

Teaching Current Events and Media Literacy: Critical Thinking, Effective Communication, and Active Citizenship

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Civic learning curricula often fail to include controversial issues or issues that address current events in communities. Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms. This understanding of literacy responds to the demands of civic and cultural involvement in an increasingly global and technologically advanced world. “Like literacy, in general, media literacy includes both receptive and productive dimensions, encompassing critical analysis and communication skills, predominantly in relationship to mass media, popular culture, and digital media.”¹ Many teachers are hesitant to teach current events through media due to the demands of curriculum coverage.² “As a result, young people may not learn how to engage productively with the issues and events that relate to our political system today and will continue to do so in the future.”³

Addressing current events, particularly those that are controversial, can help students unpack conflicting beliefs and approach those issues in a more reasoned way. Discussions of current events teach students how to engage in effective conversations about things that matter in their lives.⁴ To do so, students need classroom opportunities to research current and controversial issues in their local communities, country, and the world, and to come to defensible opinions and feasible solutions. Current issues that involve different stakeholders are by nature meaningful in that they generate multiple and competing answers. By including multiple informed perspectives, current events are key to classroom discussions because students learn to express themselves, challenge one another’s ideas, and revise their understandings. This kind of teaching reflects the social principle, stated by John Dewey, that education in America must focus on the habits and virtues required for democracy.⁵ Democratic habits are developed by participating in communities where groups come together with common interests and where dialogue exists among reasoned individuals holding different informed perspectives.

Teachers can make the social studies classroom a safe place where students can establish a foundation for civic awareness and inquiry. Incorporating current events into the curriculum helps students build language skills, vocabulary, reading comprehension, critical thinking, problem solving, oral expression and listening skills. Additionally, students can understand the importance of people, events, and issues in the media and pay attention to the news they see and hear outside of school.⁶

In this article, we describe a process for engaging students in democratic practice through the discussion of current and often controversial events. Using media literacy, deliberative discussion, and action civics, we explain how teachers can effectively incorporate current events into their classroom instruction.⁷ We call this process “building bridges” because students connect school-based civic learning with authentic civic problems and interact with knowledgeable adults in the community. This kind of teaching promotes powerful social studies and participatory citizenship that adheres to the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework.⁸

Building Bridges

Building bridges projects utilize an action civics approach. Students do and behave as citizens by engaging in a cycle of research, action, and reflection on problems they care about personally while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and political action.⁹ In our building bridges projects students in grades five through seven identified a current community issue of interest, examined relevant resources, researched and interviewed people who had information on the topic, and developed a plan of action to raise awareness and advocate for possible solutions.¹⁰ (**Figure 1**)

Using media literacy concepts, we organized the building bridges projects into four main steps. Below we discuss how we used media literacy in a building bridge activity to help students think critically about current events and communicate

their ideas about community issues.

Step 1: Examining Current Events Using a Media Literacy Framework

In order to investigate community issues students examined a variety of current events found in newspapers, on television, and on the Internet. Using a media literacy framework ensured that students utilized critical thinking and analysis skills as they examined current events found in a variety of media. To help students develop media literacy, the Center for Media Literacy suggests focusing on five core concepts and five key questions (Table 1).

Table 1: Media Literacy Core Concepts and Questions

CORE CONCEPT	KEY QUESTIONS
Media messages are targeted to audiences	What techniques are used to gain attention?
Media messages are targeted to audiences	What techniques are used to gain attention?
Different people perceive media messages differently	How might others understand this message differently?
Media have embedded values and points of view	What lifestyles and values are portrayed in this message?
Most media are organized to gain profit or power	Why was this message sent?

SOURCE: "Five Key Questions Form Foundation for Media Inquiry." *Center for Media Literacy*, www.medialit.org/reading-room/five-key-questions-form-foundation-media-inquiry

Media literacy can “provide a basis for more extensive projects that immerse students in the study of complicated events and issues, building core skills and knowledge while also developing analysis and communication skills.”¹¹ Teachers can utilize the five core concepts and key questions highlighted above as they help students investigate current events and community issues. In our building bridges projects, teachers explicitly introduced these concepts and questions to students and modeled how to utilize this framework in investigating various media sources. These concepts and questions then became an integral part of student research.

For example, while developing ideas about how food trucks might help address hunger in the community, students extended the notion of pop culture and a popular trend in the community. They found an image that portrayed a food truck filled to the brim with food with the caption, “We believe we can end poverty if we work together. Will you join us?” This news article appealed to the values of community members—sending the message that as community citizens we are responsible for providing food assistance to every person who needs it. Another example: while studying issues related to animal overpopulation, students found a local newspaper photo of a rabid stray cat that students found frightening. Using media literacy concepts and questions, students understood that the image was a technique used to gain attention to the problems created by feral cats and to warn people about the dangers of handling sick animals. In

the next section we describe how media literacy can serve as a basis for communicating with adults who are interested in similar issues through hosting a community issues fair.

Step Two: Hosting a Community Issues Fair

When students have a conversation with an adult about issues they care about, it reinforces the idea that every citizen in a community needs to devote time and energy to understanding current events and issues, forming thoughtful judgments, and acting to bring about positive change.¹² An ideal way to connect students with local civic leaders is through a community issues fair featuring guest speakers. Teachers carefully selected civic organizations they felt were related to student interest and asked them to visit their classroom to share information and resources with students. Representatives from several local organizations (concerning several topics) attended the fair, which lasted two hours.

Caritas (Emergency Support Services)

Animal Birth Control Clinic (affordable spay and neuter surgeries and basic preventive health care services)

Mission Waco (overcome the systemic issues of social injustice which oppress the poor and marginalized)

Texas Hunger Initiative (sustainable solutions to food insecurity)

The Community issues fair was a morning event held in a series of connected classrooms. Each community organization sent a representative to give a 25-minute, kid-friendly presentation on the goals and actions of the organization (and to repeat this presentation four times). Each organization had a space and a table to display brochures and information about their community issue. Students rotated through the four stations and presentations over the course of three hours.

The fair helped students clarify and narrow their focus on current community issues they wanted to study as well as connect with existing civic organizations and government agencies that were already engaged in civic action. A key aspect of the fair was to give students the opportunity to converse with adults in the community who are actively involved in solving a community issue that is currently in the news. The next step involved bringing the students back to the classroom for a deliberative discussion and finally helping them choose a community issue to study and upon which to take action.

Step Three: Facilitating a Classroom Deliberation

During deliberation, students worked through shared inquiry and talked about the costs and consequences of various solutions to a public problem. There is “much advocacy for deliberation in democratic education and it comes from the belief that a healthy democracy requires necessary and ongoing political discussion among citizens.”¹³ At the heart of deliberation is the group’s willingness to work through conflicts, to accept the consequences of one’s choices, and to establish grounds for

action. The role of the teacher is to introduce a difficult issue and allow students to voice their opinions. (e.g., Should feral cats be humanely euthanized to save native birds? Who should be invited to take free food from a food bank?)

Teachers may be hesitant to introduce current events such as those regarding crime or poverty, for a variety of reasons including the fear that the topic is too difficult for their students to handle. Also, teachers may avoid discussing controversial issues because they feel the issue is not controversial, or that their own opinion would weigh too heavily into the discussion.¹⁴ Deliberation of controversial issues, done well, is important to ensure a healthy democracy. However it requires instruction, skill, and multiple opportunities for students to practice. Teachers who focus on fundamental practices of media literacy embrace discussion that requires children to weigh the evidence and participate in collective community action. In the next section, we offer two examples of building bridges projects.

ideas to help the community, we wanted to do a fundraiser to raise some money to donate to the shelter to expand and improve it.” Students engaged in a rigorous discussion about the costs and benefits of asking community members to support this cause. Different perspectives on the subject became apparent, so the teacher took the time to allow students to discuss both sides of the issue, concurrently referencing images and news articles that the students found about animal kill policies in our community. The students wrote letters to their congressman and local city council leaders. Also, they created a billboard and a video advocating support for renovating the shelter.¹⁷ These students engaged in action civics using media literacy skills. When students learn how to apply concepts like audience, message, purpose, and point of view to any unfamiliar media (like news articles) they strengthen their critical reading skills.¹⁸ In addition, these students had to use convincing literacy skills to advocate for their cause.

In a different project, students chose to investigate hunger in their community. Texas has many citizens who are hungry on a daily basis—about one out of four. According to the USDA, the state’s food insecurity rate of 18.7 percent is 3.8 percent higher than the national average of 14.9 percent (2013 data)¹⁹

Students in this group titled their project, “Feed the Hungry.” They read multiple news articles and websites that cited statistics on hunger. On one website students learned about the National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week during which people were asked to donate to a food drive.²⁰ Maria wrote in her reflection, “We chose to investigate more about hunger in Waco. We want to help feed hungry people. Our idea is to provide a food truck that will go to the places where hungry children live.” An image that was brought up for discussion was a photo of a young African American male standing in line at the food truck. This image raised a discussion about race and hunger. Rather than avoiding the discussion, the teacher guided the students in finding more information about hunger in our community and profiles of families and children who needed food. These students decided to create a mural and a video to advocate for their cause. While hunger is a difficult subject, these students recognized the seriousness of the situation and were eager to do something about it. (See the related article on pages 9–13 in this issue of SSYL). Students used key media literacy questions to guide their development of a mural and video. They considered “who will look at our mural?” “How should it convince people that there is a hunger problem in our community?” Another student remarked, “We think that we can make a difference in our community because we have researched about our topic and have decided that other people our age have made a difference.”

Students engaged in literacy practices by writing persuasive letters and communicating their cause to a wider audience. Reflection became an important process in the projects, as student brainstormed and contributed ideas. Further, they exercised leadership and accountability to one another. Finally, students participated in a creative endeavor making connections between current events, the community, and themselves.

photo by Dave Parker <https://www.flickr.com/photos/daveparker/6297497992>



Step Four: Implementing Projects/Taking Action

One group of students chose to investigate the conditions of the animal shelter in our community. They read local newspaper articles and found that, in September 2013, only 36 percent of the stray animals that came into the shelter found adoptive homes. Students learned through news articles that after the city had taken over management of the shelter, 90 percent of the animals were successfully adopted in 2016.¹⁵ Today, the City of Waco operates the shelter and the Humane Society of Texas manages adoptions. Only a few very sick or injured animals have to be euthanized. It’s a successful local government—nonprofit organization partnership. The Animal Shelter is regional, serving 15 Central Texas cities and most portions of McLennan County. It is an open-admission shelter (no animal is turned away) and reached one year of no-kill status (90% live exit rate) in September 2016.¹⁶

However, providing stray animals with a safe and healthy place to live (while they receive medical treatment and await adoption) is costly to taxpayers. One student, John, remarked, “we had a chance to be active citizens, so we all came up with

Conclusion

Teachers should be willing to adopt flexible roles when bringing current events into the classroom. They must be able to balance mandated teaching agendas as they listen to student's interests and ideas. "There is no magic formula for learning how to do this except through creating a classroom culture of respect and trust, balanced with reflective practice."²¹ Teachers using building bridges projects create spaces for developing the kinds of citizens that will engage in participatory democracy. Citizens, who are committed to community improvement and social action, and who recognize the need for respect and trust, are the kinds of citizens that will secure a safe and fruitful future for our democracy.

Notes

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Social Studies for the Next Generation: The C3 Framework for Social Studies

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NCSS Bulletin 113, 144 pp. (including introductory chapters), 2013.

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