

When Natural Disasters Strike, How Can We Help? Participatory Citizenship and Internet Resources

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Most Americans are attuned to current events on a daily or weekly basis, with the two most captivating topics being local weather and traffic (which are followed by 84 percent of the U. S. population). “Two-thirds or more say they follow news about the environment and natural disasters, about their local town or city, national government and politics, business and the economy, crime and public safety, foreign or international issues, and health and medicine.”¹

With recent growth in social media, about half of the U.S. population who are interested in current events posts stories, videos, and photographs that relay their own experiences.² While Americans’ interest in the news contributes to a more informed society, current events often leave people, particularly children and adolescents, feeling overwhelmed and wondering what they can do to help.

Access to the World

Reflecting national trends, the majority of elementary school and middle level social studies teachers report that incorporating current events into their classes is both “important” and “essential.” Although most teachers access current events through newspapers and television, increasingly, teachers are using the Internet to access up-to-date, in-depth, and multi-perspective coverage.³ Teaching about current events encourages students to learn about happenings near and far that affect people living today. It invites students to see the relevance of social studies—the usefulness of investigating a topic through the lenses of civics, economics, geography, and history.⁴

Using current events is coupled with both uncertainty and possibility. Although aligned with academic standards and learning outcomes, content and connections associated with current events are less predictable than most activities and assignments. Incorporating current events stimulates spontaneous reactions, critical thinking, creative conversations, and conscientious actions in ways that are new and different from the usual social studies classroom content and connections.⁵

Consequently, current events can become the main reason that young learners start to enjoy and appreciate social studies since the topics and issues relate to them.⁶ Classroom discussions can help them understand stories in the news that their families are discussing, reduce their fears and concerns about stories in the news, and show them ways to enact and improve citizenship attitudes, understanding, engagement, and participation.⁷

Featuring current events in the classroom can produce four major desirable outcomes. Teachers (a) guide learners in developing genuine curiosity and objective inquiry by seeking information about themselves, others, and the world around them; (b) model the value of balancing ambiguity and uncertainty when comparing and contrasting new information with established thoughts and beliefs; (c) build upon prior learning by

Google Classroom: An Internet Resource

Google Classroom “brings the world to school integrating news and media literacy.”^a Google Classroom, when used in conjunction with Google Docs, allows all learners to access the same document at the same time to read, discuss, and/or add to the written product. Likewise, all learners can select individual issues and topics or functions within small groups at the same time. That means all learners are working simultaneously, and the class can work on several topics in one class period. The teacher can monitor progress as it is happening providing positive encouragement and constructive feedback for further consideration and revision. Google Classroom allows teachers to access submitted assignments for later use, assessment, and evidence of learning.^b

Notes for this sidebar:

- (a) David Cooper Moore, “Bringing the World to School: Integrating News and Media Literacy in Elementary Classrooms,” *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 5, no. 1 (2013): 326–336.
- (b) Scott L. Roberts, “The ‘Chalk Talk’ 2.0: Using Google Docs to Improve the Silent Discussion in Social Studies,” *The Social Studies* 104, no. 3 (2013): 130–136.

scaffolding and feature new learning by structuring ways that make the learning meaningful and relevant;⁸ and (d) reflect upon the content and connections to continue transforming new learning into future learning.⁹ Each of these outcomes contributes to strengthening “good citizenship,”¹⁰ as young learners comprehend “that their actions can make a difference”¹¹ locally and globally.¹²

Good Citizenship

Good citizenship embodies three qualities: personal responsibility, participation, and concern for justice.¹³ (Table 1) These qualities of citizenship are reflected in character education, political simulations, and service-learning, among other approaches and strategies found in many schools, and especially in social studies classrooms.¹⁴

Teachers can meet the challenge of connecting young learners with current events and promoting civic engagement by studying (and not turning away from) natural disasters when they are reported in the news.

When framing the exploration of current events within a civic purpose, learners engage in a citizen’s responsibility to become

informed. (We like to use the technological tools offered in Google Classroom. See **Sidebar**).

Good citizenship, which promotes these three qualities, serves as the foundation for civic engagement and the democratic process. Lessons built on these constructs allow learners to engage with the C3 Framework recommendations for civics (Table 2) and geography (Table 3) Teachers also can integrate standards for economics and history as students delve more deeply into background about current events to understand their depth, breadth, and context.

In the **Pullout** following this article, we offer a report form that students can use when researching a current event, as well as a model of the procedure to fill one out (using the drought crisis in California as an example). We also suggest some websites that offer free news articles, and we indicate which ones are edited so that they are accessible to student readers.

Conclusion

Learners begin to navigate the ever-changing world while advancing their technological abilities when they use Internet resources to learn about current events such as natural disasters. Learners can:

Table 1. **Qualities of Good Citizenship**

Quality	Characteristics
1. Personally Responsible	Acts responsibly in the classroom, school, and community Obeys rules and laws Volunteers to help in times of need
2. Participatory	Demonstrates and values honesty and participation Actively participates in groups and organizations Contributes to improvement efforts Collaboratively completes group tasks Demonstrates and values authentic leadership
3. Concern for Justice	Recognizes, seeks and addresses areas of injustice Critically assesses structures to see beyond surface Effects systemic changes Demonstrates and values fairness and equity for all

Table 2. **Civic and Political Institutions**

<p>Pathway (Learning Goal)*</p> <p>By the end of Grade 5, students can...</p> <p>D2.Civ.6.3.5. Describe ways in which people benefit from and are challenged by working together, including through government, workplaces, voluntary organizations, and families.</p> <p>D2.Civ.7.3.5. Apply civic virtues and democratic principles in school settings.</p> <p>D2.Civ.9.3.5. Use deliberate processes when making decisions or reaching judgements as a group.</p>
<p>Our Connection to the Topic of Natural Disasters (N.G. & S.M.)</p> <p>Learners...identify benefits and challenges of helping people and places impacted by the natural disaster.</p> <p>demonstrate collaboration in brain-storming and cooperation in problem-solving and decision-making for planning and. implementing ways of helping the people and places.</p>

* Suggested Pathway entries on page 32 of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), www.socialstudies.org/c3

1. Feel excitement about social studies in ways they do not experience through the adopted texts, resources, activities, and assignments;
2. Engage in complex and controversial conversations to fill the silence;
3. Experience information about today that seems meaningful, relevant, and important;
4. Express ideas in ways that can be discussed and developed in the classroom;
5. Exchange ideas and experiences with other children through multimedia;
6. Explore how people near and far are both like and unlike themselves;
7. Feel competent and confident to take civic action; and
8. Practice learning and living skills applicable to college, career, and civic life.

Today’s teachers want to capture their learners’ attention and strengthen their knowledge, skills, and dispositions “to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.”¹⁵ Social studies class can become the place and time where young learners begin to experience competence as they grapple with complex and controversial issues. Current events provide information that matters and is happening now, in their world.¹⁶

Notes

1. American Press Institute, “The Rational and Attentive News Consumer” (March 17, 2014), www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/rational-attentive-news-consumer.
2. Monica Anderson and Andrea Caumont, “How Social Media is Reshaping News,” Pew Research (Sept 12, 2014), www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/24/how-social-media-is-reshaping-news.
3. Mary E. Haas and Margaret A. Laughlin, “Teaching Current Events: Its Status in Social Studies Today” (2000), files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED440899.pdf.
4. Elizabeth Bellows, Michele Bauml, Sherry Field, and Mary Ledbetter, “Occupy Wall Street: Examining a Current Event as It Happens,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 24, no. 4 (2012): 18–22.
5. Ellen Kottler and Nancy P. Gallavan, *Secrets to Success for Social Studies Teachers* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008), 111-114.
6. Margaret E. Shippen, D. E. Houchins, D. Pucket, and M. Ramsey, “Preferred Writing Topics of Urban and Rural Middle School Students,” *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 34, no.1 (2007): 59-66.
7. Jeff Passe, “A Counter-Intuitive Strategy: Reduce Student Stress by Teaching Current Events,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 20, no. 3 (2008): 27–31.
8. NCSS, “A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy.” An NCSS Position Statement (2008), www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful.
9. David Cooper Moore, “Bringing the World to School: Integrating News and Media Literacy in Elementary Classrooms,” *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 5, no. 1 (2013): 326–336.
10. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, “Educating the ‘Good’ Citizen: Political Choices and Pedagogical Goals,” *PSOnline* (2004): 1–7, www.democraticdialogue.com/DDpdfs/WestheimerKahnePS.pdf.
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12. Nancy P. Gallavan, “Examining Teacher Candidates’ Views on Teaching World Citizenship,” *The Social Studies* 99, no. 6 (2008): 249–254.
13. Westheimer and Kahne.
14. Alex Lin, “Citizenship Education in American Schools and Its Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Review of the Research,” *Educational Review* 67, no. 1 (2013): 1–29.
15. NCSS, National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010) 3, www.socialstudies.org/standards/execsummary.
16. Andrea S. Libresco, “Current Events Matter... for Elementary Social Studies Methods Students,” *International Social Studies Forum* 3, no. 1 (2003): 273–276; Diana K. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (New York NY: Routledge, 2009); Handan Deveci, “Teachers’ Views on Teaching Current Events in Social Studies,” *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice* 7, no. 1 (2007): 446–451.

Table 3. Geography

<p>Pathway (Learning Goal)*</p> <p>By the end of Grade 5, students can...</p> <p>D2.Geo.2.3.5. Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationship between the locations of place and regions and their environmental characteristics.</p> <p>D2.Geo.12.3.5. Explain how natural and human-made catastrophic events in one place affect people living in other places.</p>
<p>Our Connection to the Topic of Natural Disasters</p> <p>Learners...</p> <p>Identify the environmental characteristics that may caused and/or may have been affected by the natural disaster.</p> <p>Describe the impact on the natural disaster on the people and place.</p>

* Suggested Pathway entries on pages 41 and 44 of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), www.socialstudies.org/c3.

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