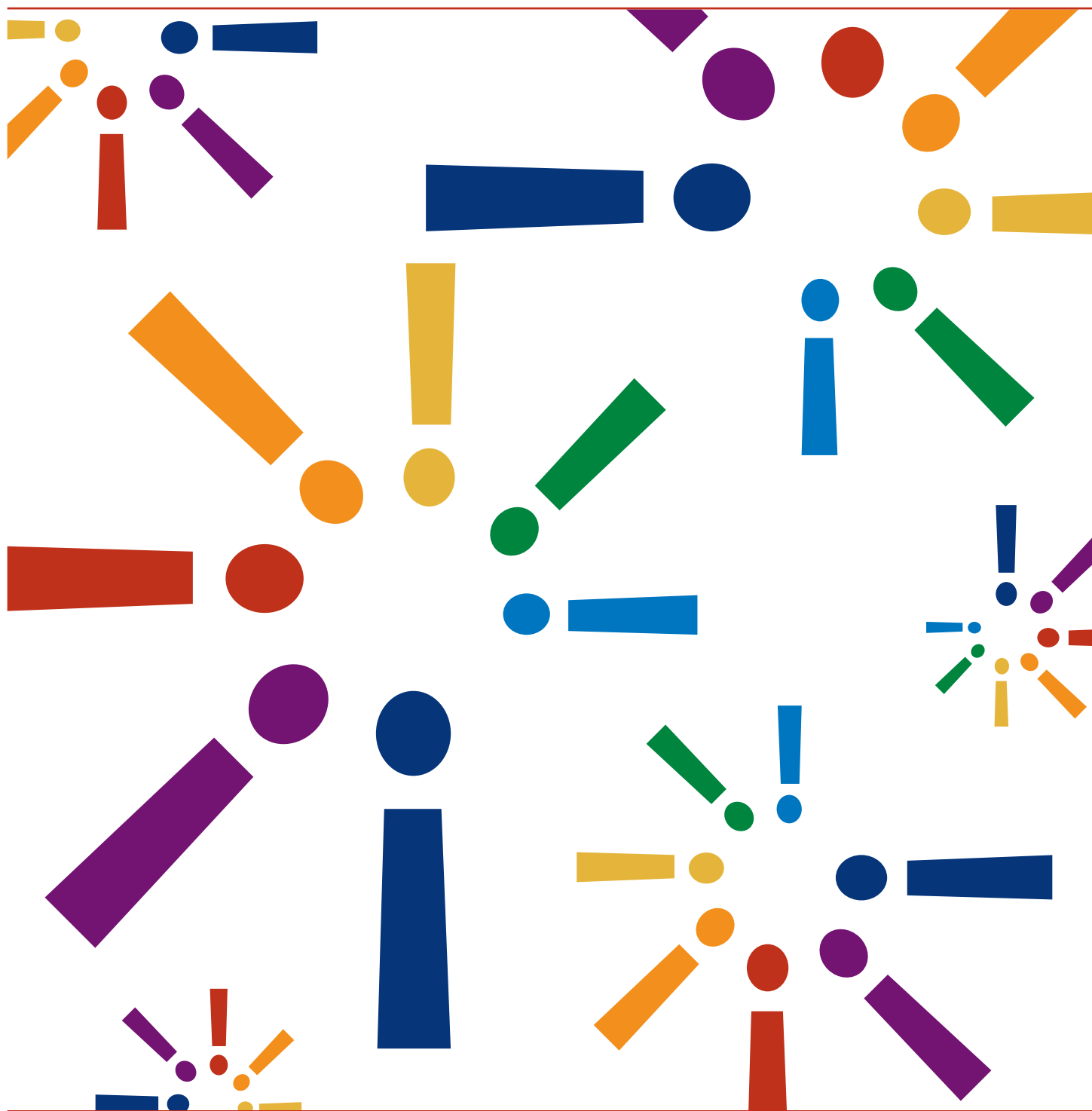


social action projects

MAKING A DIFFERENCE



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This resource was originally developed in English and translated into French. The English and French versions of this document may offer alternate resources and links.

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social action projects

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

WRITING FOR A LOCAL NEWSPAPER

Students studied the community water supply and identified sources of harmful pollutants. They wrote an article for the local newspaper explaining their findings and offering ideas to help avoid future problems.

PROVIDING FOR CHILDREN IN THE HOSPITAL

Students collected books from all of their friends and family and started a library at the local children's hospital for kids who can't go out to get books because they are too ill.

SUPPLYING SCHOOLS AROUND THE WORLD

Elementary students sent "friendship boxes" filled with letters, school supplies, artwork and other items to schools in Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The project has grown such that 2000 schools have sent supplies and computers to schools in need.

BUILDING AWARENESS IN THE SCHOOL

Students became concerned with racial tensions in their school and community; minority kids were harassed and bullied on a regular basis. Students developed an awareness-building campaign in the school to improve conditions for all students.

This handbook is for teachers who want to involve their students in social action projects. The first two sections, *Understanding social action* and *Planning social action projects*, provide the background knowledge necessary for teachers to effectively implement social action projects. The third section, *Implementing social action projects*, provides a case study of a social action project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) gratefully acknowledges the J. W. McConnell Family foundation for its financial contribution to this project.

This resource is adapted from two *TC²* publications:

Case, Roland, Flak, Cliff, Smith, Neil, & Werner, Walt (2004). *Active Citizenship: Student Action Projects*. The Critical Thinking Consortium. ISBN 978-086491-260-9.

Ford, Carole, Ashlee, Julie, McDiarmid, Tami, Frew, Nicki, Futzl, Dorothy, Manzo, Rita, & Musselle, Trish (2002). *I Can Make a Difference*. The Critical Thinking Consortium. ISBN 978-086491-262-6

The original, more extensive publications are available through *TC²*'s website www.tc2.ca, by calling 604-822-9297 or contacting the order desk at administrator@tc2.ca.

section 1

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL ACTION

DEFINING SOCIAL ACTION AND ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Historically, citizenship education has been understood in two ways: as promoting *responsible* citizens through reflective inquiry, and as *active* citizenship learned through social action.

The responsible citizen approach proposes that schools can prepare students for their civic role by developing their ability to form thoughtful opinions on matters of public policy.

Advocates of active citizenship agree that reflective thinking about public matters is important but suggest that students should learn to act on their beliefs. Active citizenship challenges students to identify, plan and carry out responsible community actions.

Participation in responsible social action is necessary if students are to become participatory citizens. By putting reflective inquiry “to work”, active citizenship provides students with opportunities to test their ideas and learn about personal efficacy through social action.

WHAT IS A SOCIAL ACTION PROJECT?

Projects that engage students in acting on their beliefs take many forms. *Service projects* involve students in volunteer activities, generally for established community groups, and on an individual basis. For example students may volunteer their time for a community service organization such as an animal shelter, or food bank.

In *social action* projects, students typically work cooperatively with other class members on initiatives they help to identify, plan and direct. A social action project prepares students to identify, plan and carry out solutions to problems within their school, community and beyond. The goal is active citizenship through thoughtful, cooperative, critically engaging, and responsible action.

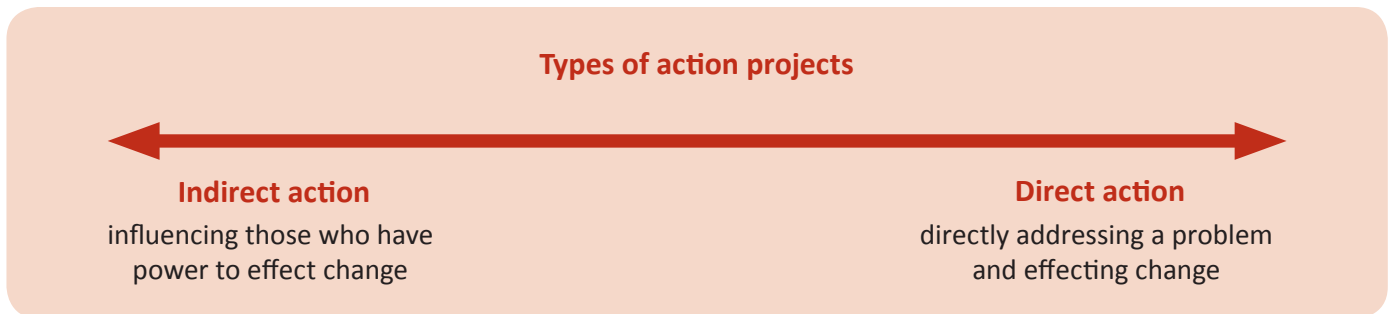
WHY ENGAGE STUDENTS IN SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS?

TC² suggest that there are four central reasons to engage students in social action projects. Through social actions students will:

- **Acquire important abilities and dispositions.** Since social action projects involve students directly in identifying, planning and implementing the action, students develop important skills, including problem solving, conflict resolution and empathy.
- **Increase their understanding of curriculum content.** Action projects provide a means of integrating text-based and experience-based learning where students’ understanding is deepened as they learn the contextual realities of what they previously considered in theory.
- **Enhance their sense of personal and collective efficacy.** Involvement teaches students that there are responsible ways to address issues, and that everyone can play a role in social change.
- **Contribute to the betterment of society.** Students learn that their actions have a broader impact on society.

TYPES OF SOCIAL ACTION

As indicated in the chart below, the focus of student social action projects ranges from school-based to local community to global. Types of student action will range from action designed to influence decision makers to action designed for direct impact.



Consider the examples below and decide where they would fit on the continuum.

School-based	• lobbying the school authorities for funding for after school programs	• cleaning the playground
	• requesting the allocation of school ground space for a garden plot	• launching a campaign to reduce litter
		• sponsoring a school wide information session about healthy eating
Local	• influencing a fast food chain to abandon polystyrene containers	• filling a backpack with supplies for a person who is homeless
	• lobbying city council for the inclusion of a skate board park in a new recreation centre	• organizing a food bank drive
Global	• raising funds to support an agency assisting hurricane victims	• fundraising to build a well in a village overseas
	• sponsoring a foster child in another country	• providing school supplies to students in a developing country

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Curricula across North America encourage students to analyze social problems, formulate thoughtful strategies, question assumptions, and act responsibly on their beliefs as part of active citizenship. Social action projects are an integral part of the exploration of curriculum rather than an “add on”. The social action project becomes the vehicle through which students uncover the curriculum and develop understanding.

section 2

PLANNING SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Pre-planning

Teacher considerations before formally undertaking a project include selecting a suitable focus for the project and securing support from key parties. While it is important to include students in originating social action the extent of student involvement at this stage will depend on the scope of the project, the students' experience, curricular outcomes and time constraints.

Select a project

When selecting a suitable project focus consider the following questions:

- *Is it relevant for my students?*

Consider whether the project is likely to interest students; is it timely and topical? Will it foster a positive outlook?

- *Is it doable and worth the effort?*

Consider the availability of human, physical, financial, and emotional resources needed to complete the project. Anticipate the likely benefits for students and assess these against the expenditures (including time) to determine the feasibility of the project.

- *Is it appropriate for my school and community?*

Assess the project's suitability in light of the various cultural, religious, political and economic characteristics of the school and community.

- *Does it grow out of and support the curriculum?*

Topics studied in class can effectively serve as the impetus for social action projects. Be sure the project enriches curricular goals and builds on students' knowledge.

Secure support

Projects that have strong support from key stakeholders are more likely to succeed. Seek the advice, approval and support of relevant individuals prior to committing to a project. Consider school administrators and other staff that may be impacted; parents; relevant external agencies such as government agencies, businesses, charities and international organizations.

Introducing ideas to students

Once you decide to proceed and pre-planning is complete, introduce students to the possibilities and expectations of a project. The following considerations emphasize the importance of ensuring student interest and establishing clear expectations from the outset of the project.

Generate student interest and explore project possibilities

The need to promote student interest may depend on whether the project is assigned or has come from the students. Following an initial class discussion one or more of the following activities may serve as catalysts for building student interest and helping students begin to explore project possibilities:

- *Invite a guest speaker to present on an issue.*
Consider inviting NGO's, elders, politicians or individuals associated with a cause to personalize the events and issues.
- *Use newspaper articles, news clips or films.*
Possible sources include CBC News in Review, The National Film Board (www.nfb.ca/store) and local newspaper. For example, ask students to bring in a newspaper article that directly relates to a personal experience they have had.
- *Present positive models that youth their age have undertaken.*
Invite students to share examples of action projects in which they have participated through school, clubs, community groups, churches, NGO's or share stories of successful action projects undertaken by your former students.
- *Teach students the concepts of direct and indirect action.*
Invite students to discuss the examples in the first section of this handbook (*Types of social action*) and identify the extent to which each exemplifies direct or indirect action.
- *Respond to apathy.*
Directly address the question "Why bother?" with the question "What will happen if we don't bother?" Provide examples of when people have taken action and others have followed their inspiration.
- *Provide choice whenever possible.*
The more control students have in selecting and defining a project, the more committed they are likely to be. Remember to support students in setting criteria in choosing which project is best suited to their interests and skills.

Identify student responsibilities

Once students have expressed interest in taking on a project discuss what is required of them.

Introduce the main tasks and establish ground rules

Briefly outline the framework for guiding students through an action project. Detailed information about each step follows in the next section of this handbook.

Explain that these four tasks, although presented in a linear form, are not a lock-step progression and it may be necessary to return to tasks previously completed. Emphasize that each task requires *thoughtful action* and the application of critical thinking to problems and issues. Invite students to describe what each task might look like if undertaken thoughtfully and thoughtlessly.



You may want to model *consensual decision making* as you establish operating principles. Three ground rules may be important to establish at the outset:

- ensure emotional and physical safety
- work for consensus
- protect the right to withdraw

Clarify assessment procedures

Explain to students that their efforts throughout the project will not be assessed only on the final outcome of the project (whether the intended result was achieved) but also on the extent to which students thoughtfully plan and implement each task along the way. On-going feedback from peers and teachers will support students in their learning. Emphasize that the purpose is to learn how to carefully and responsibly make decisions. Introduce the tools for implementing the tasks in the action project and explain that these tools will form the foundation of evaluation. A full list of assessment criteria for each tool appears in the chart *Assessing social action* later in this handbook.

Project assessment

Tools	Reflective questions
Background knowledge (Information needed to address each task in an informed manner)	Did we acquire and use enough background knowledge for each task?
Criteria for Judgment (Criteria for judging the soundest option for each task)	Did we base our decisions on the relevant criteria for selecting sound options at each step of the way?
Thinking vocabulary (concepts) (Thinking concepts and vocabulary that help students understand the key ideas underlying each task)	Did we learn and appropriately apply key thinking concepts to help us understand and carry out each task?
Thinking strategies (Strategies that might assist students in thinking through each task)	Did we develop and use strategies to assist us in thinking through each task?
Habits of mind (Attitudes of a careful thinker that will help students in completing each task)	Did we demonstrate the attitudes and values of a careful thinker?

Assessment possibilities

Introduce or negotiate with students the means by which they will demonstrate the thoughtful use of the tools and an understanding of the entire action project. Below are three methods of gathering evidence that would ideally be used in combination:

- *Project portfolios:*

During each of the four tasks, groups compile a project portfolio containing previously assessed records of their process (e.g., researched information, graphic organizers, notes). Once the project is concluded, the group prepares a final portfolio to be evaluated based on mastery of the tools. (see *Assessing social action projects* chart). Individuals also submit a summative reflection. Consider implementing small group presentations of the portfolios and inviting parents, teachers, and relevant community members.

- *Individual assignments:*

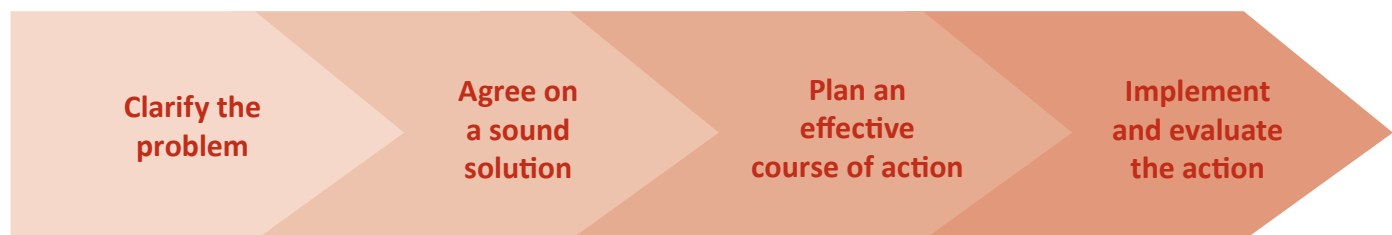
Activity sheets, oral reports, reflective journals and other forms of assessment are appropriate for assessing individual understanding and application of the tools.

- *Writing their story:*

Students individually write the story in a self-selected genre (news article, children’s story, persuasive essay) of their social action with an authentic audience in mind.

GUIDING STUDENTS THROUGH THE PROJECT

Four tasks comprise the problem-solving model suggested in this resource. The focus for each task is assisting students in making thoughtful and realistic decisions at each step of the process:



Rather than linear or discrete “steps” to be carried out in a sequence, these tasks often overlap and are recursive, depending on the nature of the problem.

As introduced in the previous section of this handbook (*Clarify assessment procedures*) developing student capacity for thoughtful social action involves teaching specific critical thinking tools. “Tools”¹ is a term that describes the intellectual resources needed to carry out a task thoughtfully.

A summary of specific tools for each task can be found in the chart “Tools for social action projects” at the end of this section. The aim of teaching students to develop and use the tools is to increase their capacity to reach beyond obvious and simplistic solutions, consider a broad range of possibilities and commit to meaningful action.

Clarify the problem

An initial task in a social action project is to help students gather information, recognize the complexity of the problem and articulate a clear statement of the problem.

¹ “Teaching the tools” is a central feature of the approach to critical thinking adopted by The Critical Thinking Consortium (see www.tc2.ca).

Gather information

Students cannot think critically about a problem—an obstacle, difficulty or deficiency—when they know little about it. Gathering adequate, relevant background information is necessary for clarifying the problem. Students may need help in identifying what information is needed, and where and how it may be located.

To begin, help students determine what they know about the issue and identify what they need to find out.

If the needed information is not readily available, review with students alternate sources for locating information such as sharing opinions; relating personal anecdotes; collecting newspaper clippings or magazine images; searching the Internet; and conducting surveys or interviews.

Recognize complexity

Social action issues are multi-faceted and interconnected across topics – environmental, social, economic, etc. As students gather information about the issue and attempt to clarify it assist them in recognizing the complexity of the issue. There are three interrelated approaches to “problematizing” the issue:

- *Explore varying perspectives on the issue:*

Consider varying perspectives by looking at the “stakeholders’ interests”. These concepts may be new to students so it may be helpful to provide a definition (*a group or a person whose interests, values, rights or wellbeing, are affected by a situation*).

Provide simple examples of interests and stakeholders. For example, discuss who is affected when students bring home a report card with poor grades (e.g., parents, students, tutors or others who worked with them and care about them). Then ask the students to explain the idea of stakeholder interests (e.g., parents may have an emotional and financial interest; students’ interests may include self-esteem, lost incentives and opportunities).

Invite students to identify the stakeholders and their specific interests involved in the identified problem. Students may explore perspectives through role playing in assuming different stakeholder roles and asserting their interest in a hypothetical scenario.

- *Search for multiple contributing factors:*

Focus on the factors contributing to the situation. Encourage students to look beneath the surface for underlying causes; ask what factors or actions contributed to its occurrence.

Once students have brainstormed possible causes there are two ways of thinking about the “hows” (or effects) of a situation. One way involves students categorizing the causes into different types (e.g., economic, personal, political, physical). This helps them to systematically think about the findings rather than randomly list causes.

Another way encourages students to look for interconnections among causes. For any incident, a cluster of interdependent contributing factors (e.g., events, conditions, actions) can directly or indirectly influence the outcome.

- *Reinforce the idea of complexity:*

Clarifying a problem can lead rise to ambiguity. Ongoing reminders of the layers of complexity in a problem help students understand that any solution to a problem depends on the context. Encourage students to develop the dispositions necessary to approach a problem thoughtfully. Suggest to students that some *tolerance for ambiguity* is a necessary condition; that seemingly straightforward problems can be complex; and that there may be no one ‘right answer’.

State the problem

Once students have considered some of the complexities of the problem help them develop a summary statement of the problem: what exactly is the problem—obstacle, difficulty or shortcoming—that needs to be resolved? Before doing so review with the class the criteria for an effective summary statement.

- *clear*
Would people reading it (or the stakeholders) understand it?
- *specific*
Does the statement include some of the key factors to work on?
- *inclusive*
Does it reflect (or is it sensitive to) the perspectives of the stakeholders?
- *complex*
Is the statement sensitive to the multiple interconnected causes?

If necessary, present the following example of an effective summary statement:

The Fraser River serves many functions. It is a marine highway. It provides recreational opportunities for local residents. It also offers food and habitats for many birds, fish, insects, mammals and amphibians. The eco-system of the Fraser River is at risk. The river banks are covered with litter, wood debris is stifling wetland growth, pollutants are threatening some species and bird habitats are decreasing.

Agree on a sound solution

After defining the problem, help students decide on the most appropriate solution. This involves guiding students in generating a range of possible solutions, assessing the relative merits of alternative solutions and reaching consensus on the best option.

Generate possible solutions

To help students thoughtfully identify a plausible resolution for the problem, write the problem summary statement on the board. Invite students to generate as many solutions as they can, recording all answers without judgment. Encourage students to “think outside the box” by asking them to revisit the factors or conditions contributing to the problem and to research solutions that have actually been tried by others.

Short-list options

To help students scrutinize the most promising options, invite them to create a short-list of plausible resolutions based on a few criteria (e.g., *probable effectiveness*—are any of the suggested options obviously unlikely to improve the situation?; *feasibility*—are any of the suggested options obviously unfeasible given the available resources like time, materials and expertise?).

Continue to short-list the options using the criteria until the students have eliminated all but a couple of the options. Then involve the students in examining the merits of each short-listed option considering the pros (benefits, advantages) and cons (costs, disadvantages) or explore the anticipated consequences of each proposed solution (short- and long-term, intended and unintended) and consider whether they will be negative (-), positive (+) or mixed (?). You may wish to have students short-list the options from the perspective of the various stakeholders.

Reach consensus

Once the options are assessed, ask students to consider which option is the most reasonable one to pursue. Help students agree upon criteria for selecting the most defensible solution from the short-listed set of options, such as:

- *effective:*
Which option offers the best results for the greatest number of people?
- *sustainable:*
Which option promises the most *lasting effects* (e.g., availability of helpful resources over time; commitment and involvement of all stakeholders; limited unintended impacts on the social or physical environment).
- *feasible:*
Which option is the most *realistic* given the available resources?
- *respectful:*
Which option best respects the feelings and legitimate interests of stakeholders?

Plan an effective course of action

After reaching consensus on a solution, students consider how the proposed solution will be put into effect. This involves guiding students in considering specific challenges, resources and strategies in developing an action plan and appraising the plan.

Develop an action plan

An action plan guides implementation activities. The quality of the plan will be influenced by the thoroughness of students' deliberations. Invite students to list specific actions that must happen if the proposed solution is to be carried out. A data chart may be a useful thinking strategy to support students in analyzing the following steps:

- specific actions to be taken;
- available resources—both intellectual and material—required to complete each step;
- people or person responsible for carrying out each step and when each task will be completed.

Once the planning is completed, encourage students to anticipate challenges (and possible solutions) they are likely to encounter. Finally, ask students to think about the order in which each action should be implemented and re-arrange the sequence of steps as needed.

Appraise the plan

Once students have planned their course of action, encourage them to assess the soundness of the plan by considering criteria, such as:

- *clear:*
Are the goals and tasks of the plan clear?
- *effective:*
Are the proposed strategies likely to lead to the desired solution? What might be some other effects of these strategies (i.e., unintended consequences)?
- *respectful:*
Does the proposed action plan respect the interest of all stakeholders?

- *realistic:*
Is the plan doable given our time and available resources?
- *comprehensive:*
Does the plan contain and sequence the important tasks necessary for successful implementation?

Implement and evaluate the action

At this stage, students initiate and carry out the plan. As they do so, they will reflect on and assess the extent to which the planned action is working. This involves assisting students in managing the progress of the project, evaluating the results and debriefing the experience.

Manage the project

Learning to implement a social action plan and keep it running smoothly may be challenging for some groups. Students will likely need to learn new skills or acquire additional information in order to successfully carry out the plan. They may need support in the following areas:

- acquiring expertise;
- anticipating emerging resource needs;
- being flexible and willingly adjusting the plan as circumstances warrant;
- tracking the progress of each activity and revising actions in light of the ongoing monitoring of results.

Evaluate results

Evaluation focuses on the project's implementation as well as its effectiveness. Discuss with students whether it is possible to determine if the planned action had the intended effect. Evaluation of the success of the project involves two activities:

- discussing the specific criteria to assess whether the project has had (or is having) desired results, and whether there could be any unintended outcomes;
- collecting appropriate evidence to assess the degree to which each of the project's tasks is satisfied; considering how the evidence will be gathered, from whom, when and how the findings will be compiled.

Draw closure

Invite students to consider how they might publicly share what they have accomplished and learned by selecting an interested audience and determining an appropriate means of sharing the project and its results (see *Assessment possibilities* above).

Encourage students to formally thank the various individuals and groups whose assistance contributed to the project's success.

When the project is completed, debrief the experience so students can reflect on the effectiveness of group and individual contributions and about conducting social action.

Tools for social action projects

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE	CRITERIA FOR JUDGMENT	CRITICAL THINKING VOCABULARY	THINKING STRATEGIES	HABITS OF MIND
<i>What do students need to know in order to...</i>	<i>By what criteria should students judge...</i>	<i>What concepts will help students...</i>	<i>What strategies might help students...</i>	<i>What attitudes or values will help students...</i>
Clarify the problem				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the problem to be solved? • Who are the principal stakeholders? • Where is the problem located? • When does it arise? • Why is the situation problematic? • How did the problem come about? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clear • specific • inclusive • complex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • problem • stakeholder • interests • symptom vs. cause 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • information needs • 5W's +H • graphic organizers • causal links • role-play • interests inventory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tolerance for ambiguity • inquiring attitude
Agree on a sound solution				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has been tried? • What could be tried? • What might happen? • What interests will be affected? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • diversity of proposals • effective • sustainable • feasible • respectful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • short vs. long term consequences • intended and unintended consequences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • short-list • pro/con chart 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • persistence • thinking outside the box • open-minded
Plan an effective course of action				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies might be used to implement the agreed-upon solution? • What resources are available to support each strategy? • What obstacles are we likely to face? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effective • respectful • realistic • comprehensive 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • task analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • thoroughness
Implement and evaluate the action				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we need to learn? • Has each step in the plan been carried out? • What are the effects of the action? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • successful implementation • successful resolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intended vs. unintended effects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implementation checklist • check-backs • periodic reviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • perseverance • flexibility

For more complete information about the tools see *Active Citizenship: Student Action Projects* available at www.tc2.ca.

Assessing social action projects

Below are possible criteria for assessing students' understanding and use of the tools for each task. Select the most appropriate criteria and assess for learning using peer, self, and teacher feedback throughout the project.

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE	CRITERIA FOR JUDGMENT	CRITICAL THINKING VOCABULARY	THINKING STRATEGIES	HABITS OF MIND
Assessing the clarity of the problem				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knows who the principal stakeholders are and why it is a problem Knows where and when the problem occurs Knows how the problem came about 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effectively articulates the problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands concepts such as problem, stakeholder, interests, cause and effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses of charts and role play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tolerance for ambiguity Inquiring attitude
Assessing the soundness of the solution				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knows options that have or might have been tried Knows what might happen and how interests might be affected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops a diversity of proposals Judges the most effective, sustainable, feasible and respectful option 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands short- and long-term and intended and unintended options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of lists and charts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Persistent Imaginative Open-minded
Plan an effective course of action				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knows the strategies and needed resources to implement the solution Knows the likely obstacles to expect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops a plan of action that is effective, respectful, realistic and comprehensive 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of task analysis and other planning tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thorough
Implement and evaluate the action				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the expertise needed to implement the plan Knows the extent to which the plan has been implemented Knows the effects the plan has had 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Judges the success in implementing the plan Judges the success in solving the problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands intended and unintended effects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of checklist, review and other monitoring and evaluation tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perseverance Flexible

For detailed rubrics and more complete assessment information see *Active Citizenship: Student Action Projects* available at www.tc2.ca.

section 3

IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS

HELPING THE HOMELESS

Intermediate students are often unaware or misinformed about the issues related to homelessness (e.g., pervasiveness, causes, what homelessness is, who is at risk for becoming homeless, services available, etc). Although the extent to which homelessness exists in most communities and the services available to people who are homeless vary, it is a growing concern across the country. While historically thought of as a crisis in urban centres such as Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary and Montreal, there is an increasing incidence of homelessness in suburbs. In the past, men used to comprise the vast majority of people who are homeless; now many more women, children and youth are becoming homeless. Lack of income, insufficient affordable housing and job loss are forcing thousands of Canadians into homelessness. Statistics Canada (2006) reports that 1.45 million Canadians want to work, but cannot find a job. In recent years, homelessness has become a major political issue in Canada.

The teacher wanted to raise students' awareness of homelessness in their community and help them develop an empathetic understanding of poverty. In doing so, she hoped they might recognize their own privilege and realize their ability to contribute.

Introduce the topic

The teacher began by discussing with the students the kinds of homes they live in (e.g., apartments, condominiums, detached houses). She pointed out that while students' families likely reside in their own homes, some people in the community might not have any home. These people are homeless. She asked the class to speculate why some people may not have a home (e.g., no money, runaways, illness, loss of job) and invited students to share their ideas of what it might be like to be homeless.

She then introduced excerpts from the movie *Pursuit of Happyness* produced by Columbia Pictures. The movie is based on a true story about a man named Christopher Gardner and his son, who through a series of misfortunes become homeless.

After watching the movie excerpts, the teacher invited the students to discuss the issues using the following questions:

- How did Chris feel about being homeless?
- Was it his fault that he and his son were homeless?
- What challenges did Chris face being homeless?
- What words describe Chris' feelings?
- How should we treat people who are homeless?

The teacher then shared some statistics about homelessness in their community and introduced the idea of carrying out a social action project.

Clarify the problem

Gather information

Following the discussion, the class raised many questions about the issues surrounding people who are homeless. For example: what causes homelessness? Where and what do people who are homeless eat? How do people who are homeless keep clean? What support services are available? What things do people who are homeless need most? What other obstacles people who are homeless face? Is it possible to get out of homelessness?

Students realized they needed more information before they could decide how to best help. They used the Internet to research homelessness and the types of organizations and services available. They watched documentaries about the experiences of people who are homeless: “Youth Share Personal Stories of Homelessness”, created by Raising the Roof; “In the Gutter and Other Good Places” (1993) a film that follows the lives of four men in Calgary who are homeless. The students also arranged guest speakers, including a representative from a local agency who supported youth on the streets.

Recognize complexity

As they compiled their information, the teacher assisted the class in considering varying perspectives on the problem. She asked the students to identify stakeholders that may be affected by homelessness and speculate about their specific interests (e.g., *police*—public safety; increased likelihood of crime; *people who are homeless*—shelter, food, clothing, personal safety; *health care workers*—increasing demands on medical services; inability of the homeless to pay for medication and services; *community agencies*—finding or advocating for affordable housing, having enough personnel to help the homeless access services; raising money to provide services and meet the basic needs of the homeless).

After students explored some of the complexities of homelessness they arrived at some key understandings:

- homelessness is a complex issue with many causes;
- reducing homelessness requires the coordination and support from many people;
- people who are homeless have limited access to resources; struggle to meet their basic needs; often suffer from malnutrition and chronic illnesses; are at increased risk for substance abuse, trauma and dropout.

State the problem

Students became discouraged at the enormity of the issue. The ‘problem’ as the group defined it was how to make a difference. The teacher reassured them that some problems would be very difficult for the class to solve but they could still make difference. They needed to consider what might make the difference for someone even if the person was homeless.

Agree on a sound solution

Generate possible solutions

The teacher encouraged students to consider all they had learned about the challenges facing people who are homeless as they brainstormed possible ways to make a difference (e.g., give them tents, scarves and mittens, lobby local community centres to offer free showers, prepare and deliver lunch, build lockers to store things, provide small items that were easy to store).

Short-list options

After considering which options would be most effective and feasible, they created a short-list. They then examined the merits of each suggestion in greater detail. For each possible solution, they drew an overall conclusion about its suitability (“Yes”, “No” or “Maybe”) to help them select the most promising option. They chose to fill backpacks with helpful items for youth who are homeless.

Plan an effective course of action

As students developed their action plan they realized there were many steps that had to be carried out. They had to conduct research on the backpacks themselves (e.g., size, quantity, cost, where they would get them) and determine which items would be most helpful to include. They then had to decide how to get the needed items (e.g., bring them from home, ask for donations, fund raise). Students quickly realized they would need the support of their parents and the community as well to get the backpacks filled and distributed.

Implement and evaluate the action

Students began their implementation by determining the criteria they might use to select the most helpful items (e.g., be small, easy to carry; meet basic needs; have lasting effects). Next, they brainstormed possible items, checking their initial list of suggestions against the donation requests from a local organization for youth who are homeless. Overlooked items were added to the class list.

Manage the project

After the items were short-listed, students realized they needed more information—the cost and availability of each item (i.e., location, convenience, number)—before they could reach consensus about which ones to include. Students looked through flyers and visited stores to do some comparison-shopping for both the suggested items and backpacks.

Once the ‘market research’ was done, the class embarked on fundraising and material gathering. They organized a number of bake sales, earned money by doing extra chores at home and wrote letters to local businesses explaining the project and asking for cash and/or material donations. Students also created a brochure to raise awareness of homelessness in the community, explain the nature of the project and outline the need for support.

Through their efforts, students managed to assemble ten backpacks each filled with seven helpful items. A small sub-group of students made individual ‘gift cards’ offering words of encouragement and letting the recipients know they were cared for.

Draw closure

Before discussing how the backpacks would best be distributed, the teacher invited the class to consider how the recipients might feel and respond differently to the class’ well-meaning intentions (e.g., appreciation, embarrassment). The class talked about how they might reduce the likelihood of the youth who are homeless feeling a loss of dignity or self-worth (e.g., act anonymously; ask a community organization to distribute the backpacks to those who really want/need them; give them in a way that makes the person feel good). The students decided to deliver the backpacks to the local agency that worked with youth on the streets and ask their workers to distribute the backpacks as they saw fit.

In wrapping up the project, the class wrote thank you letters to all those who had contributed and debriefed the experience.

Evaluate results

A month after the project, the class received a thank you letter from the charitable organization and photographs showing the distribution of the backpacks. The class felt a sense of accomplishment that they had made a difference in the lives of five individuals. Many students commented that before this project they did not think about other people—especially the homeless—in their community. Their participation resulted in increased compassion for and an understanding of the challenges facing people who are homeless.