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Behind the Headlines: Current Events Topic Discovery and Exploration Using Historical Event Headlines

Mary K. Oberlies, *William & Mary*



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Behind the Headlines:

Current Events Topic Discovery and Exploration Using Historical Event Headlines

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ACRL Information Literacy Frame: Research as Inquiry

Discipline: Social Sciences

Subjects: Conflict Resolution; Sociology; Criminology; Interdisciplinary

Learning Theory: Constructivism

Instructional Strategy: Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

Special Populations: Non-Traditional Students; Graduate Students;
Undergraduate Students; Professional Students

Selecting topics can be difficult for undergraduates. In my experience, they come to me with grand ideas—they want to solve the world's problems in a single go—which are awesome but not realistic. Whenever students come to me with a broad research topic but are struggling to figure out what their research question should be, I encourage them to search for the topic in newspapers. This provides them with various viewpoints on the topic and gives them background information, personal accounts, and a timeline of

events. Newspaper articles will also, at times, link the event to other similar events from the past or even legislation. Whenever I mention this to students, they give me a strange look because they often do not see how newspaper articles will get them anywhere with their research.

I wanted to develop a lesson to inspire students to look at current events for topic discovery and exploration. At the time I developed this lesson plan, events in Ferguson, Missouri were front page news, so I pulled historical headlines about the 1992 Los Angeles riots because the events were similar in nature and demonstrated how the issues of police brutality and militarization were not recent phenomena. Guided conversation then enabled students to draw correlations between these similar events.

This particular lesson, developed for upper-level undergraduates taking their first research methods course, prepares students for their capstone course research project. The end project for the class is a research plan for the capstone. This assignment helps students learn how to go from the topic stage to developing research questions by gathering background information. The idea for this lesson came from previous work with a faculty member while I was serving as the Conflict and Peace Studies Librarian at George Mason University. The faculty member asked me to work with her section of this research methods course on gathering data, particularly conducting newspaper and gray literature searches for background information on four current event case studies.

Developing the Lesson Plan

This lesson relies on active group work and is structured for a 100-minute session. Students are broken out into groups of three to four and are given a newspaper article (one copy per student). Each group receives a different article that covers the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The librarian selects the newspaper articles the students will be using so it is possible to alter the lesson to match the discipline of the students. Students read and discuss the article in their groups and brainstorm topics for further exploration. Each group writes their ideas on a whiteboard, which provides real-time authentic assessment and facilitates group discussion. Following the brainstorming session, the groups describe their article and how they can develop potential research topics. It is always interesting to see the range of ideas the groups generate. For example, in one session, some considered exploring legislation, community response to riots, police re-

sponses and militarization, civil rights, and linkages to the 2014 Ferguson riots.

Following this, I lead a discussion about conducting research on interdisciplinary topics, developing keywords, identifying databases, and evaluating sources. During this discussion student participation is activated by asking leading questions that require students to demonstrate their prior knowledge of conducting and understanding research. For example: What are keywords? How do we use Boolean operators? When do you use a book versus a journal article? How do you determine what type of information is needed for your question? I then ask the groups to create a research plan (Appendix 6A) on one of their identified topics; this can be done individually or in pairs.

After creating a research plan, each group shares their plan with the class. This allows me to do an authentic assessment of whether the students understand the discussion and provide corrections as needed. For the remainder of the session, students try their searches out and find three articles, evaluate them (Appendix 6B), and share one article with the class and why they selected it.

Instructional Strategy: The Zone of Proximal Development

The benefit to this lesson is that it reflects the real-world nature of research, while in college it becomes natural to lean on the assistance of professors to either provide a topic for research or provide guidance on topics. Once out of school, inquiry is prompted when students see problems and think of ways to respond to them. Newspapers can stimulate idea formation in students by helping them identify current real-world problems, understand how different populations respond to these issues, and apply their own experiences for sense-making. This focus on sense-making through learned experiences is a foundation of constructivist theory. “Learners... are not empty vessels waiting to be filled, but rather active organisms seeking meaning.”¹ Students will grapple with what they encounter until they make sense of the information and construct new understandings. An added benefit to teaching with newspaper articles is that it is an information medium students will encounter for the rest of their lives (assuming newspapers continue to be published). Knowledge must be continually

developed through problem solving and encountering challenges to previous understandings.² This matches Vygotsky's theory of learning—that real-world problems naturally encourage learning, so by including them in instruction we can improve learning.³ With newspapers, students are using a tool they will likely use to exchange ideas with their peers outside the educational environment. This encourages learning along Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) and constructivist theory.

Learning Theory: Constructivism

Instruction following the constructivist learning theory allows students to be active participants in the learning process. The teacher is not the expert but instead acts as a guide, facilitating students to test their knowledge. A lesson plan based on constructivism includes active learning, collaboration, and consideration that each student has prior knowledge and meanings that they bring with them into the learning environment.⁴ The key element to constructivist instruction is allowing students to establish their own learning goals through problem solving.

The main activity in a constructivist classroom is solving problems. Students use inquiry methods to ask questions, investigate a topic, and use a variety of resources to find solutions and answers. As students explore the topic, they draw conclusions, and, as exploration continues, they revisit those conclusions. Exploration of questions leads to more questions.⁵

Mentioned earlier, an underlying instructional strategy in this lesson is Vygotsky's ZPD. Just as with constructivism, ZPD encourages problem solving using past experiences to expand learning.⁶ Since students bring their prior knowledge into the learning environment, lessons utilizing collaborative work and problem solving create a zone of proximal development. In this, students go from a level they can successfully reach with independent problem solving to a zone they could reach with the guidance and collaboration of more capable peers.⁷ Through the assistance of the librarian and peers, students have opportunities to expand their skills into the zone of proximal development. According to Vygotsky's theory of learning, "learning leads development," meaning that learning should

motivate us and through this reach new levels of knowledge.⁸ This lesson encourages learning through motivation by tapping students' experiences and understanding of current events and asking them to explore and research solutions to the problems they identify.

ACRL Information Literacy Frame: Research as Inquiry

This lesson works within the frame Research as Inquiry. Instruction within this frame encourages students to discover the following:

1. Research requires continual engagement and exploration with information.
2. They must keep looking for gaps in information and re-examining information from various lenses.
3. Research goes beyond academic course requirements; skills translate to personal, professional, and society inquiry.
4. Research is collaborative and crosses disciplinary boundaries.
5. Disagreements and debate within research deepens conversation and expands knowledge.⁹

By using historical events, the lesson demonstrates the evolution of issues. Police brutality is obviously not a new phenomenon, but by starting with the 1992 Los Angeles riots, students might see how police militarization developed. Reading the headlines of this event helps them further engage with similar current events. Students learn to ask themselves: How are these events similar? What were the different responses to the riots? How did the public and political reactions to the 1992 Los Angeles riots influence public, political, and law enforcement responses to the 2014 Ferguson riots? Students, especially typically aged undergraduates, might lack the knowledge of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, so this lesson can help them to look at other historical events. This teaches them to look for gaps in information: What other incidents like this have happened? What have scholars and public officials said about these events? What public policy has been created in response to them?

The collaborative nature of this instruction session demonstrates the real atmosphere of research. Working as a group, the students examine an event and identify topics for investigation. These topics are generally center around attempting to fix problems or effectively respond to them. In

sharing what each group comes up with, students learn that there are multiple ways to examine a situation, deepening their knowledge. By creating a research plan where they must identify the disciplines their topic touches on, they see how research crosses disciplinary boundaries, expanding their field of investigation and the scholarly debates they encounter.

Lesson Plan: Using the News to Find Your Topic

Best- and Worst-Case Scenarios

In a perfect scenario, students are engaged and will also see how past events inform decisions and reactions that influence future events. This goes beyond preparing them for conducting research and encourages them to be informed citizens.

In a worst-case scenario, student attitudes derail the class; however, I have only experienced this once with this lesson. Students got frustrated that they were not getting to devote the entire session to finding articles for their individual research and failed to see how the skills in this lesson would transfer. In this case, the session was held later in the semester, and my session was being used as a substitute for their normal class while the professor was at a conference. This can be rectified by more communication between the librarian and instructor and scheduling the session on a day with the instructor present to reinforce the value of it.

Learner Analysis

- This lesson plan is best suited for upper-level undergraduates, first-year graduate students, professional students, and non-traditional students. It requires a level of prior knowledge in current events, basic skills in research, and ability to synthesize information. Upper-level undergraduates should have learned many of these skills, having completed research papers and becoming knowledgeable in their field of study. First-year graduate students often just need to brush up on their research skills, and this lesson is a great way to reintroduce them to topic development and prepare them to engage further in their field of research. Professional and non-traditional students come with additional skills

and knowledge learned from their working environment and, potentially, field experience. For these students, using past and current events as a platform to jumpstart research can be comforting because it removes the fear of the unknown and encourages them to use and share their knowledge with the group. Group activities allow each student to bring their own experiences and abilities to the table, thereby creating a more inclusive environment.

- Students need to be able to handle self-directed tasks. It would be a good idea to check with the faculty instructor to see if this type of lesson is appropriate for his/her class. The librarian should expect to be monitoring group activity.

Orienting Context and Prerequisites

- There are no pre-instruction learning tasks.
- Prerequisites for this class include knowledge of current events, experience exploring and developing topics, and ability to synthesize information.

Instructional Context

- The optimal space for this lesson is a room designed for group work, with moveable tables and chairs, and several white boards or wall space for flipchart paper. Students must have computer access. The librarian should have access to a computer and projector when leading discussion and highlighting library resources (LibGuides, etc.) between the group breakout sessions.
- Prior to instruction, the librarian will need to identify a significant past event that played out in the news headlines. This event must correlate to current events. Depending on the size of the class, the librarian will need to find four or five news articles about this event, one article per group, and make sure each student in each group gets a copy of the article. It is important that the librarian has read through each article to take into consideration whether there is potential that any students will be sensitive to the events covered. I recommend the librarian prepare a list of topic ideas for each article in case they are needed by the students, and to explain the correlation between the past event and current events.

Learning Outcomes and Activities

Learning Outcomes

1. After attending this library instruction session, the student will be able to identify a topic for further exploration.
2. After attending this library instruction session, the student will be able to construct an appropriate search strategy and locate three resources relevant to their topic.
3. After attending this library instruction session, the student will be able to evaluate three resources and explain how they meet the needs of his/her research.

Learning Activities

1. Students work within groups to read and discuss the newspaper articles provided and brainstorm potential topics for further inquiry. Students should display their ideas using notepads or whiteboards (*LO1, 10–20 minutes, essential*).
2. The librarian facilitates a group discussion with the class about the news articles and the topics identified, including how they came up with the ideas and thought processes (*LO1, 5 minutes, essential*).
3. The librarian leads a discussion about conducting research, including how to identify keywords, Boolean operators, how to select effective sources for research, and evaluation information (*LO1-3, 10–15 minutes, essential*).
4. Using information just discussed, students work in their groups to create a research plan for one brainstormed topic (Appendix 6A) (*LO1-2, 5–10 minutes, essential*).
 - Students conduct searches based on the research plan they created and locate three articles relevant to the topic (*LO2, 10–20 minutes, non-essential*).
 - ▷ This activity could become an after-session assignment, which is sent to the librarian for review and feedback if time is no available during the session.
5. After students have completed their searches, each group shares one article they found with the class, explaining how they found it and determined it was an appropriate source for their topic (Appendix 6B) (*LO3, 5–10 minutes, non-essential*).

- If time is not available during the session, this activity could become an after-session assignment, which is sent to the librarian for review and feedback.

Assessment

During this instruction session, I assessed the students'

- ability to identify topics for further exploration;
- understanding of research and how to create a research plan;
- ability to create a successful search strategy; and
- ability to evaluate information and articulate this to peers.

Assessment Tools

- Assessment is primarily derived from student discussion following group work and during the librarian-led session. Students are asked to discuss their article, how they came up with their topics, how they plan to research the topic, and at the conclusion of the instruction session what they found after searching and how it was relevant to their needs.
- Optional Formal Assessment Tool: Have students submit their topic, research plan, and three articles they found with an explanation of why they selected those articles to the librarian following the session. This is evaluated by the librarian to assess whether the students achieved the learning outcomes.
- The session is considered successful if the students are able to do the following:
 1. Articulate how they identified their topics for further exploration from the news article and that the topics are relevant to what they read. Relating this back to current events/policies is considered very successful.
 2. Create a successful research plan that contains relevant keywords, with at least one synonym for each keyword, the disciplines their topic crosses, and at least three databases they would search in.
 3. Locate three articles and explain how these articles are relevant to their topic and will assist them in further their research.

Appendix 6A

Creating a Research Plan

A research plan can help you organize your thoughts and guide your research process from start to finish. By thinking about what questions you need to answer, the type of sources needed, and identifying databases to start your search before beginning the process, it can help you stay on track and avoid becoming overwhelmed with all the information out there.

As a group, select one of the topic ideas you generated based on the articles you read and complete the following questions.

<p>What questions do you have about this topic? What do you want to know more about?</p>	
<p>What type of information do you need to find to answer the questions you just identified?</p> <p><i>For example: Will you need government documents? Historical information? Statistics? Journal articles or policy briefs?</i></p>	
<p>What disciplines (subject areas) does your topic cover?</p> <p><i>For example: Criminology? Sociology? Political Science? Law?</i></p>	
<p>What are some basic keywords you might use to search for information on this topic?</p> <p>What are 1–2 synonyms for each keyword?</p>	
<p>What databases might you use?</p> <p><i>The University Libraries have great subject guides (http://infoguides.gmu.edu) which provide recommendations on databases. Take a look at some of the guides within the disciplines you identified previously.</i></p>	

Appendix 6B

Evaluating Sources

Conduct a search using the keywords and one of the databases you identified in your research plan. Locate three articles that could be used to answer your question or help you dig deeper into your topic. Use the CRAAPP Test to evaluate your articles:

Currency: When was this published? Has it been revised? Can you use older sources or should they be within the last ten years?

Relevance: Does the information relate to your topic or answer your question? Who is the intended audience? Is this information appropriate for you to be citing in a research paper?

Authority: Who is the author/source of the information? Is the author qualified to be writing on this topic?

Accuracy: Where does this information come from? Is it supported by evidence? Has it been reviewed (peer-reviewed)? What type of language is being used? Is it free of errors, free of emotion, and is there bias?

Purpose: What is the intent of the information? Is the point of view objective? Is the information meant to teach, inform, persuade, or entertain?

Publication: Who published this information? Is it scholarly? Is it a magazine, blog, or social media? Is it the result of scholarly research but not reviewed (dissertation, government document, gray literature)?

Enter the citation for the 3 articles you found:	Evaluate the source. What makes it a good source for your question? Use the CRAAPP method above.
1.	
2.	

Notes

1. Marcy P. Driscoll, *Psychology of Learning for Instruction* (Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 2000): 376.
2. Ibid., 379.
3. Ibid., 250.
4. Barbara Blummer, "Applying Perkins's Facets of a Learning Environment for Information Literacy Instruction," *Community & Junior College Libraries* 14, no. 3 (January 2008): 181, doi: 10.1080/02763910802035108.
5. UCD Teaching and Learning, "Education Theory: Constructivism and Social Constructivism in the Classroom," *Open Educational Resources of UCD Teaching and Learning, University College Dublin*, accessed December 8, 2015, http://www.ucdoer.ie/index.php/Education_Theory/Constructivism_and_Social_Constructivism_in_the_Classroom.
6. Driscoll, 250.
7. Tony Harland, "Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Problem-Based Learning: Linking a Theoretical Concept with Practice Through Action Research," *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8, no. 2 (2003): 264–65, doi: 10.1080/1356251032000052483.
8. Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 60.
9. Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, 2015, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework#inquiry>.

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