

PROBLEM SOLVING IN SCHOOL



AGENDA

- Starter
- What's the Problem?
- Define and Gather
- Act It Out
- Conclusion
- Student Assessment

Objectives

Students will apply the steps of the problem solving process to solving problems at school.

Students will identify resources available in school that can help them solve common problems.

Materials Needed

- A list of resources available in the school that can help students solve problems (Part I)

Starter (3 minutes)

Write the following quote where everyone can see: “If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.” Elicit from students their thoughts about the meaning of this saying.

Ask the class to suggest one problem their school faces and who should solve this problem. Point out to students how easy it can be to wait for other people to solve problems that affect us. Explain that the quote means that if we are not taking responsibility for solving problems that affect us, we are helping to prolong them.

Explain to students that this lesson will help them develop new skills for solving problems that they encounter in school.

Part I What’s the Problem? (10 minutes)

Purpose: Students will develop new problem solving strategies to apply to problems at school.

1. Students identify problems at school.

Ask the class to list some problems students typically have in school. Have a volunteer write student responses where everyone can see. (Students might respond: problems with other students, problems with teachers, problems with cliques, dating and social pressures, drug and alcohol pressures, disciplinary problems.)

Save this list for use in Part II.

2. Students identify problem indicators.

Select one of the problems identified by students and ask them to list indicators that would help them identify it as a problem. Write the indicators in a place where everyone can see.

Look for a response that can be built upon to make the point that problems cannot be ignored; they must be dealt with or they will often become worse. Remind students that when they are problem solving, their goal is to clearly identify what the problem is so that they can take appropriate steps to address it.

Tell students that it may sometimes be helpful to talk to friends when they believe they have a problem. Ask students what characteristics they should look for in a friend when considering confiding in them. Write student responses in a place where everyone can see. (Students might respond: the person should be someone whose judgment and insight you respect, the person should be someone who will keep the discussion confidential.)

3. Students identify resources available in their school that can help them solve problems.

Referring to the list of problems that students brainstormed, elicit suggestions regarding places to go for help with solving problems in school. Guide students to identify school personnel whom they respect and who might help them. (Students might respond: teachers, principals, school counselors, social workers, librarians, school nurses, police, coaches, etc.) Also point out that community organizations or outside programs are available to students.

Part II Define and Gather (20 minutes)

Purpose: Students practice defining and gathering information to solve problems.

1. Students develop scenarios that call for problem solving.

Explain to students that they are going to brainstorm a list of situations in school that require problem solving. The class will then be divided into small groups to apply the first two steps of the problem solving process: define the problem and gather information.

Refer to the list of general situations that students brainstormed in Part I, and then ask them to suggest specific problem situations at school. Suggest situations such as the following to facilitate discussion:

- A friend is lying about you behind your back.
- You have missed five English classes in the past three weeks; there is a test tomorrow.
- You know that a friend has brought a weapon to school.
- Someone has taken your homework. You think that you know who it is, but you aren't sure.
- A close friend is having difficulty with his parents, and he has started drinking at school.
- Your teacher has accused you of copying someone else's answers on a test.
- Your PE teacher yells at you because she doesn't think you are trying hard enough. It has made you so upset that you don't even want to go to gym class.

2. Students define the problems.

Divide the class into small groups of five or six students. Assign one scenario from the class list to each group. Make sure that there are enough scenarios to give one to each group.

Explain to students that they are going to focus on the first two steps of the problem solving process: define the problem and gather information. Point out to students that in order to solve the problem that they have been assigned, they need to identify the causes of the problem, who is involved, the motives of the individuals involved, and so on.

Write the following questions where everyone can see them: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Suggest to the groups that the first step of defining the problem is to answer as many of those questions as possible.

Allow students about five minutes to develop answers that more specifically define their problems.

3. Students define strategies for gathering information.

After about five minutes, stop the groups and ask how many of them still have unanswered questions. Explain to students that when you have defined the problem as clearly as possible and still have questions, it is time to gather additional information.

Ask students how they can find answers to the questions that remain. Write student responses on the board. (*Students may respond: talk directly to the people involved, consult a counselor or other expert, talk to other friends or witnesses.*) Explain to them that these are strategies for the second step of the problem solving process: gather information.

Tell students that they are now going to prepare role plays. Tell them that their role plays should demonstrate clearly defined problems and include characters who are gathering information in order to develop solutions to the problems.

Allow students about 10 minutes to prepare their role plays.

Part III Act It Out (15 minutes)

Purpose: Students present and evaluate their problem-scenario role plays.

1. Students present and evaluate their role plays.

Ask for a group to present its role play first. Direct the rest of the class to write down the six questions (i.e., Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?) on a piece of paper and to define the problem by answering the questions as the group role-plays.

Have the first group present its role play.

2. Students gather information by asking effective questions.

When the role play is complete, ask the students in the group to remain in character. Direct the rest of the class to look at their lists and determine which elements of the problem are still unclear. Encourage them to ask specific questions of the role-playing group in order to determine the remaining details.

Students should ask questions similar to the following:

- Why did you feel that you had to spread gossip?
- How did you find out that your friend is having problems with her parents?
- When did you first notice that your friend was drinking in school?
- What does your teacher think about the absences?

3. Students suggest other resources for gathering information.

After the class has had a chance to question the characters, ask the students observing the role plays to suggest other resources that the characters might use to solve their problems. To guide their thinking, refer students to the list of resources that they created in Part I.

Repeat this process and discussion for each group.

Conclusion (2 minutes)

Ask students to think about a problem they currently have or anticipate having in school. Ask them to consider how well-defined the problem is: How much information do they have? What other pieces of information are missing? Elicit from students the following **key points** that were taught in this lesson:

- Once you determine that you have a problem, the first step is to clearly define it.
- Answering the six questions (i.e., Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?) can help us define a problem and determine what other information we need.
- There are many resources available to help us gather information and solve problems at school.

Student Assessment

1. List three possible problems that someone might face in school. For each problem, discuss who can help answer questions about it.
2. What questions do you need to answer in order to gather information about a problem?

LESSON EXTENSIONS

Using Quotations

“In creative problem solving, it is frequently more important to look at the problem from different vantage points rather than run with the first solution that pops into your head.”

Have students think of a problem they had recently and their reaction to it. Have them write a new solution to the problem. Ask, “How could you have looked at the problem differently?”

Addressing Multiple Learning Styles

Present students with a problem. Ask students to create a time line for solving the problem.

Have groups of students brainstorm alternative time lines.

Writing in Your Journal

Have students write about how they deal with problems at school. Have each student create a plan of action to use the next time they face a problem at school.

Have students share their plans with partners and discuss alternative solutions and possible resources within the school.

Using Technology

Have students research current education issues online. Offer various websites that discuss such issues.

Ask students to write two or three paragraphs about one of the issues.

Homework

Ask students to bring in or draw an object that represents a problem (such as a knot).

Have students describe how the object is a representation of a problem in school.

Additional Resources

Have students review *The Thinker's Toolkit: 14 Techniques for Problem Solving* by Morgan D. Jones.

Have students debate the ideas in the book or add some of their own.