

GOAL: Get involved with a community issue



Contributed by Dharini Abeysekera
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Introduction

Getting involved in a community issue can be done in a small group setting or in a one-on-one tutoring pair. The starting point should be an issue in your community. This issue can be one that affects your daily life and that you have the power to change such as getting better trash service or changing a bus route. Broader issues may be of concern to you too; issues such as homelessness or healthcare. Either way, if the issue is relevant to your life then you will feel motivated to work on this issue. Getting active in your community helps build self esteem and in time, you become a role model for others inspiring them to work for positive change.

Getting Started

To focus on a topic of concern and begin the process of identifying action steps, ask yourself the following “W” questions. Jot down all responses on paper (remember, there are no wrong answers!):

- What are the issues that affect your daily life? What are the challenges that face your community, large and small?
- Why are these issues of concern?
- What change do you want to see?
- What are your priorities? (Select an issue you would most like to focus on.)
- Where can you find more information about this issue?
- Who can you contact?
- Who else could be involved? Who are your partners?
- Where can you make your concerns heard?
- What actions can you take?
- When do you take action?

To research an issue, don't forget these community resources:

- Libraries
- Churches
- Government (see the text box, below)
- Independent non-profit organizations
- Community Centers
- Schools
- Universities and Colleges
- Your neighbors, homeowners associations, tenants associations, or other neighborhood groups.

Probably the best place to start is at the library reference desk. The Reference Librarian can direct you to online and other valuable community resources.

There are people in government who work for you.

In your local government there are two types of people:

- There are people elected to represent you. For instance, your town has a mayor and a city council. Their job is to make sure the community gets what it needs. They work for everyone in the area they represent.
- There are also people who work in local government departments. Their job is to help different parts of the city run well. For instance, there is a police department and a fire department. Most cities have a department of Public Works that takes care of street repairs. While the names may be different from one city to another, most cities have the same kind of departments

To find out who to call, look in your phone book. There is a section called the "government pages" near the front of the book. Or you can call the operator to ask for a number.

[Excerpted from How to Be Heard and Make a Difference!]

Books & Materials

How to Be Heard and Make a Difference! A Workbook by Students for Students. Edited by Susan Clark and Taylor Willingham. Santa Clara County Public Library/California State Library, 1995. Find it on the California Library Literacy Services website under Learner Resources: <http://libraryliteracy.org/learners/resources.html>

Civic Participation and Community Action Sourcebook: A Resource for Adult Educators. Andy Na, Editor. Published by World Education, Inc., 2003. Find a long excerpt of this book at <http://books.google.com/books>. You might want to recommend that your literacy staff purchase a copy of this book for the library shelves.

The Change Agent, a semi-annual newspaper bringing social justice issues to adult education through ready-to-use lessons, writings, math activities and graphics. Learners are also invited to contribute articles on a given theme. New England Literacy Resource Center at World Education. www.nelrc.org/changeagent

Making Connections: Literacy and EAL Curriculum from a Feminist Perspective – A collection of curriculum on topics that address the issues of women's lives including the pervasiveness and magnitude of violence against women. Editor: Kate Nonesuch. Publisher: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, 1996. For full text of this publication go to: http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/Making_C/Cover.PDF

Vocabulary

- ◆ Action
- ◆ Meeting
- ◆ Community
- ◆ Activist
- ◆ Information
- ◆ Resource
- ◆ Participation
- ◆ Change
- ◆ Issue
- ◆ Resource
- ◆ Advocate
- ◆ Research
- ◆ Reference

Reading & Writing Practice

- **Warm up.** Consider these questions and either write the answers or tell them to your tutor and s/he can write them down.

The problem I want to solve in my neighborhood is...

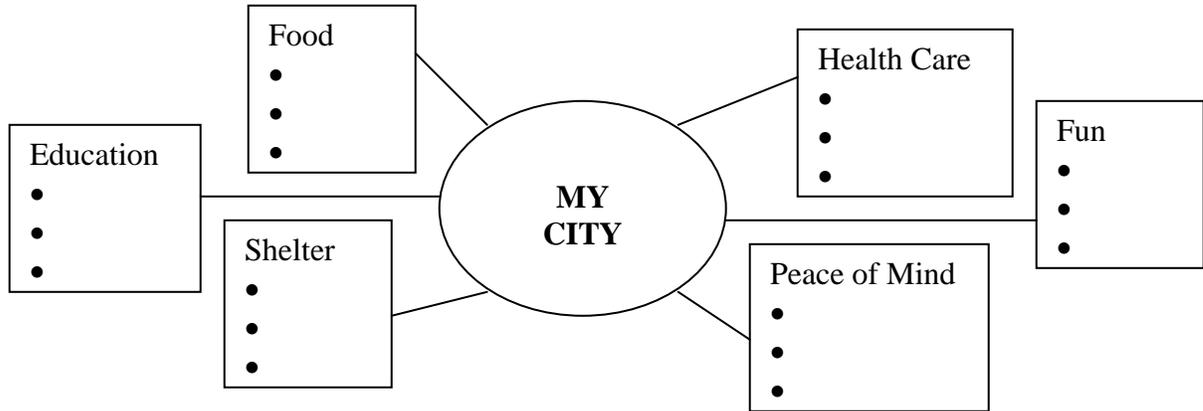
Where is the problem? (street/address)...

The problem is important to me because...

What has been tried in the past (if anything) to solve this problem? What is the history of this issue in the community?

What are some ideas about what should be done now?

- **Mapping Neighborhood Resources.** Reading maps is a useful skill to have. Mapping the neighborhood you live/work/study in is a meaningful way to develop this skill. It is also a strategy to identify a lack of resources in the community and is the precursor to action for community needs:
 - Draw a word-web. Put your city or town in a circle in the middle. Draw six lines beginning at the circle and ending in squares. Fill in squares with the categories Food, Education, Shelter, Health Care, Fun, and Peace of Mind (churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.).



- Brainstorm where you would go to obtain each of these items. For example, where would you go to buy food? List those places in the Food box.
 - Provide a map of your city or town or draw a simple map. Find the places listed on your word-web and plot them on the map. Practice giving directions to the grocery store, church etc. using the map.
 - Once everything has been plotted, identify which resources are missing or need improvement. For instance, are there parks in one area but not another?
 - Discuss next steps. Ask the question: What can we do to change the situation?
- **Get Organized.** If you've decided on a particular issue or problem, it's time to look at the overall picture and ask yourself: What do we need to get this job done? List those tasks from start to finish. If others are helping you, ask them to volunteer for a task and put their name next to it. Think about a timeline and when the task should be completed. Use a form like the one below to keep track:

Task	Who?	When?	How?	Done

- **Doing Online Research.** Especially if your issue is a very broad or wide-spread one, you will want to know who else in your community is working to address that issue. To get this kind of information, the Internet can be very helpful. You must be comfortable with computers to do this on your own (see the "Search the Internet" goal in this curriculum guide if you would like to improve in this area). Or you can involve your tutor or literacy staff as needed for help with searching for information and note taking.

- Step 1:** Use a computer at your literacy program or library.
- Step 2:** Open up a search engine like Google – www.google.com
- Step 3:** Type a search term into the box

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- Step 4:** Read through search results
- Step 5:** Click on the result that you think will provide the most information
- Step 6:** Type new search terms into the box to get more information or to narrow your search.
- Step 7:** Print or write down the information that is most helpful to you.
- Step 8:** Repeat Steps 3 –7 as needed

Example: We were researching “homelessness” and we already knew that there was a national organization that helps the homeless called “Dorothy Day Organizations.” We wanted to know if there was a local agency:

- Step 1:** We used our literacy computer lab.
- Step 2:** We connected to the Internet and went to Google – www.google.com
- Step 3:** We typed “Dorothy Day” in the search window.
- Step 4:** We got the following results: Dorothy Day - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia
- Step 5:** We clicked on that result and found this entry:
“Dorothy Day (November 8, 1897 – November 29, 1980) was an American journalist, social activist, anarchist, and devout Catholic convert. Day became most famous for founding, with Peter Maurin, the Catholic Worker movement.”
While this is interesting, we really want to find something about homeless services in our area so...
- Step 6:** We went back to the search box and refined our search by adding the word “organization” to “Dorothy Day:”
- Step 7:** We found what we needed including all of the contact information and printed it out:

Organization: Dorothy Day House of Berkeley
Address: 1931 Center Street, PO Box 12701, Berkeley, CA 94712
Contact: Kessy Gbenedio
Phone (510) 466-5553
Interest Area: Community, Homeless & Housing, Hunger

- **Learning to Use the Phone Book.** Knowing how to use a phone book is one way to help solve a community problem. It is a key to finding resources.
 - Find a variety of current phone books either from home or from the library shelves (usually near the reference desk – ask the librarian)
 - Together, get familiar with the different parts of the phone book such as the yellow and blue pages, the government pages and other services at the front of the book.
 - Make sure the principles of alphabetical order are understood. Search for people and organizations that can help with the issue.

- **Write a Letter** – Use a business letter format when writing a letter. Start each part of the letter on the left side of the page:

Your address
Date
Name of person and title or name of the office
Address of the office
Dear _____,
Body of the letter:
• Explain the problem
• Give details: the place, days and times if they are relevant to your issue
• Tell what you would like to see happen
• Ask for a written response to your letter
• Tell how you can be contacted
Sincerely,
Your Signature
Print/type your name
Your phone number and/or e-mail

Tips for writing letters:

1. Be cool! Don't write an angry message; remember you are looking for solutions. Write a first draft; leave it for a while; come back to it. Have someone else read it before you mail it.
 2. Make a copy of the letter for your records. You can refer to your letter if follow up is necessary.
 3. Call if you do not hear anything in on one or two weeks.
- **Sending an E-mail.** You will need your own e-mail address and account for this exercise. (See the "Write, send and receive e-mail" goal in this curriculum guide.) Use the basic letter writing format above.
 - Use a computer at your literacy program or library
 - Put the e-mail address of the person you are writing to in the "To" line
 - Describe what the e-mail is about in the "subject" line
 - Write the e-mail using the basic letter writing format, above

- Send the e-mail
- Go to “Sent Items,” find the e-mail you have just written, and print yourself a copy

Tips for writing e-mails:

1. Write a meaningful subject line. Remember that organizations and individuals get a lot of e-mails. People who get e-mails read the subject line in order to decide whether to open, forward, file, or trash a message. So make sure to write a clear subject line.
 2. Use standard capitalization and spelling. If the whole message is in capital letters it comes across as shouting. No capital letters make it look sloppy.
 3. Identify yourself clearly. If you do not know the person you are writing, be sure to include your name and any other important identification information in the first few sentences.
 4. Don't assume privacy. Computer hackers, the FBI and the e-mail administrator could read e-mails. Do not write anything that could get you into trouble in an e-mail.
- **Publicize Your Issue.** Is your issue one in which you would like to involve and inform others? Here are some things you can do to spread the word:
 - Create a flyer inviting people to a meeting
 - Write slogans for pickets and banners
 - Write a survey to gather information
 - Write a letter to the newspaper
 - Speak up at a public meeting
 - Call your radio station

Games and Activities

- **Using Song to Encourage Thinking and Discussion.** Using songs or poems to explore a potentially sensitive topic is non-threatening. It is also a fun way to vary lesson material. What follows is a model for using a song as lesson material:
 - Step 1:** Bring in a song/s that highlights an issue and/or use a song that you know.
 - Step 2:** Develop pre-listening or warm-up questions that will encourage critical thinking about the issue.
 - Step 3:** Find the lyrics on-line or type up the words of the song. Follow the words on the handout while listening to the song.
 - Step 4:** *Understanding the Song:* Ask questions about details in the song to ensure comprehension.
 - Step 5:** *Word Study:* Create a “cloze” or fill-in-the gap exercise, especially using any rhyme words; highlight grammar if available within the context of the song.
 - Step 6:** *Guided Discussion:* Ask questions that will help identify action that can be taken to address the issue presented in the song.

Example: The following song excerpt helped facilitate discussion on the issue of homelessness:

You can still hear the sound of her accordion playing
Each afternoon by the subway stairs
She plays a battered pearl grey Hohner
Same color as her hair

She's got the case wide open at her feet.
And the people throw money in as they rush by her
She's got a post card pinned on the lining
Of the savior with his heart on fire

From: "Singer of the Sacred Heart" by Connie Kaldor

Understanding the Song:

- Where is the performer playing? Describe her surroundings.
- What is an accordion? What color is her accordion?
- Why do you think that she is called the "Singer of the Sacred Heart"?

Word Study:

- Find the contractions (two words that haven been combined into one, like she + is = she's) in the song and write out the two complete words for each contraction.
- Create a cloze (fill-in-the-blank) exercise, like the one below. Listen to the song again and fill in the blanks. The number of dashes can provide a clue about the number of letters in the word. (There is also a dash if punctuation is needed.) Play the song as often as necessary.

You can still hear ___ sound of her accordion _____
Each afternoon by the _____ stairs
She plays a battered _____ grey Hohner
Same color __ her hair

She's got the case _____ open at her feet.
____ the people throw money in __ they rush by her
_____ got a post card pinned __ the lining
Of the _____ with his heart on fire

Guided Discussion:

- Describe street performers you have seen?
- Are they different from street folks selling the street newspaper?
- Who are the homeless?
- Are there more homeless in the cities? Why?
- Do older people who are homeless have problems that are different from young people who are homeless?

- What can be done to help the homeless?
- **Making a Quilt or Collage.** Quilts made of felt or collages made of pictures and found objects can be colorful and dramatic. It can bring attention to your issue while decorating the space.
 - Step 1:** Collect materials. For the quilt: fabric glue, bits of fabric, ribbon and felt for cutting up, Squares of felt, a large piece of felt for the background and scissors. For the collage: pictures from magazines, found objects, craft glue and scissors
 - Step 2:** Talk about what you want to show on the quilt or collage. Go square by square for the quilt. Example: each square could show the history of your issue.
 - Step 3:** Work on the squares and the collage.
 - Step 4:** Enjoy
- **Analyzing Media Response.** Television is a powerful reality in our day-to-day lives. Using it as a tool to encourage critical thinking could be both entertaining and educational. This exercise can be adapted for radio and newspapers.

- Step 1:** Watch the news on different TV channels for coverage of the same issue
- Step 2:** Use this handout to record what you notice:

Name of Program	TV Station	Good	Bad	Why:

- Step 3:** Discuss responses at your next tutoring session.

Real World Practice

- Write a Public Service Announcement (PSA) bringing attention to your issue and send it to local newspapers and radio/TV stations
- Advocate for your issue at your local city council meetings
- Start a petition to change the law relating to your issue

Independent Practice/Homework Ideas

- Participate in a demonstration or event that highlights your issue

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- Volunteer at a local organization that is making a difference on the issue that concerns you (see the “Become a Volunteer” goal in this curriculum guide)
- Organize a donations collection drive at your literacy program (food, clothing, used books, etc.). Talk to your library literacy staff to get something started.

Milestones

- **Initial Effort** – This is the preparation stage: brainstorm for ideas; develop action plans; and begin research.
- **Making Progress** – Here you are taking action. You are writing and sending letters; making phone calls; going to meetings; and even making presentations.
- **Accomplished** – Of course this can vary based on the issue you are focusing on. But generally, you have accomplished this goal when the issue is resolved; a particular phase of a campaign ends; or even if you hit a dead-end and recognize the need to regroup and begin again. Some issues like “homelessness” will be too large to resolve on your own but you can take on one small piece of the homelessness issue – like doing a drive for donations of coats or blankets – and then accomplish that piece of a very large issue.

Contributor’s Biography

Dharini Abeysekera. Dharini began as an English Language teacher in her country of birth, Sri Lanka. Over the years she has been involved in tutor training, curriculum development and program evaluation in a variety of language instruction settings. At present she volunteers at Berkeley Reads and works part time. She lives with her family in Berkeley.