Lesson 5: Analyzing Root Cause

OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students will explore public problems caused by both individual-level and systems-level sources. They will practice examining the root causes of the sample issues and will then turn their analysis to their own focus issue.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will have...
• Distinguished between individual-level and systems-level root causes of problems
• Learned about ‘close-reading’ and examined an article about their issue using this strategy
• Created a concept map organizing information about the background of, people involved in, policies and programs pertaining to, and proposed solutions of their focus issue

AGENDA
• Do Now: Give a Man a Fish (5 minutes)
• Individual versus Systems-Level Root Causes (20 minutes)
• Root Cause Evidence Analysis (22 minutes)
• Wrapping Up (3 minutes)

MATERIALS
• Student handbooks
• 1 article about root causes of focus issue (one per student) – If longer class period consider bringing in 3 articles

PREPARATION BEFORE CLASS
☐ Download the following video, or confirm that you can access YouTube in the classroom: http://www.c-span.org/video/?286358-2/erica-williams-careers-politics
☐ Find and print an article about the students’ focus issue which presents suggestions of root causes to the issue (no more than 1 page single-spaced)
☐ Lesson 7 will be a class period dedicated to hearing from an expert or guest speaker related to your focus issue. You or your students should reach out THIS WEEK to invite a guest speaker and schedule his/her visit to the class. (See your site’s Generation Citizen Weebly (www.generationcitizen.weebly.com) for suggestions, or turn to Lesson 7 for more context).

REFERENCES
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GETTING STARTED (5 minutes)

Do Now: Give a Man a Fish

Turn to page 15 in your handbook to read the Chinese proverb (or “saying”) in the comic below, and analyze the illustration. What is wrong with this picture?

![Cartoon of a man fishing in a lake full of dead fish]

'Give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime.'
- proverb

ECONOMY

Ask students to turn and talk to a partner about what they wrote in the Do Now. Share out 3-4 ideas. Support students in their observations.

**Why, Why, Why Protocol:** Many students will notice that all of the fish are dead in the water. For every comment shared, ask “Why?” to dig deeper.

*Possible comment from student:* All the fish are dead, so he can’t go finishing.

*Facilitator:* Why do you think all the fish are dead?

*Student:* Because the water is polluted.

*Facilitator:* Why do you think the water is polluted?

*Student:* Because someone must have dumped waste into it.

Etc. Why, why, why....

Explain that this cartoon helps us understand that individuals (in this comic, people who have learned how to fish) exist within a larger community, and community forces affect how we operate. In this comic, these men and many others may know how to fish, but they are still unable to fish due to community forces.

What could some of these forces be?

- The lake could be polluted because the manufacturing plant down the road has been allowed to dump waste there.
- The legal system might be so weak that no one has been prosecuted for killing fish.
- Beyond this cartoon and thinking instead about the proverb itself, the economy could be so poor that small fishing supply businesses may be out of business so no one can buy a fishing pole.
- There may not be enough money in the city budget to pay teachers who can then teach people how to fish.

**TIP:** There is a lot to cover in this lesson. Be mindful of pacing and timing. Sometimes you will need to move on or think of creative ways to keep the pace going.
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There are many factors impacting these fishermen’s success other than their own ability and knowledge.

Framing: Now that the class has selected its focus issue (review the term focus issue if needed), Today, the class is going to begin to examine the root cause of the issue, why the issue is happening. (Point to the hourglass to show students where they are in the process). They will be taking their first look at research to discover this. This will help them get to a class goal that is really meaningful.

Review the day’s agenda.

DURING CLASS (40 minutes)

Individual and Systems-Level Root Causes (20 minutes)
Understanding the Difference (10 minutes)

Ask students to turn to page 16 in their handbooks and to follow along as you describe the diagram shown.

Explain that the reason issues in our society exist, their root causes, can fall into two types. Ask a student to read aloud the definition of “root cause” on page 17 in their handbook, which was introduced to them in Lesson 2.

First, a root cause to an issue can exist because an individual has failed to do something. Individuals have the ability to take individual responsibility to prevent issues, like seeking out the education to learn how to fish. The inner circle represents the individual-level reasons why an issue is occurring in society.

Every individual also exists in a larger community that is made up of lots of different systems that can either help or prevent an individual from accomplishing their goals.

SYSTEMS: Interacting groups or organizations which serve a common purpose, or are influenced by related forces

Sample Sentence: The new prescription drug law influenced the entire healthcare system, from hospitals to patients to doctors to insurance companies.

GLOSSARY TERM:
System: Interacting groups or organizations which serve a common purpose, or are influenced by related forces

Sample Sentence: The new prescription drug law influenced the entire healthcare system, from hospitals to patients to doctors to insurance companies.

GLOSSARY TERM:
Root Cause: A main reason why a problem exists

Sample Sentence: Keisha argued that the root cause of all the garbage on her street is that there weren’t enough trashcans. If there were, she thought, people wouldn’t litter.

Sample Sentence: The new prescription drug law influenced the entire healthcare system, from hospitals to patients to doctors to insurance companies.

Stop and Jot: Even as they walk down the street to go to school, they interact with the transportation system who keeps the street clean so they don’t have to walk down dirty streets. Offer them one minute to silently “Stop and Jot” other examples of how they interact with the given systems on a daily basis. After letting them jot ideas for one minute, ask students for 2-3 more examples.

Examples could include: we use buses in the transportation system, we go to the school itself in the education system, we pass the nearby park in the parks system, we encounter the police in the public safety system.
If there is time: Ask students to consider another system in the diagram and describe how they interact with it on a daily basis.

Framing the Video: Explain that students are now going to watch a short 2-minute video featuring Erica Williams who is the deputy director of Campus Progress, part of the Center for American Progress. The group does grassroots and national organizing for causes affecting young voters. She’s speaking here to a group of students at Eastern High School in Washington, D.C. about making change in politics. As they watch, students should listen carefully for what they believe her main point is and jot down any notes on page 16 in their handbooks.


Pair/Share: Ask students to turn and talk to a partner about Erica’s main point. Do they agree with her? Why or why not? Solicit 1-2 ideas about what Erica’s main point is. Why does she say that it’s important to think about the larger systems when you’re looking for the root cause of problems?

Understanding Root Cause (10 minutes)
Now that students have reviewed the levels of community, they are prepared to find a root cause of their problem.

Explain that for every problem in our community there are both individual-level and systems-level causes which contribute to it. Review definitions listed on page 17 of their handbooks.

**Individual-level root causes** are personal choices made by people that contribute to a problem.

**Systems-level root causes** include external factors that impact a person’s ability to make a choice; these might be:

- There is a lack of something.
- There is not enough of something.
- There is too much/many of something.
- Something needs to be better in quality.
- Something is unequal.

Ask students to consider the example of smoking cigarettes in public. Ask students to make a list on page 17 of why individuals might adopt the behavior of smoking, offering one example yourself. Solicit 2-5 responses.

**Individual-Level** (examples)
- He just doesn’t care about his health.
- He wants to look cool in front of friends.
- His parents smoke and he likes the smell.
- He’s bored.

Explain that these are individual-level root causes, which might contribute to the man’s
behavior. Suggest that there are also systems-level root causes supporting his behavior.

Ask students to make a list of potential systems-level root causes of smoking, offering one example yourself. Suggest that students keep asking themselves, "Why?" to stimulate their thinking. Solicit 2-5 responses.

**Systems-Level**

- There are too many smoking advertisements on buses and trains.
- There are not enough education programs about the dangers of smoking.
- There is a lack of regulation limiting who can buy cigarettes or how expensive they are.

Invite students to turn and talk to a partner about the advantages of focusing their time, energy, and resources on addressing systems-level, rather than individual-level root causes.

Solicit 1-2 responses, underscoring why we address systems-level root causes:
- The change can last beyond convincing one person to change his behavior (which can always change back again) – we call this long-term change
- Has the opportunity to affect many more people

Make the point that every problem has many root causes that contribute to it. Focusing on one root cause at a time can help you create a specific and strategic plan of action. It’s easier to solve a specific problem than a broad one. In Generation Citizen, students will be identifying and working to address one systems-level root cause contributing to their focus issue.

**If you feel that students need further clarification and have time, consider using another example:**

Ask the class to work through another problem, using the example of a student being late to school. Invite them to work with a partner to brainstorm individual-level versus systems-level root causes of the problem for why a student might have been late to school.

**Individual-Level**

- She forgot to set her alarm.
- She always stays up too late.

**Systems-Level**

- There is a lack of public transportation in her neighborhood.
- There are not enough buses on her bus route.
- The buses are rarely on time.
- School start-time is too early for people of her age who need more sleep.

Ask students to offer suggestions of root causes, and use a scribe to write these on the board (noting which level they are). Ask students, “What questions do you have about root causes?”

**Root Cause Evidence Analysis (20 minutes)**

Tell the students that they’re going to be reading research and talking to people to learn about the systems-level root causes of their focus issue. First, they’re going to write down their own beliefs about what they think those root causes might be.

Invite students to, with a partner or independently, brainstorm potential root causes of their own focus issue. After two minutes, solicit ideas and write these down on the board.

Congratulate students on doing a great job brainstorming potential systems-level root causes of their issue. Explain that the class is going to dig deeper by looking at a short
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Have students turn to the “My Research” concept web on page 18 of their handbooks. Explain that the class as a whole is going to read an article and analyze it to pull out more root causes and other information about their issue.

As they read their article together, they should engage in ‘close reading, which means they should underline, circle or mark important information so that after they can easily translate their findings to their own concept web. Every student should fill out their own concept web. It is important to master the skill of ‘close reading’ because next class we will be looking at even more articles in small groups. Explain the categories and answer questions.

- What are my issue’s background details (FYI = for your information): statistics, stories, history
- Why is this issue happening (RCS = root causes): What are the systems-level root causes our issue exists?
- What’s been proposed or is being tried here or elsewhere (GLS = goal ideas): the programs or laws or other solutions that people have tried here or elsewhere to solve the problem
- Who’s working on the issue (PPL = people): individuals and organizations involved with the issue

Stress that while they are focusing on looking for root causes today - RCS – they should fill in any other information they learn from this article. This research will help guide students in their next lessons, whether in identifying experts to talk to, formulating questions to ask of others or to continue researching, etc.

**Read Aloud:** Read the article aloud as a class using the popcorn method (one student reads a paragraph and then gets to ask one of their peers at random to do the next paragraph). In the beginning, model stopping to annotate the article as appropriate. Give a shout out to a student who is following along and taking notes.

**Article Debrief:** Ask students if they learned any new root causes about this issue. Talk through ideas and add to list on the board. Review other three categories briefly and have all students add to their Student Handbook diagram.

**WRAPPING UP (3 minutes)**

**Exit Ticket**
On a separate sheet of paper, students should respond to the following prompts.

- Write down one individual-level root cause for our focus issue and one systems-level root cause.
- Out of everything discussed today, which systems-level root cause would you like to address the most? Why?
Do Now: Give a Man a Fish

Read the Chinese proverb (or “saying”) in the comic below and analyze the illustration.

What is wrong with this picture? Why?
Lesson 5: Student Handbook Pages

Individual-Level and Systems-Level Root Causes

Root Cause = the main reason why a problem exists

YOUR VOICE!

A. Jot down an example (below or on the chart) of how you interact with one of the systems shown.

B. Watch the video of Erica Williams speaking to students at Eastern High School in Washington, D.C. What do you believe her main point is?

Do you agree with her? Why or why not?
Understanding Root Cause

**Individual-level root causes** are personal choices made by people that contribute to a problem.

**Systems-level root causes** include external factors that impact a person’s ability to make a choice; these might be:

- There is a lack of something.
- There is not enough of something.
- There is too much/many of something.
- Something needs to be better in quality.
- Something is unequal.

Consider the once serious problem of public smoking (cigarettes) in public.

Why might a person make the choice to smoke cigarettes? / What **individual-level root causes** might contribute to the problem?

What broader factors in the community might be influencing a person’s choice to smoke cigarettes? / What **systems-level root causes** might contribute to the problem?

What are the advantages of addressing systems-level, rather than individual-level root causes?

Consider your own focus issue.

What **individual-level root causes** exist? / What **systems-level root causes** exist?
My Research: Root Causes (RCS)

Article Title:
Date it was Published:
Article Source:

[FYI]
What's the background of the issue (facts, stories, history)?

[RCS]
What root causes explain why the issue is happening?

[GLS]
What are potential goals or solutions that have been proposed or tried here or elsewhere to solve the problem?

[PPL]
Who are people or organizations involved with the issue?

YOUR VOICE: What other questions does this article raise for you?