



Using Root Cause Analysis to Help Students Examine Social Problems

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Abstract

Root cause analysis is a valuable tool for helping students examine a societal injustice and determine its impacts and underpinnings. The 5 Whys technique is a type of root cause analysis that journalism and mass communication educators can use to teach students to analyze the causes and effects of social problems so they can report on them ethically and responsibly. This article outlines the 5 Whys process for analyzing a social injustice. It also applies this process to a specific issue as an illustrative example. Finally, the article considers the benefits and drawbacks when teaching students to apply the 5 Whys technique in the classroom.

Our U.S. institutions of higher education were designed, in part, to foster students' civic participation in public life. Indeed, many journalism and mass communication educators seek to prepare their students to produce communication for engaged citizenship and civic advocacy. Such teaching requires these educators to raise students' awareness of societal injustices and the systemic causes that create and sustain them.

One valuable tool for helping students to unpack an injustice and determine its impacts is a root cause analysis. Root cause analysis is a practical and structured approach to problem solving. It originated as a management practice to enable companies to achieve organizational improvement and operational efficiency. The goal is to determine the cause of a problem in order to reduce or eliminate the error.

There are several different ways to perform a root cause analysis. One method is the 5 Whys technique. The 5 Whys is attributed to Sakichi Toyoda, the founder of what is today the Toyota Motor Corporation (Serrat, 2017). Toyoda developed the technique

to uncover errors in the company's manufacturing process. With the causes of these errors identified, Toyoda and his employees could develop solutions to the problem and mitigate the potential of it happening again.

Since its birth in manufacturing, the 5 Whys technique is now widely used in a variety of industries, including healthcare, construction, engineering, and even education. For example, school districts throughout the United States engage in this method of root cause analysis to evaluate and improve the performance of their K-12 schools (DESE, 2018; Salmon, 2019). The 5 Whys technique can also be found in college classrooms as a tool for developing students' critical thinking and collaboration skills, as well as their solutions-oriented approach to problem solving (Moaveni & Chou, 2016).

I teach my students to apply the 5 Whys every semester in my *Media for Social Justice* capstone course. The course requires students to create compelling multimedia stories about a social justice issue. In the

past, we have focused on criminal justice reform, voting justice, immigrant justice and more. Before students can report on these important issues, they must first understand them more fully. Thus, within the first few weeks of the semester, I help students perform a root cause analysis on our issue using the 5 Whys technique.

Below is the process I lead my students through, which can be applied by fellow JMC educators in any course that requires students to examine social problems and their underpinnings.

1. Work independently, or with your students, to identify an issue of societal injustice that affects the lives of many people in a significant and tangible way.
2. Prime students for the 5 Why technique here at the start. Set expectations with your students that this assignment will require them to examine the oppressive policies and structures that underpin the injustice. Explain that they must perform a deep examination of the “underlying historical, social, political, or economic root causes” of the injustice (Movement Strategy Center, 2012, p. 12). Share with them that “some examples of root causes are sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, ableism, or ageism” (Advocates for Youth, 2019, p. 5).
3. Engage your students in researching the issue to understand its complexities. Direct them to pay attention to:
 - a. Who is the most affected by the issue and how they are affected.
 - b. Its political, economic and cultural implications.
 - c. Its global, national and local dimensions.
 - d. The people, teams and organizations working to address the issue, as well as the impact of their efforts.
4. Students’ research should illuminate a list of problems related to the issue. For each problem, students should be able to observe evidence that it exists. This evidence represents the symptoms of the problem that are visible to us. We can see these symptoms and their impacts. Here in this step, have students create a concise, research-driven problem statement for each significant problem they want to analyze further.
5. Have students apply the 5 Whys to each problem statement. Each Why question should interrogate the response to the question that precedes

it. Instruct students to reference their research to answer each Why question. They may need to conduct further research to respond accurately to some questions as they get closer to determining the root cause or causes of the problem.

6. As they ask Why, students will come to identify the policies, procedures, structures and practices that facilitate the problem. Complex social problems like the one they are investigating are predicated on structural inequities. Name these factors that give life to the problem and that allow it to propagate.
7. Have students seek to determine the root cause or causes of the problem by the response to the fifth Why question. Certainly, some root causes require more than five Whys to uncover, some require fewer. Large scale societal injustices may require more given the systemic nature of these problems.

The analysis concludes with the discovery of the root cause or causes of the problem, as well as the factors that fuel it.

On the next page is an example of a root cause analysis using the 5 Whys technique. It is illustrative of the process steps above and one that I helped my students create when examining the issue of voting justice.

One semester is a limited amount of time to sufficiently analyze issues upon which students must report responsibly and ethically. This technique accelerates students’ comprehension of the systemic nature of social inequities, as well as their contributing factors. It also enables students to think beyond problems to their solutions, and to recognize solutions that address root causes versus only symptoms of the injustice. Moreover, this technique educates students’ hearts, evoking their empathy for those who suffer and eliciting their ardent desire to communicate for justice and the common good.

An example of this transformative education of the heart comes from a former student in the course who wrote:

This experience has given me a greater understanding of what people go through. Most of all, it has connected me to the world at large and given me greater empathy for the journey we all go through to live and love in peace. I have aspirations of using my creativity to make a change in the world through working with a company that values human rights (A. Wilson,

Example of Root Cause Analysis Using 5 Whys Technique

Identify an issue	Voting Rights
Research the issue	<p>Voter suppression limits the number of people who can vote in a political election. Throughout our nation's history, the votes of African Americans have been disproportionately disenfranchised through voter suppression tactics like literacy tests and poll taxes. The landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965 ended states' discriminatory disenfranchisement. Fast forward to today where there is a resurgence of voter suppression tactics again targeting Black voters.</p> <p>These tactics include partisan gerrymandering, voter purging, voter ID laws, polling place closures, early voting restrictions and more. Evidence of these tactics can be seen across the nation in the form of various states' gerrymandered congressional maps, reduction in polling locations, etc.</p>
Problem Statement	According to a report released by the ACLU of Georgia in September 2020, the state wrongfully removed nearly 200,000 Georgia citizens from the voter rolls (Palast, 2020).
5 Whys Technique	Why were these Georgia citizens removed from the state's voting rolls?
	Georgia election officials said these citizens were removed because they had moved from their registration address.
	Why did the election officials believe these citizens had moved?
	Election officials made the determination that these citizens had moved based on their failure to respond to an address confirmation postcard sent to their home. Postcards were sent to citizens who election officials say had failed to vote in the last two federal elections. If citizens did not confirm their address after receiving the postcard, the state purged their voter registration.
	Why did election officials use this "purge-by-postcard" (Palast, 2020, p. 19) method?
	Election officials say they engaged in this practice to maintain accurate voter rolls. However, the postcards were mailed to citizens without the state first receiving certification from the U.S. Postal Service that the addresses were accurate. As a result, tens of thousands of postcards were returned as undeliverable. Postcards that did reach citizens were not always read and returned. (Palast, 2020)
	Why did the state forgo the accepted industry best practice of using reliable lists?
	The office of the Georgia Secretary of State did not respond with an answer to this question when queried by an independent investigator (Palast, 2020, p. 15). What is known, however, is the disproportionate effect of this postcard campaign on young voters and voters of color. Analysis shows that it led to the purging of voters who are mostly "young, urban (renting), low-income, and citizens of color and those for whom English is a second language" (Palast, 2020, p. 19).
	Why would this postcard campaign affect these voters the most?
	Because demographically these voters are less likely to read and return postcards. Young voters move more frequently and are more likely to treat postcards as junk mail. Voters of color are more likely to be renters and fall into a lower income bracket. (Ageism and Racism)

personal communication, May 2, 2019).

Aside from these benefits to using the 5 Whys, educators who teach students to apply this technique need to understand the drawbacks as well. First, students often need their educator's help to formulate a succinct and well-defined problem statement. Second, inevitably, some students will want to rush the process. They will respond to Why questions with their own opinions rather than dig to uncover the facts. They will also ask too few Why questions, ending their interrogation of the problem too prematurely. When they do so, they will fail to uncover the true root of the problem. Often, we as educators need to assist students in the research process and help them formulate Why questions that truly examine the nature of the problem.

To illustrate this challenge, let's return to the Voting Rights example above. Students may feel, after finding the answer to the second Why question, that the cause is clear. Namely, citizens did not return their postcards. While that is true, it is not the root cause of the purge of 200,000 Georgian voters. To find that, educators must prompt students to ask more Why questions, as well as conduct additional research on the postcard mailing methods and motives of Georgian election officials. Only then, will the true root of the voter purge be discovered.

Another challenge is that students tend to ask the first Why question and come up with several different first-level responses instead of questioning each response in a successive fashion. Again, referring to the Voting Rights example, this would mean that students simply list various justifications that election officials cite for voter purging in Georgia: voters have moved; voters vote infrequently; voters had the same last name and date of birth; voters fell victim to an election software error. The list goes on; however, these different first-level responses will never drive students to the root cause of the actions by Georgian election officials. Therefore, educators must prompt students to stay within one successive "Why stream" at a time.

In summary, root cause analysis using the 5 Whys technique is a simple yet powerful method for enabling students to perform a deep investigation of a social problem. Educators who teach students to apply this technique should be prepared to help them through the process steps as needed. The value of this method lies in its transformative revelations of the causes and effects of injustice, as well as the solutions

necessary to achieve real and sustained social change.

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