

The Five-Step Process to Issue Investigation

Step 1: Choosing an Issue

How you and your learners choose an issue will depend on many factors, including time, resources, and age-appropriateness. Ideally, the learners should be actively involved in generating a list of possible issues and in choosing the issue to investigate. It is important that your learners see the issue as "their" issue and not just "your" issue. There are many strategies for generating an inventory of issues and choosing an issue. Here are some:

Generating an Inventory of Issues...

- Conduct a brainstorming session with students to find out what issues they are concerned about.
- Have students bring in newspaper articles/summaries from TV about local issues for a designated period of time.
- Have students conduct Internet searches
- Have students interview other members of the community, including other students as well as their parents and other adults.
- Conduct a walking tour of the school and the neighborhood.

Choosing an Issue...

- From the list of issues generated, have students:
- Develop criteria for choosing an issue and use the criteria to examine and rank the issues
- Vote
- Lobby each other and then vote
- Reach consensus

Helpful Hint: Collect newspapers for a month or two and let students begin by examining these for issues.

Step 2: Clearly identifying the problem is the most crucial step in the process.

This step involves facilitating the students thoroughly researching the issue; gathering information from a variety of sources; and identifying and analyzing a variety of viewpoints. Too often, students want to jump from identifying an issue to generating solutions without taking this important step of researching the problem and considering different perspectives. In your planning, you should allow adequate time for this step.

Students can gather information from...

- The library
- Community experts
- First-hand observation
- Media
- Interviews with community groups
- Guest speakers from community groups/agencies

To analyze the issue, students need to know...

- Who are the interested parties?
- How are they affected by the problem?
- How do they perceive the issue?
- What do they value?
- How would they want the issue resolved?

Ultimately this step will require gathering info from several sources, clarifying biases, sorting fact from opinion, challenging assumptions and thinking critically about the consequences. Because this step involves so many skills and types of activities, subsequent lessons will focus on Step Two.

Step 3: Searching for Solutions

Searching for solutions engages students in understanding alternative views and in exploring a range of alternative solutions. At this stage, learners need time to think creatively and to weigh possible solutions by revisiting the problem definition stage. At this stage, learners may move back and forth several times from searching for solutions to redefining the problems as new information comes to light.

A List of Possible Solutions can be generated by:

- Drawing on information gathered through research about the issue
- Considering how interested parties in the issue would like it solved
- Creating original ideas

Step 4: Evaluating the Options

Once students have generated a range of solutions, it is time to critically examine those solutions in order to narrow the list down for potential action plans. Students will need to be guided through the consideration of the "pluses and minuses" of each possible solution. Here are some questions to use in facilitating the students' evaluation of the possible solutions:

- What are the values and interests served by each solution?
- What possible outcomes does each solution hold?
- For each solution, what are the barriers that might stand in the way of the desired outcome?
- Does the solution directly relate to the problem as the students defined it?
- To which solution is it most feasible for the students to meaningfully contribute?
- What resources and time would be required?
- Is the solution a "win-win" or a "win-lose"?

Step 5: Taking Action

One of the fundamental aims of EE is citizen involvement with and contribution to the resolution of issues that impact our daily lives. Dr. Harold Hungerford has written extensively about six categories of responsible citizen action that can be taken to resolve environmental issues. These are:

1. Persuasion - An effort to verbally motivate human beings to take positive environmental action as a function of modified values.
2. Consumerism - An economic threat by an individual or a group aimed at some form of behavioral modification in business or industry or some conservation mode of behavior with respect to goods and/or services.
3. Political Action - An effort aimed at persuading an electorate, a legislator (or legislature), or executive governmental agency to conform to the values held by the person or persons taking that action.
4. Legal Action - Any legal/judiciary action taken by an individual and/or organization which is aimed at some restraint preceding some environmental behavior perceived as undesirable.
5. Ecomanagement - Any physical action taken by an individual or a group aimed directly at maintaining or improving the existing ecosystems

And, finally interactions of any of the above.