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Using the News to Enhance Critical Thinking and Engagement in Middle and High School Students

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This article describes the author's adaptation of Gallagher's (2009) Article of the Week approach to teaching students literacy skills using current events. The use of this unique instructional routine within the context of a Catholic middle school language arts classroom has proven successful for supporting students in developing critical literacy and an understanding of moral leadership by examining world events from a Catholic worldview.

Keywords: English language arts, news, middle school, literacy, religion

Having taught sixth and seventh grade students for the past seven years, I have learned that middle school students are well versed in many facets of popular culture. Asking about a Top 40 artist can give you not only the lyrics to a chart topper, but also provide any information that you could want about the artist's life, habits, personality, and latest media drama. One area of news coverage, however, where students are consistently lacking is in an understanding of current events, including local, national, and global events.

Although one could attribute this to a variety of factors, the reality is that these students are largely unknowledgeable about critical global events (Snell, 2010). As Catholic educators, we have the responsibility of building all students' background knowledge of current events as well as their understanding of how we, as both a local and a global Church community, should respond. This second charge is certainly the most important. The goal of Catholic education is not just preparing students who are able to be productive citizens, but also in developing students who will become the leaders of our Church community (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). Students cannot meet this second charge if they have not learned how to view local, national, and international events through a Catholic lens.

Finally, as educators in classrooms with diverse student maturity levels and educational backgrounds, we must be sensitive to the myriad needs of

students. Classrooms everywhere contain students with a wide variety of abilities, requiring that teachers be able to adjust both the materials and modes of instruction in order to support and build upon students' needs (Robertson, et. al., 2014). A teacher who is unable to adapt to the needs of the students risks a lack of engagement as well as a lack of understanding of the topic being taught.

Knowing that my students will soon be able to vote, I knew that I had to develop a way to build their understanding of the events playing out around them. As a teacher whose predominant instructional focus is in language arts, I wanted a strong critical reading and writing component. As a religion teacher, I also knew that I wanted to create an assignment that allowed us to examine these events from a Catholic worldview.

Using Current Events to Develop Students' Thinking

One classic way that teachers have worked towards the goal of developing students' background knowledge has been through assignments involving current events. Students are asked to find a news article and report back on the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* about the event. Today's student, however, is faced with many different news sources and outlets. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), the average visit to a digital news source lasts three minutes. Students need to be able to evaluate sources quickly and gain an initial understanding about their source. As a result, the traditional current events model is not always effective for the needs of today's student. If the focus remains solely on answering basic level comprehension questions, students will not gain practice in forming an opinion about a topic or in evaluating truthfulness and detecting bias in news media. Additionally, many traditional news reports are not always suitable for students reading below grade level, especially in elementary and middle school. This often means that students may select texts that they will not be able to completely comprehend independently, therefore leading to potential misunderstandings.

After reading about several different instructional solutions to this dilemma, I came across what Kelly Gallagher (2009) named "Article of the Week". The purpose of the Article of the Week (AotW) is to build students' background knowledge of important issues by reading of short articles from newspapers, news magazines, as well as opinion pieces and speeches. What moves AotW beyond a basic level understanding are its critical reading, writing, and discussion components. Gallagher has structured the AotW so that students read, annotate, and write a one-page reflection based upon the given article.

While this assignment outline met the critical reading, writing, and speaking points I was looking for, I knew that my students would need more structure to help them be successful with the critical thinking component. The instructional routine that I developed is as follows. At the start of the week, students are given a new AotW. After a short 5 to 10 minute hook of background information and vocabulary preparation, students are responsible for reading the article, making meaningful annotations, writing an objective summary of the text. At the end of the week, the class is given 15 minutes to discuss any confusions as well as share, explain, and defend their opinions regarding the text within a small group setting. Each AotW comes with a reflection starter question that students can use as a jumping off point for their conversations. After the discussion, students write a reflection about the article relating to either their opinion regarding the topic of the article or the discussion that was had in class.

Modifying the Article of the Week to Meet Students' Needs

In order to provide the level of differentiation needed to meet the needs of a diverse classroom, care must be taken in choosing the articles. Several websites now exist that gear news articles toward students. Some even allow teachers to select an article and use versions with different Lexile levels (see Table 1.)

Utilizing sites like these allow teachers to quickly and effectively support and challenge students as appropriate. They allow all students exposure to the same topic while respecting their individual reading levels. This helps to support student engagement and buy in to the reading and discussion process. As a result, more students will be exposed to the information being taught and have greater background knowledge once they become voting adults.

Students may require support with the discussion and writing components. To help these students, I offer scaffolded paragraph outlines to help them internalize appropriate structure for summary and reflection (see Figure 2). Having these materials prepared allows for quick and easy differentiated instruction. There are several benefits to this practice. For students who struggle with writing, the frames provide exposure to increasingly complex sentence structure. They are able to focus on the content and comprehension components of the learning process while building upon their writing abilities. For those who struggle with comprehension, the frames provide a guide for the critical information students should focus on. As Tovani (2015) has noted, "I would find it difficult to ask a how or why question if I were still

Table 1

Resources for Article of the Week Assignments

Website	Summary
Newsela www.newsela.com	This site allows teachers to select news articles, many from sources like Associated Press and other well-known news outlets, and then select Lexile levels. Spanish languages translations are also available. Teachers do need to create a free account. Students can also create free accounts, which then enables teachers to assign articles electronically. Teachers can also take advantage of multiple choice comprehension questions and short answer questions, which are graded electronically.
Smithsonian TweenTribune www.tweentribune.com	This site is very similar to Newsela. Allows users to with post and view comments from other users.
PBS LearningMedia www.pbslearningmedia.org	Site contains a variety of free resources for teachers. The PBS NewsHour Extra page features segments from NewsHour, with a video, informational text, and support materials. The video can provide additional support who struggle with decoding or who need additional practice with listening comprehension. Teachers can share and assign videos electronically using their free account.
<i>The New York Times:</i> The Learning Network learning.blogs.nytimes.com	Site provides teaching resources for using articles from the <i>New York Times</i> with middle and high school students. While the articles cannot be adjusted to specific reading levels, the support materials are beneficial for assisting a wide variety of instructional needs.
Text Compactor www.textcompactor.com	This site is not a news outlet, however, it allows users to input text and generate a shortened version. Users can choose the level of compression for the article, which allows teachers to tailor the summary. This site does not provide specific lexile levels.

wondering about who, what, when, or where.” With this focus in place, students can be sure they have the basic level comprehension in place and then move on to more complex thinking. Additionally, the summarizing compo-

ment itself provides continuous and structured comprehension support for struggling students over the course of the school year. It should be noted that while writing frames provide good support, especially for struggling writers, students will need guidance in using them effectively, especially at first.

To build your summary, match up a bullet point from each box in the next row:			
Intro Sentence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The article “_____” by (Author)... • (Publisher/author name)’s article “_____” ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • examines • addresses • introduces • supports • _____ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the idea of _____ • the use of _____ • the relationship between _____ • the importance of _____ • the reasons for _____ • _____
Now, match up bullet points from the boxes to build the remainder of your paragraph. Repeat as needed to address all supporting details.			
Supporting Details	(Author name) explains this by...	describing _____ explaining _____ detailing _____ providing the following details _____ _____	Transition words to link ideas Additionally For example Including In the same way In contrast Because of Instead of Be sure your sentences flow! Watch out for choppy writing!

Figure 2. Sample summary paragraph frame used with middle schoolers

As previously mentioned, my students have also had challenges in entering into conversations about the AotW. This is not because the class is silent, in fact, they are quite eager to answer questions. Rather, the challenge was in entering and sustaining what Walsh and Sattes (2015) call “a process through which individual students give voice to their thoughts in a disciplined manner as they interact with others to make meaning and advance individual and collective understanding of the issue” (p. 33). If we want students to be able to examine an event or issue through a Catholic worldview and develop

their own opinions, then we must be sure to provide them with this practice. Guidelines and protocols for guiding students toward this level of discourse have been given many labels, like “student driven discussion” or “accountable talk.” Regardless of what it is called, these protocols focus on giving students the tools they need to take ownership of the issue and develop their own opinions.

The protocol that I developed with my students encourages them to use the text at hand to develop conclusions, to listen to the contributions of others, and to reply to those contributions (see Figure 3). The most important component of this protocol is modeling how to use it in an actual discussion. Since this discussion protocol is also one that I use as part of other instructional routines, introducing and modeling were not intrusive to my teaching time and cements the AotW as a typical classroom routine instead of an obtrusive “add-on.” Many ways can be used to model discussion, including a technique called “Fishbowl.” The fishbowl format requires a small group of students to model a discussion while the rest listen in and observe. This allows those outside of the discussion to note what worked and provide suggestions for future growth. This also provides time for the teacher to provide feedback for the students.

<p>Getting Started</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think that (idea) was ____. • I agreed/disagreed with the author when he/she wrote ____. • I’m not sure what ____ means. 	<p>Agreeing with a Group Member</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I agree with (name) because ____. • I think that (name) is right because ____.
<p>Disagreeing with a Group Member</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I disagree with ____ because ____. • I saw ____ differently. I think ____. 	<p>Building on What Someone Else has Said</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To add to ____’s idea, ____. • This makes me think about ____. • I wonder if ____. • This sounds similar/different to ____. • What if ____?
<p>Clearing Up Confusions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you please explain that again? • I’m not sure I understand what you are saying. • I’m not sure what ____ means. • Could you show me where you found your idea in the article? 	<p>Quick Reminders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember—tone is important—keep your voice respectful. • Make eye contact with the person with whom you are speaking. • Use your group member’s name when talking. • Disagreeing is okay! Just remember to be respectful (the Golden Rule!)

Figure 3: Discussion protocol starters and reminders.

Multiple modeling and feedback sessions may be required to help students develop discussion skills. The modeling process I use begins with the whole class with the goal of moving to a small-group setting. Once students are engaged in small-group discussion, the teacher should circulate to listen for misunderstandings or to help guide the discussion as necessary. The teacher could also rotate small groups to evaluate discussion using a rubric. There are many ways that technology could be tied in at this point if desired, including audio recording discussions for evaluation by the teacher at a later time or for sharing with the whole class. Students could summarize their discussions and post them on a class web page. Whatever extensions are used should keep in mind the purpose of these discussions to have students engaged in an authentic, opinion-based conversation about a given topic. Teachers should be careful not to detract too much from this. Additionally, teachers should keep in mind the short time frame devoted to the AotW discussion. The more that a teacher layers in, the longer the time needed for AotW, thus leading to less time for other curriculum concepts.

Classroom Observations

In using this instructional routine over the course of the school year, I have observed a significant improvement in my student's ability to discuss the relationships between current events. For example, after reading "Martin Shkreli: America's most despised man who makes AIDS sufferers pay £488 per pill" (Nicholas, 2015) and "Supreme Court ruling protects health insurance for millions of Americans" (Associated Press, 2015), several students turned their discussions to how Shkreli's actions affect not just those living with AIDS, but also all health insurance customers. Connections between events and people that are not evident at first glance have become clearer as students come to understand the impact that a person in one part of the country can have on others. I have also noticed that less frontloading needs to be done to understand articles relating to current political events, as students know who the significant individuals are. This is extremely important as we approach what appears to be a tempestuous political climate. If our aim is to develop conscientious citizens, then we must encourage students to think beyond the opinions that they hear on television and enable them with the tools that they need to be critical thinkers.

Addressing Initial Challenges

As I began utilizing AotW to enrich my students' background knowledge of global events, I came to realize that it wasn't just the background information they were lacking in but also the ability to think critically about real life events, perhaps because they were unable to make a connection to them. They were stuck in the rut of the traditional current events model the "who, what, when, and where" of something far away and unrelated to them. They needed support in stretching their thinking and in seeing how the price of an AIDS medication might affect them. Weekly discussion that focuses on student opinions has helped to bridge this challenge. When AotW was first introduced, I started by selecting articles that were immediately relatable to the members of my classroom in order to ensure that my students saw the importance and relevance of these current events. As students began to see connections between events that were important to them and other, unrelated events, they became more adept at making these connections on their own.

Using AotW has helped my students to develop those critical thinking skills they will need to be successful and productive citizens, as well as socially conscious Catholics. This instructional routine has emphasized the importance of student talk in developing social consciousness. On weeks where student discussions were not held, reflections were not as strong as weeks with discussions. Additionally, listening in to small group discussions indicated that students needed support in holding an academic discussion. Productive student talk does not happen by accident or chance. Students need guidance in developing and sustaining focused conversations.

Introducing the AotW revealed a gap in my typical instructional routines. While students may have been discussing texts, the discussions were not student-led or fully centered on their opinions. When students take responsibility for the discussion, they also take responsibility for their learning (Walsh & Sattes, 2015). AotW discussions have increased the amount of time that my students spend in student-centered and student-led discussion, which increases the responsibility that they take for their learning.

Investing the time in new instructional routines can sometimes feel like a risk. If the routine does not provide the purported outcomes, we have wasted our students' valuable learning time and gotten behind on our curriculum maps. The integration of speaking, listening, reading, and writing domains within this instructional routine have answered the Common Core State Standards' call for increased rigor in these areas, as well as the increased use of nonfiction texts. Many teachers would like to develop their students criti-

cal thinking skills, and there are many routines and programs that exist for doing so. I have found that the highly structured format of the Article of the Week that I have implemented to be the best fit for my students. As Catholic educators, we cannot afford to wait for a high school civics or social justice class to begin developing our students' ability to authentically engage with the world around them. We must challenge them to see their role in their local and larger communities and to think about how they will step into those roles both now and in the future. What better way is there than by turning to the news and spring boarding into an honest discussion? After all, isn't that what we do in our adult lives? If school is where students can rehearse how they will act in the "real world" then we should provide as many authentic opportunities to engage in this practice as possible (Gambrell, 2015). Teachers, regardless of content area, should find a way to do this.

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