

Why Teach Current Events?

Byron Swartz

Abstract: Current events should be taught in the social studies classroom. Moreover, there are more reasons why these events should be taught than why they should not. This article will discuss the reasons why current events should be taught, but will also have an honest discussion about why summative standardized testing may stand in the way of doing so. Through research regarding social media and its place in the world today, this article will explore how these findings show the increasing amount of news media that students interact with, and how current events can help students stay informed, identify fake news, and help them become overall effective citizens. This is the mission of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS).

Introduction

Current events provide an interesting connection between the world outside of the classroom, and the world inside the classroom. By utilizing current events in a social studies classroom (or any classroom for that matter) social studies material can come to life. When material can become a living event, the students can see more connections to their day-to-day lives. The goal of this article is to articulate to the reader why current events should be taught, as well as a few reasons why one may consider not teaching them. The article, no doubt, is intended to provide teachers with reasons why they should begin to incorporate current events into their classroom; however, the goal is also to be fair, as not everything has only positives. Before we go any further, let us visit a hypothetical classroom, to see what it may look like when current events are not incorporated, versus a classroom where they are.

Imagine you are in a classroom. A lesson over the end of George Washington's presidency is taking place. The teacher in the classroom, has just covered President Washington's farewell address, where he warned future generations of the rise of political parties. Upon the completion of the reading of President Washington's address, Johnny raises his hand and asks, "didn't this all happen in the past?" The teacher pauses, attempting to figure out a way to approach the question without losing the students any interest they may already have in the subject. The teacher, unprepared with respect to how to provide a response, says to the student "yes and please be quiet while we learn material that is necessary for you to perform well on the standardized test." Johnny is left frustrated.

Not only did the teacher in the classroom just neglect the student's concern, but also contributed to the potential belief that there is no purpose in the study of social sciences. But, what if the response by the teacher had been different?

This time, Johnny asks the same question from above; and the teacher, having the formal training in the presentation of current events previously mentioned, responds: "You are correct, Johnny! This did all happen in the past. However, what do we possibly know about politics in our country and throughout the world that would tell us whether or not we listened to President Washington's advice?"

In a turn of events, the teacher has gone away from disregarding the student's question and has now moved on in a way that continues to engage the students in a classroom discussion, while also providing them with real world examples, similar to those being covered in the textbook or other materials. By incorporating current events, the students in the classroom can feel better connected to ideas. In this sense, the material is becoming alive and may be more engaging for the students, as opposed to a history lecture about names and dates. It was Dewey, who subscribed to a theory such as this, as he defined education as "that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (Dewey 1966, p. 76). By providing students with a restructured or reorganized account of history with a current event, a teacher can thus better direct the learning of the student in an effective manner.

The example described above is one that we must keep in mind when deciding whether to utilize current events to teach. This is necessary to do, as we see that when the teacher uses current events or current concepts and applies them to their classroom, the discussion becomes more focused on developing effective citizens (more to come on this idea later). Teaching current events or teaching through current events is, in my opinion, the path to take in a classroom. In the example above, by utilizing current events as a means to enhance classroom curriculum, students are learning about how the outside world can connect to their history classroom, further making history come alive.

As a social studies teacher, I view the topic of current events as something which can benefit in my discipline. However, it's my hope that teachers from all disciplines can take away from this article, the importance and effectiveness of teaching current events. While there are many pros to teaching current events, there may be a con as well. It is my hope that the reader will see the importance of teaching current events, and be able to reason whether teaching them may suit their classroom and subject.

Social Media and Current Events

In today's world, students are surrounded by more media than ever before. In fact, according to some people, some of this news encountered on a daily basis is "real news," while other news media may be considered "fake news." By providing content instruction of current events, students gain an insight to the world around them. This understanding of what is real and what is "fake" is especially important in a world where social media has never been more prevalent, especially among young people. A study conducted by Rideout and Robb (2018) researched just how much social media teenagers find themselves involved with. The survey, polled 1,141 kids, ranging in age from 13-17 looked into the social media habits of the students. In 2012, 34% of teenagers in a similar survey, stated they used social media once per day. Today, that number is 70%; and the findings showed that this 70% of students check their social media accounts more than once per day (Common Sense Media, 2018). Further, according to Head, Wihbey, Metaxas, MacMillan, and Cohen (2018), 89% of those sampled had suggested that within the previous week they had used Social Media as a method of inquiring about news.

Compare these statistics with that found in Project Literacy, which found in its survey, that 58% of respondents repost/share news media with their social media followers/friends. (Head et al., 2018). Connecting the dots of these two studies would suggest that, students' use of social media is an ever-rising number. Combine the percentage of teenagers who look at their social media more than once per day (70%) with the percentage of individuals who share news media at least once per week (58%) and one could infer that students are interacting with more forms of social and news media than ever before. Further, in the study conducted by Head and colleagues, the results showed: two-thirds (68%) said the sheer amount of news available to them was overwhelming, and half (51%) agreed it was difficult to identify the most important news stories on any given day.

It is my belief that as an educator, my job is to prepare students for the “real world” that they will enter after they graduate from high school. But it's not just a personal goal that pushes me towards this belief. So too is it the mission of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) to develop citizens whom are engaged and effective (NCSS, n.d.). What makes an engaged and effective citizen though? NCSS has defined an effective citizen as one who has the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to assume the office of citizen in our democratic republic. If we revisit the study from Head and colleagues (2018), it is noted that there is only one category in which students received news more than from social media, and that is word of mouth and discussion with peers (93% stated receiving news in this way). Keeping this information in mind, I would ask the reader, what better way is there to prepare students to be an effective and engaged citizen, and engage in discussions with accuracy and relevance, than by providing them with content pertaining to current events?

Standardized Summative Assessments and Current Events

While I am a strong advocate for utilizing current events in a classroom to teach, I do feel it is only right to express that there is another side to this argument of teaching current events, as standardized summative assessments may stand in the way of one's ability or decision to take current events. Journell (2010) studied six government teachers in the suburbs of Chicago. The results indicate that teachers find themselves wary of teaching current events, regardless of what else is happening in the world around them, due to a fear that the students in the given class may not pass or perform well on an end of year, standardized assessment (Journell, 2010)

Journell was conducting his research the United States was nearing the 2008 presidential election between then Senator Barack Obama, and then Senator John McCain. These teachers, whom he surveyed, were located in a suburb of Chicago. The teachers were asked how much of the election (a current event) they had covered in their government classes. These educators found themselves in an interesting predicament. On the one hand, their junior senator was running for the presidency. However, on the other hand, students in Illinois must pass a Constitution Standardized Test in order to be eligible to graduate. Within the survey, there were teachers who suggested that they were leery of teaching any aspect of the election. However, they were not wavering on the teaching of the election on the grounds of controversial. Rather, they were unsure what to do because of the standardized

testing. One teacher stated, “I don’t want to teach to the test, but I want to give them exactly—I just want to nail in them the information they need to know” (p. 117). This teacher also stated : “I do want to incorporate current events because I do think it is very important that they know what is going on...” (p. 117). This last quote is telling. Here, we see a teacher who wants to incorporate current events, but is unsure if it is the right thing to do from the test score perspective.

Unprepared Educators?

Standardized testing may be one reason not to teach current events, but there is also another potential problem with teaching current events, and that is simply that teachers may not be adequately equipped to do so. In this case, the con of teaching the current event becomes simply that not all teachers are prepared to teach them. For example, in another study conducted by Journell (2013) he sampled preservice social studies teachers over the span of three years, seeking insight to these up-and-coming teachers’ knowledge of politics and current events. The results varies slightly for secondary and middle grades social studies preservice teachers. On the surveys (compiled), both secondary and middle grades teachers did not score above a 79% on either of the first two surveys pertaining to party politics and government. In addition, focusing more on the current events survey, the scores for each secondary and middle grade teacher was also low. Specifically, neither groups of teachers got more than 50% of the questions correct.

The survey results described above leave me wondering about several things. First, in what ways could we prepare these preservice teachers to better handle current events and political happenings (keeping in mind, though that, these are really one in the same)? Further, are these preservice teachers’ scores on the surveys a reflection on a lack of current events and civic awareness taught in the public schools? If the answer to this question is yes, then again we revisit the concept that teaching current events in school is the way to go, both to develop effective citizens, keep content relevant, and assist with the development of tomorrows teachers.

Conclusion

Current events surround students every day. Happenings of their city, state and national governments, as well as global events shape the world in which they live. Additionally, students have more access to news media than they have ever had before. Gone are the days of waiting for the newspaper to see what happened in the world on a particular day. Now, students can find this information easily, as they have internet and news applications right at their fingertips. Keeping in mind that students are surrounded by news media, it’s important that students learn current events as a method to not only engage in civil activism if they are so inclined, but so too does it help them differentiate between real and “fake” news.

From a social studies aspect, and likely from all disciplines, the job of a teacher is to develop citizens who can be effective in the world in which they live. Students can use current events to do just this. Learning current events allows students to stay informed and learn to formulate an opinion that belongs to them as opposed to their parents. Further, students can embrace different opinions and can come to

respect those opinions that are different from their own. Current events serve not just as a teaching tool of classroom content, but as a teaching tool of life. Inevitably, there may be drawbacks to teaching current events, but there are always pros and cons to anything one looks at. It is my opinion, however, that current events in the case of the general education classroom setting, serve a positive purpose that far outweighs any drawbacks. We as teachers must unite in the idea that standardized testing is no substitute for preparing students for the real world that they will enter upon completion of school. Current events can be a regular part of classroom content, and based on research previously conducted, they should be incorporated into the general classroom setting.

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About the Author

Byron Swartz graduated from Owens Community College and Lake High School in 2015, having obtained his high school diploma and associates degree simultaneously. Byron then graduated from Wright State University with a bachelor's degree in economics in 2018 before completing a master's in secondary education from the University of Toledo in 2019.