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News Literacy: What Works and What Doesn't

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NEWS LITERACY: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T

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By Renee Hobbs

Many people think of news literacy as a subject for high school or college students. But in the summer of 2010, I observed a perfect example of "what works" in news literacy with a much younger group of students at the Powerful Voices for Kids program. In this university-school partnership program for children enrolled at the Russell Byers Charter School in Philadelphia, Temple University undergraduate and graduate students work with small groups of children to develop and implement media literacy lessons and projects for one month in July (Media Education Lab, 2010). One group of children ages 9 – 11 were involved in a project where they explored one news story in depth: the violence associated with flash mobs in Philadelphia. By learning to use a simple programming tool, Scratch, they made interactive media about the news event and used the games to stimulate conversation about the how the news is constructed and why news is so important in society.

In this essay, I offer seven learning principles that should guide the pedagogy of news literacy and offer a critique of other models now emerging in the field, some of which have problematic assumptions and ineffective instructional strategies. I intend to show that those practicing news literacy at every level of education need to pay a lot of attention to both their assumptions about journalism and the instructional strategies they use if they want to be successful in developing students' critical thinking and communication skills.

Exploring the News about Urban Flash Mobs

At the Russell Byers Charter School, children themselves had identified the problem of flash mobs as one of great interest to them. Every child remembered hearing about the news from their family and relatives earlier in the summer, when social networking tools enabled large groups of young African-Americans gather for informal fun that turned violent. This was the topic they wanted to dig into.

The teacher, John Landis, selected news stories from print and television to help build students' knowledge of the issue. They read news stories from Philadelphia and Washington DC about flash mobs being used for a variety of purposes, including political advocacy, informal play, and violence. Using Red Lasso, an online TV news search engine, they had selected and watched local TV news stories on the events from earlier in the summer. At the same time, the teacher introduced children to key ideas about the structure of a news story and the reporting process. As they read and discussed these articles and TV news segments, they asked a lot of questions. This inspired them to want

to learn more—about the news issue itself and about the way news is constructed and how it represents reality.

In the context of a natural process of questioning, children learned about how sources are identified. They learned about how quotes are chosen. They learned about what an assignment editor does and how video editing works. They learned about news values like timeliness, proximity and conflict. They read and deconstructed articles to discover how different points of view were included in the story: from the teens involved, the police, and bystanders. Students visited the offices of the Philadelphia Inquirer to talk to editors about the newsmaking process.

Creating Multimedia to Express and Share Ideas

As they planned their own simple videogames about the news event, they had deep discussions about choices and consequences, about risk-taking and danger and stereotypes associated with being an African-American teenager, and the stereotypes we have about how police will behave and react. A sample of the children's projects gives a good look at the level of thoughtfulness and creativity that were activated by this assignment. In one video, a teen decides whether or not to go to a flash mob. The user gets to decide whether the character goes or stays home. If he stays home, he gets ridiculed and beaten up by his peers. If he goes to the flash mob, he must decide whether or not to vandalize property. If he breaks a car window, he gets arrested. If he doesn't break a car window, he also gets arrested. The child was aware that this particular point of view was completely absent from all the media accounts of flash mobs. In this child's videogame, we see how he expresses a "no win" situation when it comes to the decisions about participating in flash mobs, reflecting an attitude about helplessness and the many often invisible but inevitable risks that African-American children in Philadelphia experience in the process of growing up.

When the teacher wrote up a press release about students' work analyzing flash mobs, all were thrilled that a local TV news team showed an interest in the story. A cameraperson came to the school, interviewed the teacher, interviewed children, and took pictures of children talking and planning and creating their projects.

But when the story ran on NBC10, the Philadelphia local news channel, in a 25-second story, children had questions. Why had they not used their faces or voices in the news story? Why was the point of view of the teacher omitted? One child counted how many times the phrase "flash mob" was used in the story. They wondered: Was their learning experience just another excuse for the local station to recycle bad news? Why weren't their creative projects shown on a screen? One student noticed a tiny error in the broadcast: the program said the program was held "at" Temple University but the program was actually held at the children's own elementary school "with" Temple University as a sponsoring partner. Poor choice of preposition created an inaccuracy; in a teachable moment, the teacher discovered that through exploring this error, kids were beginning to realize how important words are in shaping our understanding of reality.

What Did Children Learn?

Here are the main learning outcomes of this learning experience for the children who participated in the project:

- News tells us about problems in our neighborhoods and in the world.
- Journalists make the news by getting information and opinions from different people.
- Ordinary people help make the news by actively reaching out to journalists and inviting them to cover what's important to them.
- The decisions a journalist makes can shape our opinions and feelings about people and places we don't experience directly, reinforcing or challenging stereotypes.
- There is inaccurate information in news reporting. Even a small word choice can make a message inaccurate.
- A lot of information is left out of a news report.
- A journalist makes these choices because there is a lot of news and not much time and journalists must balance what people need to know with what people want to know.
- Anyone can create a media message about news and current events to reflect your experience of the world.
- You can use words, images and interactivity to investigate and comment on what's happening in your community.
- You can share it with your family and friends and have a conversation about the problem – and that can help people learn, solve problems, and take action.

In my view, these are the kinds of insights that are now essential for people to be full participants in contemporary society. These are the habits of mind that will enable young people to flourish in the tsunami of information that surrounds them, where news pretenders offer "fake news" and where cheapening and corner-cutting interfere in cash-strapped news organizations leads to a diminution of quality news and information (McManus, 2009).

Learning Principles

How did such young children learn all that? The teachers used instructional methods that build critical thinking and communication skills. I believe these learning principles are important for any level of education, from kindergarten to graduate school:

1. **Start from the Learner's Interests.** The learning experience begins with children's interest in a news event that is contemporary, local and relevant. Learners, not teacher selects the topic to examine, and they select news that's personally meaningful to them.
2. **Connect Comprehension and Analysis.** Learners build reading comprehension and analysis skills through close reading as a means to both understand the news content and pay attention to its form and structure.

3. **Ask Critical Questions and Listen Well.** Learning and discussion centers around the practice of asking questions. Asking good questions is more important than having answers. Multiple answers are respected and valued. Learners ask questions, not just the teacher. Learners offer answers and use reasoning and evidence to support their ideas. The teacher is not the exclusive font of knowledge. The teacher listens carefully and helps knowledge to be co-constructed through the practice of asking questions, searching for new information, developing ideas, and listening with openness, curiosity and respect.
4. **Focus on Constructedness.** Careful attention is paid to how news stories are constructed: to understanding the construction process and to examining how creative and strategic choices of words, images, sounds and graphic design shape a reader's perception of reality. A focus on the constructedness of news helps us examine the complex relationship between representation and reality.
5. **Use New Ideas to Directly Support the Practice of Critical Analysis and Media Composition.** Ideas and information are presented in ways that connect deeply to the task at hand—there are no unnecessary, de-contextualized and easily forgettable facts about "things you should know."
6. **Use Collaborative Multimedia Composition to Produce Meaningful and Authentic Communication.** Learners work together to compose new messages using media genres and forms that are appropriately challenging and meaningful for them to share their ideas with real audiences.
7. **Make Connections between the Classroom and the World.** Learners benefit when the boundaries between the classroom activity and the messiness of the real world makes them consider the tensions nd contradictions that exist between the ideal and real, between theory and practice.

The reason why these seven learning principles are effective is that when combined, they are the heart of inquiry learning. These instructional practices help to create a learning environment where learners can build knowledge, critical thinking and communication skills in ways that are personally meaningful and relevant to them.

News Literacy: What Not to Do

There are three problematic instructional practices now emerging among practitioners of news literacy that deserve attention. First, unfortunately, some educators and practitioners think of news literacy as a journalism class for non-journalists. Their instructional strategy is based on the transmission model of education. They dump the content of their introduction to journalism class into a class for non-journalism majors, covering topics like the reporting process, First Amendment, press law and ethics. For a few students, of course, this is thrilling new information. For most students, however, this becomes another meaningless class with more meaningless facts to recall and spit back to the teacher on an exam.

Another problematic practice is to teach about news and current events exclusively from a journalist's point of view. Journalists can be inspiring and highly motivational to students and can make a positive difference in a classroom. But telling

war stories about the good ol" days does not inherently work to develop critical thinking and communication skills among students. As John McManus has pointed out, journalists may also have blind spots when it comes to being aware of how commercial bias affects the newsmaking process (McManus, 2009). When foundation money is used to support journalists to work in the classroom, these practices may offer students some inspirational benefit but do not contribute to building the kind of institutional change that's needed to transform American public education.

Finally, some news literacy initiatives place a significant emphasis on teaching about the ideals of American journalism. Now, make no mistake: I am deeply committed to the ideals of journalism and I think they need to be expressed in ways that make sense to students. The public *should* be able to place their trust in the "news neighborhood," as Howard Schneider calls it. Journalists *should* work hard to be accurate and fair. News *should* contribute to people's ability to participate as democratic citizens. But all that focus on the ideals of journalism is mere propaganda if it is blind to the realities of contemporary journalism, where partisan politics and smear-fests are the surest way to build audiences. We live in a world where deadline pressure means journalists rely on corporate handouts and flog special interests, bloggers may be paid to write glowingly about products and services, and news aggregation services spread misinformation blindingly fast, sometimes leaving truth in the dust.

In my view, news literacy programs must have, as their primary learning outcomes, a focus on building learners' critical thinking and communication skills in responding to news and current events in today's world, warts and all. If a news literacy course leaves students frustrated with the fact that American journalistic practice today does not meet the idealistic vision we have for it as the watchdog on power and catalyst to democracy, if students leave the course having higher expectations for journalism, that's not the dreaded cynicism everyone seems so afraid of. Those frustrations and high expectations for journalism are what citizens need to have if we ever expect journalism to fulfill its social function.

News Literacy vs. News Appreciation

Some news literacy programs have a more narrow and focused aim: to increase people's positive regard and appreciation for journalism. There is an important difference between news literacy and news appreciation. Of course, there is much about good journalism to appreciate. One of the most ambitious news literacy programs ever developed is the BBC "School Report" project. This program enables 25,000 children in more than 700 UK schools to learn about the practice of journalism and news production. Supported by the BBC, children develop community-based television and radio news reports which air locally and nationally during a specific time period. School Report mission is to engage young people with news, bring their voices and stories to a wider audience and share some of the public service values behind content creation, such as fairness, accuracy, and impartiality since so many young people are content creators and distributors.

The main aim of BBC News School Report is to interest young people in news of all sorts, and the world around them, by giving them the chance to make their own news. The program helps students develop skills of gathering information, teamwork and time management, while providing an opportunity to discuss the responsibilities involved in broadcasting to a worldwide audience. In a 2007 large-scale evaluation report, researchers used a mix of measures to examine both intended and unintended learning outcomes. In this study, researchers used structured and unstructured interviews as well as child-created pre- and post-intervention concept maps to understand what young people actually learned from creating a news production project.

Researchers found that children who participated in the "School Report" program as it was implemented in its pilot year gained new insights into the news production process. Over and over, children were awed at how much time and effort goes into the making of a news broadcast. Children also improved their oral and written communication skills and enriched journalistic skills, including interviewing practices.

However, little evidence was found to demonstrate children's ability to define the purpose and function of news. Children did not demonstrate much learning about the concepts of credibility and trust. They did not gain an understanding of the role and skills of the editor or develop an understanding of concepts like balance, fairness, and bias (Bazalgette, Harland & James, 2008). While children gained more positive appreciation for news and strengthened communication skills by participating in "School Report," there was no corresponding development in the arena of news analysis or critical thinking skills, even though teachers had voiced an interest in developing these competencies.

When the focus of a news literacy class emphasizes lionizing the ideals of American journalism and the important work of the press and the First Amendment and when little attention is paid to the complex realities of journalistic practice in a contemporary context of declining circulation, job loss and new forms of journalism arising on the Internet, then a news literacy class may come too close to a form of nostalgic propaganda from the old guard desperately trying to remind young people about a world that doesn't exist anymore.

News Literacy: Get "Real" about the Challenges and the Opportunities

Practitioners of news literacy need to "get real" about the contemporary challenges of using news and current events in the classroom. When it comes to news literacy in the context of K-12 education, news and current events have been dramatically declining as a component of the American educational curriculum for over 50 years. In 1947, more than half of American high schools offered a course in Problems in Democracy that emphasized news and current events reading (Hobbs, 1998). Where competition and fragmentation of the news audience reign, no easy assumptions can be made about the nature of what counts as trustworthy and authoritative when it comes to news and current events. As a result, many teachers are reluctant to bring news and current events into the classroom in an increasingly polarized political climate (Hobbs, Ebrahimi, Cabral, Yoon, & Al-Humaidan, 2010; Hobbs, 2001).

The shifting economics of news and journalism in schools also creates challenges. The Audit Bureau of Circulation, the service for advertisers, ad agencies and publishers that provides audited circulation data, prohibits newspapers from making newspapers freely available to American students in public or private schools. Access to quality journalism, therefore, is an additional expense for school districts in communities that are often strapped to manage even basic expenses.

According to the "Growing Lifelong Readers" study, more than 60 percent of young adults with high exposure to newspapers in the classroom say they read a weekday paper regularly. Of those without exposure to newspapers in the classroom, the weekday readership percentage is only 38 percent (NAA Foundation, 2004). The foundation community's support of program in the First Amendment and high school journalism is noteworthy. However, not since the early 1990s has there been any large-scale effort to help teachers and students use news media in the classroom. Although studies show that newspaper reading in high school contributes to reading and writing skill development (Palmer, Fletcher & Shapley, 1994), there has been little scholarship in the past ten years about the broader cultural and educational value of using the news and current events in K-12 education.

In both the United States and the UK, "It has proved difficult to support, develop and sustain teaching about broadcast news because of the ephemerality of the subject matter and the effort involved in bringing current TV, radio or Internet news into the classroom" (Bazalgette, Harland & James, 2008, p. 81). For these reasons, a greater effort needs to be made to help educators see the value of bringing news and current events into K-12 and higher education. Digital and media literacy programs must be designed to create learning environments where students can start from the learner's interests, connect comprehension and analysis skills, help students ask critical questions and listen well, focus on the constructed nature of news stories, use new ideas to directly support the practice of critical analysis and media composition, use collaborative multimedia composition to produce meaningful and authentic communication, and make connections between the classroom and the world.

Programs that engage children and young people in both the genuine pleasures and challenges of news and current events using appropriate forms of critical inquiry and student-centered learning are likely to be most effective for 21st century learners of all ages.

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