

LEARNING THAT MOVES FROM INQUIRY TO SOCIAL ACTION

A DEFINITION

A key role of public education in a democracy has always been to prepare students to become responsible citizens in their communities. To become such citizens, young people only truly learn the skills and attitudes necessary by thoughtfully planning and seeking to promote change, rather than just being prepared—supposedly—to be leaders in the future.

There are at least five major steps students take in pursuing this kind of learning:

1. Identifying issues important in their lives and community, and deciding on one to address
2. Researching the chosen issue and deciding how to change or improve the situation
3. Planning an action, including determining a goal for change; identifying who or what body in the community has power to make the change; and deciding how to approach that person or persons
4. Carrying out the action through letters, talks, meetings with officials, policy proposals, and activities, depending on the specific goals of the project.
5. Reflecting on the effort to understand their successes, challenges, and ways to continue learning and growing in the future

Two features are especially crucial to making the experience authentic and empowering for students. First, they must own the responsibility to make choices and decisions and to figure out solutions to problems themselves. The teacher of course facilitates the work, but leaves as much of the decision making as possible to the students.

Second, the work should culminate in some action focused on change in the school or community. It's not enough to just talk about change, or practice mock legislatures. Only when students see adults actually listening to them with respect, do they begin to realize they have a voice and can make a difference in their world. Their efforts may not always succeed, but in being heard they come to value the studying, reading, writing, and planning that they have done.

School and learning begin to truly matter.

Based on *From Inquiry to Action: Civic Engagement with Project-Based Learning in All Content Areas* by Steve Zemelman. Heinemann.

<http://www.heinemann.com/products/E06257.aspx>