

Writing for a Change

**BOOSTING LITERACY AND
LEARNING THROUGH
SOCIAL ACTION**

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Principles for Practice

What is Social Action?

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This chapter describes how Social Action is different from the commonly understood concept of social action, covering the principles and theory behind Social Action and the process for conducting Social Action activities in the community and classroom.

Social Action is a community development theory based on the simple premise that *change is possible*. The Social Action approach enables groups of all ages and circumstances to take action and to achieve their collective goals. It offers an easy-to-understand, open-ended process that enables people to identify and act on issues that are important to them while working within a set of principles. For us at the Centre for Social Action, Social Action is a distinctive methodology and should not be confused with the generic term *social action*, which describes activity aimed at bringing about change in society.

Social Action redefines the relationship between professionals and service users—in this case, between teachers and young people. It presents a democratic framework for true partnership, and it is inclusive rather than exclusive. Social Action has the potential to engage the most hard-to-reach young people because it starts from their understanding of what needs to change and relies on their efforts to change it. This approach contrasts with many others that define young people as the problem to be tackled or changed. Social Action views young people, parents, and communities as experts about their lives and as capable of creating positive and lasting social change.

learning; learning happened when teachers relinquished and trusted their students and the Social Action process. Out participants always getting what they want, but about ess so that all involved know they have a stake in the decision, these teachers' stories show that the process can be youths and adults. Social Action practice allows the parents as agents of change and as stakeholders in their own used with first graders, middle school students, or parents, otential to initiate change and fundamentally alter how ves within the context of their larger community. As Paula al Action process with her first graders (Chapter Two), she . seven years of age, these students already believed they change." Reflecting on the implications of her experiments ites, "What is really encouraging to me is how my students at ease with thinking of themselves as agents of change." e an all-too-rare occasion for students and teachers alike ds and thoughts can matter.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT SOCIAL ACTION?

Social Action differs from traditional pedagogy in three important aspects:

- Young people set the agenda.
- Social Action workers and group members work in partnership.
- All people are viewed as having the capacity to create social change and are given the opportunity to do so.

Social Action draws heavily on the work of the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, who linked literacy with social change. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) he describes traditional education as the “banking approach” (Hope and Timmel, 1999, p. 19). In this setting, the student is treated as an empty vessel into which the teacher pours knowledge. Social Action draws on Freire’s ideas to suggest a problem-posing approach to education.

SOCIAL ACTION PRINCIPLES

Social Action combines two essential and inseparable elements: principles and process. These are completely dependent on each other. The principles elevate the process beyond a set of techniques that are barely distinguishable from other practices (see Figure 13.1). Similarly, the principles without the process are unlikely to foster action or change.

Social Action is continually developing and changing as a way of working. The changes take place within a framework of values, principles, and processes that evolve over time and change in detail but are nonnegotiable in terms of their overarching view of the world.

THE SOCIAL ACTION PROCESS

The process is meant to ensure that the relationship between young people (or other service users) and the professionals employed to work with them is equitable. A Social Action worker is a facilitator, not a provider, and his or her role is to facilitate the group through a five-stage process (see Figure 13.2).

The five stages of Social Action are as follows:

What. This stage is about discovery. The goal is to find out what is happening in people’s lives. What are their issues, problems, and concerns? What makes them

Figure 13.1. The Social Action Principles

The principles that guide the work of the Centre for Social Action are as follows:

- Social Action workers are committed to social justice. We strive to challenge inequality and oppression as a result of race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, class, disability, or any other form of social differentiation. Social Action is about fighting for equality and justice, and this needs to be stated clearly at the beginning of any training, workshop, or class that is using the process. We recognize that injustice, discrimination, and oppression exist and take a stance against them in all our work.

- We believe that all people have skills, experience, and understanding that they can draw on to tackle the problems they face. Social Action workers understand that people are experts in their own lives, and we use this as a starting point for our work. Our job is to help uncover what is already there, to encourage people to use the insights and knowledge they possess to bring about changes in their own lives.

- All people have rights, including the right to be heard, the right to define the issues facing them, and the right to take action on their own behalf. People also have the right to define themselves and not have negative labels imposed on them. Ordinary people's right to be involved in the changes that affect them, to have a voice and a stake in the society they live in, is fundamental to Social Action work. People's right to "name their world"—to define themselves and the world around them—is something we insist on. Too often, people have to contend with labels imposed on them or the places they live for the ease of policymakers and professionals. Injustice and oppression are complex issues rooted in social policy, the environment, and the economy. Social Action workers understand that people may experience problems as individuals but that these difficulties can be translated into common concerns. We recognize that there are many different problems in individuals' lives. They may feel overwhelmed and daunted by them; they may even feel responsible for them. Social Action gives people the opportunity to break free from this negative view,

Continued

to understand their individual problems in a wider political context, and to do something about organizing to overcome them.

- *We understand that people working collectively can be powerful. People who lack the power and influence to challenge injustice and oppression as individuals can gain it through working with other people in a similar position.* Oppression is experienced by a majority of people; thus, it can only be maintained through isolation and division. Our job is to bring people together so that they can share their experiences and pool their resources and skills to fight injustice. Finding common cause may give individuals the will and power to tackle more complex issues than they might have dared on their own.
- *Social Action workers are not leaders, but facilitators. Our job is to enable people to make decisions for themselves and to take ownership of whatever outcome ensues. Everybody's contribution to this process is equally valued, and it is vital that our job not be accorded privilege.* Social Action workers value all skills and knowledge equally, making no distinction between experience and formal qualifications. Our job is to work alongside the group, resisting the temptation to become either a group member or a group leader.

angry, frightened, happy, and frustrated? What occupies their thoughts? The Social Action worker designs ways in which community members can express this, creating as comprehensive a picture as possible of what is going on in their lives at present, *without interpretation* and without having to worry about what to do with the material. This is often the longest stage of the Social Action process. Video, role-playing, photography, drawing, and discussion may be used during this exploration of life in the community.

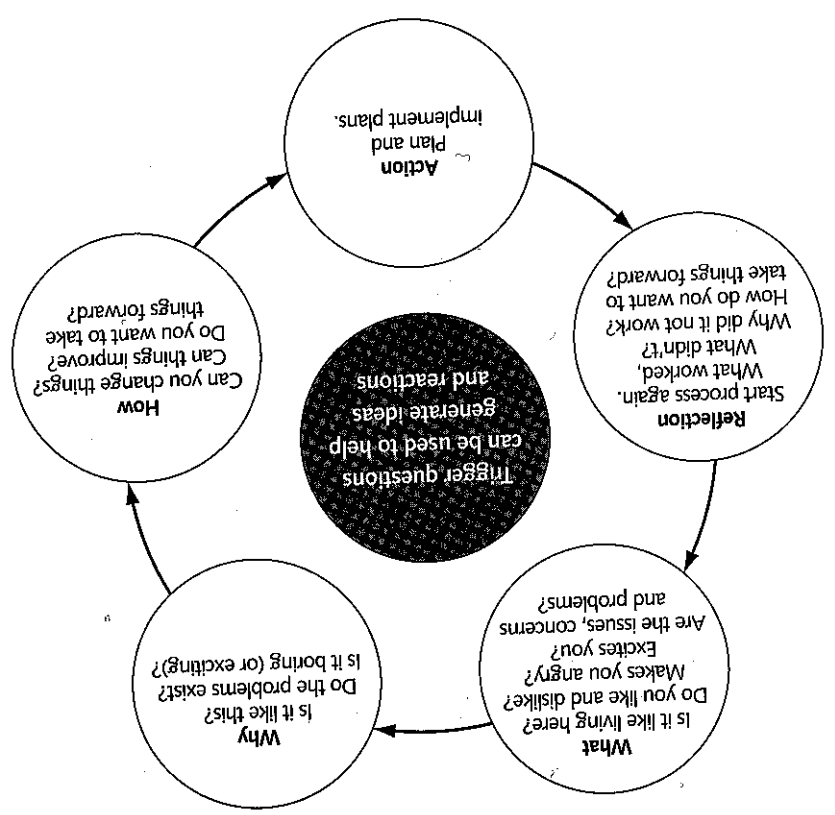
Why. Once the issues have been agreed on, it is important to identify the reasons why they exist so that any solutions devised will attack root causes, not just symptoms. Asking "why?" helps people examine their private troubles in a wider context. It provides them with a deeper understanding of the causes, which is necessary if community members and service users are to go on to create and own positive social change. This stage of the process allows community members to engage in analysis and to present their understanding of the problems facing them. This stage

also helps participants to discover the most effective point of intervention, the place at which it is possible to make changes that will affect the final outcomes. This analysis is accepted by the Social Action worker, again, without interpretation, reinforcing one of our basic beliefs: people are experts on their own lives.

How. So what do we do with this understanding? How can people change things in a meaningful way? Here the role of the Social Action worker changes. The facilitator's responsibility now is to create safe spaces where the group can test out their ideas for change before putting them into practice. It is vital that community members not be set up to fail and that their ideas undergo rigorous examination before they take them into the world outside the group. The decision about which ideas will be taken forward lies in the hands of the group; the Social Action worker must question their viability without crushing enthusiasm.

Source: Centre for Social Action and the Guinness Trust, 2000, p. 10.

Figure 13.2. The Social Action Process



Action. Next, the group members put their ideas for change into effect. By now, the group should have a realistic sense of the possible outcomes, whether these outcomes will solve their problem or simply be the first stage in a longer struggle. Even if the action disappoints, as sometimes happens, the legacy of the work is that the group members now have an understanding and practical experience of the tools needed for dealing with problems that they will face in the future.

Reflection. The fifth stage calls for the Social Action worker to bring the group together and ask "What happened? Now that we have carried out our action, are your issues, problems, and concerns the same?" This critical reflection enables community members to learn from their experience and to plan future actions for change. The What? Why? How? process, which is recursive, begins again.

FACILITATION, PROCESS, AND CONTENT

Using Social Action in the classroom redefines the role of the professional away from that of leader. The role is negotiated with the input of the group. This is not about diminishing the importance of professionals such as teachers. Being a good teacher-facilitator requires a great deal of skill and discipline and a combination of diverse skills. Using Social Action requires thorough preparation, active listening, and the ability to be creative, patient, disciplined, and interested in people's lives. The Social Action teacher-facilitator must also maintain a consistent, realistic level of optimistic energy that will fire the group. All of these are qualities of effective teaching practice as well.

When a teacher-facilitator uses the Social Action process in the classroom, students are not just consumers but active agents for change. This can be a difficult balance for some teachers to achieve. For others, as illustrated by some of the stories in this volume, it is liberating.

Social Action facilitation is a discipline with its own particular qualities. The teacher-facilitator helps participants—students, parents, or colleagues—identify which issues they wish to address. The Social Action worker provides a safe environment in which these issues can be explored and poses the most effective questions to the group in the most effective way. As shown in Figure 13.3, a Social Action worker provides the process for a group's Social Action project. The line in the diagram is one that the Social Action worker does not cross; a Social Action worker is restricted to being responsible for the process rather than providing the content.

Professionals often make ill-informed or inaccurate assumptions about people's lives. In contrast, effective Social Action workers ask searching questions that enable people to fully explore what is going on in their lives. To say that young people or other group members provide content means that they share their ideas, beliefs, and experiences. They must identify the issues at the center of the work and provide the analysis, action plans, action, and critical reflection. A Social Action worker should support, work alongside, and encourage but not take over. This may be a different way of working for many teachers, all of whom are paid for what they know and for their input into group learning and discussions. In order to be effective Social Action workers, teachers need to go through a process of developing additional facilitation skills that allow the students to fill in the silences. Not only does this process help to achieve desired changes through Social Action, but in its reliance on discovery learning and peer education, it links teaching and learning. A teacher-facilitator must understand the stages of Social Action and keep the group on track. The process should be explained at the outset and should be well understood by the group. A teacher-facilitator using Social Action must also know where a group is in the process and when to move on. Of course, every Social Action group is different; Group B may do three stages in one lesson, while Group A may take three months on one phase. Similarly, process-led work often means allowing groups to take what may seem like a tortuous route to a simple solution. The ability to allow people to reach their own conclusions in their own time is essential. Sometimes institutional time limitations will place constraints on the time for discussion and reflection. It is crucial to discuss these time limitations and devise a strategy for dealing with them.

Figure 13.3. Responsibilities of the Social Action Worker and Group Members

<p>Social Action worker</p> <p>What</p> <p>Why</p> <p>How</p> <p>Action</p> <p>Reflection</p>	<p>Community members or students</p> <p>are the issues, concerns, and problems that the group faces?</p> <p>do they exist?</p> <p>can they be changed?</p> <p>Do it!</p> <p>Review what has happened, what has changed, and what still needs to be done, then start the process again.</p>
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Occasionally, the content produced by the group may conflict with the values and principles of the Social Action worker or of the school. These potential conflicts must be openly discussed and documented as far as is possible at the beginning of the process or as they arise. If the Social Action worker makes it clear that her or his personal principles and her or his reason for wanting to carry out this work involve a commitment to fairness, equality, and social justice, then that legitimizes any refusal to become embroiled in an activity that undermines those principles.

SOCIAL ACTION AND TEACHING

Sometimes Social Action workers face organizational pressure to adhere to more traditional methods. It is crucial for a Social Action worker to believe in the process and in the ability of people to effect change.

As the NWP teachers used Social Action and met to discuss their successes and less glorious moments, their confidence grew and their learning increased. At one of the later institutes, the participants created the following list of lessons learned, which shows how some previous concerns have been resolved through practice.

What We Know About Social Action That We Didn't Know Before

- Social Action is a dynamic process.
- Social Action is not predictable.
- It can take time.
- It can be messy.
- You have to accept that you do not know what the outcomes will be.
- Uncertainty is an important ingredient of the process.
- It can be difficult to create opportunities for Social Action unless you have some level of power in the institution in which you work.
- The process needs a balance between information and discovery.
- It is a fine line between facilitator and teacher.
- A teacher is *never* neutral.
- People in the same room can do the same [Social Action] training and yet can go away with completely different ideas of how to use it.

- The Social Action process builds communication skills.
- Social Action can fit with the curriculum.
- Conflict can be positive and is often part of the Social Action process.
- Divest from the product; concentrate on the process.
- You really have to believe in the principles, or it is an empty process.
- Social Action can be used in all sorts of different places.
- Group-building work is essential to the process.
- It takes time to understand Social Action in its entirety.

For some people, the tensions between Social Action and more traditional teaching remained a constant. Others felt validated by Social Action because the principles closely reflected their beliefs in student-centered learning. One teacher wrote, "It has been liberating for me to move from my traditional role of imparting knowledge to students to a revised role of creating knowledge alongside my students. This is not entirely new to me, but learning about Social Action has given me a structure for working in this way."

As teachers developed and adapted their Social Action practice to different situations, they learned from their own and others' experiences. For them, the Social Action approach *and* the challenges that they faced in using it with their students, colleagues, and communities engaged the power of their creativity.