

# “Remixing” Current Events: Navigating the Transmedia Terrain with Fifth Graders

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When I recently sat down with a group of fifth grade students, I began with the question, “What events have been in the news recently?” When students mentioned several sensationalist stories that were generating ratings, webpage views, and social media chatter, I tried shifting the discussion by asking slightly different questions to encourage them to consider more substantive issues:

“What current issues are important to you and our communities?” “Is there anything unjust we should strive to better understand or change?” With a quiet voice a student near me leaned forward and shared that many people do not have homes. Another student inquisitively asked, “Is homelessness a current event?”

The topic of homelessness seemed to strike a chord with the group. After some dialogue about the relationship between events and media coverage, we decided that homelessness was an ongoing issue that the media *should* be covering more often, and more prominently.<sup>1</sup>

Similar to other social institutions, mainstream media can overlook systemic inequities or issues that impact disempowered groups in favor of “infotainment” that conveys trifling gossip or scandalized narratives, and other stories with little relevance for democratic citizens. Students need opportunities to explore important civic issues and identify blind spots in media coverage. This challenge relates to the social studies curriculum standards theme **5 INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS**.<sup>2</sup>

Once we had identified an issue of personal *and* social consequence, we were tasked with the complex work necessary for nurturing informed citizenship in the 21st century. Recent shifts in the media landscape meant that citizens must not only navigate, evaluate, and synthesize media stories from a variety of mediums, but they can also create, curate, and spread them too.

Citizens have long needed to *critically* consume stories from local and national newspapers, radio programs, and television broadcasts, but 21st century citizens now encounter many more media outlets. Social media in particular gives citizens opportunities to contribute to the media ecology as they produce, curate, or spread news and information. Teachers can help young children to prepare to navigate, interpret, and create stories across this transmedia terrain.<sup>3</sup> Before turning to how to enact a four-part framework for doing so, I will describe two democratic media literacy skills—transmedia judgment and

remixing—that teachers can model and teach to help students as 21st century citizens.

## Transmedia Judgment

As young people encounter stories across various media formats, they must use transmedia judgment “to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information carried through various forms of media texts (57).”<sup>4</sup> Whether they realize it or not, upper elementary students often navigate the transmedia terrain as they follow corporate marketing stories (that sell products and promote brands) across multiple media. For example, when a new children’s movie is released, it is common for young people to see the film marketed in television and YouTube commercials, as toys in their fast food meals, as characters and stories in digital games, and as banners on websites or in print newspapers. Young learners can hone their transmedia judgment as they investigate “how stories change as they move across different contexts of production and reception, as they give consideration to the affordances and conventions of different media, and as they learn to create using a range of different media tools.”<sup>5</sup>

## Remixing

Like transmedia judgment, remixing is another skill valued in the online participatory cultures that flourish in the 21st century. Remixing, or appropriation, is a democratic media skill that concerns citizens’ abilities to take aspects of culture apart and put them back together as something new. Cultural creations and understandings have long been part of larger social processes where the sampling of ideas, characters, or narratives helped produce great novels, music, and art. By surveying many of the materials we use in schools, teachers might notice that “most of the classics we teach in the schools are themselves the product of appropriation and transformation, or what we would now call ‘sampling’ and ‘remixing.’”<sup>6</sup> Fractured fairy tales, like *The*

*True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, have brought elements of remixing stories to young learners.<sup>7</sup> Jazz, fan fiction, collage, hip hop, mashups, and Internet memes are all examples of mediums of expression where sampling and remixing are not only understood, but integral to the art form. Remixing can serve as a means for citizens to challenge elite, corporate, or political interests with critiques and counter-narratives. But, how can teachers already strapped for time hone such democratic media skills of young learners in the 21st century?

### A Framework for Remixing Current Events

Young learners need to cultivate new democratic skills and dispositions to fully participate in civic dialogues, but many teachers have yet to integrate suitable experiences into their curricula. These new media skills apply established aspects of citizenship like deliberation, pluralism, and participation towards engagement with various forms of media. More so, these skills overlap and build upon skills embedded throughout the NCSS standards and the C3 Framework for elementary students like detecting bias, evaluating sources and using evidence, and communicating conclusions and taking informed action.<sup>8</sup> In this article I will propose a framework for learning about current events and media through a four-part process: (1) democratic decision-making, (2) media appraisal, (3) summarizing and synthesizing a range of media stories, and (4) remixing media coverage into a new story (Figure 1).

Teachers can utilize this flexible framework to cultivate the democratic media skills of transmedia judgment and remixing in varied contexts and time. This approach aligns closely with the four dimensions of the inquiry arc of the C3 Framework, but gives attention to appraising various forms of media.

### Democratic Decision-Making

I began this article by explaining how I recently worked with fifth grade students to reconsider the notion of current events and determine an issue to investigate. I initially asked, “What current events have been in the news recently?” This question quickly moved towards discussions about what *should* count as current events. Current events are sometimes defined narrowly as major tragedies, political outcomes, or simply the most popular stories in mainstream media, but students need opportunities to consider, question, and even reject what stories media outlets choose to tell and attend to those that are usually ignored. Mainstream media outlets tend to focus on sensationalized stories that are “often fear-based and systematically focused on violent events and natural disasters” in efforts to garner ratings or website views.<sup>9</sup> Expanding the notion of current events empowers young citizens to push back against mass media or narrow political narratives when necessary.

I have consistently found students to be adept at discussing compelling questions (Dimension 1 of the C3 Framework) about critical issues that concern our local, national, or global

Figure 1. Four Components of Remixing Current Events

The Four Components	Key Question(s)	Activity and Goal	Four Dimensions of Inquiry (C3 Framework)
1. Democratic Decision-making	What current issues are important to you and our communities? Is there anything unjust we should strive to better understand or change?	Clarify students’ priorities of interest and concern. Democratically choose social issue to investigate.	Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Media Appraisal	Where can you find this story? What kind of information is available from this source? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this medium as a source for news? How does the medium influence the message of the story?	Review how to evaluate the credibility of a source. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of various media as sources of current events.	Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts
3. Summarizing and Synthesizing Stories	What are the main ideas of the story? Who are the authors and what are their aims? Is this a credible and reliable source of information?	Compare and contrast information from various sources, summarize news stories collectively, and synthesize the information	Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Remixing Stories	How can we remix more than one element of media stories to tell a new story about our current event?	Use elements from various stories to remix news stories, critiquing of the author (or source), the medium, and the content.	Communicating Conclusions, and Taking Informed Action

communities. When I asked fifth grade students to determine what current issues were important, unjust, and in need of examination, they responded thoughtfully with hopes of making a positive difference, which relates to the curriculum standard **10 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**. Once we decided to research homelessness, I asked students what they already knew about the topic. The class had watched the video *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl* (2008), a historical fiction about a girl in the 1930s who writes a story about a Great Depression-era migrant “hobo” camp that a newspaper editor declines to print.<sup>10</sup> This narrative provided a natural segue into appraisals of the various media from which we might learn more about homelessness.

### Media Appraisal

Before talking about different types of media I asked students, “How do you find credible and reliable information at school?” This initial question allowed all students to participate in a discussion about the quality of sources. (Students had varying experiences with different media sources. Not all had access at home to the Internet.) Students mentioned teachers, books, and encyclopedias as reliable sources. We agreed that those were trusted sources because we associated them with expertise, but we also concurred that none of these sources were perfect or sufficient on their own. Students and I then deliberated on different types of media from which we might learn about homelessness (**Figure 2**), and we considered the strengths and weaknesses of each medium in helping us learn about homelessness. I started with questions like, “Where can you find this story?” “What kind of information is available from this source?” There are a variety of possible traditional media options that include mainstream news sites for print or video (i.e., ABC, CBS, NBC) and radio (e.g., NPR). I quickly learned that fifth grade students tended to overgeneralize traditional media sources as reliable and objective, and other sources as unreliable and subjective. However, in a post-*Citizens United* world,<sup>11</sup> campaign messages can be supported by virtually unlimited campaign contributions. In this environment, students benefit from scrutinizing stories from organizations or interest groups through websites, blogs, or social media. Social media that can be mined for stories or posts include social networking

sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), Web 2.0 websites (e.g., Wikipedia, amateur blogs), video-sharing sites (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo), and more. Because many people learn about social issues from amateur social media posts, videos, or blogs, it is important to include stories from these media in classroom lessons.

Depending on students’ abilities, class time, and Internet access, teachers may assign students to find stories via different media with the help of teachers, or family members, or both.. While it can be valuable for young students to search for media stories, due to time constraints, I collected an array of media stories and added them to a single “story” in the social network aggregator Storify (storify.com) between my sessions with the fifth graders (**Figure 3**). By collecting all our media stories in one accessible space on the Internet, we were able to better use our limited time together and avoid barriers associated with searching for online sources in school (e.g., internet filters, parental concerns).

**Figure 3. Storify Screenshot**



To further appraise media, I asked students to consider, “How does the medium influence the message of the story? This is a complex question for fifth graders so we started with an example. I asked students *why* a one-minute YouTube video from a homelessness coalition seemed so memorable. Students indicated that *seeing* people who were homeless when combined with *hearing* music and *reading* text from the professionally produced video was more emotionally appealing than *reading* facts from a tweet or a story from a print newspaper. However, students also recognized that the video provided limited infor-

**Figure 2. Categories of Media in the Internet Age**

Category	Brief Description	Examples
Traditional, Mainstream Media	Print media like newspapers and broadcast media like radio and television	<i>New York Times</i> ; <i>National Public Radio</i>
Independent Media	Non-mainstream media that are generally free of government and corporate influences	ProPublica; Salon.com; <i>Mother Jones</i>
Web 2.0	Online sites where users create content	Blogger; YouTube
Social Networking Sites	Platforms where users create content and interact around it	Twitter; Facebook; Instagram

mation, and other sources might be needed for a deeper understanding. Continual questioning and searching helped the young learners appraise various mediums.

Summarizing and Synthesizing Stories

After appraising various mediums, the students and I began summarizing key information from stories using a shared Google document (Figure 4). We began this process by considering questions about the authorship, credibility, and reliability as we summarized the stories from different mediums. After the students and I had answered these questions on our shared Google document, students took turns sharing with the whole group, and we discussed and modified students’ answers as was necessary.

Our conversations about how different sources and media framed homelessness helped us begin to collectively synthesize not just the story, but media forms, content, and biases. For example, after reading a local news story, we learned of a homeless veteran who had few people in his life he could trust. Students and I believed the reporter’s aim was to shed insight into the uncertainties of the man’s daily life. The numerous details offered a depth of information that other media sources lacked. On the other hand, the YouTube video by a local advocacy group offered few details, but challenged stereotypes about why people are homeless and who makes up the

homeless population. (People with jobs, talents, degrees, and certifications can still become homeless.) If students are to be prepared for living in a pluralistic society, then teachers should encourage students to seek out stories that represent diverse and unfamiliar perspectives, particularly of often marginalized or underrepresented groups. Once students summarized all our sources across various media (Figure 4), we collectively synthesized the information, giving priority to stories told by people who are themselves homeless as well as insightful reporting about them. We were then ready to tell our own story, moving from consumers to producers of information.

Remixing Current Events

After appraising mediums and summarizing and synthesizing various media stories, students and I used VoiceThread (voicethread.com) to mix images and audio, creating a slide show to convey a new story about homelessness and media coverage of it (Figure 5, p. 31). The C3 Framework recommends that, by the fifth grade, students should be able to use digital technologies and diverse mediums to derive conclusions, take informed action, and create digital content (D4.3.3-5). Of course, there are many digital programs and ways that students can remix stories. Students could use programs like Scratch to create interactive stories or utilize video equipment to record a newscast focusing not just on homelessness, but how various

Figure 4. Student Worksheet: Analyzing Stories and Sources

Source and Medium (See Storify)	Summary <i>What are the main ideas of the story?</i>	Emphasis <i>What is highlighted in this story? What seems to be left out?</i>	Analysis <i>Who are the authors and what are their aims? Is this a credible and reliable source of information? How does the medium influence the message?</i>
Article from Local Newspaper article			
Tweets from National Homeless Coalition			
News report from Mainstream Radio			
Youtube Video by an Amateur			



media portray it. I started this step by asking students, “How can we remix more than one element of media stories to tell a new story about our current event?” Students and I decided to remix media coverage of homelessness by combining screenshots from various media (e.g., traditional news story, YouTube video, a tweet) with poems that students created with the use of quotes from all the sources.

We sampled quotes and phrases from various sources, interjecting our words to connect ideas and highlight various media, in an effort to share how different media sources addressed homelessness. With my help, every student contributed ideas, added screenshot images, wrote the script, selected quotes, and recorded the audio. For example, while the audience sees a screenshot taken from the YouTube video, they hear a student reading a script that includes quotes from statements made by homeless people. One student script read,

The group Rethinking Homelessness used YouTube to make us care more by showing us that the homeless are diverse: “Epileptic seizures for 10 years... And still fighting.” “I was a personal trainer.” “I once had a scholarship to play baseball.” “I DO have a job.”

This final step—selecting images and creating narrative scripts for them—allowed fifth graders to not only understand and deconstruct media stories, but to respond to them. Once the students’ slide show is completed, teachers can share it with other students, teachers, administrators, families, and in online communities. “When you speak in a public voice—as a citizen appealing to other citizens as part of the serious business of self-governance—you are undertaking the co-creation of democracy.”<sup>12</sup> This project can serve for the basis of further activities where students consider what social and institutional changes might be needed to address the needs of people who are homeless (NCSS 5 INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS).

**Figure 5: VoiceThread Screenshot**



## Conclusion

This framework for remixing current events offers a way for upper elementary (and older) students to join in, and contribute to, discussions about the pressing and significant current

events of our day. Online activities are now intertwined with civic, communal, and social activities, but neither the authors of content nor the media by which we access that content are entirely neutral. Young citizens should consider how different media influence our understandings of messages, while also scrutinizing embedded perspectives and interests. Educators cannot ignore digital and new media sources because these are the sources citizens consume, produce, and interpret daily. The rise of digital platforms and sites complicate our media ecology, and educators must help students cultivate the democratic media skills needed to traverse the transmedia terrain and respond accordingly. 🌐

## Notes

1. This article was reviewed and edited by Kathryn M. Obenchain and Julie Pennington for publication in the January/February 2017 issue of *SSYL*, which overran the pages. Thus, it appears here. A version that provides more background and detail on the methods is available at [www.academia.edu/18715748/Remixing\\_Current\\_Events\\_Navigating\\_the\\_Transmedia\\_Terrain\\_with\\_Fifth\\_Graders](http://www.academia.edu/18715748/Remixing_Current_Events_Navigating_the_Transmedia_Terrain_with_Fifth_Graders).
2. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010).
3. NCSS, “Media Literacy: A Position Statement of NCSS,” *Social Education* 80, no. 3 (May/June 2016): 183–4, [www.socialstudies.org/publications/socialeducation/may-june2016/media-literacy](http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/socialeducation/may-june2016/media-literacy).
4. Ching-Fu Lan, “Democratic Education in the New Media Era: Toward a Framework of Democratic Media Literacy,” *Ohio Social Studies Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring: 2013): 51–62.
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7. Jon Scieszka, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (New York: Viking Kestrel, 1989).
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10. Patricia Rozema, dir., *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl* (video, 1 hr 41 min, 2008), see [www.imdb.com/title/tt0846308](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0846308).
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