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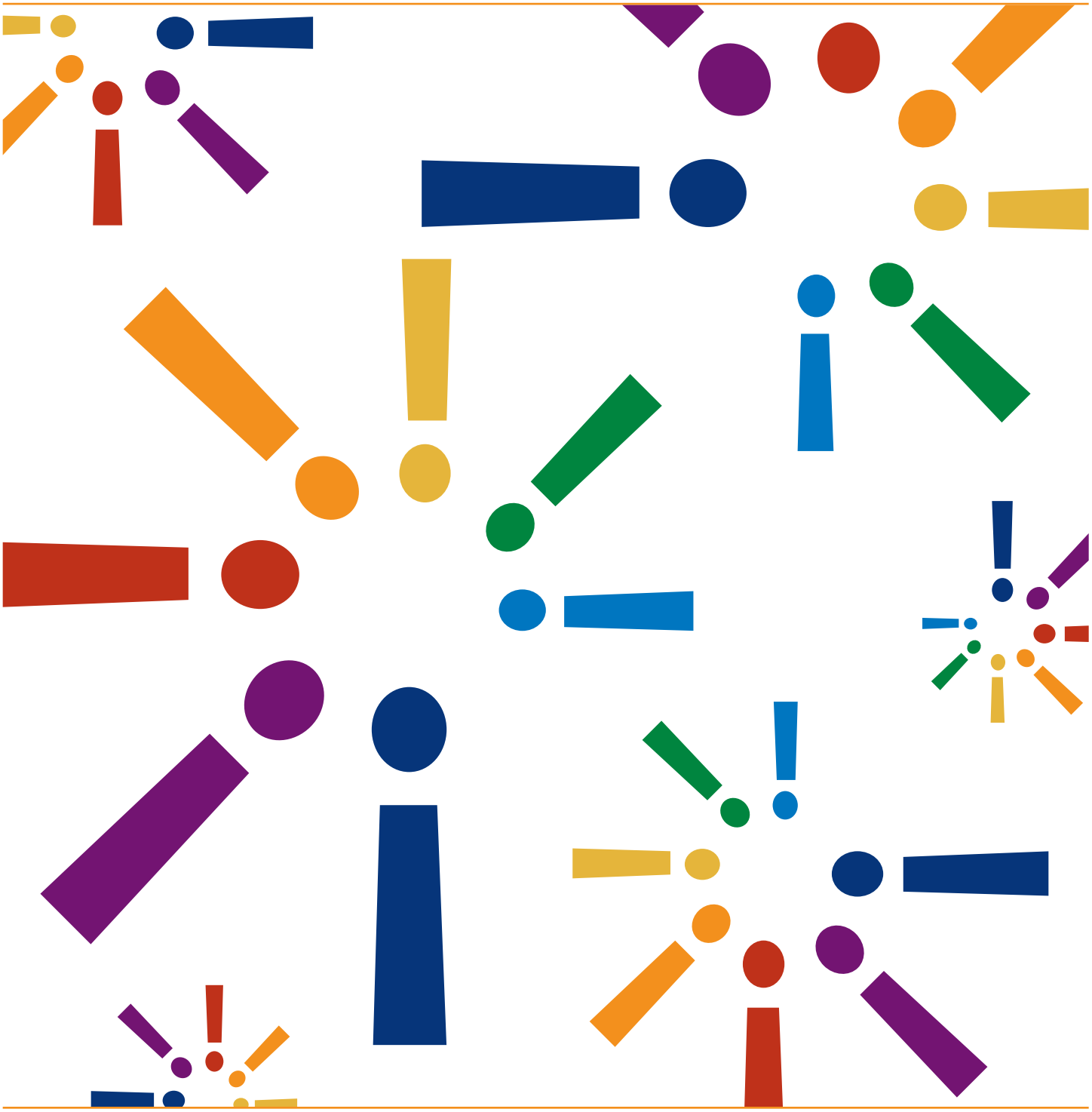
social **action** projects

MAKING A DIFFERENCE



Canadian Teachers' Federation
Fédération canadienne des enseignantes et des enseignants

imagineaction

The Critical Thinking Consortium

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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

RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT CONSUMERISM

An assembly speaker came in and spoke to the students about issues of over consumption. Students in the high school started a movement where for one day every month, they asked their peers to sign a pledge committing not to buy anything that day.

HELPING TO REDUCE BLINDNESS IN NEPAL

Students learned through an organization called SEVA that millions of villagers have no access to adequate eye care. They raised funds to support operations for cataract patients.

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.

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.

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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, Futlz, 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?

TC^2 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.

Types of action projects

Indirect action
influencing those who have power to effect change

Direct action
directly addressing a problem and effecting change

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	• sponsoring a school wide information session about healthy eating
	• requesting the allocation of school ground space for a garden plot	• launching a campaign to reduce litter
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 is it 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 *What do students need to know in order to…*	CRITERIA FOR JUDGMENT *By what criteria should students judge…*	CRITICAL THINKING VOCABULARY *What concepts will help students…*	THINKING STRATEGIES *What strategies might help students…*	HABITS OF MIND *What attitudes or values will help students…*
Clarify the problem				
• 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?	• clear • specific • inclusive • complex	• problem • stakeholder • interests • symptom vs. cause	• information needs • 5W's +H • graphic organizers • causal links • role-play • interests inventory	• tolerance for ambiguity • inquiring attitude
Agree on a sound solution				
• What has been tried? • What could be tried? • What might happen? • What interests will be affected?	• diversity of proposals • effective • sustainable • feasible • respectful	• short vs. long term consequences • intended and unintended consequences	• short-list • pro/con chart	• persistence • thinking outside the box • open-minded
Plan an effective course of action				
• What strategies might be used to implement the agreed-upon solution? • What resources are available to support each strategy? • What obstacles we are likely to face?	• effective • respectful • realistic • comprehensive		• task analysis	• thoroughness
Implement and evaluate the action				
• What do we need to learn? • Has each step in the plan been carried out? • What are the effects of the action?	• successful implementation • successful resolution	• intended vs. unintended effects	• implementation checklist • check-backs • periodic reviews	• perseverance • flexibility

For more complete information about the tools see *Active Citizenship: Student Action Project*s 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				
• 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	• Effectively articulates the problem	• Understands concepts such as problem, stakeholder, interests, cause and effect	• Uses of charts and role play	• Tolerance for ambiguity • Inquiring attitude
Assessing the soundness of the solution				
• Knows options that have or might have been tried • Knows what might happen and how interests might be affected	• Develops a diversity of proposals • Judges the most effective, sustainable, feasible and respectful option	• Understands short- and long-term and intended and unintended options	• Use of lists and charts	• Persistent • Imaginative • Open-minded
Plan an effective course of action				
• Knows the strategies and needed resources to implement the solution • Knows the likely obstacles to expect	• Develops a plan of action that is effective, respectful, realistic and comprehensive		• Use of task analysis and other planning tools	• Thorough
Implement and evaluate the action				
• 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	• Judges the success in implementing the plan • Judges the success in solving the problem	• Understands intended and unintended effects	• Use of checklist, review and other monitoring and evaluation tools	• 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

IN OUR OWN BACKYARD

Sometimes issues in our own backyards go unnoticed. We assume they cannot be changed. This was the initial response of a grade ten social studies class when their teacher asked how the large park, located across from the school, should be used. Situated in the urban center, the park is home to over 170 species of birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals, houses an art gallery and a museum, and provides for recreation such as hiking and boating. Years earlier, the Parks and Recreation Board had completed a development plan for the park. Since then, however, residential development around the park dramatically increased, placing new pressures on the natural environment. The Board had recently developed a questionnaire on the community's priorities for the park, and expressed interest in hearing young people's ideas. The teacher wanted to engage her students as active citizens in a public process important to both the community and the students.

Clarify the problem

During initial discussions, the class identified existing park uses in relation to community needs, and shared opinions of what should be done. But as some of the complexities emerged, students believed there was little they could do to influence the park's future. As part of building further interest, they participated in a simulation where the task was to formulate a development plan for a piece of imaginary land based on the perspectives of different stakeholders. Further interest in the planning process was raised as the class came to realize that city planners were indeed interested in their views. They debated about possible forms of involvement and the possibilities for change. Would adults listen to them? The "problem" as the group defined it was how to make their views known in a way that might influence public opinion on appropriate park uses.

Agree on a sound solution

The class recognized that they needed to learn more about current uses of the park and the perspectives of various stakeholders, including the Parks Board and the Art Gallery Association. Their investigation began with a walk around the park, which allowed them to look thoughtfully through the eyes of other users. They also viewed an animated film—"Lorax", based on a Dr. Seuss book—that humorously highlighted the importance of recognizing and respecting different values and beliefs. They realized that not all members of the class would agree on park priorities.

They decided that the Park Board's questionnaire would be one way to present their views. This would give them experience with a method commonly used by governments to collect public opinions, and provide an avenue for making their own views known to the public and influencing Board decisions. When exploring further ways to have an influence, they agreed that booths could be set up during the school's Environmental Week as a means to build awareness for other students, parents and community members.

Plan an effective course of action

The group decided to create onsite data collecting stations throughout the park to learn more about the views of those who used the park. Plans were also made to invite guest speakers to come the class, including a representative from the Fish and Wildlife Department, in order to broaden perspectives and raise new questions. Students decided that they would take photographs, collect maps and maintain individual journals to record research information, questions and reflections. The goal of this data collection was to enable them to answer the questionnaire in an informed manner, and to thoughtfully engage their audience during the upcoming Environment Week.

Implement and evaluate the action

Students collected aerial photographs and maps from city planners, located their homes on the maps to situate themselves in relation to various uses of the park, considered traffic flow patterns, and hypothesized the consequences of increased activities on vegetation and wildlife habitat. They gathered observational, photographic and interview data in various settings in the park on topics such as fish and wildlife, heritage, and recreation. They also identified the priorities of various stakeholders: homeowners wanted views and property values maintained, families wanted recreation areas for children, and arts patrons wanted increased musical presentations. They considered the possible impacts of these priorities (e.g., more arts programs would raise vehicle traffic and impact wildlife). They also thought about their own perspectives and what values they did, or did not, share with other stakeholders. Through this process there was a growing awareness of the complexity of the issue.

A variety of park use options were identified as: developing further areas for trails, increasing picnic space, enhancing outdoor performance areas, restoring heritage buildings in the park, encouraging native vegetation, and improving fishing opportunities. Instructors in the Fish and Wildlife Program from the Institute of Technology made presentations on the impacts of the alternative choices. Through discussion the class came to see that some options were at odds while others complemented each other, and that decisions regarding park use had to benefit a range of community members. What could be the best balance among the diversity of needs? What options would have lasting positive change? Students began to focus on cause and affect relationships (e.g., increased urbanization affected water quality for swimming because storm runoff augmented phosphorus levels, which in turn caused algae growth; if swimming were to be allowed, there would be impacts on the water fowl habitat and feeding habits).

When individually completing the Parks Board's questionnaire, they evaluated the options and described their future visions for the park. The challenge in creating the interpretive booths was to carefully represent these ideas in ways that were informative and thought provoking for a wide audience. Parents, community members, and representatives from the Parks Board had the opportunity to interact with the students and see the results of their research.

As a result of the investigation, the class felt well prepared to complete the written questionnaire. This participation meant that their perspectives were considered by the local government (the class response constituted a significant portion of the youth responders to the questionnaire). Their involvement was acknowledged and praised in a letter received from the Parks Board. The Board noted that in the past it was difficult to get youth input on such studies.

Students felt a sense of pride as they received positive comments from community members, including representatives from the city, who attended their interpretive booths. The students had presented their ideas visually and orally to an appreciative audience who went away better informed about a range of park uses. A local newspaper article recognized this achievement.

In discussions after the project, students said that as a result of their efforts, they felt more confident about themselves, became better-informed citizens, knew more about how to be involved in their community, learned research and problem solving skills, and were better able to listen to other people's perspectives and question their own. The initial negative response to the question at the beginning of the project—"What can we do to influence decisions on the park?"—had now changed. Through action their voices had been heard.

When park planners reviewed the input from students and others, they found that most respondents favoured protecting the park's natural state. As a result, the first phase of the new management plan focused on improving water quality in the park and enhancing the habitat for local animals and birds.

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