Using the Internet to Teach about Political Cartoons and Their Influence on U.S. Elections

C. Frederick Risinger and Ray Heitzmann

One of the most interesting and rewarding aspects of working on this column is receiving recommendations about topics for future columns and suggested websites that could be useful for classroom social studies teachers and supervisors. About a month ago, I was deliberating about what topic I’d use for this issue when I received an e-mail from Ray Heitzmann. Ray is a professor and teacher-educator at Villanova and a specialist on the use of political cartoons in the classroom. He is the author of *50 Political Cartoons for Teaching U.S. History*, available from Social Studies School Service.

Ray proposed that we cooperate on a column that could draw on his knowledge of political cartoons and how to utilize them in the classroom. Since I had sat in on one of Ray’s workshops a while back, I knew that we could come up with a useful column. A week or so later, the controversial *New Yorker* cover featuring caricatures of Barack and Michelle Obama hit the newsstands, and was subsequently discussed and analyzed by news outlets across the United States and the world. In the next paragraphs, Ray outlines the value of using political cartoons in the classroom.

A wonderful opportunity exists for classroom teachers to utilize the powerful teachable moments of the presidential election to assist student learning. The political cartoon presents a point of view concerning people, places, and events using visual imagery. The artist hopes to convey quickly a message using caricature, symbolism, and related techniques. As a classroom strategy, it offers teachers opportunities to:

- Differentiate instruction;
- Motivate at-risk students;
- Build visual literacy;
- Prepare students for standardized tests;
- Provide comic relief and classroom humor;
- Utilize alternative assessments;
- Satisfy state and national standards;
- Stimulate writing activities;
- Promote learning and retention.

The political cartoon is also of great value in enabling teachers to present a great lesson during observations by supervisors. Presentations by student teachers as part of the job acquisition process have likewise shown success. The power of this strategy unfortunately lies somewhat dormant; and clinical and experimental research documents that students have serious difficulties in working with the cartoon. Several studies over several decades concluded that viewers (adults included) could not effectively understand a cartoonist’s message. Recent examples can be obtained from the *The Nation’s Report Card: U.S. History 2006* and *The Nation’s Report Card: Civics 2006*, both published in May 2007.¹

Cartoon Selection

As teachers develop their collection of cartoons, student grade level, ability level, and maturity should serve as the basic criteria for selection. Avoid risqué or offensive cartoons. (Some cartoonists may utilize callous stereotyping.) Selecting classic cartoons has a particular benefit—these often appear on state and national assessments. Also the taxonomy can serve as a guide for cartoon selection—that is teachers can carefully select visual works that can be used to teach, for example, caricature or symbolism.

Additional criteria are provided by cartoonist specialists Allan Nevins and Frank Weitenkampf in their classic book, *A Century of Political Cartoons: Caricature in the United States from 1800 to 1900*:²

a. “Wit of Humor”—Usually obtained by exaggeration; the cartoon should not have been drawn for the sole purpose of comic relief.
b. “There must be a basis in truth”—the caricature must be recognizable and the cartoon’s message must have a grounding in fact.
c. “Moral Purpose”—without moral
earnestness no cartoonist is likely to give his work the quality of universality or permanency.”

Teachers should avoid the quick laugh or the heavy handed, excessively negative cartoons that can appear on editorial pages. Students attempting to develop cartoons should likewise adhere to these guidelines. Also, it is beneficial to highlight for students the overall contributions cartoons have provided to the nation. This rich tradition has called attention to political indiscretions, social injustices, and economic abuses. Most editorial cartoons offer great learning opportunities.

A Favorite Political Cartoon Activity
Carefully select a cartoon that integrates well into the unit of study. Next “white out” the commentary in the bubbles above the individuals, duplicate, and distribute, asking students to fill in suggested comments (transparencies are useful in this regard). An alternative activity is to use a cartoon with its caption removed. This activity can be carried out individually or with groups. Depending upon time and objective, students present and defend their ideas, and discussion follows. Some students’ commentaries/captions may even be more interesting and humorous than the artist’s. Often students will take this activity to a further level of sophistication and voluntarily request to have each group draw a cartoon for other groups to caption.

This Truman State University-supported website provides a nice summary of the basic history and purpose of political cartooning.

The Cartoon Research Library at Ohio State, cartoons.osu.edu, likewise provides a wonderful resource; its treatment of Thomas Nast, the leading cartoonist of the nineteenth century, receives special attention. Nast has the distinction of popularizing the Democratic Donkey and inaugurating the use of the Republican Elephant. In addition, he developed the idea of the American version of the “roly-poly” Santa Claus. See also the following site: www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/reconstruction/nast/sf_nast.html.

Cartoons and the World Wide Web
The development of the World Wide Web coupled with an expansion of available political cartoons has made integrating cartoons into the classroom much easier. Below are several websites that educators will find useful:

American Political Cartoons: An Introduction.
www2.truman.edu/parker/research/cartoons.html

Association of American Editorial Cartoonists
nieonline.com/aaec/cftc.cfm
This is the website of the professional organization of fulltime, freelance, and student cartoonists. At the time of this writing, the home page spotlighted a downloadable lesson plan analyzing the infamous New Yorker cover that presented Barack and Michelle Obama as terrorists. The lesson, “Satire or Misfire,” is best suited for secondary students. This is a good resource for teachers and provides some quality lesson plans—128 were available at last count.

Baldy Editorial Cartoons, 1946–1982, 1997:
The Clifford H. Baldowski Collection at the Richard B. Russell Library
dlg.galileo.usg.edu/baldy.html
Most cartoonists have their work archived; the value of Clifford H. Baldowski’s (Baldy) collection is that it stretches over 50 years and covers many topics and historical events. His cartoons on the Vietnam War and tensions in the Middle East would be very useful to classroom teachers.

Five Decades of HerbBlock
www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/herblock/5decades.htm
This is the site for the dean of American editorial cartoonists during the twentieth century. His site covers just about every aspect of American life, culture, and society from 1946-1995. There are too many outstanding ones to identify just one or two. If you have the time, go to this site and examine Block’s amazing insight into the American character.
Daryl Cagle’s Professional Cartoonist Index
cagle.com
This is one of Ray’s favorite sites. Not only is Daryl Cagle a wonderful cartoonist, but he provides a site with links to thousands of cartoons from across the United States and around the world. From the home page, click on the “Teacher’s Guide” link on the left side. They have developed lesson plans for social studies and journalism classes at all grade levels. Each and every one of the cartoons can be copied with a quick left click and pasted into a Microsoft Word document for use in classrooms. This site and slate.com will email cartoons to teachers who register, at no cost. Both sites send cartoons daily.

Learning by Cartooning
www.learningbycartooning.org
Donna Sharer was a teacher at Northeast High School in Philadelphia when she developed this project with her history students in 2004. By having students do the “cartooning,” she compelled them to analyze issues, grasp various perspectives, and explore ways of “taking sides” on those issues. There is also a page for her lesson plans and many very well selected links to sites that feature cartooning, analyzing political cartoons, and lesson plans used in schools. One lesson plan, used in 4th grade classes in Boulder, Colorado, was particularly impressive (go to “Teacher Links” and scroll down to “Creating and understanding political cartoons”). This project can serve as a great model for other teachers and their students.

Library of Congress
memory.loc.gov/learn/features/political_cartoon/
The Library of Congress has made special efforts in the past few years to be helpful to classroom teachers and students. This site includes a great classroom activity on analyzing political cartoons and many more teacher resources. Note: this is just one of the dozens of sites within the Library that focus on concerns of teachers and students.

The Opper Project
hti.osu.edu/opper
This site may be the best for history teachers looking to augment any historical event or era with political cartoons. Named after Ohioan Frederick Burr Opper, the site and library include cartoons covering more than 100 years of U.S. history. They are organized topically with associated lesson plans. There is also an Editorial Cartoon Analysis Worksheet that would be an excellent introduction to studying political cartoons. This is a good, teacher-friendly site.

Political cartoons have a unique ability to encapsulate a decade of history or a major social/political/cultural issue in a single picture. Many social studies teachers have used them for years to help students understand both historical and contemporary issues and events. These sites that Ray and I have suggested are worth perusing and provide some good ideas for future lessons.

Notes

C. Frederick Risinger retired as director of professional development and coordinator of social studies education after 31 years at Indiana University, Bloomington. He currently is working on two social studies writing projects, is developing a new website, and works two shifts a week as a bartender at a local microbrewery. Ray Heitzmann, Ph.D., has taught in the public schools of Illinois and New York. A long time political cartoon enthusiast, his first article on the topic appeared in 1974.