

Creating Relevant Curriculum Through Current Events in the Secondary Classroom

I have found that allowing students to find a current event that connects to a unit or novel can help them make **relevant connections** that many gifted children crave. Bridging the curriculum in this way helps students to make meaning of the content with their own lives.

Current events allow for a **deeper understanding** of the content. The goal is also for teachers to **create empathy, bring the everyday** into the classroom, allow for **critical thinking**, and form responses to the curriculum that allow their students to become **advocates and allies**. Teaching with current events creates **empathy** and **cultural competency**, as well as the understanding of what it means to be an **advocate or ally** for a cause.

Using current events in the classroom naturally **differentiates** for students who can make complex connections. These connections allow for higher order thinking skills that are necessary for **critical thinking**.

Now is an important time in history, and our students need to be aware of the world around them in order to be **changemakers** for their generation and generations to come. Thoughtfully including current events, yet still focusing on the curriculum, allows for this view into the world.

In the English Classroom:

In order to understand that the *theme* is the authors message, and that the theme is found in other works of literature as well as on the screen, students identified the theme in their book and then found a current event that had the same theme. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the concept of theme as well as a better grasp of the meaning behind the themes in their own novels.

After reading *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 2006), students were asked to research outsiders in our world. They were asked, who are outsiders? How is the theme of being an outsider connected to a current event today? Where do you see outsiders? They were told to research the outsiders in our society that they wanted to bring to light. They chose anyone they wanted and had to understand how these individuals feel through the lens of being an outsider. They did a visual/oral presentation that told the plight of their outside group and explained why people should know about them. This could connect with many books that deal with being on the fringes of a group, not just *The Outsiders*. Examples of groups they researched who had recently been in the news were: autistic children, LGBTQ individuals, and religious groups that had experienced hate crimes.

While reading *Chains*, a book about an enslaved girl during the Revolutionary War, students were asked to find a current event that connected. Students found articles on modern-day slavery, modern-day abolitionists, and countries or people fighting for modern-day rights, and they also found articles on individuals who feel trapped in some way. They even took this connection as broadly as connecting the problems with our planet and the big decisions people face to help the world to the main character and the decisions she faced throughout the book.

My English class often does Socratic Seminars during the year, to either reflect on a book, make connections between topics, or just have a higher level of discussion on a big topic. With these, the students are asked to come in with a current event that connects in some sort of way as the Socratic Seminar conversation. I am always impressed with what my students come up with. They have advanced ideas about these current event connections which are way beyond what our normal discussions generate.

For creative writing, students were asked to take on the perspective of a person in a current event. Students found a current event that interested them, and then took the information from the third person account to create a first-person story.

In the Social Studies Classroom:

My students do weekly current event assignments called WHOWs (What's Happening in our World). These are due on Wednesday, and I use the two W's in WHOW to help them remember the due date.

We go over what makes a reputable source. Students understand that their sources should tell the facts, not try to persuade, and not try to sell anything. I give a list of sources that are advisable.

For many, this is the first time they have been asked to look at the news. Parents are frequently impressed that they are doing this, and they report talking about the news with their children more now that they are doing this in for class. I let parents know that they can determine what they feel most comfortable for their family (sticking to the two websites I provide, watching a news source together, listening to NPR, or having full access to research the news on the web).

Two good websites: NEWSELA, and The Good News Network. NEWSELA is all student-friendly news, and students can change the reading level to meet their ability. The Good News Network has all good news.

Two Rules: No sports (this is to steer them away from a play-by-play of a game, though they are allowed to do big events that occur in sports, such as kneeling for the flag), and no celebrity gossip (or what I like to call "fluff").

The assignment requires two paragraphs. The first paragraph needs to tell about the event (the who, what, when, where, and why of what they are reporting) and the second paragraph should give their thoughts on the matter. They must include a citation, as well. All three parts need to be there and done well for full credit.

Students choose what topics they want to report on. Some students might stick to heroic animal stories or other news-worthy events that are not too difficult to understand. Others will look at the economic situations in a country or take a political stance. Allowing this choice creates natural differentiation.

On Wednesdays, students are invited to share their news stories aloud, and I explain any confusions. On Fridays, we watch the current events FLOCABULARY (also known as the week in rap). At least once a month, we place FACTORIUM, a paper-based news game with questions related to the news of the week. You have to sign up and pay, but it is awesome and new content is generated weekly.

Other ways to use current events in social studies: Throughout the year, I will ask students to find a current event that connects to the unit. This really reinforces the purpose of learning history, and how history is active not static. We have done connections with: the Fall of Rome, The Middle Ages, The Renaissance, The Golden Age of Islam, and Feudal Japan.

Benefits for Gifted Learners:

Current events allow for depth and complexity. Depending on what you ask students to do with the current event that they find, or the unit you are working on, the complexity can be in the analyze, evaluate and create range with the opportunity for greater depth.

According to Heacox and Cash (2014, p. 26), when designing depth projects that include “sophisticated levels of higher order thinking” there are some natural connections to current events:

- “Use situations that are authentic (real-world) and meaningful (worth solving) for the students”
- “Use relevant topics (from student interests) to frame the projects”
- “Connect the project to self, society, culture, technology, other disciplines, or community development”

Gifted students “have an advanced sense of justice, morality, empathy, and fairness, especially about global issues that many of their age peers aren’t interested in” which makes current events a natural way to connect to the curriculum (Winebrenner, 2012, p. 13).

Current events can increase the rigor and challenge of a curriculum “Educators in rigorous learning environments should be more concerned with challenging advanced students to pose essential questions, examine the ambiguity of multifaceted materials and different way of thinking, and engage in problem solving real-world issues relevant to today and the future” (Kingore, 2013, p. 18).

Current events, done with intent, should increase critical thinking (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1967; Bahmani, 2016).

“Dewey wanted students to puzzle over human events and activities” (Noddings, 2011, p. 40). Current events allow for students to puzzle over human events in a natural way that can connect to their interests and the curriculum.

Noddings, like Dewey, believes that “schools can help the society to develop individuals who have a clearer, more responsible sense of what it means to live in a democratic community” (Noddings, 2011, p. 41).

Students need to understand the world to be able make choices that impact the future. “Wisdom is conviction about values, *a choice to do something*, a preference for this rather than that form of living. Wisdom involves discriminating judgements and a desired future. It presupposes some grasp of conditions and consequences, yet it has no special access to them. Rather methods of access must be scrutinized in order to decide which ones are more reliable for the task at hand. In this way, Dewey does not devalue knowledge but only *situates it in human experience*” (West, 1989, p. 86).

Challenge to Myself:

Every year, my students design a life-sized samurai for our Feudal Japan unit. Around the background, they include the feudal pyramid, bushido code, religions of the samurai (Buddhist or Shinto) and ways in which their samurai will defeat the Mongols. While the students enjoy this project, and they are able to design the samurai in any fashion they choose, the other information with the project ends up being very similar for every group.

This year, I challenged myself to come up with a new project that still involved designing the samurai, but also allowed for higher order thinking skills (critical thinking). I decided that a good way to do this would be to link the project to the modern-day through current events. The resulting project looked like this:

Japan is known for its advanced technology as well as its connection to its cultural and feudal roots. You will draw a life-sized samurai with all of the armor and features of a samurai during the feudal times. But, this is not the feudal world, this is 2020. Therefore, your samurai will be a (pretend) robot programmed with AI. Your task today is to “program” your samurai to combat modern-day problems. You will decide on a world problem and find two current events related to the problem. You will then reflect on the values of Japan (Bushido Code, Confucianism, Shintoism, Buddhism, etc.) to determine what qualities are most important for your AI samurai to be programmed with, in order solve your selected problem in the modern world. You will need to explain both the current event, and the reasoning behind the programming of particular beliefs or attributes.

Reasons to Teach Current Events (Tiedt & Tiedt, 1967).

1. To help the student understand the problems of the United States in the world situation.
2. To provide a background of knowledge for understanding future events.
3. To develop an understanding of other peoples and places.
4. To follow changing institutions and trends in our society.
5. To learn skills – reading and listening with comprehension, learning to recognize propaganda, reading of maps and globes.
6. To help make social studies more interesting and more up-to-date.
7. To develop the student’s ability to select significant issues from the mass of daily events.
8. To encourage independent thinking and judgment in problem solving.

Tiedt and Tiedt (1967) recommend that current events should involve more than just sharing with the class. “Thought-provoking questions should be asked, so that students learn to consider the background of the news report” (p.112).

“When students relate current events to the concepts studied in the classroom by writing and presenting a series of analysis ... their learning and critical thinking improves as they regularly connect the theory, presented in the lessons and textbooks, to real-world applications” (Bahmani, 2016, p. 190).

“When students are given the freedom to choose any current event that sparks their interests, concerns and values, it makes the reading that much more important to them because they are eager to learn about that particular topic” (Bahmani, 2016, p. 191).

Other Ways to Approach Current Events (from Tiedt & Tiedt, 1967):

- Have groups report on a local, regional, state, national or/and international news (with a different group reporting on each, or all groups reporting on all).
- Have students present problems related to a particular regional area through the current events that they find about that region.
- Focus on topics (art, music, education, etc.).
- Have a class “scrapbook” of the top 10 current events for the week, and then vote on the top 10 for the semester/year, with the goal of asking “What makes news that is of some lasting importance?” (p. 118).
- Provide news stories without the headlines and have students write the headlines that they think would be best.
- Have students write the news that they think will happen in the future.

Bahmani (2016) used current event journaling, in which students wrote journal pages about current events and connected the events to the study of their class. Bahmani found that with this method, critical thinking increased, as did the complexity of the topics as the year continued.

From Edutopia: “Teaching Current Events in the Age of Social Media” by Wolpert-Gawron (2017)

Edutopia suggest:

1. Find resources (like Newsela) that can alter the reading level for your readers.
2. Provide positive news sources
3. Work with students to critically read and determine if a news article is true or questionable.
4. Provide lessons on the value of unplugging (and the physical and mental benefits that come with this.)

From **Why Teach Current Events**: In an NHES (National Household Education Survey) measure, it was found that, “students who reported taking a course that generated at least some increase in interest in politics or national issues also reported outside news-seeking behaviors. They were more likely than others to discuss the news or watch or listen to the national news with parents.”

The National Society for the Gifted and Talented (Swicord, 2017) recommends a two-step process of analysis for gifted students.

Step 1: Determine the “how” and the “what happened.” They organize “when” events in chronological order and provide three sentence summaries of the situation.

Step 2: Students determine “why?” At this point, students can get into the shoes of those involved and determine why the individual might choose a particular course of action (ex. to maintain power).

Current Events – Not Just for the Social Studies Classroom!

Great Resources!

- Newsela
- Upfront Magazine (by Scholastic)
- Factorium
- Flocabulary (week in rap)

Great Resources!

- Facing History and Ourselves has thoughtful and thought-provoking lessons.
- The Learning Network from The New York Times has resources such as a lesson a day with news articles and an interactive online news quiz.

Citations:

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