

Script: stimulate learning through societal issues

Hi, welcome to the Digital Destiny Principle “Learning through societal issues”. In this module we will begin by clarifying what a societal issue is and inspire you why they provide an engaging and rich learning context in your classroom and finally give you tools and methods to work on societal issues with your students.

Let's dig in!

A societal issue

How do you know when an issue or a challenge is a societal issue? Well, there are four criteria through which you can decide whether it's a societal issue. Let's go through them.

1. Societal issues have negative consequences for a large proportion of the population.
2. People recognize them as problems to be addressed.
3. They challenge a shared value.
4. They can be addressed and solved by different means (social action, resources, money...).

When an issue meets these criteria then you know that you are dealing with a societal issue.

By the way check out the Bullseye Method in the module ‘learning through thinking’ you can use this visual method on your own or with your students to determine whether a problem or challenge is a societal issue.

Wicked problems

As you reflect on a societal issue you may notice that knowledge alone isn't sufficient to address the issue. There are people with diverse norms and values, of which some might be controversial. These can be called “wicked problems”.

Because these wicked problems are not linear, and they do not present a clear path toward a solution, they create a perfect way to build a rich learning environment in a classroom that encourages and supports dialogue and interaction. They also encourage the development of explicit thinking, reflection, evaluation, and they create an opportunity for integrated learning.

Impact societal issues

Societal issues such as the impact of smartphones on children, access to healthy food, inclusion and gender equality are issues that can allow you to relate more to your students' lives. You will quickly notice that each of these issues impact your life in direct and indirect ways. Either way, you can draw a clear connection between yourself and these issues, and between your students and these issues. They are part of your day-to-day life, and they are part of your students' lives as well. They are RELEVANT.

When students can connect what is being discussed in the classroom to their personal lives; their interest and engagement grows. Suddenly, the things they learn about have meaning to them.

That topic can help create a rich and safe learning environment where in you and your students can continue to enhance that meaning by inviting other students to share, think, listen, experiment, fail and try again.

Are you a teacher who recognizes the central role of creativity in your classroom? Are you passionate about engaging your students in exploring ideas and issues and challenging their thinking? Regardless, we are going to support you in creating a rich learning environment to do so.

Selecting a societal issue

You may be wondering, well, how do I decide which societal issue to bring into my classroom? You yourself know your classroom and students best and there are many avenues to select a societal issue to explore in your classroom.

Be sure to consider who is in your classroom as well as their backgrounds and lives to ensure you select an issue that is appropriate. Maybe you read or heard about an issue. Remember it needs to be relevant for your students.

Another option is to let the students choose. You can brainstorm together and make a democratic selection. You may have heard or observed your students talking about issues that you can highlight. Or you could present several examples of societal issues to the classroom and let them decide as a group.

You can help your students begin to understand the complexity of the issue by using the Venn diagram method. Is it a social issue? Is it an environmental issue? Is it an economical issue? Or is it perhaps a combination of the three?

Breaking down societal issues

You might find that an issue seems so complex that you need to break it down into smaller sub-issues before you start to tackle the subject. One of these sub-issues might arise in the classroom and you will want to help the students recognize that it is a part of a larger societal issue.

Regardless of the direction in which you are moving, there are wonderful methods to engage your students with the process. For example, if your classroom is beginning to explore homelessness in their city, you can use the methods in this module. These invite students to share personal stories of an interaction with the issue and help them to suss out the smaller sub-issues that come forth from their stories.

Five ways to engage your students

Personal stories (1)

Create a knowledge gap students must try to fill for example by introducing a question such as 'How does someone end up living on the streets?'.
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Create knowledge gap (2)

Then start the investigation by listing all kinds of ideas and questions that arise among the students and choose together what to investigate further. Or let them listen to a story about homelessness and continue exploring from there.

Trigger them by confronting them with a disturbance of habit. For example, ask them to make a story or cartoon in small groups about how they would spend a normal day if there would be no water flowing from the taps anymore.

Create disturbance of a habit (3)

Provide students with the opportunity to share their background knowledge by letting them play the teacher for 5 minutes or letting them compose a news report in a small video format or just by letting them exchange ideas in pairs and then in a plenary session. These can be supported by some key words on post-its, which can be digital.

Students share background knowledge (4)

Offer methods and exercises that invite different opinions and compare conflicting visions. You could for example work with statements or introduce pictures of persons, objects, animals, ... that have a different view on the issue.

Invite different opinions (5)

Finally, you can facilitate further exploration and investigation on your societal issue. One way is by adding information, objects, or perspectives to the conversation. For example, by showing them a video, telling a story, going to a local homeless shelter. -

Guide investigation of a societal issue by...

Adding (1)

You can also offer direct instructions for example “Compare what the man in the story said to what we discovered in our small groups’. Or ‘what happens if someone sleeps outside? And what happens next? And next?’ This way you guide them in deepening and broadening their thinking.

Instructing (2)

Furthermore, give students the chance to find out whether their investigation is going in the right direction or needs some guidance. For example, by letting them check their findings with their parents or giving reflective questions or exercises.

Confirming and reorienting

You could let your student’s experiment. That way they can be confirmed in their thinking or not. Help them in taking further steps, or if needed reorient their focus.

Generating and judging

Finally, support them in coming to their conclusions, making decisions and in expressing their own point of view. There are several working methods in this module that can help you get started.

The other modules also elaborate further on these aspects, so be sure to check them as well. Now, it’s your turn. We hope that you are inspired to try the methods provided and create more on your own.

Thank you for watching!