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The different sides of activism

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The different sides of activism – From peaceful protests to illegal actions

Paul Senkerson



Ob Schulstreik, Demonstrationen, das Unterzeichnen von Petitionen oder radikale Aktionen – politischer Aktivismus kann unterschiedliche Formen annehmen. Insbesondere die letzten Jahre haben dies gezeigt, mit zahlreichen Protestaktionen zu diversen Themen. Der Klimawandel, Rassismus sowie die Maßnahmen während der Corona-Pandemie nahmen hierbei einen besonders großen Stellenwert ein. In dieser Unterrichtseinheit setzen sich die Schülerinnen und Schüler mit verschiedenen Aspekten von political activism auseinander. Wie sehen Protestaktionen früher aus und wie ist es heute? Wie reagieren die Regierungen weltweit darauf? Und welche Rolle spielen moderne Technologien? Den Antworten auf diese und weiteren Fragen nähern sich die Lernenden anhand verschiedener Materialien wie Texten, Videos und Cartoons.

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Paul Jenkinson

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Competences and skills:

By working with several texts, students especially train their **reading competence**. Dealing with the texts more closely, as well as with three cartoons, they also enhance their **analysing skills**. Furthermore, students' **speaking skills** are trained as they participate in presentations and discussions and express opinions orally. The unit also contains tasks concerning videos; thus, improving students' **listening and viewing comprehension skills**.

Overview:

List of abbreviations:

A Analysis**D** Discussion**P** Working with the picture/cartoon**R** Research**T** Working with the text**W** Writing**C** Comment**LVC** Listening/viewing comprehension**PR** Presentation**RC** Reading comprehension**VI** Working with the video

Topic	Material	Methods/Skills
1: Young activists	M1–M3	A, D, LVC, PR, R, T, VI
2: Activists and the law	M4–M5	A, C, P, T, W
3: Speaking out for a cause	M6–M7	P, PR, R, RC, VI, W
4: Civil disobedience	M8–M9	A, C, RC, T
5: Remodelling youth activism	M10–M11	R, T, W
6: 2020 – An eventful year	M12	A, C, LVC, VI

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Facts

Activism takes many forms from school strikes, demonstrations and protests to signing petitions or boycotting products. It also covers a wide range of topics from ecosystems being destroyed to human rights. The spark that frequently ignites activism is a political or social injustice that is being ignored. In years gone by, these grievances were often local or national ones; today's activism, though, tends to focus on wider issues, such as climate change or how people of colour are being abused and unfairly treated. This development, in part, is due to social media making communication instant and the organisation of activist events easy. Successful protest movements generally have had strong leaders – for example Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Emily Pankhurst, John Lennon or Greta Thunberg. However, the igniting force could also be a tragic event, such as the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement.

Activism could be seen in two ways: active activism, meaning people taking physical action in form of demonstrations, for example, or passive activism with people who sign online petitions or silently refuse to buy certain brands. Activists walk a fine line, though, between acting legally and taking a civil disobedience route with peaceful protests Gandhi-style or a disruptive route bordering on, and sometimes including, the illegal such as gluing oneself onto a road or an airport runway in “Extinction-Rebellion-style”.

There has also been a shift in the age of the activists with many young people not even old enough to vote playing an important role in trying to safeguard their generation's future from the abuse of the planet.

Definitions of activism are quite similar and worth noting:

- “Activism is the process of campaigning in public or working for an organisation in order to bring about political or social change.” (*Collins dictionary*)
- “A doctrine or practice that emphasises direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.” (*Merriam-Webster dictionary*)

Notes on the material

Although activism knows no class or age barriers, it is usually seen as being associated with the youth of a certain time period. Recently, a much younger global activist group has appeared on the scene, many of which are not yet even at a voting age; their voices, though, have resonated worldwide thanks to social media. Their ways of organising and accessing information have made these young people awareness savvy. They are protesting about global issues regarding the climate and racial injustice, for example, as opposed to former generations that tended to focus on a single issue, such as the Vietnam War. **Topic 1** looks at how the generation born between 1997 and 2012 is changing activism. Apart from working with the text, students are given the opportunity to study other protest movements that have had a major impact on societies and governments. A further part of topic 1 is a video concerning the impact of hashtags and petitions.

When governments do not react to urgent situations such as the climate crisis, some activists decide to take physical action rather than just protesting loudly. In recent times, they have thrown soup at famous paintings, glued themselves onto major roads and climbed onto motorway gantries. Due to these escalating and disruptive actions, the British government is increasing police powers, effectively giving them carte blanche to deal with activists. **Topic 2** deals with this development through an article showing the author's personal opinion. After analysing the text, students express their own views on disruptive protests. Included in topic 2 is also a cartoon which is connected thematically to the text.

Protests come in many forms and cover many issues. **Topic 3** compares two protests from very different times: the pulling down of the Colston statue in Bristol in 2020 and John Lennon's and Yoko Ono's bed-in in 1969. Students are asked to research these protests to discover why they came about and, in two follow-up videos each dealing with the protests, they are asked to express their views about them.

Is civil disobedience acceptable? Is breaking laws justifiable to prevent injustices? **Topic 4** contains a comment from The Guardian newspaper exploring these themes and gives students an opportunity to express their views about civil disobedience.

School strikes, Greta Thunberg, Fridays for Future and such like have all drawn global media attention with politicians and world leaders praising their actions. Platforms for the child-activist movement were provided and important figures enjoyed their photoshoots with these young people who want to change the world. But was it all just patting young people on the head and returning to normal? **Topic 5** observes the rise and fall of the child-activist movement and how it has subsequently developed.

If one had to pick a year when activism was at its height recently, it would be 2020. The video in **topic 6** provides a summary of events during these twelve months, kicking off with the death of George Floyd and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. It also covers the outbreak of the pandemic, climate activists and the climatic disasters that affected the USA. A multiple-choice listening task is set together with an opportunity to analyse the video.

Topic 1: Young activists

M1 *Gen Z¹: How young people are changing activism*



[...] Activism has long been synonymous with youth culture. From the May 1968 protests in France, and demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement in the US, to the global Occupy movement and the Arab Spring of the late noughties, young people have a record of pushing forward social change. Gen Z is the latest chapter in the decades-long encyclopaedia of young activists; however this cohort appear to communicate, mobilise and rally support in a way that sets them apart from the generations before them.

Raised against the backdrop of the Great Recession of 2008, Gen Z has experienced a unique set of hurdles². Along with unprecedented societal unrest and division, their path to adulthood has been complicated by the pandemic, during which they've seen the rising impact of global inequality. Climate change is front and centre, threatening the future of the planet they will live on. And as the world economy enters a period of looming instability, Gen Z are increasingly bearing the brunt³.

“The sense of crisis right now is amplified,” says Jessica Taft, an associate professor of Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz whose work focuses on the political lives of children and youth across the Americas. “The extent of the climate crisis, the profound inequalities, the global creep of fascism – they are all existential threats.” Of course, there have been countless perils⁴ in the past, however the potency and global nature of these historical moments is shaping young people's world views, and the role activism plays in their lives, she says.

Fuelling Gen Z's anxiety is the fact that they are exposed to news in a different way to their parents or grandparents at the same age; young people are consuming content around social issues and events almost constantly. With just a smartphone, people can access a 24/7 buffet of reporting through social media sites, search engines, news sites and TV. Social media is fast overtaking traditional news channels among young people. Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are now the top three most used sources for news for British teens, according to the broadcasting

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