

Introduction to News Literacy

Structured Engagement with Current and Controversial Issues



Critical Engagement Question: Why is it important to follow current and controversial matters of public concern and how do I become news literate?

Overview

Students are apt to better retain information if it is connected to real world events. Encouraging discussion of current events in the classroom allows teachers to demonstrate the relevance of concepts they are discussing. It also allows students to learn about current affairs and wrestle with the complexities of making decisions about important, often controversial issues. Quality classroom engagement with current and controversial issues features discussions of controversial public issues at the local, state, national and world levels. This information should come from a variety of media sources, and associated discussion should be ideologically balanced.

Objectives

- To examine current and controversial issues of public concern at the local, state, national, and world levels.
- To tie these issues to concepts embedded in the formal curriculum, highlighting their contemporary relevance.
- To wrestle with their complexity as a basis of making decisions on matters of public concern.
- To develop news gathering skills with an eye toward separating fact from opinion, objectivity from ideological bias, and reliable sources from hearsay or whim.
- To develop news gathering habits that facilitate lifelong civic engagement.
- To elevate the important role that journalism plays in a healthy democracy.

Standards

NCHS: Era 10, Standard 2E

NCSS: Strands 2, 9, and 10

Illinois: Goal 1, Standards B and C; Goal 4, Standards A and B; Goal 5, Standard B; Goal 14, Standards C, D, E, and F; Goal 16, Learning Standard B; Goal 18, Learning Standard B

ISTE: Strand 3, Research and Information Fluency

Student Materials

Major newspaper or access to its news Website

Evaluating News Sources worksheet

Resource Guide

Time and Grade Level

One 45-minute high school class period with pre-activity homework, plus a brief warm-up exercise prior to assignment distribution (the latter is required for only the first use of this assignment).

Warm-Up

Lead a class discussion, using the following questions as prompts for student responses:

1. What are the various sources for news? Are some more reliable than others? Why?
2. Distribute and reference the "Resource Guide" provided. Describe the differences in various story forms, including news stories, news analysis, editorials, and opinion-editorials. What is the value of the various story forms?
3. Move next to a discussion on news sources, then proceed to highlight "on the record" conversation and anonymous sources. What makes a source reliable?
4. Why does news consumption require us to read, watch, and listen with a critical eye?

Homework

Distribute one copy of "Evaluating News Sources" to each student in class. Instruct them to look at the newspaper or web site and select an article that pertains to the content of your course. They should proceed to complete each of the questions listed on the worksheet, and bring this to class the following day.

Activity

1. Ask students to congregate in groups of four.
2. Each group member should take turns sharing their findings from the "Evaluating News Sources" worksheet. Estimated time: 10-12 minutes.
3. Upon completion of step 2, the group should discuss the story they found most pertinent to course content and worthy of broader consideration by the class as a whole. For purposes of preparing for a class discussion to follow, group members should assume one of the following four roles:
 - A. Story summarizer: Should include subject, date, and source of the story under consideration, along with a brief summary of the content.
 - B. Class connector: A simple explanation of how the story selected relates to the content of the course.
 - C. Media critic: Highlight the main facts and arguments presented in the story, the sources cited, and the questions the article leaves unanswered.
 - D. Opinionator: Share the consensus group position on the content of the article, or the various viewpoints represented within the group.
4. Estimated time: 10-12 minutes.
5. Ask students to reconvene as a class. Representative groups should proceed to present their selected stories, with individual members performing one of four assigned roles in order. Upon completion of each group presentation, other class members should be encouraged to ask clarifying questions of individual group members or the body as a whole. Estimated time: 20-25 minutes.
6. Collect students' completed "Evaluating News Sources" worksheet for purposes of assessment.

Extensions

1. **Follow-up class discussion** — In light of the various current and controversial matters of public concern encountered in the previous exercise, why is a free press critical to a healthy, functional democracy?

2. **Opinion-editorial** — Ask students to continue research on the subject addressed in their article or one presented by a peer. They should consult a broad array of sources including other media outlets, but also delve into more substantive research in the form of reports, journal articles, even books. In an accompanying opinion-editorial, they should define a problem of public concern, present various potential solutions, select the one they deem most promising, and defend their decision, acknowledging and addressing criticism of this chosen path. Finally, encourage them to submit it to a local newspaper for publication.

3. **Letter-to-the-Editor** — Students write a letter-to-the editor of the media outlet where their article appeared. They should consult the organization's editorial policies for guidance on the length and conditions of submissions qualified for consideration.

4. **Interviews** — There are several different types of interviews students can conduct in conjunction with a news source.

Ask students to identify and seek an additional, local expert on the subject of their selected article. They should use the questions generated in the last question of the Evaluating News Sources worksheet as guides to structure their interview. Afterward, have them write up and submit a summary of their exchange.

Students can also find someone to interview who is, or was, directly impacted by the issue in one of the articles. For example, if you're doing a lesson on homeland security ask students to interview someone about the Sept. 11 attacks. Have the interviewee explain what his or her life and liberties were like before and after this historic events. How did life change for them personally? How did it change for their communities and country?

Interviews are also a great learning tool to supplement course content. For example, if one of your lessons is on World War II have students interview someone who lived through war.

5. **Vocabulary notebook** — Have students keep a vocabulary notebook of words they come across in news articles that they do not know or key words they need to remember in the future. The vocabulary notebooks can be used as a reference guide to help students build vocabulary skills and to help them remember key current events and people that may be part of the curriculum.

6. **Analyzing legal questions** — Find a story that involves a current or developing court case and have students analyze the legal questions in the case. Which amendments are being discussed in this case? What's at stake in this case? Will the court set a precedent through its decision? Have students pretend they are the judge or justices and have them write a 500 to 1,000 word opinion.

7. **Debating an issue** — Have students deconstruct a story to highlight the various viewpoints presented in it. Have students pick a side and debate it in class. For a more enriching experience, have students do more research on the topic as homework and ask them to debate it in a separate class period.

8. **Following an issue** — Have students follow one particular issue in the news over the course of a month or a semester through a variety of news sources. This can be used in the classroom in two ways.

A. As a news literacy piece that teaches students to evaluate news coverage, distinguish types of stories, identify any perceived biases and determine what sources are reliable.

B. To give students an opportunity to become experts on a current issue in the news. Students can use this expertise to write a paper or make a presentation to the class on what they've learned about this topic.

If the entire class is following one or two topics over time, ask students at the start of this to predict the outcome. Seal these predictions in a large envelope and at the end of the semester (OR the end of the story itself) open up the envelope and see what predictions played out. You can also perform a similar exercise with opinions. Ask students to write down their opinion on the issue itself. Did their opinions change later on as the story unfolded and they received more information? How do they view this topic, particularly the opposing viewpoint now compared to the start of the semester?

Student Worksheet Supplement

Key terms

Explanation: Please reference the definitions and examples below to assist you in completing the "Evaluating News Sources" worksheet.

Story forms

News story:

A. **Definition:** Standard, objective, fact-based reporting on a current matter of public concern. Author's name is identified in the byline. These stories usually represent the majority of stories in printed publications and on the Websites of mainstream news organizations.

B. **Example:** Associated Press. 2010. "N.J. transit worker who burned Quran sues over firing." Associated Press Wire Service. Available Online: <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/news.aspx?id=23576>. Newark, N.J.: Nov.8.

News analysis:

A. **Definition:** Similar to a news story, but also includes some analysis by the reporter based on the facts. The reporter does not take a definitive stand on the issues addressed in the article. Author's name is identified in the byline. These stories are less frequent and often appear in the aftermath of a later event when the author is able to look back and offer additional perspective.

B. **Example:** Preston, Julia. 2010. "Democrats Reframe Debate on Immigration." *New York Times*. Available Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/01/us/politics/01immig.html>. NY: April 30.

Editorial:

A. **Definition:** Opinion-based articles that take a definitive stand on major issues of public concern with the intent of persuading the reader to adopt their stated position. The authors are from the media outlet's editorial board and are not identified individually in the editorial's byline. These articles typically appear on the second-to-last page of the front section of a print newspaper.

B. **Example:** Editorial. 2010. "Too Young for Life without Parole." Washington Post. Available Online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/17/AR2010051703457.html>. Washington, DC: May 18.

Opinion-Editorial (Op-Ed):

A. **Definition:** Opinion-based articles that take a definitive stand on major issues of public concern with the intent of persuading the reader to adopt their stated position. The authors are identified individually in the byline and may be regular contributors or experts who speak out on issues where they have special insights. These articles typically appear on the last page of the front section of a print newspaper.

B. **Example:** Healy, Shawn. "What's Happened to Free Speech?" *Chicago Tribune*. Available Online: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-04-13/news/0904120081_1_boston-college-academic-freedom-william-ayers. Chicago: April 13, 2009.

Other key terms

Byline: Name of the author or authors of an article.

Source: An individual or organization that provides information to a reporter.

Off the record: A source that provides background information for a story, but asks the reporter to keep this information confidential.

Anonymous source: A source that speaks on the record and can be quoted in a story, but asks that his or her identity is kept confidential.

Objectivity: Journalistic standard that requires news presentation of facts in a story without bias. This is accomplished by telling all sides of the story.

Bias: Occurs when personal opinion influences the direction or tone of a story.

Student Worksheet

Evaluating News Sources

Name

Directions: Please select a story from your news sources that pertains to your course, and complete the questions that follow.

Title and author of the story you selected

Date and source of the story

Story form (circle one): news story news analysis editorial op-ed/ commentary

In three to four sentences, please summarize the content of the article.

How does the issue addressed in this story relate to the content of this course?

List at least three major facts or arguments presented by the author in the article.

A.

B.

C.

How many sources does the author cite in the article? Who are they? Are they reliable?

What questions does the author leave unanswered via the facts, arguments, and sources he or she cites? List at least three.

A.

B.

C.

Based on the information presented in this article, along with what you have already learned in class, what is your opinion on the issue addressed? Please support your argument with information in the article, from other media sources, and/ or from the content of this course. (attach another sheet or write on the back if necessary)

Additional resources

Recommended Websites

The following is a list of resources that teach critical thinking skills through current events or teach news literacy. Many also specifically designed to highlight news stories that may coincide with curriculum and be of particular interest to students. Please note some of these resources fall under multiple categories.

[News sources with lesson plans and news literacy components](#)

The New York Times Learning Network	http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/
PBS NewsHour Extra	http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/
Channel One News	http://www.channelone.com/
CNN Student News	http://www.cnn.com/studentnews/
PBS NOW Classroom	http://www.pbs.org/now/classroom/
C-Span Classroom	http://www.c-spanclassroom.org/
Newspapers in Education	http://nieonline.com/

[News and media literacy resources](#)

The News Literacy Project	http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/
Common Sense Media-Digital Literacy and Citizenship Curriculum	http://www.common sense media.org/educators
Temple University's Media Education Lab	http://www.mediaeducationlab.com/
American Society of Newspaper Editors *searchable archives of lesson plans	http://www.hsj.org/News_Literacy/index.cfm?menu_id=4 , http://www.hsj.org/modules/lesson_plans/archive.cfm
FactCheckEd.org	http://factchecked.org/
The Media Education Foundation	http://www.mediaed.org/
Political Cartoonist's Index	http://www.cagle.com/teacher/

[Other resources](#)

Newseum	http://www.newseum.org/education/index.aspx?style=c
Poynter Institute's News University	http://www.newsu.org/tools
Radio and Television News Directors Foundation	http://hsbj.org/index.php
Annenberg Classroom-Working with the Media to Make Your Voice Heard	http://www.annenbergclassroom.org/Asset.aspx?id=1322
Y-Press Power of the Question Curriculum	http://www.ypress.org/special_project/power_of_the_question
Columbia Journalism Review Resources page	http://www.cjr.org/resources/