

How Do People Change the World?

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Describe the impact of citizens who have taken action to address various problems in society.
- Identify strategies used by citizens in a case study to come together, communicate their concerns, and work towards their goals.
- Consider local issues that may require action by members of the community.
- Evaluate the power of government, corporations, and citizens in shaping how society looks and runs.

Themes

- Activism
- Civic Engagement
- Democracy
- Environment

Materials Needed

All materials are available for download at thischangeseverything.org/studyguide.

Handout: How Do People Change the World? (p. 40-41 of this guide)

Film clip: "Saying No in Greece" (length: 5:17)

Clip Summary: Activists in Halkidiki, Greece come together to protest the treatment of a fellow protestor and the proposed expansion of a gold mine in their region run by Eldorado Gold, a Canadian mining company. Local residents are concerned about the long-term effects that mining activities will have on their land and water, which in turn affect agriculture, tourism, and the health of community members. Government officials are committed to the mine expansion. Police use tear gas against the protesters. The protests continue and the mine expansion is delayed. In the next mayoral election, the candidate supported by the protesters wins, and the mayor who favored the mine is voted out.

Activities

1. Ask students to think about this question: “How do people change the world?” Give each student a copy of the handout and ask them to read the passage and respond to the questions. After a few minutes, have students compare their responses with a partner, and then invite pairs to share an example of a transformative movement and how they think society would be different if people had not spoken up or taken action on that movement’s issue. Emphasize how citizens can bring about important changes in society when they raise awareness about problems and get involved in social and political activities to address the issue.

2. Tell students that they are going to watch a modern-day example of how members of a community in Greece organized themselves around an issue of importance to them – stopping the proposed expansion of a gold mine in their region run by Eldorado Gold, a Canadian mining company. Then, show students the video clip, “Saying No in Greece” (length: 5:17) from the *This Changes Everything* documentary. Focus student viewing by having them take notes on the strategies they observe citizens using to come together, communicate their concerns, and work towards their goals.

3. After watching the clip, discuss:

- Why were the activists against the expansion of the gold mine? Why were the government leaders for it?
- What strategies did citizens use to come together, communicate their concerns, and work towards their goals?
- How did the government and police respond to the protestors? What is your reaction to their response? Explain.
- How did the persistence and unity of the protestors pay off in the mayoral election? What can you do to ensure that your elected officials advocate for the needs of your community?
- What do students think would have happened if the citizens shown in the film had not voiced their concerns and continued with their protests? Why?
- What examples are there in your community of people speaking up about issues of importance to them? Are there local issues that students think require more action by members of the community? If so, what should be done and who should do it? How can those most affected by the issue play a central role?

4. Who do you think are the most powerful forces in society? Government? Corporations? Citizens? Who decides how society looks and runs? Have students write an opinion piece on this topic that supports their positions with specific evidence from their studies.

Go Further

- Discuss what is meant by change happening from the “top down” or from the “bottom up?” Have students read excerpts from Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States (1980)* to prepare. What examples of each can you draw from history? How might popular pressure and grassroots activism have shaped moments of change that are often considered “top down?” (Examples for discussion: the New Deal and the civil rights movement). Why might different groups of people choose to focus on one approach to political and social change over the other? Which do you think is more effective? Why? Change from the “bottom up” requires mass participation from everyday people. What do you think would motivate people in your community to challenge things as they are and work to build something better? What would motivate you?
- Ask students what an “activist” looks like. Do they consider themselves activists? Why or why not?
- Brainstorm and research various types of protest and list each on its own index card or sticky note. Draw examples from the website *Beautiful Trouble: a Toolbox for Revolution* (<http://beautifultrouble.org/tactic/>). Student pairs could participate in several categorization rounds in which they discuss and move their cards or sticky notes under labels such as, “Legal/Illegal,” “Ethical/Unethical,” “Effective/Not Effective,” “Something I Would Participate In/Something I Would NOT Participate In,” etc. Each student could then focus on one set of labels, research a specific protest in history or modern times, and justify in writing why that protest belongs in one category versus the other. Have students apply one of the tactics to addressing an issue at school or in the community.

Lesson 6 Handout

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Instructions: read the excerpt from the book *This Changes Everything* below, then respond to the questions.

Excerpt from *This Changes Everything*, by Naomi Klein:

“...There are certainly lessons to learn from the transformative movements of the past. One such lesson is that when major shifts in the economic balance of power take place, they are invariably the result of extraordinary levels of social mobilization. At those junctures, activism becomes something that is not performed by a small tribe within a culture, whether a vanguard of radicals or a subcategory of slick professionals (though each play their part), but becomes an entirely normal activity throughout society—it’s rent payers associations, women’s auxiliaries, gardening clubs, neighborhood assemblies, trade unions, professional groups, sports teams, youth leagues, and on and on. During extraordinary historical moments—both world wars, the aftermath of the Great Depression, or the peak of the civil rights era—the usual categories dividing “activists” and “regular people” became meaningless because the project of changing society was so deeply woven into the project of life. Activists were, quite simply, everyone.” (pg. 459)

Questions:

1. What does “transformative” mean?

2. According to the text, what is the key to success for any transformative movement?

3. What is an "activist"?

4. Choose an example of a transformative movement (i.e., abolition, suffrage, labor rights, civil rights, etc.). What would have happened if citizens had not chosen to speak up about issues of importance to them or to work to make things better in the community?
