

Chapter Seven

DEVELOPING SCHOOL ACTION PROGRAMS

*“Always act in such a way that
the principles underlying your
actions could become the
principles of humanity.”*

Immanuel Kant



*The following material is based on the **Action Handbook**, by William Hammond, *Natural Context*, 1993. It is reprinted here in an adapted version with permission of the author.*

Why do we need Action in Education?



Since the earliest days in the 1960's, when environmental education was being redefined from its predecessors—nature education, conservation education, and outdoor education—environmental education has been defined to include three critical components:

- a developing awareness of the environment and one's connections to it
- a developing understanding of environmental concepts and knowledge of ecological, scientific, social, political, and economic systems
- a capacity to act responsibly upon what one feels and knows within the processes of the democratic system, in order to implement the best solutions to environmental problems

Many environmental education programs built their philosophical foundations, curriculum frameworks, and program activities upon the premise that awareness leads to knowledge, which in turn creates the potential and capacity for appropriate actions. This premise may be questioned.

It is often evident that people who have considerable knowledge may not be particularly effective as action takers. It is also evident that people can be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information, sometimes conflicting or contradictory, about a given topic. Many people would like to wait until all the scientific and technical questions have been definitively answered before taking action.

But science is always tentative, it is always in process and there may always be new discoveries and inventions which will profoundly alter today's situation. Nevertheless, we need to act responsibly, recognizing the limits of current knowledge and technology. If we were to wait for total percent certainty, we would likely never act. As has been noted by other environmental writers, a decision not to act is also a decision.

Beginnings of Action in Schools

Many young people appear to have no feeling of connection or sense of personal control over the "system". Instead they feel rejected by the democratic system or feel that it has failed them. However, many very successful instructional programs have been designed and implemented since the early 1960's to engage students in action work, within the context of schooling.

These programs have clearly demonstrated that if students are taught basic “action skills” and are actively involved in trying to solve local, provincial, national, or international problems, they will act within the democratic system as responsible citizens—not only while in school but after graduation.

However, schools are not usually seen as venues for action. Many people continue to see schools as places for learning about things, rather than places for learning how to do things—especially when learning how means taking action on significant or controversial problems.

Issues in Implementing a School Action Project

Implementing an action project within the context of schools is different from implementing one within community organizations, businesses, or special interest groups. Schools have special obligations to the spirit of ethics and fair play, in a world of diverse values and viewpoints. Schools are obligated not to use their privileged positions to propagandize and must not make self-serving advocates of students who are required to attend.

It is critically important that every school board, principal, and teacher makes an uncompromising commitment to provide students with a wide range of viewpoints on any values-based issue. It is important for students to recognize that knowledgeable people may differ widely in how they see a problem and what they see as a solution.

It is up to the student to make an informed choice about what position to take on any issue. If a student does not feel allowed to take a reasoned position which varies from his or her teacher or classmates, we will know that education has been replaced by propaganda or indoctrination.

Role of the Teacher in an Action Project

Introducing action into the curriculum requires a change in the teacher’s role. He or she must move from being the primary conveyor of information, to being the facilitator of action-skill development and coach or mentor in student decision-making and implementation of proposed solutions.

A set of goals for developing action in schools may be described in the following way. Teachers must develop programs that:

- help students develop the capacity and skills to effectively anticipate the consequences of their actions.

- enhance student self-concept by helping students to be independent thinkers and instilling them with confidence for leadership. Leadership comes from acquired knowledge, understanding, skills, and experience which is built upon previous successes.

- develop student spirit and skills, and inspire, motivate and prepare students to be full participants, working for positive change within the democratic system.

Why Action Projects are an Important Part of Education

There are other good reasons why action projects play an important role in the basic education of all learners. These reasons are:

1. It has long been an accepted principle of education that one of the most powerful ways to teach something is by modeling the thing to be learned.
2. Constructivist views of teaching and learning point out the importance of students applying information in order to build a personal body of knowledge. If we expect students to truly understand new knowledge, we must provide them with real life situations where they can transfer and apply their knowledge to new situations or circumstances.
3. Critical and creative thinking strategies are enhanced when people are given real, life-wrenching things to think about—things which affect their neighbors and themselves.
4. Students don't always get an opportunity to do something of benefit for others. The power of the altruistic feeling which comes from doing something for someone else is missed. Many students truly enjoy the feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction when they complete a service project for the first time.
5. Many business and education authorities believe that students should have opportunities to develop skills in leadership, conflict resolution, and teamwork or collaboration. Young people need to experience new co-operative, collaborative leadership alternatives as opposed to the highly competitive, win-lose, leader-follower models with which they are generally provided.
6. The practices that characterize effective schools such as: time management, co-operative learning, a safe and orderly setting and interdisciplinary studies, are enhanced when students have an opportunity to take on a meaningful role in school leadership and service responsibilities.
7. When students develop more community perspective and commitment they feel attached to their communities and enhance their sense of belonging to something larger than themselves. Such attitudes replace the notion of "us versus them".
8. Improved life skills, data collection skills, communication skills, co-operation, time management, and priority setting are critical outgrowths of any student participation in an action program. The best way to learn many skills is in the context of meaningful, real applications of them.

9. Political effectiveness is learned through experience. Action programs provide students with an opportunity to develop skills in the political process and to apply them in a variety of contexts.

10. Students have the opportunity to become peer teachers, as well as learners. They can build relationships with many different people in the school and community as they work on their action goals. Students gain experience and support of mentors who assist them as they strive to attain their goals.

The three important outcomes that are likely to be acquired by every student participating in an effective school-based action program are that students become committed to natural systems, to democracy, and to their community.

Types of Action Projects

Over the past thirty years, experience has affirmed that action work within schools, can be effective with students from preschool through high school and beyond. It is just the level of sophistication and magnitude of the problems addressed that varies with age levels. A successful "Action Project" may be an individual effort or a small or large group endeavor within the context of school programs.

In Canada, many schools have become involved in environmental action. The various projects have included:

- SEEDS (Society, Energy, Education and Development)
- Salmonid Enhancement Program (SEP) of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans of Environment Canada
- Environmental Youth Corps, Local Initiative Projects and Opportunities for Youth
- Ducks Unlimited
- Canadian Wildlife Federation's Habitat 2000 program
- Watershed Restoration Projects
- other joint efforts between schools and community interest groups

In the USA, the Monday Group (environmental seminar classes) of the Lee District Schools in Florida, has possibly the longest running school-based action program in the nation.

The Monday Program has been featured in the Project Wild Teacher's Guide as a model for school-based action projects. It was established by Bill Hammond and Environmental Education teaching staff, some of whom began school-based action work in 1962.

Other approaches to action programs may be found in the effective programs developed at Southern Illinois University by Harold Hungerford and his graduate students. These programs are called Investigating and Evaluating Environmental Issues and Action Skill Development Modules.

Other programs to mention include: Global Rivers Environmental Education Network (GREEN) Program, established by William Stapp and his graduate students at the University of Michigan, and the Audubon Expeditions Program established

by Michael Cohen and implemented through the National Audubon Society of the United States.

There are literally hundreds of other documented, successful environmental action programs which have been conducted in schools and developed by classroom teachers throughout North America and the world.

Implementing Action Programs in Classrooms

Key Elements of an Action Program Component in Schools

The action element of a sound educational program requires that a student have mastery of basic skills in reading, writing, math, science, social studies, the arts, ecological systems, and technology applications. In turn, the action element provides a very effective context for the direct application of these academic subjects in the real world.

Action projects bring life to learning, because the ultimate outcomes are unknown as learners take part in the action. The experience becomes a real problem-solving process which allows students to synthesize what has been learned in school and apply it directly to the selected problem or issue.

An action program enhances the development of character skills for students of all ages. Honesty, integrity, work ethic, trust, positive risk-taking, collaborative participation, and empathy for others are a few of the character skills that are emphasized through action work.

Learner-Teacher Guidelines

A critical teacher role in implementing action programs is coaching students to plan their broad visions or goals into a set of key steps, milestones, or critical sub-goal accomplishments. In this way, if the time constraints of the school setting or the political process (which always seems to take longer than most of us estimate) delay the attainment of the ultimate goal, students will still have a positive sense of accomplishment, of partial closure, and a feeling that they indeed made a difference and can continue to make a difference if they persist.

There are other important guidelines that have evolved over years of studying successful practices for carrying out action projects or programs in schools.

Simply stated they are:

1. Learners should be free to decide upon and select the problem they feel is important to research and address with action. Teachers and other adults may serve as advisors in this process. However, it is important for the students to develop personal ownership of the project.

2. A basic set of “action skills” can be learned and must be taught, practiced, and applied. These include:

- how to identify, research, and investigate the problem or issue
- developing leadership and group organization skills
- developing communication and lobbying skills (letter writing, phone calling, public speaking)
- developing presentation skills
- developing conflict resolution skills
- “force field” analysis—determining support and opposition to the solution and selecting appropriate methods, strategies, and tactics for implementing action
- understanding alternative strategies, learning how to sustain and continue projects

In addition to mastering these individual skills, it is equally important to master collaborative team skills, particularly if a project is a group project. Often, we do not distinguish between individual skills and the equally complex but different set of skills required to be an effective, contributing group member.

3. The Monday Group in the Lee County Schools program has developed a set of guidelines for interactions and communication with those involved in any action project. They are:

■ **Express positions in positive terms.**

If you are opposed to something, you must be for something. It is your responsibility to express what you stand for and what your proposed solution is, in positive, concrete terms.

■ **Avoid stereotyping others.**

Treat everyone as a person of high moral worth whether they are in support or opposition to your project. Stereotypes : (developer, environmentalist, liberal, conservative, politician, bureaucrat, tree hugger) get in the way of establishing positive relationships and communications, because they lump individuals into categories.

■ **Do your homework—become an expert on your topic.**

Read specific articles about your topic, interview experts, do field investigations, and get first hand information where possible. Don’t rely on rumours or hearsay. Identify the core problem or issue(s) and formulate your research questions and hypothesis based on the best way to address the problem.

■ **Follow the “force field”.**

Investigate the viewpoints of all people who have a stake in the problem. Keep an open mind to the views of others. Try to consider the impact that proposed actions will have on the lives of the various stakeholders, both in

the short and long term. Formulate an action plan selecting the strategies and tactics you believe are most appropriate to the situation.

■ **Avoid scapegoating.**

If you fail to attain your goal for any reason, avoid the temptation to blame your lack of success on someone else or on some other set of circumstances. If you failed to attain your desired goal, it may be because you did not do something as well as you needed to. You may have not done your homework, lobbied, or communicated to all the concerned people effectively enough.

■ **Recycle your efforts.**

If you do not reach your intended goal, recycle your efforts or start the process all over again. You know far more the second or third time through the process than you did the first time. You know key resource people and what worked and didn't work in your initial approach. Do it again! Try again and again until you succeed.

■ **Be persistent—stick with it!**

People don't always recognize the potential students have to accomplish community changes, particularly on environmental problems and issues. Long term planning, commitment, and a tenacious approach are most important to the success of significant environmental action projects. The action process tends to be a spiraling pattern of action-research-action-research-action. This is why recycling your efforts is critical to success.

Three Levels of Action

There are typically three types or levels of action work. Succeeding levels require a greater degree of sophistication and skills for successful action.

Level 1: Actions which result in a distinct end-product within a fairly short time period.

This type of project involves generating products or producing results such as: wildlife habitat improvements, marked watershed storm-water drainages, developing informational publications and multimedia programs, planting trees, recycling trash, or building and placing bird or bat boxes in critical locations. Other activities might be: writing letters, making phone calls to decision makers, or buying a piece of tropical rainforest. The goal is to achieve action within a fairly short period of time.

Level 2: Actions which result in ongoing or sustained environmental processes.

This category includes Level 1 type projects, but it goes farther. Level 2 projects involve the development and design of long term, on-going endeavours that continue even after the project designers have moved on to other grade levels, schools or projects.

People involved in Level 2 action projects have to develop strategies to train their successors and to maintain political, institutional, or financial support for the long term.

Level 3: Actions which result in some level of policy change.

A Level 3 project is directed at changing or creating new public policy at the school, school district, city, county, state, or federal level. Students in this type of project need sophisticated skills in lobbying, working with mass media, dealing with governmental processes, and knowing how to work within the democratic system. Projects of this type require the most complex set of skills in order to succeed.



Although the three levels of action require different qualities and sets of skills, one level of action work is no more important than another. Elementary, middle, and high school students have successfully carried out projects at all levels. A typical pattern for a teacher and students is to evolve through the levels as skills are acquired and students mature. However, students and teachers sometimes directly enter a higher level and accomplish a Level 3 project without ever completing a Level 1 or 2 project. In any action project, motivation, commitment, and skill development are the keys to success.

Mentors in Action Programs

Mentor: a wise, loyal advisor; a teacher or coach

Students rarely succeed in their first attempts at action without developing a special supportive relationship with someone outside their group. This specialized form of intervention and teaching or coaching may be defined as mentorship.

A mentor provides support in many ways. He or she may advise, counsel, encourage, suggest, and provide critical information or materials. A mentor gives support at the right time—perhaps by making critical phone calls when the way seems blocked.

A mentor may be a friend, another student, a caring teacher or school staff member, a business person, or an outside government or public agency member. Whoever it is, a mentor can make you feel positive and willing to risk the next step in your action plan.

In the Monday Groups, the team of teachers tries to make sure that every student feels positive affirmation of his or her efforts every day. This affirmation helps students recognize the progress that she or he is making.

When speakers or resource people from business, government agencies, or community groups meet with students, they are encouraged to get to know one or two of them. They are urged to make follow-up calls or write brief notes of encouragement to the students. Often, these encounters become a rewarding and collaborative relationship for both the mentor and the student.

The mentor relationship must be actively cultivated and supported for all students engaged in action work. While this is especially true for students new to action work, even experienced project workers find mentors to be an important element in helping them to pursue their goals.

Leadership

Leadership, within this context of this guide and these action projects, is defined as existing when a person takes actions which help a group move toward attaining its goal. This definition of leadership is much more inclusive than many. By using it, anyone can see his or her potential for leadership.

Conflict Resolution

The “art of the possible”—even when things seem impossible!

For centuries, the primary ways to solve conflict have used force, cunning, trickery, or skillful negotiation. In this type of conflict resolution, there is usually a winner and a loser. Recent conflict resolution strategies focus on both sides working to get mutual satisfaction—a “win-win” approach.

“The only good deal is one where all parties to the deal feel they got a good deal.”
Frank Hammond, President S.S. White Dental Company

Two different strategies for this type of negotiation are summarized in *Getting To Yes* by Roger Fisher and William Ury. Their process may be summarized as having the following attributes:

Attributes:

- **People**—separate the people from the problem.
- **Interests**—focus on interests, not positions.
- **Options**—generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do.
- **Criteria**—insist that the result be based on some objective standard.

These attributes are the basis for a negotiating process that has four steps:

Step 1. Define the Problem. (In the real world)

Identify what is wrong. What are the current symptoms? What is disliked? What is the preferred situation?

Step 2. Analyze the Situation. (In theory)

Diagnose the problem. Sort symptoms into categories. Suggest causes. Observe what is lacking. Note barriers to resolving the problem.

Step 3. Consider Possible Approaches. (In theory)

What are the possible strategies or prescriptions for addressing the problem? What are some of the theoretical cures or solutions? Generate broad ideas about what might be done.

Step 4. Develop Action Ideas (In the real world)

What might be done? By whom? When? How? What specific steps might be taken to deal with the problem?

This process is powerful if the participants are skilled in problem analysis or have a facilitator to guide them through the process. Too often, participants have not developed enough skill to objectively separate the problem from the personalities or to distinguish the underlying problem from the symptoms which surround it. In either case, training can provide a real bridge to getting past these obstacles.

Developing Student Confidence: Simulations and Role plays

Simulations, role plays, and debates are effective ways of helping students develop an understanding of environmental issues. Each of these strategies allows students to look at issues from many points of view.

It is often effective to assign roles to students that they would not typically choose. This “force fit” helps participants to develop empathy—an understanding of what it feels like to be in someone else’s shoes. Here are some examples of how to train students for political lobbying, using simulations and scenarios.

Definition of Lobbying

To many people, the word “lobby” as a form of political influence has connotations of corruption or political sleaze. In the development of the Monday Group Environmental Action program, the staff have defined the term as: “To lobby is to communicate with and persuade a person(s), agency or organization that represents a “power influence” on an objective you wish to achieve.” A lobbyist is the person(s) doing the lobbying.

With this definition in mind the Monday Morning staff have created a way to teach students the process of lobbying. It is as follows:

Instructional Goal: To develop skills in effective lobbying in all students.

Guidelines for Action: Set up a lobbying team that is made up of three team members. Each person on the lobbying team should have a very specific responsibility and role to play in the lobbying effort. The three assignments are as follow:

Lobbyist Role 1: The Recorder

This person plans the lobbying session with two other team members and observes and records all that occurs. He or she usually leads the debriefing session for the rest of the team members immediately after the lobbying session.

Lobbyist Role 2: The Listener/Support Speaker

This person co-plans the lobbying session and listens carefully to everything people say. He or she should be ready to assist the Presenter by adding key points which have been missed and providing additional information, as needed, during the lobbying session.

This member of the team must know the objectives for the lobbying session and be sure the Presenter covers them all. He or she must participate in the debriefing session when lobbying is complete.

Lobbyist 3: The Presenter

This person co-plans the lobbying session and is prepared to be the primary communicator for the lobbying team. He or she must also take part in the debriefing session.

Steps for Classroom Simulations of Lobbying Action

1. Do your homework and plan.
2. Make appointments for the lobbying session.
3. Make an effective entrance with introductions and set the stage.
4. Communicate your purpose and plan to the person(s) being lobbied.
5. Clarify understandings and commitments.
6. Summarize the key points of understanding and define follow-up actions and their timing.
7. Thank the person(s) being lobbied and remind them of follow-ups or commitments to be acted on (by both parties).

8. Debrief the session with the lobbying team to verify what each person observed and to review commitments and follow-up promises.

9. Send a note thanking the person(s) who was lobbied, include any pertinent information and affirm commitments.

Note: Written scenarios based on actual community issues, may be used in the lobbying practice sessions. Other students or teachers can act as the "targets" of the lobbying effort and can evaluate the success of the team's approach.

Try role playing the lobbying of a mock county commissioner or other elected official. Have the class critique each team's lobbying effectiveness. A variation might be to ask the recorder/observer to publicly debrief the lobbying team in front of the remainder of the class and invite class feedback.

An Example of a School Action Project

Here's an example of an action project that you can use to involve students and community members.

Riparian Zones

A riparian zone refers to an area situated on the banks of a river or other body of water. Riparian planting means re-planting indigenous vegetation on the banks of a creek, river, or other body of water.

Background Information

Riparian areas are an important part of aquatic ecosystems. By restoring vegetation in these areas, the health of these systems will improve dramatically and quickly. The benefits of riparian planting include improvement of the habitat and strengthening the food chain not only for aquatic organisms, but for terrestrial organisms and birds as well. Riparian planting helps: stabilize stream banks, traps sediments and pollutants, slows and dissipates flood waters, provides thermal cover, and improves water quality and wildlife habitat.

Urbanization, logging, and agriculture, in some areas, have had a profound negative impact on the riparian zones of our waterways. In urban areas, streams have been dredged, channelized, culverted, and development has occurred right up to the banks. Past logging practices have seen harvesting right up to the edges of lakes and streams. Livestock have been allowed to browse riparian vegetation, denuding the banks of major waterways.

Remediation of these problems through riparian planting is inexpensive and rewarding for groups interested in protecting aquatic environments.

Activity: Riparian Planting

This type of project can be taken on by clubs or school groups. It involves planting indigenous trees and shrubs in the riparian area of lakes, streams, and rivers where the vegetation has been removed by grazing or human activities.

Ask a naturalist or landscaper for help on choosing the right type of trees and shrubs for planting. Use ones that are indigenous to your area and can be planted fairly easily. Spring is a good time for planting.

There are several ways to get trees and shrubs to use for planting:

- grow your own from cuttings
(*Note: only Cottonwoods (Populus) and Willows (Salix) are easily propagated this way. These are usually the natives and are a good choice for your first year.*)
- start your own from seed
- purchase plants from a commercial nursery

- get plants donated by forest tree nurseries
- use a combination of the above

Materials:

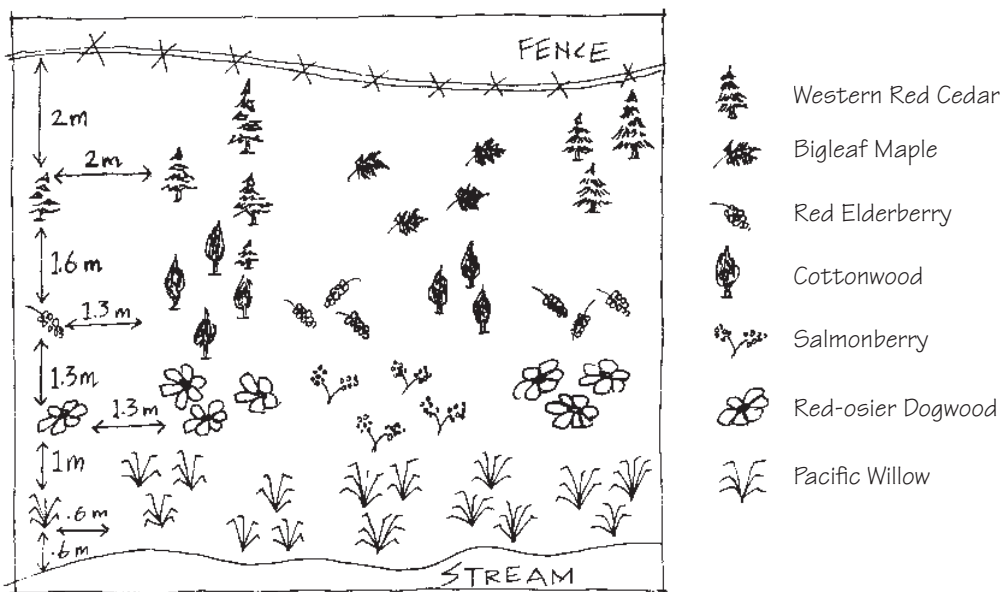
- trees
- shrubs
- hoe or shovel
- well-rotted manure
- straw for mulching
- mouse guards

Procedure:

Before Planting

1. Get approvals from the owners of the land where planting will take place.
2. Find a source of trees and shrubs for planting.
3. Plan your planting. Find out which plant species suit the area and map out how you will plant them. Make the layout look as natural as possible. (Ask a naturalist or landscaper for help.)

Note: if you are planting only one or two species, the planning is easier. Generally, you will want willows in the wetter sites, close to the stream bank and the cottonwoods further back. Shrubs and conifers can be interspersed as shown in the diagram. To emulate natural succession, you may want to plant deciduous trees the first year and coniferous trees in subsequent years.

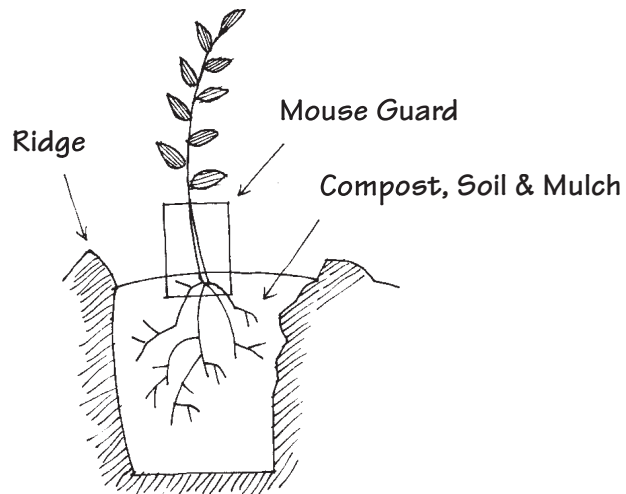


During Planting

Begin by explaining and demonstrating the following steps to your group. (See the diagram showing a properly planted tree.)

The steps are:

1. "Think" like a tree and choose a planting site accordingly. Think about high and low water conditions. The site needs to be "digable". On rip rap (rocky) sites, soil should be brought in to allow the plants a foothold.
2. Clear the micro-site. You need a circle of about 1 meter (3 feet) around the planting spot that is clear of weeds and grass.
3. Dig a hole. Make it about 15 cm. (6 inches) bigger than the root ball of the plant.
4. Place the plant in the hole so that the top of the roots is slightly below ground level. Pack the soil firmly around the plant so that no roots are exposed to the air.
5. Build a crater about .3 m. (1 foot) around the plant to hold the water. Put the mouse guard around the stem of the plant with the bottom end 3-5 cm. (1-2 inches) below the ground level.
6. Place a scoop of well-rotted manure inside the crater, around the plant. Cover it with a mulch of straw.
7. Water the plant by filling the crater with 8-12 litres (2 or 3 gallons) of water. Place a stake next to the plant so that it doesn't get trampled or mowed and is easily found for follow-up care.



After Planting

1. Water the plants once a week over the summer.
2. Remove competing weeds.
3. Remove the stakes once the plants are well established.

Publicity

Invite the media to your planting. Put up signs at the planting site to explain what you are doing and why. Education of the public can begin by publicizing the work you do in riparian planting.

Summing Up

Awareness and knowledge without the capacity for effective, appropriate action is sterile and lacks engaging power or relevance for students.

The above concepts, guidelines, and approaches, can be used to train students for effective action. The fact that many classes have had great successes protecting, restoring, and sustaining the environment speaks for the success of action projects. Less evident, but equally important, are the personal success stories of students who discovered their capacities for leadership and increased their sense of self-worth and competence.

Directions for specific action and monitoring projects such as: Stream Mapping, Water Quality/Quantity Surveys, Stream Invertebrate Survey, Storm Drain Marking, Stream Clean-Up, and Streamside Planting are available through the Fisheries and Oceans Streamkeepers Handbook. Contact the Community Advisor or Water Stewardship Co-ordinator in your area for information.



