

Knowledge, Fear, and Changing Perspectives: The Impact of Using News as a Primary Source in Classrooms

Austin Lamb

Note: the students mentioned in this article have been given alternative names. Female students Dove, Louise, and Blue, as well as Curtis, a male student, were in the most recent class mentioned below. Esme is a 2016 alumna of the class.

In a dimly-lit room on a May morning, three high school students gather around a table. Each has several pages of notes, ready to summarize any one of the five articles they read in the last week to the teacher sitting before them. They're unaware of which article it will be, as it's randomly selected, but they are eager to present.

When the teacher, Chris Sperry, calls upon each student one-by-one, they come alive, giving concise summaries and conveying their thoughts about the articles. They don't remember all of the details, because capturing the essence of the reading is what they're evaluated on.

After the students fulfill their task, they engage in conversation about the content of the articles. They share personal stories and connections, discuss heavy topics, and raise important questions, sometimes coming to new realizations.

All the while, they are demonstrating valuable critical thinking skills, the degree of which they did not possess several weeks ago—much less in September, when they began taking *Facing History*, a combined English and social studies course offered at Lehman Alternative

Community School (LACS) in Ithaca, New York. The curriculum focuses heavily on students analyzing their own perspectives while studying topics such as the Holocaust and Middle Eastern affairs, as well as prioritizing the importance of students asking questions about what they are learning, and providing evidence to back up opinions that they form.

For the past month and a half, the combined class of 15 students has been divided into small groups once a week, where each of them presents on an op-ed article about global affairs. And over the last eight months, the students have been quizzed weekly on world news events. Through this process, the high schoolers have developed their ability to read, comprehend, make connections, synthesize, plan, and organize—all skills that will prove invaluable in the coming years.

My name is Austin Lamb, and in June of 2018 I graduated from LACS. During my senior year of high school, I was a teaching assistant for a *Facing History* class, which I took as a sophomore. The course title was taken from

the extensive Holocaust unit that begins the class—using the *Facing History and Ourselves* resource, *Holocaust and Human Behavior*.

As an extension of the unit, students read international news reports as their primary texts, and their knowledge and recollection of the information is assessed in weekly news quizzes. After the weekly news quiz, each student poses a question to the class about the content covered in the news—an aspect of the course that encourages critical thinking and meaningful discussion. These questions then become a driver of the year-long curriculum regarding each student's understanding of today's world and his or her place in it.

The class typically has three teaching assistants—seniors who took the class in 10th grade. My foremost role was as the News Czar, creating the news quizzes in collaboration with teacher Chris Sperry, who is Director of Curriculum and Staff Development for Project Look Sharp, a media literacy initiative of Ithaca College. The news quizzes are graded quantitatively and make up 50 percent of each student's "knowledge and vocabulary" demonstration for their global studies portfolio of the year. Although LACS is a New York State public school, students graduate through portfolios and



Performance Based Assessment Tasks (PBATs) instead of credits and Regents Exams.

The news quiz questions and readings become progressively more complex as the year progresses (see boxes on pp. 273–274). In the first quarter, students who likely have never followed the news before this class become familiar with international leaders, events, and issues through weekly readings, quizzes, and class discussions. The teacher and teaching assistant put together a weekly

print handout with a dozen short articles beginning with accessible sources such as *USA Today* and *The Week*. These become progressively supplemented with longer articles posted on the class news aggregator website. During the weekly debriefing of the quizzes students learn to ask questions about the news, share strategies for learning new information and discuss the state of the world.

In the second quarter, the articles expand to cover different political

points of view within the U.S. media. As the year progresses, students analyze media from non-Western outlets such as Al-Jazeera, the Syrian Arab News Agency, and *The Jerusalem Post*. In the final quarter, students read five op-ed articles weekly, and then split into small groups where they each present a summary of the main points of one randomly selected article, provide their own analyses, and then pose questions to their peers for discussion. These presentations are facilitated by one of the teaching assistants or a teacher, who then evaluates each one and averages the score with the rest of the news quiz to form a composite score.

Using news as a primary text not only accustoms students to following international affairs on a regular basis, but it teaches students to think critically about the world and news, critique and analyze their own perspectives, and seek the truth. As a result, the intellectual ben-

Using news as a primary text addresses a range of curricular goals including facilitating:

- learning of key information about international affairs,
- strategizing about how to learn new material and take tests,
- critical thinking about the news, its construction and sourcing,
- ongoing conversations about social issues of importance to the class,
- the development and sharing of each student's beliefs about global issues,
- each student's ability to reflect on their own biases and views of the world.

1st Quarter News Quiz Questions Example

News Quiz #1

Name _____

September 15, 2017

1. The president of [check one below] has received criticism recently from Human Rights Watch for his support of systematic torture in his nation's detention facilities.
 Myanmar Syria India Kenya Egypt France the United States
2. Soldiers from the war-torn nation of [check one below] with the support of [check one below] recently forced ISIS troops out of a significant portion of the group's de facto capital, Raqqa.
 Myanmar Syria India Kenya Egypt France the United States
3. A journalist in [check one below] was murdered by unidentified gunmen last week because of her anti-government rhetoric, sparking widespread civilian protest across the nation.
 Myanmar Syria India Kenya Egypt France the United States
4. At an international conference of leaders from emerging economies last week, Russian president Vladimir Putin's evaluation of Trump and American politics was
 a. optimistic b. critical c. congratulatory d. both a and c
5. Write one question about any of the news on this quiz.

efits are immeasurable. Consuming such a high level of information at a rapid pace has led to significant intellectual growth and knowledge in the students—and with that, confidence and maturity that serve them for the rest of their lives.

Reflecting on their experience, the students give insightful remarks on how the class has shaped them.

“In terms of education, reading the news has been very valuable to me,” said Curtis. “It is useful to be knowledgeable about current events and it allows me to engage with adults on topics which they don’t expect me to know about.”

This growth in knowledge has come with a heightened awareness of the many societies and cultures that interlock every day, and the histories that define them.

“I definitely feel as though following the news ... made me more aware of world events and more cued in to

politics and culture in a good way,” said Esme.

As the year progresses, students typically recognize the limitations of their knowledge. However, Chris Sperry, who taught this course for three decades, sees this as an integral part of the class. “It is important for students to recognize the limitations of their own understanding,” he said. “By the end of the year the class typically comes to the collective recognition that they cannot fully understand any issue from all perspectives but that it is their responsibility to keep trying.”

Louise and other students echoed this sentiment. “I know that it’s impossible to fully understand it all because there is so much there, but I have a much greater understanding of all of it. And as the year was able to progress, I was able to find myself making more connections in different things because I knew the background.”

But with a constant attention to the news comes frequent exposure to details of violence and suffering, and a strong emotional impact in some students that strengthens throughout the year. “When you hear about it so much, it’s kind of hard to not help worry about it,” said Dove.

Blue affirmed that reading about humanitarian crises could be emotionally draining. “I’d say—that for an overly-emotional person—I have been taking the really dense, emotional news pretty well. Sometimes a nerve gets struck and I think about the real-life children and people who are actually suffering while I read about and assess it ...,” Blue said.

But for others, the effects are more severe. “Emotionally, it’s a bit painful,” said Marie. “Last semester, when all the news was about nuclear war and North Korea, I would get genuinely scared at night and in class, and sometimes still

2nd Quarter News Quiz Questions Example

News Quiz #10

Name _____

December 15, 2017

Circle the letter for the news outlet whose article/bias most reflects the following summaries.

a. The Times of Israel b. Fox News c. The Syrian Arab News Agency d. Al Jazeera

26. *Despite predictable condemnation by the liberal media and Palestinian groups, President Trump was merely stating the obvious—that Israel controls Jerusalem. Despite attempts to deny history and the Jewish State, President Trump recognized Israel's long-standing control over its historic capital.* a. b. c. d.

27. *The leader of Hezbollah, Hassam Nasrallah, has called for action against Trump's decision. The U.S. president's decision should spark outrage and action against U.S. desecration of Arab rights and Israel's domination of Jerusalem. The holy city will always be at the center of the Palestinian cause.* a. b. c. d.

28. *Prime Minister Netanyahu says he is in contact with other nations that intend to move their embassies to Jerusalem now that the U.S. is making this historic move. "President Trump has inscribed himself in the annals of our capital for all time," Netanyahu said.* a. b. c. d.

29. *Trump's move upended U.S. diplomacy in the region and further isolated the U.S. from the rest of the world. It has led to scores of anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli protests and ends any illusion that the U.S. could be a neutral player in the peace process. Although, one unintended consequence is a renewed focus on the Palestinian issue.* a. b. c. d.

30. Write one question or connection about any of the news on this quiz.

4th Quarter News Quiz Format Example

News Quiz #17

Name _____

April 20, 2018

Come prepared to do the following for all the articles in no less than 2 minutes and no more than 4 minutes.

1. synthesize the **main points** of the article (1 to 2 mins.)
2. give **your opinion** on the article
3. ask a **question**
"In Death, Some More Equal Than Others," Margaret Sullivan, *NY Times* Public Editor, April 3, 2016
"Why Movie Facts Prevail," Jeffrey M. Zacks, *NY Times* Feb. 15, 2015
"The Epidemic of Facelessness," Stephen Marche, *NY Times*, Feb. 14, 2015
"How Facebook Warps Our Worlds," Frank Bruni, *NY Times*, May 22, 2016
"YouTube, the Great Radicalizer," Zeynep Tufekci, *NY Times*, March 10, 2018

Scoring Criteria

- 0.....not prepared, no presentation
- 50.....under prepared, inappropriate or inaccurate information, fails to address the bulk of the assignment
- 70.....shows evidence of having read the article, generally accurate and appropriate presentation, addresses most of the assignment
- 85.....Would be a 100% but no opinion or no question or too long
- 100.....well prepared, shows clear understanding of the article, consistently accurate and appropriate information and analysis, addresses all aspects of the assignment, stays within the time constraints

do. I also sometimes feel really helpless, and angry. I wish that it were easier to know what I can do to help even in the smallest way. It seems unfair that I get to go to school and go to sleep safely and read newspapers about girls my age around the world who are being murdered in terrorist attacks daily.”

As a teacher, Mr. Sperry said he didn’t observe these traumatic responses until more recently. “In the last few years, I have consistently recognized certain students—they’ve typically been girls, and we’re talking 10th and 11th grade high school level—who are overwhelmed by following the international news,” he said. “And I’ve had to really reflect on that, and take some responsibility for my role in their emotional state. And some of it is almost always reflective of what’s going on in their lives more broadly.”

While deep emotional engagement in current events has been prevalent throughout the class’s history, Mr. Sperry wonders about its relation to what he describes as an epidemic in anxiety amongst teenagers coupled with a notable rise in intake of media. “For some reason now, the anxiety levels linked to following the news are at a completely different level than they were 10 and 15 years ago,” he said. “And there is a lot of speculation as to whether that is related to new media forms, the state of the world or other factors.”

Thus, Mr. Sperry has had to make additions to his teaching of current events to address the wellbeing of his students. “I have no choice now but to bring that into my curriculum if I’m going to be responsible,” he said. “I have young people talk with each other and with me about the emotional impact of following the news and share with each other for coping.”

For one student in the class, following the news has been a source of negativity. “Newspapers are incentivized to cover death, the terror, and the injustice in the world because that is what sells papers,” said Curtis. “It is because of this that reading the news has cultivated cynicism

in me and also desensitized me to events that should create shock, awe, and horror in the reader. News outlets want to cover what is out of the ordinary, but in doing so make what should be abnormal normal.”

Other students also felt desensitized while following the news. “Oddly enough, my emotional response to the news I read [in class] was very blunted,” said Esme. “Following stories about terrorism and death and bombings and horrific human rights violations did not

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affect me nearly as much as I expected it would, or as much as I thought it should. In comparison to peers who were feeling the figurative punch it packed much more deeply, I felt cold and emotionless and that my compassion was failing me.”

The challenge is finding a way to take in the news for information while not becoming numb. “They don’t want to be non-feeling about what’s happening in the world,” said Mr. Sperry. “On the other side, students who feel very deeply about what’s happening have a very difficult time reading and following because they’re not numbing at all. We need to help students develop strategies for self-regulating in a way that isn’t just

numbing to reality but also not feeling so much that you can’t follow the news, and you can’t be informed because it’s too overwhelming. Ultimately, the young people themselves have to come to grips with that, and have to help each other and themselves figure out how to regulate.”

Reflecting on my role last year as News Czar, I realize how important being a teaching assistant was. From writing the questions for the quizzes, to grading work, or engaging in discussions, the contributions of the teaching assistants lead to intellectual gain for both ourselves and the students in the class. And this does not apply exclusively to the academic year in which one takes the class. The knowledge, perspectives, and media literacy skills that are introduced through using news as a primary text are assets that benefit students later in their careers. This was evidenced in my interactions with the class’s graduates through the alumni journal that I ran last year for my senior project. These alumni refer to our class as a formative educational experience in their years of young adulthood, and assert that they have since drawn upon what the course taught them in their careers and lives. As a former teaching assistant of the class, it is empowering to know that I took part in teaching a curriculum with the capacity to develop young people who have the knowledge and abilities to be critical thinkers with equitable outlooks in a world in need of them. 🌍

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