

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

STRATEGIES FOR SOLVING SOCIAL PROBLEMS



PRESENTED BY
Solutions Journalism Network
www.solutionsjournalism.org

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
The Transformative Action Institute
www.transformativeaction.org

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Classroom activities for understanding social change



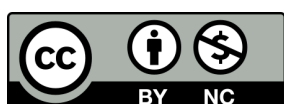
Do you want to...

- Introduce your students to the vast and complex world of social change with real-life examples of how people and organizations are working to make the world a better place?
- Teach them effective problem-solving strategies that will help them as students and in their future professions?
- Shift their perspective from a problem mindset to a solutions mindset?

You've come to the right place! Our Making a Difference: Strategies for Solving Social Problems course modules are based on a semester-long, undergraduate-level course developed and taught by Scott Sherman of the [Transformative Action Institute](#) (TAI). SJN has adapted his exemplary work into an introductory trio of modules to help educators orient their students toward a critical, yet productive stance on tackling social change:

- [Part One: Shifting the Focus to Solutions](#) will introduce students to the implications of a problem-centric worldview and help them re-orient to solutions thinking.
- [Part Two: Measuring and Maximizing Impact](#) teaches students how to distinguish between outputs and outcomes and identify social change programs that are supported by strong evidence of success.
- [Part Three: Discovering What Works](#) examines prizes and rapid results challenges as motivating factors for discovering the best solutions for social problems.

Each module includes discussion prompts, in-class activities, and links to relevant SJN story collections. The Making a Difference modules are based on SJN's in-house [Success Factor](#) taxonomy, a framework for understanding the tactics that are crucial to the success or failure of a given social change initiative. Our mission at Solutions Journalism Network is to spread the practice of solutions journalism: rigorous reporting on responses to social problems. We seek to rebalance the news, so that every day people are exposed to stories that help them understand problems and challenges, and stories that show potential ways to respond. Our work with educators and community leaders is designed to creatively engage learners with the challenge of solving complex social challenges in their own communities. These materials are available for educational use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) license.



SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO SOLUTIONS

Starting at the earliest levels of school and continuing through college and post-graduate education, we teach students to focus extensively or exclusively on problems. While understanding root causes and the systemic effects of social ills is a crucial skill, the exclusion of proposed solutions and existing efforts to enact positive change creates a lopsided, inaccurate view of reality and discourages learners from taking steps to become involved in initiatives for change.

Despite their wide-ranging absence from curricula, there are hopeful stories and inspiring case studies of people who are making a difference. The lessons described below are designed to introduce students to the implications of a problem-centric worldview; help them re-orient to solutions thinking; and connect them to a useful tool for doing so: solutions journalism, rigorous reporting on what's right with the world.

Activity One:

What's wrong with the world? (And what's right?)

This exercise is designed to encourage students to re-orient their thinking from a problem-focused perspective to a solutions-oriented perspective. The idea originated with David Bornstein, one of the authors of the weekly Fixes column in the New York Times and co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network. The complete unit will take about 90 minutes; if your classes are shorter and you are splitting the unit across two days, be sure to keep the written lists produced by students in activity one and bring them back for activity two.

Time: 20- 25 minutes

Materials: Any writing materials that will allow students to collaborate as a group: chalkboard or whiteboard, Post-It notes, large flip pads, butcher paper taped to the walls...

Step One: ask the students to write down all the serious problems and challenges that face their generation. Encourage them to consider their home community, their campus community, national issues, and global issues, but leave the scope of the issues up to them. They can take five minutes to come up with a list of everything that's wrong. They can brainstorm these out loud, while somebody writes their responses on the board, or they can each write their responses on Post-It notes that they post on the wall – choose a format that works well for your class size and level.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO SOLUTIONS

Activity One (CONTINUED):

What's wrong with the world? (And what's right?)

Students will come up with long lists; in a few minutes, they might write dozens of challenges such as:

- Global climate change
- Refugees
- Poverty
- The opioid crisis
- Violence
- War
- Gender inequality
- Racial discrimination
- Unemployment
- Wealth inequality
- Homelessness
- Lack of meaning and purpose

Step Two: ask them to follow up by brainstorming all the practical, realistic solutions that they have learned about for any of these problems during their time in higher education. Their lists will likely be far more abbreviated, and they might struggle to recall any significant solutions.

Step Three: bring the students back together into a large group and briefly review their lists; you might want to create one master list of problems and solutions.

Step Four: debrief. Encourage the students to talk about why their education has resulted in this type of understanding. Why are we so focused on critical analysis, yet unable to shine a light on better examples? Let the students spend some time discussing this and considering the implications of this focus. Prompt them to recall which factors in their education have led to this focus on problems:

- how they have been instructed to create arguments or respond to prompts (on exams, homework, etc.)?
- what types of sources they have used?
- How have they engaged with history? What historical perspective is most commonly represented in the materials they are familiar with?

The news media faces similar problems. Most journalists focus on what's wrong with the world, but they rarely focus on what's working. Bornstein has an analogy to parenting. If he constantly pointed out what his son was doing wrong, it wouldn't necessarily lead to better behavior. So why do we assume that the world will improve if journalists spend most of their time pointing out all the examples of corruption, injustice, and malfeasance? You can ask the students how they feel when they read, watch, or listen to the news. Are they empowered and inspired to improve the world around them? Or are they depressed and hopeless when they hear about the massive problems?

Help students summarize their thoughts and reactions to these issues in preparation for activity two.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO SOLUTIONS

Activity Two:

The Jigsaw Classroom

Time: 30-45 minutes

Materials: Students need to have computers, tablets, or smartphones to access SJN's [Shifting the Focus to Solutions](#) collection.

Step One: Divide the students randomly into three groups.

Step Two: Assign one of the articles from the story collection to each group. You could have the students read the articles on their computers or you might print them out and distribute. Tell the students that there will be a quiz at the end of the exercise with at least one question about each of the stories. (The quiz part is optional, but it does an element of excitement to the exercise). Since they are each going to read just one of the stories themselves, they will be relying on their peers to teach them what they need to know about the other stories. Like a jigsaw puzzle, each person has just one small piece of the big picture, and in order for everyone to understand the big picture, they need to collaborate on their learning.

Step Three: Give the students five minutes to read their assigned article, and then five to 10 minutes to discuss the story amongst their group. This helps ensure that everyone understands the main points of their article and gives them a chance to discuss what they want to teach other students.

Step Four: After each group has discussed their article, have the students form new groups so that now in each of the groups, everyone has read a different story.

Step Five: Within each group, have the student who read the first article spend two to three minutes teaching the rest of their group what they learned, and then the student who read the second article does the same, and so on, until each student has taught the rest of the students in their group what they need to know to pass the quiz.

Cooperative learning is the point of the exercise. If the students know at the beginning of the exercise that there will be a test at the end, then they may work harder to help each other succeed. Everyone must be a good enough teacher to help their classmates comprehend articles that they haven't read.

After your discussion on problems and solutions in activity one, have students read and discuss a selection of solutions journalism stories that reflect the trend towards solutions in the fields of journalism and social change via a cooperative learning exercise called "The Jigsaw Classroom."

The Jigsaw Classroom comes from social psychologist Elliot Aronson, who sought to increase student motivation and performance while also overcoming racial conflict. He developed and tested this technique at the University of California and the University of Texas. It has now been used in thousands of classrooms across the country and has shown to improve students' educational outcomes in many respects. For more information, please see <https://www.jigsaw.org>.