

A Guide to Selecting Powerful Current Events for Study

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At this moment in history when so many of us feel constantly pressed for time and deluged with information, we need to rethink why we address, or do not address, current events in K-8 classrooms. Our children are persistently interacting with images on screens of all sizes and shapes. We need to consider how we can best use our understanding of powerful social studies learning and students’ access to information to help foster creative, involved young citizens in a digital age.

To this end, I offer a guide for selecting current events items and resources for finding them. I hope this guide will help teachers efficiently identify current events items that support meaningful instruction for engaged citizenship in a technologically connected world.

Connecting with Children’s Lived Experiences

Descriptions of urban, suburban, and rural communities written for students tend to make the world seem very orderly. However, more than 80 percent of Americans live in 350 metropolitan statistical areas.¹ These people’s lives are shaped by multiple small jurisdictions, such as cities, boroughs, or school and electoral districts, with varying boundaries and overlapping laws and regulations. For instance, friends living across the road from each other may attend different public schools, while their parents vote for the same candidates for mayor. Children move within these multi-layered bureaucratic micro-environments each day. Studying current events can help them become aware of these political structures and realize that the people they may know are engaged in civic discourses that determine many aspects of their daily lives.

Each year, increasing numbers of children around the globe are gaining access to the Internet, allowing them to explore human-constructed worlds online. A large-scale study of American children’s recreational media usage undertaken in 2009 determined that the majority of young people 8-18 years old were spending more than seven and a half hours a day, taking multi-tasking into account, on using media, including television, computers, video games, music, print, cell phones, and movies.² Today the numbers are much higher, mainly because in the last five years the costs of mobile devices and internet usage have dropped dramatically, while many businesses and public facilities offer free Wi-Fi connections.

In this virtual world, there is a thin line between imagination

and reality. Children watch television shows about aliens, or families with superpowers. They discover cute animal memes and catchy tunes by musicians, posted from anywhere in the world, on YouTube. They play online games as imaginary characters, and they collect fanciful toys. They interact with highly mediated views of the real world. However, perhaps most importantly, these children have access to information that not long ago was only available to experts and professionals. They can enter conversations about anything and everything with people around the world. It is appropriate and timely that learning how to ask a generative question is essential in the C3 Inquiry Arc.³ School was once the place where individuals had opportunities to access information and to learn how to learn. Today, an Internet connection puts that information into the hands of the young. Young citizens need help identifying important questions to ask, especially about events that will shape their future.

Cultivating Civic Life

Studying carefully selected current events can help children identify organizational structures and practices, as well as people who are making impactful decisions. Traditional studies of communities—as defined solely by geographic location—should be reframed because young children are living in political, social, ecological, and virtual communities.⁴ Current events can offer provocative ideas and starting points for generating questions and interactions in the students’ various communities. They can learn how local, state, national, and non-governmental agencies and corporations shape their daily lives. They can build connections to the real world.

In two large scale studies, researchers concluded that young people who had talked about politics and civic life with their parents were more committed to civic participation than those who had not.⁵ Other researchers determined that teenagers who actively participated in online forums around gaming had similarly positive dispositions towards civic engagement.⁶ When this issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner* was proposed, I talked with elementary teachers in Michigan and New Zealand, where I live part of each year, about how they approached teaching with current events. These teachers gave me multiple reasons why they were not addressing current events on a regular basis. Upon reflection, these statements were compelling reasons

why we should be teaching with carefully selected news items, as will be illustrated in the following interpretations.

1. “News can be too controversial.” Yes, parents, teachers, and administrators may not agree with each other on many things. For instance, passionate, vocal opposition has accompanied the construction of a national highway through residential areas of a number of beachside towns near Wellington, New Zealand. Parents and local business-people are working on, or benefitting from the construction activity. The law of eminent domain has forced other families to sell their homes and relocate. Yet this construction story is a current example of what has happened throughout history. The dissent and displacement of people are generally glossed over when children learn about large man-made structures such as cathedrals, shopping malls and interstate highways.

2. “News can be too violent or scary.” Within any classroom there will be children whose parents are protecting them from images or ideas that may upset them. Also, some children are already living with stressful life events, so adding others’ burdens to their own may be asking too much. There is a strong direct association between economic stress and domestic violence. Apart from natural disasters that disrupt communities, more than 40 percent of children in the United States are living at or below the federal poverty level.⁷ Yet ignoring such situations will not make them go away. What is key to talking about such events is to find ways of giving agency, even to young children. Investigating such new items can be an opportunity to share useful resources and pertinent information with children and their families. Also, analyzing news items that do not reach the front page or ignite the blogosphere may provide counter-narratives to provocative, sensationalist visions of the world offered by major news outlets.

3. “News is often about people behaving badly.” While this is often true, talking about real people helps children understand that that individuals are not infallible; circumstances shape the decisions they make, and people (even talented, clever, wealthy, and/or beautiful people) do not always make wise decisions. Also, how we judge others’ choices is determined by our own experiences and understanding of the world. What is important to focus on with children in a democracy are the notions of role, rule of law, and Constitutional rights. Elected officials are expected to exercise civic virtue even as they make lifestyle choices others might criticize.

4. “Teachers are too busy to have a good understanding of the news, therefore they do not feel comfortable teaching about it.” To the contrary, the high correlation between formal education and voter turnout⁸ means that teachers are likely to vote, and, hopefully, to be informed voters. Having conversations with their students around public figures in the news can foster students’ interest in the political process. Integrating current events into the elementary curriculum will help teachers remain aware of what is happening in the world beyond their school, which is something they likely desire. As the most experienced learners in their classroom, teachers can be modeling how to ask good

questions, then knowing how to look for answers.

5. “Families value news differently in terms of what is important and what is not.” While an event may seem worthy of study to the teacher, it may not to parents. This is why a selection guide – one that you first share with the parents and your principal—can be extremely helpful. Teachers can have support in justifying their choices. Skeptical parents, or a worried principal, can be invited to help identify news items for possible study in class.

Online Sources for News

Apart from using local newspapers that offer stories such as the township manager’s resignation, or the most recent fundraising efforts of various community groups, the Internet supports us in finding multiple perspectives on current events in the larger world. However, the challenge of using many websites and international newspapers with and for children is that they have been written for adult readers. **Table 1** identifies sites that offer news items written for children and instructional ideas for teachers. Localized versions of *Time for Kids*, *National Geographic*, and *Scholastic* are available in many nations. The sites below are other outlets for news for children. Young students benefit from learning about their lived environment. Content and perspectives from distant places can be compared and contrasted with locally sourced news.

Table 1. News Sites from Different Countries for Children

Country	News Website
Australia	http://www.abc.net.au/btn/
Canada	http://teachingkidsnews.com/about/
Great Britain	http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround
Great Britain	http://www.firstnews.co.uk/
Hong Kong	http://yp.scmp.com
India	http://www.childfriendlynews.com
India	http://www.kidsfreesouls.com
Ireland	http://www.theprimaryplanet.ie/news/
New Zealand	http://www.kiwikidsnews.co.nz/
USA	http://www.dogonews.com/
USA	http://newsela.com
USA	http://www.youngzine.org/
Internt'l	http://theconnectedclassroom.wikispaces.com/News

The Challenges of Selecting a News Item

Choosing which news items to study in class is a challenge. When teachers assign the responsibility of selecting news items as homework in the early grades, there is a tacit understanding that caregivers are involved (young students cannot read the hard-copy or online news items). Therefore, teachers are passing the burden of selection to their parents.



While there is a lot of interesting information on websites, the publishers are not making content decisions for any particular classroom. When students are asked to search for news on the Internet and to come back and share it, weird and humorous stories are likely to dominate their selections. In other words, pretty much anything goes. “Current Events” becomes a distraction from the “real work” of the classroom. Alternatively, when news item selection is the responsibility of the teacher, it can be seen as yet another task to add to an already busy schedule.

Nevertheless, when given clear guidelines, even older children can identify current event items that will add to, rather than detract from, the mandated curriculum. The NCSS Position Statement on “Powerful and Purposeful Elementary Social Studies,” states that in order to develop children’s knowledge, skills, and dispositions as participating citizens, powerful social studies instruction should be meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active.⁹

Suggesting strategies teachers might use when addressing current events in their classroom is beyond the scope of this article. However, using the questions in **Table 2** (the guide to selecting powerful current events), can help determine if any particular news item will contribute to a particular classroom community. The more positive responses you have, the more meaningful the news item will be as an instructional resource.

A user-friendly guide is one that allows novices, with different levels of understanding, to engage with the material. With that

in mind, the guide I offer here is brief. It is constructed, however, in a way that allows inquiries that arise from the current events item to go in multiple disciplinary directions, determined by students’ interests and teachers’ curricular needs, in terms of particular curriculum standards and the C3 Inquiry Arc’s Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries.

Five Guiding Concepts

The five concepts of my guide for teachers—Community, Time, Place, Authority, and Agency—reflect the ten NCSS thematic strands. Scholars have devoted their careers to defining these concepts, and social studies encompasses multiple disciplines that use the same terms with different nuances.

Community refers not only to a group of people interacting in a common location, but to the multiple social networks in which those individuals participate. Sociologists suggest that social networks shape people’s values and behaviors and identities as much as where they live. When disasters happen, individuals rely on their social networks for support even as their physical or biological community changes.¹⁰ A current event identified as affecting the students’ community could lead to inquiries in any one of the thematic strands of the social studies curricular standards.

Time can be defined as an intellectual structure used for sequencing and comparing events. Different cultures and people across historical eras have measured time and understood time

Table 2. Guide for Selecting Powerful Current Events Items

CONCEPT & QUESTIONS	EXPLANATION
<p>COMMUNITY Does this event connect with, or provide an example of, something that is happening in the students' social networks; in their political, social, economic or virtual community?</p>	<p>The news item refers to something or someone in the students' political, social, economic or virtual community. Students can make a personal connection to this event or the people involved. Studying the event will give insights into who they are, what they do, and who they might become. In 2014 the online game, <i>Minecraft</i>, which has over 100 million registered users, was bought by Microsoft. Now those individuals are being offered <i>Minecraft: Windows 10 Edition</i> for free. Children will be excited to explore the consequences of these decisions, or to examine the idea that only 12 nations have more citizens than there are Minecraft users.</p>
<p>TIME Is this event particularly unusual? Does it connect with students' experiences?</p>	<p>This event will be a chronological touchstone in the future. When they are older, students will say "I was in Grade ... when this happened". Just like grandparents can tell them where they were when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, or their parents can tell them how they felt when they rode a bike for the first time. There can be discussions about how it might affect their lives in the future, either directly, or indirectly, such as through policy change.</p>
<p>PLACE Did this happen close to where we live?</p>	<p>Students see the consequences of this event or item in the daily lives of themselves or people they know. They may drive past a construction site, or the site of a burned out building each day without attending to it otherwise. Built environments tend to last longer than individual people. Generations of people use buildings for different purposes. When these buildings are the setting or object of news items, older neighbors can share their memories with students, providing students with a sense of place and connection.</p>
<p>AUTHORITY Who has authority in this situation? Is it someone in the local, state, or federal government? Or perhaps officials in multiple nations? Or business corporations or other non-governmental organizations? What are their responsibilities? What budgets might pay for anything that has been done or needs to be done?</p>	<p>Students see how people at levels of government and in other organizations influence our lives. In our every-day life people from different government departments work with each other, with private companies and not-for-profit organizations, to solve problems. The fire in a neighbor's kitchen sees local firefighters (who may be volunteer) on the scene. Wildfires in Washington State may require teams of professional firefighters from other states and even other nations, to assist. The cost of fighting these fires is rarely discussed with children yet helps explain why people pay taxes.</p>
<p>AGENCY Now that we know about this, is there something we can do to make a difference?</p>	<p>The decisions that individuals, groups of people, and governments made before and during this event can be investigated. Students can do something in response to this news. For instance, learning that the home of people they know burned down and that neighbors are now homeless can lead to a recognition of how many toys and clothes they could give to others, without really noticing a difference. Noticing the numbers on emergency vehicles in a news article can lead to an investigation of municipal responses to distressed citizens; or to a study and sharing with others of local emergency preparedness. Also, the notion of proxy agency is important here. Children might not be able to vote, but they can encourage their parents to do so.</p>

in various ways. Historians suggest that events can vary in their significance.¹² In the academic field of chronology an "epoch event" is an event that is later determined to be the beginning of an era, e.g. birth of Jesus, U.S. Civil War, 9/11, etc.¹³ This guiding concept corresponds closely with the thematic strand of **Ⓒ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**.

Place is a term used to identify a location that has special meaning to particular people or animals who may name or mark the location as theirs. Childhood places shape people's identities because as they grow up individuals tend to compare new environments they encounter with their "primal landscapes."¹⁴

This concept in the guide corresponds with the curricular strand of **Ⓒ PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS**.

Authority is the power given to an individual because of his or her position in a formal organization. **Ⓒ POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**, and **Ⓒ CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES** are the strands that fit with authority in this guide. A person's power in society can be defined as the extent to which an individual is able to achieve his or her goals. Power has always been associated with access to knowledge and the opportunity to voice thoughts, and we can observe today how communication technologies are redefining power and authority.

Agency is an individual's capacity to make choices and to act upon them. This is not to be confused with "proxy agency," which is when an individual seeks out others to wield power or influence on his or her behalf. From socio-cultural theory, we get yet another conceptualization of agency, "collective agency," which is when individuals believe that if they work with like-minded people, then they can effect change. The concept of agency corresponds especially with the thematic strands of **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**, **INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS** and **POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**.

In sum, the concepts of community, time, place, authority, and agency relate directly to the disciplines of history, geography and political science (civics) that are highlighted in many state-level social studies standards.

Engagement and Advocacy

Social studies advocates will be familiar with my arguments above for using current events in the classroom. No doubt they have shared articles with colleagues that have explained how acknowledging the news can reduce students' stress, and how investigating current events can help children and families move forward after disasters. They will have pointed to the numerous Common Core Language Arts standards that call for the use and analysis of informational texts.¹⁵ Across the years *Social Studies and the Young Learner* has published descriptions of classroom activities inspired by and responding to current events of national import, including Hurricane Katrina, the attacks of 9/11, and Occupy Wall Street, and local concerns such as recycling or bullying in schools. Recent issues of *SSYL* offer multiple examples of how teachers are developing civic agency in their students by responding to current events in their communities. These articles have demonstrated that the "right" current events items can be, as John Dewey would say, educative. After interacting with ideas that are presented in the news, learners are disposed to learning more, and engaging in the real world.

If children are to develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to participate in the political and civic practices of dynamic democracies, it is imperative that they are aware of, and interact with, not only their virtual world, but also the real world in which they eat, sleep, play and learn, even as we use online resources to support this interaction.

We hope that listing, in this article, reasons why this generation of students needs an awareness of current events, offering a list of child-friendly news outlets, and outlining a framework for selecting educative news items will inspire colleagues to address current events in their classrooms. 

Notes

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