Taking issue

SKATE PARK PLANS

The Waratah–Wynyard Council has been given a helping hand for a new facility, with Table Cape Primary School pupils setting up a display at council chambers of plans for a skate park. As part of the national Discovering Democracy pilot project, the school's year 5 and 6 pupils took surveys to find out what people most wanted in the area.

After finding that a skate park was the most desired facility they set about planning, designing and constructing models under the guidance of year 5–6 teacher Richard Freeman. Councillor Richard Muir-Wilson said the council had been looking for input from skate park users. "This has been one of the major youth issues brought to the council's attention in the last few years," he said.

The Advocate, 6 July 1999

Students from Table Cape Primary School hold up one of the models they have built for their skate park display.

The Investigation at a glance

Recommended level   *MIDDLE PRIMARY – MIDDLE SECONDARY*

Related Discovering Democracy Units	Key questions	Main suggested research activities
All units	○ What is happening about the selected issue? ○ What are the various views about the issue and how might the issue be resolved? ○ How do you prepare an action plan?	○ Media search and analysis ○ Surveying ○ Interviewing ○ Action planning and evaluation

*T*his Investigation is designed for students to examine the different views about an issue chosen by the class. Students then develop and evaluate an action plan that would enable them or others to influence the outcome of the issue.

Links to Discovering Democracy materials

Taking Issue can be used as an extension to almost all of the Discovering Democracy Units, modified as necessary to reflect the level of competence and maturity of the students.

What Sort of Nation?, in particular, will provide a ready-made set of issues which have long histories, for example immigration, the republic and multicultural policy.

Each chapter of the *Australian Readers* provides a grouping of texts with a civics focus. They offer stimulus and support material for a number of issues the class might select. For example, the *Australian Readers Middle Secondary Collection* has a chapter 'Equality and Difference' that would be a resource for an issue related to different kinds of equality or difference within society.

Indicators of student achievement

The Research Investigations provide frameworks on which teachers can build their own specific teaching programs. The Introduction outlines the general skill development outcomes for all school levels and gives an explanation of their relationship to the curriculum in each of the States and Territories.

This Research Investigation offers some additional assessment indicators of specific skills, concepts and knowledge that are developed by this project. Teachers may wish to integrate these into their own measures of knowledge-based and conceptual outcomes that they might develop from the specific context of their individual program designs.

Time allocation

The recommended time allocation is three class sessions per week over a six- to eight-week period. Much will depend on local circumstances. Advice from trials strongly suggests that reasonable time should be allowed for organisational issues, assessment and elements beyond school control (eg slow return of mail surveys, access to public figures).

Preparation

Planning and structuring the work

1   Identify a range of specific issues for students to consider and discuss with a view to selecting one or more for group-based research. Useful criteria for the selection of issues include:

   ○   relevance to civics and citizenship concepts or the material in Discovering Democracy Units currently or recently studied by the class

   ○   appropriateness to the age, maturity, interests and skills of the students

○   availability of information and/or sources of information on the issue (eg newspaper articles, people who can be interviewed, sites on the Internet).

Examples of issues selected by students in trial schools	CASE IN POINT

○   Local concerns such as reducing the amount of water wasted at school, mining in a local conservation park and a campaign to establish local youth club facilities.

○   Broader national issues such as reconciliation, whether or not Australia should become a republic and immigration policy.

○   International concerns such as Australian and United Nations support for East Timor.

2   Determine your expectations of students in conducting their research. It may be appropriate to limit the scope of the issue in accordance with some of the above criteria. It is important to keep research realistic, attainable and manageable in the context of local conditions.

3   Decide whether all groups will research a common issue, or each group will work on a separate issue.

4   In the planning stage consider what formats the final reporting might take. The final decision on this element of the work may have direct implications on the way the research takes shape. Some options for presenting research findings are outlined on pages 15 and 31.

5   Review the student handout Taking Issue Task Planner on page 33. Copy or redevelop it into a format which best meets your needs.

Sources

Secondary sources

○   Library resources. These are particularly relevant if the topic is a long-running issue or one that has been raised in the past (eg levels of migration to Australia, land and water conservation, Indigenous land rights). Texts or articles may provide background to the issue – its history, the major players, the arguments and the points of view.

○   Newspaper and journal commentary articles on the issue – local papers and/or the major dailies or specialist journals, depending on the significance of the issue.

○   Television and radio commentaries and documentaries for high-profile issues.

Primary sources

○   Interviews with representatives or members of core groups involved in the issue.

○   Interviews with individuals who are interested in or affected by the issue.

○   Surveys of random samples of respondents who may have views related to the issue.

○   Television news reports, including interviews.

○   Print- and web-based campaign material produced by the participant groups.

○ Reports, papers or submissions already presented by the interest groups.

○ Newspaper reports, photos and cartoons expressing viewpoints on the issue.

○ Participant documentation – photos, film or videotape.

○ Other photos, perhaps lent for copying by interviewees.

Cultural sources

○ Films, music, poetry, visual art that reflect the attitudes, experiences, positions and values of participants in the issue.

Internet sites

○ Sites operated by major daily newspapers in Australia. These are all available at the National Library of Australia Website (http://www.nla.gov.au/oz/npapers.html).

○ Electronic news broadcasters' websites. On the ABC Website, for example, each station has its own site (eg the Radio National Website is at http://www.abc.net.au/rn). The Channel Nine Website address is http://www.ninemsn.com.au/

○ Sites on the particular issues under consideration. (See the advice on using search engines on page 17.)

Create a context

○ Where relevant, briefly review the Discovering Democracy Unit studied by the class which gives rise to Taking Issue.

○ Provide students with a list of the issues (local, regional, national, international) selected for consideration. Brief news reports, articles or video segments could provide the stimulus. Conduct a brief introductory discussion that focuses on such questions as:

  – What are the issues?

  – Why are these 'issues'?

  – What do you know about these issues?

  – What views and/or feelings do you have about them?

  – How are they linked to the material in the unit studied?

  – Which issues do you consider to be really important?

  – Which issues do you consider to be not so important?

  – What issues would you like to know more about?

○ Use the discussion as the vehicle for the class to select one or more issues to research in more depth, as appropriate.

○ Gather and tell stories about relevant local issues that have been resolved, for example how a local business was saved from closure by community action and community support for the company; how youth unemployment was reduced by a regional mentoring scheme; how a campaign to clean up the local lake eventually converted it into a popular tourist destination.

○ Record material from television programs for review and discussion. Current affairs programs are obvious sources, but campaigns turn up on some popular TV dramas as well.

○ Consider an advertising campaign promoting a social change with which students are familiar (eg Quit, TAC, work safety campaigns). What is its purpose? Who is it appealing to? How? Do you have any information about what impact it is having?

Establish the nature of the task

1 Explain to students that they are to research a particular issue and respond to three key questions:

○ What is happening about the selected issue?

○ What are the various views about the issue and how might the issue be resolved?

○ How do you prepare an action plan?

2 Describe in more detail the range of tasks: choose an issue to investigate; use a range of sources to find out about it; identify a range of views about the issue; evaluate arguments presented and formulate a position; after the core research is complete propose an action plan that might move the issue to a successful conclusion; report and disseminate findings and recommendations.

3 Introduce and discuss the ethical principles for researchers (see pages 8–9). Working at an appropriate level, ensure that the students understand what is being asked of them, why the principles are important and how they will affect the way they go about their research work.

4 Choose the issue. There are two broad options for this.

○ You choose an issue which is likely to engage student interest and for which there are suitable resources available. This may be the more efficient way, but the onus will be on you to generate student motivation.

How an issue took shape and became a research project   CASE IN POINT

The class had been working on the mathematical concepts of area and measurement and I had been looking for a practical way to assess students' skills and knowledge in these areas. An adjoining municipality had just opened a new skate park and I challenged the children to design and construct their own scale model for a skate park in their town. Many of them were keen skaters.

A day or two after beginning their own designs, some of the students heard that the local council was gauging public opinion about the construction of a local skate park and that there was a draft design on display at the council chambers. Using their own initiative, two of the boys from the class visited the Council Chambers to view the display and they obtained a copy of the planned proposals, which they then brought into the classroom the following morning. All of the students were excited that the council was considering building a park but, after viewing the proposed site and designs, the consensus was, 'We don't want it there' and 'We want more ramps'. Suddenly we had an issue!

The project quickly expanded beyond traditional classroom learning as, in the course of their investigations, the children interacted with their peers, the wider school community, local business and local government. Learning outcomes from this project are evident across a range of curriculum areas.

Teacher, years 5–6, Tasmania

    ○   Engage students in selecting an issue. This could be done through discussion following from other work undertaken by the class or by analysing appropriate resources such as a class set of newspapers. Some decision process will be necessary.

5   Outline and discuss the steps in the research process (see pages 5–7) as a way of indicating the activities and skills they will develop in the project.

6   Each working group (individual, small group or whole class) should start to develop their Taking Issue Task Planner (page 33).

Conduct the research

This Investigation involves two tasks:

○   studying and researching information about the issue of concern and the varying viewpoints

○   the development of an action plan proposal to support a campaign to resolve the issue.

What is happening about the selected issue? KEY QUESTION 1

What the class does will be determined by the choices made in the processes referred to above. However, the following material provides one model.

1   Background research

     Collect articles on the issue from local and/or daily newspapers and, if the issue is a high-profile one, tape or video any radio or television reports. (Note: some newspapers produce student briefs on issues of state or national significance and articles can also be obtained from their websites. See Sources on pages 23–4.) Prepare a brief outline of the issue that explains:

    ○   what has been happening, what is involved

    ○   why it is important

    ○   where it is being discussed and considered (eg school, the local council, parliament)

    ○   who the main players are (ie the key organisations and individuals).

2   Develop a media board or other form of display for material as it is collected. Summary sheets with headings can be used to keep track of what is being learnt. Have updates and class briefings to discuss the issues.

3   Develop an Active Timeline Chart to capture any history of the issues – key events, decisions, group actions and statements – and also capture the unfolding story as the research progresses. This is a graphic way of not only recording results of research but also creating a sense that the students are part of a 'history in the making'.

4   Use a Results Grid (see sample on pages 28–9) to start processing information, sorting evidence, identifying interest groups and their positions, clarifying arguments and looking at strategies.

What are the various views about the issue and how might the issue be resolved?

1 From initial background research, the group can focus their primary research and develop informed questions to get to the data. For example, they should have identified the key decision makers on their issue, they should know the history of the issue, and they should have identified key matters of dispute or contention to be resolved.

2 Assist students to design the research tasks around the questions:

   ◦ What information is needed?

   ◦ What are the sources?

   ◦ How will the information be gathered and recorded?

3 Let us assume, for example, that the students opt for a survey and interviews as their methods to identify viewpoints about the issue. Assist the students to design, organise and conduct a survey of fellow students and/or appropriate members of the community to determine their views. In designing the survey, have students consider sampling, effective questioning and recording of results.

   Students should develop their own questions using the student handout Taking Issue Survey on page 34 as a guide. The following is another example.

Sample survey of local citizens

Local issue	National issue
Issue: _____	**Issue:** _____
1 Are you aware of the issue in the local community? yes no	1 Are you aware of this issue? yes no
2 Do you consider this issue important? yes no Why?	2 Do you consider this issue important? yes no Why?
3 What, to your knowledge, is being done about this issue in the community?	3 As far as you know, what disagreements exist in the community about this issue?
4 Is there anything else you think should be done?	4 Do you know what is being done by relevant authorities (eg government) to deal with this issue?
	5 Do you approve of the action being taken on this issue? yes no Explain.
	6 What else should be done?

4 Collate the results and have the group explore the range and patterns in the responses and make a report on what the survey reveals.

5 Identify the two or three main groups involved in the issue and seek to interview a representative from each, using the following questions as a guide. Again, assist the students in designing effective questions, arranging for the interviews, discussing how to conduct the interview, preparing and practising the interview, and making all the practical arrangements.

Sample interview questions
1   Briefly outline your group's position on the issue.
2   Why is this issue so important to you? How did you become involved?
3   What actions are your group taking to resolve the issue?
4   How effective have these actions been?
5   How do you think it can best be resolved?

Remind students to ask for any materials (eg pamphlets, posters and kits) which the group has produced and which may help the students to prepare their report.

A local councillor takes questions about local facilities   CASE IN POINT

Some year 6 students in Victoria invited a local councillor to speak to them about their research into local community facilities and the need for a new public library. The questions they prepared for the meeting, and allocated to different students to ask, were:

- What steps would the community need to take to get a public library in the area?

- What is a campaign? Do you think young children could organise a campaign?

- How do you organise a public meeting?

- What do you do after a public meeting?

- How do you think you can get the money to build the library?

- Who do you think would not want to have a public library and why?

- What is the importance of having a public library in this district?

- What steps will council go through to make a decision about a public library?

6   Analyse and discuss the results. Again, the Results Grid could be a useful aid. Assist students to discuss and record their thoughts on:

- identifying the main groups involved and the positions they have taken

- describing the arguments these groups have for supporting their position

- the strategies the different groups are using to achieve their aims

- areas of possible agreement which might lead to a resolution

- a summary of ideas for making progress on the issue.

Sample results grid

Issue: Construction of skateboard ramps for youth on a site within the local park			
Groups/organisations involved	Position adopted	Supporting arguments	Strategies used
Local residents' group (opposing the development)	Seeking to protect the park lands and locale. Concerned about impact on residents. Prefer to locate ramps at another site.	There is a need to keep all the park space available for all citizens. Ramps will attract noisy teenagers at all hours and increase litter and traffic.	Lobby council. Letters to the local paper. Considering a legal appeal to the relevant tribunal.

Sample results grid (continued)

Local youth groups (supporting the development)	Seeking a purpose-built facility to take skateboarding off the streets.	Teenagers also have a right to use the park.	Appealing to the broader community through advertising and media releases.
	Concern about lack of youth facilities in the district.	It is safer for all in the community to keep skateboarders off the streets and roads.	Seeking support of the local member of parliament.
Areas of agreement between the groups	1 2 3		
Suggestions for resolution	1 2 3		

Students dealing with a school-based issue could complete a table like this one.

Issue: Reducing student lateness			
People interested in the issue	**What they want**	**What they're saying**	**What they're doing**
Principal	All students to be at class on time. Disciplinary action to deter lateness.	Too many students are late and this is disruptive to classes. Students late more than three times should get a detention after school.	Preparing a discussion paper for parents and the school council. Asking teachers to insist on notes from students who are late.
Parents	Understanding of our situation and the impact that school disciplinary action can have on us and our families.	We do our best to make sure our children are on time. Detention without notice upsets our after-school routine.	Providing notes on request. Arranging a parent meeting to discuss the principal's discussion paper.

How do you prepare an action plan?   KEY QUESTION 3

This part of the work should be seen as an application of the research undertaken. Groups of students are asked to design an action plan proposal that suggests an approach to resolve the issue. This could be used as an extension activity.

1   Students should use the data gathered from all sources to develop an informed point of view that they wish to pursue. It may not be possible to reach consensus, in which case make provision for groups to work on differing points of view or associated issues.

2   From their discussions students should be guided to formulate a realistic goal to be achieved in relation to this issue. Two examples are:

Issue 1	Issue 2
Issue: Student involvement in school decision-making processes	Issue: Construction of skateboard ramps within the local park
Goal: To set up a Student Representative Council in the school by the beginning of Semester 2	Goal: To have the local council approve and build the new ramps

3   Students develop a specific strategy to achieve their goal. The strategy could involve a single action (eg raising the issue with local authorities) or be a multi-faceted campaign (eg letters to relevant bodies and/or newspapers, a petition, posters, discussion sessions in classes throughout the school).

This process can also be simplified by using a What? Who? By when? chart.

Questions to assist in developing a strategy   CASE IN POINT

One teacher of a year 9 group in Queensland used the following questions to focus this activity:

- What do you want to achieve? (eg to have the local council build skateboarding ramps)
- What needs to be done? (eg publicity campaign, have issue debated)
- How do you intend to do it? (eg letters to the editor, posters in local shops)
- Who else besides your group will need to be involved? (eg youth group leaders)
- What other actions can be taken? (eg an after-hours information evening for interested members of the community)
- What support is needed from others? (eg parents to lobby the local council, local paper coverage, shop owners to display posters)
- When will each of the steps occur?
- Who will be responsible?
- How will progress and effectiveness be monitored? (eg a survey of park users to assess their reactions to the campaign)

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4   Evaluate the plans that have been developed. If small groups have prepared their own action plans, these could now be considered by the class as a whole with a view to determining whether or not each plan is workable. Test the plan with questions such as:

- Is the plan realistic and achievable?
- Is the plan legal and does it conform to accepted school rules?
- Is the plan appropriate given the circumstances?
- What is the likelihood of the plan affecting the people targeted?
- Is it likely to lead to success?

Students could then select the plan they consider to be the best, or combine elements of different plans to create a new, agreed whole-class plan.

The results of this process can also be reported more widely, through use of the school website or by displays in the community or at school.

An example from the United States of America	CASE IN POINT

As part of the development of an action plan, secondary students in particular may wish to consider the work of Project Citizen in the United States. It is run by the Center for Civic Education in conjunction with the National Conference of State Legislatures and aims to develop students' commitment to active citizenship and governance by engaging school-based teams of Grades 6–9 students in:

- identifying a public policy problem in their community

- gathering and evaluating information on that problem

- examining and evaluating potential solutions to the problem

- selecting and/or developing a proposed public policy response to the problem

- developing a specific action plan.

Further information about Project Citizen can be obtained through the Center for Civic Education Website at http://www.civiced.org

Report the findings

In preparing to report their findings the students will need to decide first on who their audience will be and how best to report to this audience. Therefore they need to consider the formats, media and circumstances in which their reporting will take place.

There is a range of options that could be considered and combined in different ways to ensure a comprehensive report is produced. Students could consider:

1   writing and illustrating a booklet for presentation to other classes and/or for placement in the school library

2   organising and conducting a 'public' meeting or forum in the school using a range of speakers to bring the issue to the attention of other students

3   scripting and preparing a short public performance piece about the issue, using drama, song, role-play, visual projections and movement

4   preparing an illustrated report to present to relevant organisations and/or decision-making bodies with a role in the issue

5   designing and providing content of web pages to post on an appropriate website for the consideration and feedback of other students or interested parties.

Evaluation and assessment

Evaluation

Developing effective research skills is an evolutionary process. Accordingly, teachers are encouraged to allow sufficient time for a thorough evaluation of the research. It is suggested that students could evaluate their research at several different levels.

Initially, as one measure of effectiveness, the students could use the response and feedback of the audiences who took part in the presentation of the research findings. To do this effectively they would need to develop ways of collecting and recording audience feedback. They could also evaluate their own learning outcomes against a set of agreed criteria.

Further, they could evaluate the effectiveness of the work in small groups and as a whole class by applying a strengths and weaknesses analysis. From this they

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CASE IN POINT
Students and the conservation park

Students who investigated the issue of mining in a conservation park:

- prepared visual display

- wrote a report on community support for the mine

- wrote an environmental report

- constructed a model

- carried out a community survey

- conducted interviews

- carried out a survey of parliamentarians

- prepared charts on the impact of mining

- designed a web page outlining the arguments for both sides.

Year 8, South Australia

might devise a list of recommendations to improve the operation and effectiveness of future research.

The Evaluation Planner (page 20) may also be useful.

Thinking about the unit: an evaluation	CASE IN POINT

A secondary teacher prepared the following evaluation sheet for her students.

Name _____   Date _____   Topic _____

Knowledge

These are the most interesting things I have learnt about this topic …

Skills

These are the skills I have learnt or improved on during the study of this topic …

Action

As a result of studying this topic, this is what I now need or want to do:

Did you enjoy learning about (research title)   yes   no

What did you learn in this research?

What did you enjoy most or find most interesting in this research?

What didn't you enjoy or find interesting?

Is there anything else you would like to do or learn about regarding this topic?

Values and attitudes

This is what I think and believe now about this issue:

My thoughts and beliefs about the issue have/have not changed because …

Assessment

The Research Investigations assume teachers will develop their own specific indicators of student achievement in accordance with the relevant State or Territory syllabuses and frameworks and the requirements of the chosen Investigation (see page 3). The following examples of achievement indicators complement the list of general skill indicators listed in the Introduction (page 4).

At primary levels, assess students on:

- their contribution to the preparation and organisation of tasks
- their capacity to use appropriate information-gathering techniques
- the structural organisation, relevance and clarity in their presentation
- their application of basic types of questions to elicit information
- their ability to distinguish different types of sources
- their ability to describe accurately another person's point of view on an issue
- their ability to form an informed personal point of view on an issue
- their ability to examine and evaluate potential solutions to an issue
- their ability to work with others and in groups on set tasks.

At secondary levels, students could also be assessed on:

- the depth of analysis applied to the components of the issue
- their ability to plan, design, implement and record an effective interview or survey
- their critical comparisons of representations of issues
- their ability to work with others and in groups and to evaluate the effectiveness of the group itself.

Student name/s _____

Our key questions

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

Major milestones

What	Who	When
Choose an issue to investigate.		
Background research: texts, newspaper articles, radio or TV reports.		
Design and conduct surveys and interviews, analyse the results.		
Describe what is happening about the issue and the range of views people have on it.		
Evaluate the arguments that are presented and work out our own view on the issue.		
Prepare and evaluate an action plan aimed at successfully resolving the issue.		
Prepare and present research findings.		
Due date for completion:		

Our issue

Brief description _____

_____

_____

The specific sources we will use in this research are _____

_____

Our audiences for final presentation will be _____

Our final presentation of the research will be _____

_____

The date for final presentation will be _____

We will measure the success of the whole project by _____

_____

Survey by _____

The issue (brief statement describing the issue) _____

_____

Introduce the survey by saying _____

_____

The respondent

Gender   M   F

Age group: 10–15   16–25   26–35   36–45   46–55   56–65   66–75   76+

The questions

1   Please read the statement above. Are you aware that this is an issue in the community?

yes   no

2   How important do you consider this issue to be? Rate it on the following scale.

<-->

        extremely   very   fairly   neutral   not very   unimportant   not an issue

Please explain your rating: _____

_____

3   From your understanding, what are the main arguments about the issue?

For _____

_____

Against _____

_____

4   From your understanding, what is actually being done about the issue?

_____

_____

_____

5   What do you think should be done about the issue? And why do you think this?

_____

_____

_____

Thank you for participating in our research.