

News-Group Fridays: Engaging Students in Current Events

Natasha C. Murray-Everett and Erin Coffield

Many elementary and middle school students are confronted by media messages constantly. They receive messages not only from family and friends, but from television and social media outlets.¹ The media messages about current events are often politically biased, polarized in nature, and potentially inaccurate, especially on social media platforms.²

Teachers can model how to evaluate media for potential biases, showing students that just because something is political does not mean it should be off limits for discussion. Students are rarely given opportunities in school to critically analyze news and media messages dealing with current events due to a very full curriculum³ and teachers' reluctance to bring controversial content into the classroom. However, students who do engage in dialogue about critical and controversial current events can learn not only about the biases that are inherent in media messages, but also about the multiple perspectives that people hold. Those students are able to engage in class discussions in which they express their thoughts, listen carefully to differing opinions, challenge opinions and evidence (including their own) in a civil way, and consider revising their initial perspectives.⁴

Times are changing. Increasingly, teachers are tasked with helping students develop critical media literacy skills necessary to analyze media messages and detect bias, fake news, inaccuracies, and poor arguments. The C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards supports engaging students in critical literacy skills, such as incorporating English Language Arts (ELA) standards and creating lessons that foster deep understanding of the arts and humanities to prepare students for real-life skills.⁵ This has become ever more important today as students are likely to come across inaccurate and misleading news sources in this increasingly digital age.

In 2016, NCSS published a Media Literacy position statement that asserted, "While print literacy continues to be a key priority in K-12 schools, there is a growing consensus that this new information landscape requires new approaches to teaching and learning. Our discipline has an opportunity to lead the way in teaching students to both analyze and produce rich, complex, diverse and engaging mediated messages."⁶

Exploring News Groups in a Methods Course

This article draws upon experiences from both a sixth grade social studies classroom and an undergraduate methods course. While teaching elementary social studies methods, I (Natasha) noticed that my pre-service teachers did not often engage with news content and were frequently uninformed about national and global issues. Their knowledge was, in general, quite limited on topics such as immigration, racial profiling by police, racial equality, gun control, and various refugee crises around the world. Observing students' lack of engagement inspired me to develop a semester-long project called "news groups" as a core component of my elementary social studies methods course.

The news group project had several goals and served multiple purposes: (a) to have students read and engage with current media; (b) to cultivate their skills in determining the accuracy of the stories they find and read; (c) to guide them in recognizing biases inherent in the media; (d) to develop a comfort in discussing controversial media content with their peers; and (e) to consider ways that these pre-service teachers might engage their future K-6 students in similar news groups by modeling the practices they used in this project.

To begin the project, I encouraged students to share topics they were interested in. During class discussion, we came up with the top five or six topics of most concern. The following week, I distributed a sheet listing those topics, and students ranked their preferences by voting. In the end, students were always placed in one of their top three choices.

In the news groups of four or five students each, pre-service teachers considered who might be the intended audience of a media message, and why the message was written. They located multiple sources on the same story to ascertain how different media outlets portrayed the same event. At the end of the semester, these students presented findings to the class and

discussed their pertinence to K-6 curriculum. They reflected on the process and shared ways that news groups could be used in elementary lessons.

Exploring News Groups in the Sixth Grade

Each Monday, Erin (the second author of this article) introduced a “news article of the week” that she had selected for the class to study. Erin assigned students to read the article as homework and write a short response to it, one that includes a student’s perspective on the topic (not merely a description of the article). The writing assignment was due in four days, on Fridays, when the whole class discussed that article.

Also on Fridays, the class watched CNN 10, the Cable News Network’s (CNN’s) daily, ten-minutes summary of the news (**Sidebar**). Each episode offers different perspectives on major global issues that often appear on the nightly news of that same week. It includes special programming segments such as “CNN Heroes” and “ten second trivia.” The class discussed each CNN 10 episode after viewing it.

Erin sought a way to tie these current-events assignments and activities together. As it happened, Erin was also an adjunct professor at West Virginia University that semester, and worked in collaboration with me. While teaching elementary methods and guiding pre-service teachers through news groups, Erin was impressed by how much the college students learned about their particular topic and its ties to other worldly events. Maybe, she thought, establishing news groups with her sixth graders might make the activities more meaningful to them.

Friday News Groups

The remainder of this article describes how Erin integrated and adapted news groups as a semester-long project in her sixth grade classroom in a public school. The project drew upon the curriculum theme **POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**, in which students examined the multiple perspectives present in the various news and media sources. Strand **CIVIL IDEALS AND PRACTICES** was also practiced, as students were encouraged “to recognize and respect different points of view.” Students learned to recognize the importance of these multiple perspectives in

order to be more informed citizens in a democratic society.

Erin encouraged each news group to stay up to date with its news topic for the duration of the semester. She provided a structured time, 40 minutes each Friday, for students to find, read, and analyze various news and media sources. Her main goal for news groups was to foster a sense of engagement with what was happening in the world, and for students to understand that even as young learners, they could take on the role of responsible and informed citizens. Other goals for implementing news groups were to encourage students to improve their writing skills (e.g., to be able to articulate their own points of view clearly), and to grow in their civics skills (e.g., to be able to listen respectfully to a classmate’s point of view with which they may not agree).

Voting on which Issues to Study

After a discussion about some of the most pressing issues in society, students in each class made a list of high-interest topics, such as school safety (as it relates to gun control); the 2020 Democratic primary debates; climate change; mental health awareness; animal rights; climate change and extreme weather; state level news and laws surrounding both educational issues and drug use; and reasons for shopping at Amazon as opposed to other retail stores.

Students then voted on topics to research over the semester, using the following method. Using a secret ballot, each student (in all five of Erin’s social studies classes) voted for his or her favorite topic. Erin tallied the votes for each class, and the winning topic was that class’s subject of study for the whole semester. There were five classes and four final topics because two classes picked the same topic. The winning topics were

- School safety and gun control,
- Climate change,
- Mental health services and public policy, and
- The positions of the many democratic candidates for presidency

The last topic was the subject for two social studies sections, as it won the most votes in both rooms.⁷

Every Friday, students’ article-of-the-week writing assign-

What is CNN 10?

Quoted from www.cnn.com/2013/07/22/studentnews/sn-what-is-student-news/index.html

Explaining global news to a global audience: This is the mission of CNN 10, a 10-minute news show that appears as a daily digital video on CNN.com. CNN 10 replaced CNN Student News, the network’s longest-running show that first aired in 1989. CNN 10 serves an audience interested in compact on-demand news broadcasts—either on the go or in the classroom. The show’s priority is to identify stories of international significance and clearly describe why they’re making news, who is affected, and how the events fit into a complex, international society. The show maintains a neutral position on controversial topics. It seeks to provide multiple viewpoints, clear illustrations, and general overviews instead of graphic descriptions.

Where can I find CNN 10? You can see CNN 10 free of charge with no sign up or subscription needed on CNN.com’s CNN 10 page [as well as] CNN 10 on YouTube. If you are a teacher using this in a classroom, it is recommended you preview each episode.

ment was due at the beginning of the period. As a class, we watched that day's episode of CNN10, and discussed it briefly. Students then broke into their news groups and dove into researching their class's topic for the remainder of the class period. At the end of the class period, groups checked their discussion boards for weekly questions and research work (e.g., any additional research questions for a specific news group). This sequence of activities became a familiar Friday routine.



The student-selected topics for the news groups often appeared in CNN10 programming. The class discussions that followed each weekly episode, allowed for students to practice sharing their thoughts, opinions, and questions in a safe environment.

Developing Critical Media Skills

The process of incorporating news groups into a sixth grade classroom required a lot of scaffolding in order to develop each student's media literacy skills. Students needed support in creating useful search phrases, detecting unreliable sources, and selecting articles that focused on their specific topic. In the first weeks of implementing news groups with her students, Erin began by sharing two websites, **FactCheck.org** and **PolitiFact.com/truth-o-meter**. She explained that they could use these websites to ascertain whether the content they came across was accurate.⁸ The effort begins by visiting multiple websites and comparing the coverage there. For example, students looked at how reports in the *Wall Street Journal* about the U.S. presidential election campaign differed from those found at BBC News. Taken together, these activities helped students become more critical of what they were reading, thus, enhancing their critical media literacy skills.

Although there are many news providers (e.g., TIME.com) that sponsor a school-friendly version of the news (e.g. TIME for KIDS), we often avoided the latter. Part of the purpose of teaching with news groups was to help sixth graders learn to navigate websites for the general public (with their ads, click-

able links, and misleading information) in order to recognize and value reliable sources and facts.

How to Conduct a Focused Web Search

Students also learned appropriate internet searching techniques, such as using Boolean operators (“and”, “or”, and “not”), which are logical terms that we employ during online searches to delimit and focus the search. Additionally, by placing quotation marks around certain phrases, their search would yield more specific results. For example, if you search using this phrase

“climate change” and NASA

(notice the quote marks surrounding the first two words) into the search engine, the top results will feature publications (e.g., webpages, articles, videos) by NASA on the topic of climate change, as well as other items (e.g., newspaper articles) that include the terms “NASA” and “climate change” within their text. Students learned this could be done in both a broad search engine such as Google or with a website's own search box (whose site-specific search engines are often “Powered by Google”). These strategies made for a clearer and more fruitful internet searching.

Erin recommended age-appropriate websites to the class such as a selection from National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) for more balanced news sources,⁹ as well as resources that broadly analyze various media, such as the Ad Fontes Media Bias Chart (“We Rate the News” is their slogan).¹⁰ Recommending websites prevented students from wasting time aimlessly searching the web or navigating towards sensitive or fake news sources. Erin also provided some guiding questions to help the students navigate and focus their research. A Handout lists the assigned current events topics, website sources, and the guiding questions for each news group.

Engaging in Small- and Whole-Group Discussions

News group Fridays became a place and time in which rich discussion could occur. Students enjoyed working with a small group of peers before coming together as a whole class to share their findings and their ideas. Students would read, research, and discuss their guiding questions to gain confidence in the small groups. It was also helpful to use the virtual discussion board on Google Classroom to document their thoughts, especially for some of the quieter or more reserved students.

It was important to provide students with open ended questions instead of questions that could be answered by a simple “yes” or “no.” Sometimes we called the yes/no (binary) queries “Google-able” questions, meaning that you could type the query into the Google search bar and find a single, “correct” answer without much thought. We wanted to go deeper than that.

News Group Topics, Suggested Websites, and Guiding Questions

Visit the recommended website listed in column (1) for your news group, and find the “search box” there, which often has an icon, a little magnifying glass, beside it. Type your key search terms into that box, at that website, to find webpages, articles, and other resources about your topic. Use that information as you respond to the questions in column (2) in group discussions and individual writing.

(1) Topic and Recommended Websites	(2) Guiding Questions for Virtual Discussion Board and Writing
(A) Gun Control and School Safety www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/ www.cnn.com www.npr.org	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Should metal detectors be placed at school entrances? Why or why not?2. Should teachers should be armed? Why or why not?3. Should schools have armed police (“resource officers”) on school grounds routinely? Why or why not?
(B) Climate Change www.nasa.gov www.climaterealityproject.org www.carbonfootprint.com	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How do scientists explain the effects of climate change on weather patterns (hurricanes, wildfires, early snowfalls, droughts, and icefields melting)?2. Is it possible for the United States to become “carbon neutral” by 2050? Why or why not?3. Should “climate change” be a top concern for elected officials? Why or why not?
(C) Mental Health* www.espn.com www.nami.org www.teenmentalhealth.org	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How can mental health affect an athlete’s career? Group One, read an article at ESPN, searching on “mental health” to find one.2. How can mental health affect a media celebrity’s career? Group Two, read an NAMI article, searching on “celebrities.”3. How can schools help provide mental health services to students? Group Three, read an article at TeenMentalHealth, searching on “school services” to find one at that website.
(D) Elections 2020: Positions and Platforms www.politico.com www.ballotpedia.com www.time.com www.apnews.com www.bbc.com	Pick ONE specific issue you are passionate about in the upcoming election. Then pick a candidate and search on “the name” + “campaign” to find their campaign website. Candidate statements and positions might be mentioned on various webpages there, or within a “party platform.” <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What is that candidate’s position compared with that of an opposing candidate? Summarize your findings.2. What was the opinion stated during the last public debate?3. What questions did the audience ask at that event?

*Note: Students researching the issue of mental health worked through their discussions by doing a jigsaw reading in three small groups of roughly 8–10 students, each group exploring a different subtopic.

One Friday, in the class studying the issue of gun control, one of the news groups held a discussion on whether schools should place metal detectors at their entrances. Some students favored having them at schools. Others were more concerned with the amount of time it might take to have students scanned and potentially searched in the morning.

“I do think that there should be metal detectors in school because it would be a lot safer for students. It would also mean a bit less school [classroom time] for us if everyone had to be scanned” Hannah said.

“We could start the school day earlier so there was time to scan or search all of the students,” Mateo said.

“School already starts so early! The buses might not be able to get us there any earlier!” Bria exclaimed.

Okay, and what about the cost?” asked Xavier. “These things cost, like, \$5,000. Can we afford to put these in all of our schools?”

The students’ engagement in this conversation showed that they were thinking through possible options and outcomes, while respecting each other’s opinions and concerns. Through such dialogues, the sixth graders became more invested in their topic. Week by week, they also became more proficient in their critical media skills, and in finding pertinent information while researching a topic.

Preparing and Presenting News Group Findings

At the end of the semester, students created a culminating project to highlight their work and display what they had learned. After students mentioned how interested they were in filming and video making,¹¹ we collectively came up with a project, which also served as an assessment of student learning. News groups created their own version of a CNN10 program, by writing a news script (based on their weeks of research), acting as staff and crew in the newsroom, and filming their performance.



Students voted (using Google Forms,) for the job or role they would prefer to have in creating their news program. Roles included script writer, videographer, teleprompter, news anchor, interviewer, and iMovie editor. Erin assigned roles, posted the results on Google Classroom, and guided students on where equipment was located and how to tackle the various tasks and roles. They were done.

Students created news broadcasts over the course of one week, with not everyone working on their roles on the same day or hour, or working in the same spaces. They prepared scripts using their research notes, prepared interview questions, and then interviewed fellow students and teachers about their views on these current events. For example, the class that focused on school safety and gun control wrote and interviewed the school’s resource officer (a police officer) about his job and what steps everyone can take to keep our campus safe.

Some of the filming was done in the hallway in front of a large green wall, using an app for iPads called “Green Screen Live Video Record” that can project background scenery behind the speaker. In our case, students filmed their own “broadcast” in front of a faux “newsroom setting.”

Adaptations and Extensions

Teachers can, of course, modify these methods to fit their own grade level and student population. For example, students could keep a news group journal on paper, where they record their findings and share their thoughts over the course of the project. Having students write thoughts, opinions, questions, ideas, and emotions regarding the news allows students to make connections and situate themselves in the world.¹² After weeks of gathering data, students could also create an edition of a classroom newspaper, or they could put on a presentation to share with their classmates, students in other grades, or families during an evening presentation.

Conclusion

Before implementing a news groups project, teachers should discuss among themselves what sorts of topics are relevant and appropriate for a particular grade level, invite the principal to offer any advice, and inform parents briefly of the project. It’s also important to have students be a part of the process, suggesting what topics they find interesting and want to learn more about, and volunteering for roles during the assessment. Students are more highly motivated when they participate—from the beginning—in helping to shape what the project will become.

Structured time for news groups became part of a routine. Students looked forward to working together to research their topic. Dedicating 40 minutes a week to this effort also helped with Erin’s overall lesson planning.

Incorporating news groups at the elementary and middle grade levels offers students an array of learning opportunities. Students develop critical media literacy skills, determining

reliable and accurate media content, examining bias, and recognizing how to detect fake news sources. Engaging in research, analyzing, and discussing controversial current events helps students become more knowledgeable about the world around them. It allows students to have more educated opinions and perspectives, ultimately becoming more active and informed citizens in society. 🌍

Notes

1. J.D. Alarcón, P. Marhatt, and E. Price, “Addressing Current Events in Age-Appropriate Ways: Learning about the Confederate Flag Controversy,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 29, no. 3 (January/February 2017), 21–26.
2. D. Hess, “Controversies about Controversial Issues in Democratic Education” (2004), PSOnline. <http://schoolandsociety2014.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/73531061/ps-hess.pdf>; D. Kellner and J. Share, (2007); “Critical Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Reconstruction of Education,” in *Media literacy: A Reader*, D. Macedo and S.R. Steinberg, eds. (New York: Peter Lang (2007), 3-23; E. D. Moffa, C. J. Brejwo, and R. A. Waterson, “Digital Citizenship. Social Media Discourses within Social Studies,” in *Teaching Social Studies in an Era of Divisiveness: The Challenges of Discussing Social Issues in a Non-Partisan Way*, W. Journell, ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 143–158.
3. M. Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
4. K. LeCompte, B. Blevins, and B. Ray, “Teaching Current Events and Media Literacy: Critical Thinking, Effective Communication, and Active Citizenship,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 29, no. 3 (January/February 2017), 17–20.
5. NCSS, *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), <https://www.socialstudies.org/c3>.

6. NCSS, “Media Literacy” (Position Statement) *Social Education* 73, no. 4 (January/February 2016), 183–185.
7. Students used Google Classroom for their searches, but sometimes went straight to Google’s main home page for searches (because our school has an Internet firewall so that students are not viewing in appropriate material).
8. Carolyn A. Weber and Heather N. Hagan, “Is the “Right to Clean Water” Fake News? An Inquiry in Media Literacy and Human Rights,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 33, no. 1 (September/October 2020), 3–9.
9. “Media Bias Chart” (Ad Fontes Media, 2020), www.adfontesmedia.com/?v=402f03a963ba.
10. At this point in the year, students had some experience, in another class, of creating a video using a “green-screen” background.
11. S. Ahmed, *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2018).
12. We avoided partisanship by following students’ interest in the positions of the many candidates running for president on the Democratic Party ticket for 2020 during that semester (in the spring of 2019). We also visited the campaign website for President Trump, and that of his self-declared Republican Party challenger at that time, Bill Weld.

NATASHA C. MURRAY-EVERETT is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction/Literacy Studies at West Virginia University in Morgantown, West Virginia

ERIN COFFIELD is a graduate student at West Virginia University and a Teacher at Suncrest Middle School in Morgantown, West Virginia



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