

SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM IN THE CLASSROOM

Sample activities and assignments for educators



**SOLUTIONS
JOURNALISM
NETWORK**

CREATED BY
Solutions Journalism Network
www.solutionsjournalism.org

SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM IN THE CLASSROOM:

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS

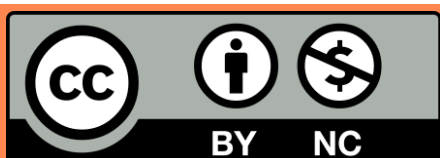
Thank you for participating in Solutions Journalism Network’s educator community! Most educators are familiar with how to pull articles from the 12,000-plus stories in our [Solutions Story Tracker](#), or one of the 120 discussion collections that SJN has curated for your use - but what can you do with our resources beyond just adding supplementary resources to your syllabi?

This document contains a collection of classroom activities and homework assignments that utilize SJN’s online resources. All of the activities in this collection were created by educators within our community and are freely available for you to adapt and implement as you see fit; we hope you are inspired by the myriad possibilities.

These instructional materials represent a wide variety of disciplines and student skill levels. Some demonstrate how solutions journalism can be generally incorporated into classes as an assessment or application tool; others demonstrate how content-specific courses leverage solutions articles. If you choose to adapt an activity for use in your own classroom, we recommend customizing the assignment to align with your classroom’s style guidelines. Do not hesitate to contact our [Higher Education Program Specialist](#) with any questions about SJN’s educational resources. These materials are available for educational use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license.

Table of Contents

Student Discussion Facilitators	3
Weekly Independent Solutions Presentation	4
Sustainability Challenges: Solutions to Business as Usual	5
What is a Good Life and What is a Good Act?.	7
Cash Stipend or Personal Responsibility? A Policy Debate	9
Solutions Journaling: Assessing Social Challenges	10
Success Factors in the Classroom	11



STUDENT DISCUSSION FACILITATORS

CREATED BY: ALANE PRESSWOOD

Description: These student discussions facilitators were a recurring feature of my Introduction to Communication Theory course. The activity encourages students to consistently link theory to real-life case studies pulled from the Story Tracker and familiarizes them with group leadership and idea synthesis. The articles they are discussing can either be assigned by the instructor and selected by students (although I recommend approving the chosen articles before letting students proceed to the full activity). This concept will work in any class that is blending theory and praxis, and I'm particularly fond of watching intermediate learners work through the process.

Assignment Requirements: You and a partner will be assigned a solutions article to present an overview of and guide the rest of the class in discussion. Your initial presentation should be 5-7 minutes in length, following which you should guide the entire class in 20-30 minutes of discussion.

You must prepare a handout for your classmates on your facilitation day. The handout should begin with a hyperlink to the article being discussed, followed by a bulleted agenda that outlines your plan for the day's discussion and contextualizes your priorities. Next, provide a succinct one-paragraph summary on the article to be discussed. Finally, create a list of thoughtful, open-ended discussion questions (at least three). I want you to contextualize the reading, draw connections, and analyze. You might address such issues as:

- How the article relates to earlier material from this class or to your own studies
- What you find most/least useful in the piece, intellectually, politically, or personally
- What contradictions or inconsistencies you see in the author's argument
- Why you agree/disagree with an author's approach, argumentation, or evidence
- How the text may shed light on a related current issue in the public sphere.

The questions are the most important part of the presentation. Don't shy from controversy; do go beyond mere facts and try to challenge your fellow students. The goals for this assignment are to be able to demonstrate and communicate a clear understanding of a case study, both in your handout and in your oral presentation.

WEEKLY INDEPENDENT SOLUTIONS PRESENTATIONS

CREATED BY: MARCY HESSLING O'NEIL

Description: This is one of several assignments for Anthropology 439, an upper division anthropology course on Human Rights in which students considered human rights within critical analyses of law, society, and history. Students were required to consider what is enabled and foreclosed when particular struggles are represented as issues of human rights. The course situated human rights within the discourses and institutions of international laws and treaties, transnational, nongovernmental activism, and representational strategies such as shaming and denial, as well as reflecting on the tension between universal norms and particular cases and the vernacularization of human rights. Finally, the students also considered human rights in relation to humanitarian intervention, development, and sovereignty.

Assignment Requirements: Students were instructed to create a Solutions Journalism Network website account at the beginning of the semester and informed that they would be using and creating materials on the site. For this assignment, three students each week find solutions journalism stories relevant to the weekly course readings on human rights, migration and refugees; to explore the links between our course readings and events happening in the world students signed up for a presentation date at the beginning of the semester. The students find the articles in the Solutions Story Tracker and then undertake an analysis and deliver a presentation. These presentations should be between 5-8 minutes and include your own analysis of key points in the readings assigned for that week in addition to extra materials that you are analyzing. The most effective presentations will make thematic/analytic links to readings rather than to topical links. Please include a discussion question for the class at the end of your presentation.

SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES: SOLUTIONS TO BUSINESS AS USUAL

CREATED BY: KATHERINE NOBLE-GOODMAN

Description: This was the first assignment in an upper division Green Business course offered through the Environmental Studies department at the University of Redlands. Both environmental studies majors and business majors took the course, and this assignment was a way to make sure the students all had a basic understanding of current sustainability challenges. First the students identified a business (or another type of organization) that was responding to the sustainability challenge they were researching. Then they described a future scenario in which the solution they read about had been widely and successfully implemented and contrasted that with the projected consequences of a “business as usual” scenario.

Assignment Requirements: The goal of this assignment is to give you an opportunity to review and advance your understanding of the ecological and social foundations of several significant sustainability challenges as they relate to operating a business. Climate change is not listed as a separate topic because, as Peter Senge writes in *The Necessary Revolution*, “... climate change is not an isolated problem. Rather, it is part and parcel of all the other problems that are signaling the end of the Industrial Age.”

This assignment focuses on those other problems, how they relate to climate change and the role of business as both part of the problem and a key to the solution. You and your partner(s) will research one of these challenges and identify how business has contributed to the problem. Then, you will have the opportunity to image two futures: one under a “business as usual” scenario, and the other, a future in which effective solutions have been pursued. You will research and write a three-page brief, and working with a partner, give a seven-minute class presentation.

Please use the Solutions Journalism Network to identify the business (or other organization) that is pursuing a solution to your problem. Work with your partner to select a topic from the following list of challenges:

- Energy use, excluding transportation
- Energy use, transportation sector
- Fresh water quality (water pollution)
- Fresh water use (water scarcity)
- Biodiversity Loss
- Chemicals and toxins
- Air pollution
- Oceans and fisheries
- Deforestation
- Industrial agriculture (crops)
- Industrial agriculture (animal husbandry)
- The built environment

*Note: Many of these challenges have overlapping and reinforcing causes and drivers (i.e. population growth), and social and environmental impacts (i.e. loss of ecosystem services). However, they represent distinct trends that are worthy of individual examination. (CONT. on next page.)

Write a concise three-page summary of your topic based on the guidance above. Organize the content as follows:

1. The Problem: provide an initial description of the problem and an overview of what the available data tells us about the current state of affairs.
2. Causes & Drivers: describe the causes and drivers of the problem with a particular focus on the role of business.
3. Impacts: describe the major impacts on the climate, natural resources and society that we are seeing as a result.
4. Looking Ahead: describe the projected consequences of a "business as usual" scenario and contrast that with a future scenario in which the solution you identified has been widely and successfully implemented. The solution can be small scale now, but must be a solution that you believe can be scaled or replicated.

Finally, you and your partner will give a seven minute presentation on your topic in the second week of the course. Your slides (Powerpoint, Prezi, Google, or whatever platform you prefer) can only contain visuals (charts, photos, other images); no bullet points. You may use a title slide with writing, and please include a final slide with the top three resources you have identified for staying abreast of your topic. The use of note cards during your presentation is optional.

WHAT IS A GOOD LIFE AND WHAT IS A GOOD ACT?

CREATED BY: JUDIT TOROK

Description: This was the final assignment for a 100-level, online ethics course offered in the Spring of 2017. The project offered students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the major ethical theories covered during the semester and to apply and evaluate the usefulness of these theories in making real-life decisions. The students are also asked to demonstrate what they have learned about themselves as a "moral person."

The students base this work on an article they select from Solutions Story Tracker. They are instructed to read through and evaluate several articles on a pressing social issue, and then select one as the focus of the final assignment. This semester-long study of ethics pursued the following course objectives:

- Become conversant with major ethical theories
- Learn about the work of philosophers of ethics
- Apply these theories to particular situations
- Evaluate the usefulness of these ethical theories for guiding human behavior
- Learn about yourself through critical reflections and conversations
- Evaluate your own actions and the world around you in terms of how people treat each other

Assignment Requirements: The aim of this final project is for students to demonstrate that they have achieved the above-stated course objectives; in other words, that they are familiar with some of the major ethical theories, they can apply and evaluate their usefulness for making decisions in real-life situations, and they can discuss what they learned about themselves as moral persons. This is a written assignment as well as a hyperlinked interactive assignment, which means you will need to hyperlink your sources, additional readings, videos, images, and other web-based materials within your Word document or Google doc. Imagine it like a blog post; you can (and should!) be creative and conversational as long as you address the objectives listed above.

The main question you will need to address is: What is a Good Life and What is a Good Act? Start by checking out the Solutions Story Tracker:

- Use the browse or search feature to find articles that interest you personally or professionally.
- Read through a couple of them and select one that you want to use in this paper. The article will describe a solution to pressing social issues from around the globe.
- The selected solution-based article should be used in your project as an example as you answer the main question, and it should be analyzed according to your selected moral theory (similar to how we have done it throughout the semester).
- Don't forget to hyperlink to the article itself.

The final three-page hyperlinked, interactive (and creative) paper must meet the following specifications: (CONT. on next page)

- Follows the course objectives and references at least one philosopher or at least one moral theory/perspective that we discussed in class in depth.
- Discusses at least one way to apply a moral theory to a particular situation (any article or issue of your choice, using the Solutions Story Tracker listed above).
- Shows the writer's ability to evaluate the moral philosophy and/or its usefulness.
- Provides a reflection on the writer's own learning and what it means for them to live a Good Life and do a Good Act. What does it mean for you to be a moral person?
- External references are hyperlinked and incorporated into the body of the paper; don't copy and paste, explain your analysis and then hyperlink to the original source.

CASH STIPEND OR PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY? A POLICY DEBATE

CREATED BY: BETSEY SCHMIDT

Description: This assignment challenges students to decide if providing cash to people -- either as an incentive to change behavior or with no strings attached -- is an effective way to solve social problems. It was developed for an upper division public policy course on policies and strategies for social change. Readings and a video provide context for this assignment, and then students are asked to identify two solutions journalism stories on a societal challenge of their choice, one about a project that provides cash stipends as part of its strategy, and another that pursues a more traditional approach. In class, the students will create a story collection together based on their research.

Assignment Requirements:

Before class:

- Watch this [short video](#) on Peru's cash transfer or "juntos" program.
- Read [The Best Welfare Reform: Give Poor People Cash](#) (Charles Kenny, The Atlantic, Sept. 25, 2015)
- Find two stories in the Solutions Story Tracker:
 - one about a cash stipend program (conditional or unconditional) that is part of a solution to a societal challenge that interests you
 - one about a solution to the same (or a similar) challenge that is being pursued through a more traditional mechanism
 - SUGGESTION: "[providing cash](#)" is a specialized search term available under the "Creative Financing" Success Factor heading

In Class:

Be prepared to discuss both the juntos program you read about and the two articles you discovered in the Story Tracker. Consider: if you could make policy decisions, would you include Peru's cash transfer policies in the actual United States and/or in an imaginary perfect country? Why or why not? Be able to include data/arguments from the materials you have read, listened to, and/or watched.

As a class, we will outline persuasive arguments for each of these positions and work together to create a story collection together from the articles you found for this assignment about cash stipends. You can view previous collections created by students [here](#).

SOLUTIONS JOURNALING:

ASSESSING SOCIAL CHALLENGES

CREATED BY: ROBERT LYON

Description: Each spring, NYU Stern's entire freshmen class embarks on the Undergraduate College's highly-esteemed Social Impact curriculum by taking Business and Its Publics (BIP). Combining lectures and small group discussion sections, BIP introduces freshmen to the interconnections between business, society, markets, politics, art, culture and life. The course features an array of distinguished speakers, providing students with different perspectives on the role of business in society.

In the sixth week of BIP, after the students have explored challenges and solutions in higher education, the focus shifts to challenges we face as a society. In this assignment, the students use the Solutions Story Tracker to identify a societal challenge to research further, forming the basis of much of the rest of their work for the semester.

Assignment Requirements: Search the Solutions Story Tracker to find a pressing, chronic social problem or societal issue that you'd like to research further. If you are not sure where to begin, start with the Issue Areas or Success Factors.

In this process, select at least four articles, on at least two different topics, and discuss what is interesting to you about each challenge and solution. For EACH story, please create a journal entry that lists the article title and addresses the following points:

- What unresolved aspect of the problem concerns you?
- Identify significant underlying social conditions and problems that exacerbate the problem you're looking at or that hinder change.
- Which societal institutions contribute to the current situation? The societal challenge you select will be the basis for much of your work for the rest of this semester as we examine stakeholders, externalities, market-based solutions, ethics and shared value. Later this semester, you will be proposing a market-based solution to the social problem you identify this week.

SUCCESS FACTORS IN THE CLASSROOM: ATTACKING ROOT CAUSES

CREATED BY: SCOTT SHERMAN

Description: A diverse array of educators have used the Solutions Journalism Network Success Factors to supplement their coursework in innovative ways. These example lessons were created by Scott Sherman of the Transformative Action Institute as part of his semester-long undergraduate course on social problem-solving; they demonstrate simple ways to encourage students to interact with the core Success Factor concepts. You might also be interested in our Making a Difference: Strategies for Social Change course modules ([part one](#), [part two](#), and [part three](#)), which combine experiential learning with more than 50 solutions journalism stories to introduce your students to the power of solutions thinking.

This simple exercise called "The Five Whys" comes from the Toyota production system in Japan and has proven to be very effective in helping people get to the root cause of a problem. The process of repeated questioning helps us overcome our natural assumptions that we immediately know the answer to a problem. Embracing the childlike instinct to question "why" allows us to dig deeper into complicated issues.

Assignment Requirements: In the first 5-10 minutes, explain the basic idea and process to the students with an example :

Imagine that you were trying to address the problem of the public health crisis. You might begin by asking:

1. Why do we have such a bad public health crisis?

Example response: Because people engage in unhealthy behaviors like eating too much sugar; smoking too much; and not exercising enough.

2. Why do people engage in such unhealthy behaviors as smoking, eating too much, and not exercising enough?

Example response: Because they feel too much stress.

3. Why do people in modern society feel so much stress?

Example response: Because we compare ourselves unfavorably to others and see ourselves falling behind.

4. Why do we compare ourselves unfavorably to others?

Example response: Because we constantly see images on social media, where it seems like other people have perfect lives, and we only see our own flaws and imperfections. (CONT. on next page)

5. Why do we spend so much time on social media looking at images of other people's supposedly perfect lives?

Example response: Because we are lonely and yearning for connection to others; social media is about our need to feel like we belong and are part of a community of friends and family...

As you can see, each question gets us progressively deeper and deeper to the root cause of an issue. Once we get to the root cause, we can more easily look for solutions that treat it.

Going back to the example above, before doing this exercise of the Five Whys with regards to the public health crisis, the students might suggest the following solutions:

- Give people much more information about how bad unhealthy behaviors are, like smoking, eating too much, and exercising too little;
- Tell people to exercise much more willpower and self-discipline;
- Put "sin taxes" on things like sugary sodas

As we can see, these are all Band-Aids. They don't address the underlying problems of people's loneliness and desire to have deep, meaningful connections with other people. We know that giving people information about negative health habits has little impact. Telling people to have more willpower is also ineffective. And when places like New York City instituted a sin tax on sugary sodas, there was a huge backlash.

So, if the root cause of so many of our health problems is about the disconnection and lack of belonging that people feel, that should point us to solutions that are potentially more effective. How might we strengthen and reweave the fabric of social bonds?

You can't have the students answer that question now, of course; that could be an entire semester class unto itself! For now, ask the students to do their own root cause analysis. Have the students break into groups by an issue they are passionate about. Then have them brainstorm the "five whys" and go deeper and deeper. Allow them about 10 to 15 minutes to do this.

With the remaining time, ask students from each group to come to the board and share their root cause analysis with the class. Together go through each deeper level and ask the other students if they agree that they are getting to the root of the problem.

SUCCESS FACTORS IN THE CLASSROOM: EXPANDING ACCESS

CREATED BY: SCOTT SHERMAN

Description: A diverse array of educators have used the Solutions Journalism Network Success Factors to supplement their coursework in innovative ways. These example lessons were created by Scott Sherman of the Transformative Action Institute as part of his semester-long undergraduate course on social problem-solving; they demonstrate simple ways to encourage students to interact with the core Success Factor concepts. You might also be interested in our Making a Difference: Strategies for Social Change course modules (part one, part two, and part three), which combine experiential learning with more than 50 solutions journalism stories to introduce your students to the power of solutions thinking.

This activity demonstrates that the most creative solutions often come from having constraints, an important lesson for anyone wanting to help make the world a better place. Because we often have limited resources, we can't wait for billions of dollars to pour in; we can start creating solutions right away with what we have. The good news is that financial, logistical, or other constraints have historically led to some of our most creative solutions!

Assignment Requirements:

Give the students a few minutes individually to brainstorm all of the necessary elements of a restaurant. They might say that every restaurant needs food, a chef, waiters/waitresses, silverware, walls, a floor, etc. You can compile a master list on a whiteboard.

Now, instruct the students to get into teams of four. Assign a different element from your master list to each group and instruct them to design a restaurant without it. How might you have a restaurant that doesn't serve food? How might you have a restaurant with no chef? How might you have a restaurant with no walls? In each case, you can spur innovative thinking by putting limits and constraints around a problem.

Give them 10 minutes to brainstorm how their restaurant would function. How would it work? What would it sell? How would it stay in business? At the end of the 10 minutes, each group can present their ideas to the entire class.

Debrief: ask the participants for their reaction to this activity. Often, they say that it was surprisingly fun and easy. This gets into an important point about creativity and innovation. A key ingredient for innovation is to have constraints. People are more creative when they have limits and obstacles, rather than when they have free rein. There's a lot of truth in the old saying: "Necessity is the mother of invention."

In design thinking, the key phrase is "How might we...?" This phrase is an essential tool for getting people to think of possibilities, where otherwise they might have seen roadblocks.

SUCCESS FACTORS IN THE CLASSROOM: USING CREATIVE FINANCING

CREATED BY: SCOTT SHERMAN

Description: A diverse array of educators have used the Solutions Journalism Network Success Factors to supplement their coursework in innovative ways. These example lessons were created by Scott Sherman of the Transformative Action Institute as part of his semester-long undergraduate course on social problem-solving; they demonstrate simple ways to encourage students to interact with the core Success Factor concepts. You might also be interested in our Making a Difference: Strategies for Social Change course modules ([part one](#), [part two](#), and [part three](#)), which combine experiential learning with more than 50 solutions journalism stories to introduce your students to the power of solutions thinking.

This assignment on creative/alternative financing can easily be summarized as: “take an existing nonprofit that relies mostly on charity and philanthropy. Figure out creative ways for it to make money.”

Assignment Requirements: Explain to your students that many nonprofits are dangerously dependent on outside funding, which causes a number of problems: if the funding source disappears, their entire organization could collapse. (Many foundations will fund an organization for a few years, and then look for something new to fund.) Also, when nonprofits are dependent on charity, they end up “begging for change,” which can lead to mission drift (the phenomenon where an organization changes its priorities just to please a funder). And finally, they may have to devote a tremendous amount of their resources to fundraising, which limits their capacity to focus on the actual issue at hand. Many social entrepreneurs and innovators talk about how they started their work because they were passionate about the cause, but they ultimately end up spending most of their time chasing dollars instead of doing the actual work to change the world.

After the discussion, sort students into pairs and give them 15 minutes to choose a topic they are interested in from one of the issue areas on the Solutions Story Tracker. Then have them find a story using the Story Tracker about a nonprofit that is trying to solve that social or environmental problem, and that is reliant predominately on fundraising to support this work. If they cannot find funding information on the organization’s website in their annual report, they will have to do some deeper Google research. After 15 minutes of research, have the students spend another 15 minutes brainstorming creative alternative financing strategies for this organization.

Finally, the students will have 10 minutes to present their solutions, and for the entire class to discuss and debate the merits of these creative financial strategies.