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Bringing the World to School: Integrating News and Media Literacy in Elementary Classrooms

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Abstract

For three years, the Powerful Voices for Kids program, a university-school partnership program of the Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island, developed a multifaceted approach to integrate news and current events into in-school and after-school instruction in K-6 schools. Three case studies detailing the program's impact on an undergraduate novice instructor, an in-school technology mentor, and an experienced classroom teacher illustrate the ways in which different stakeholders at the school approached news integration. Though approaches, interests, and values of each teacher vary considerably, all teachers share a commitment to the following classroom principles: (1) the use of inquiry to guide lesson development, (2) the role of ambiguity and uncertainty in otherwise structured learning environments, (3) the use of scaffolding and planning to limit and shape students' experiences with a variety of unpredictable media texts in the classroom, and (4) written reflection on how individual teacher values and motivations contribute to the unique classroom culture. Implications for future professional development in K-6 news literacy are explored.

Keywords: media literacy, digital literacy, news literacy, professional development, university-school partnerships, K-12, elementary education, inquiry learning, media production

News and Media Literacy in K-6 Education Settings

The integration of news and current events into K-12 teaching has taken on new significance in the digital age, as students frequently are called on—both in educational contexts and in their personal and home lives—to access, analyze, create, reflect, and act on variety of diverse information in multiple media formats (NAMLE 2007; Hobbs 2011). Although Internet access has expanded dramatically in recent years, many young people still spend a majority of their time using what is sometimes called “passive” media, including popular films, television, music, and non-participatory online sites and games (Kaiser Family Foundation 2009). In turn, children and young people still put faith in the high credibility of mainstream print-based and television news outlets, especially local news; in one large study, a majority of young people claimed television news was the most credible source of news information (Metzger and Flanagin 2008).

News and current events connect directly to children and young people's lived experiences, and actively shape their values about the world. Media literacy interventions seek to improve the quality of students' ability to process and “talk back” to the

news around them, especially within a mainstream news culture that is often fear-based and systematically focused on violent events and natural disasters. One study showed that a media literacy intervention helped decrease young people's fears about tragic news (Kaiser Family Foundation 2003), while media literacy interventions with parents supported co-viewing and a reduction of fear in their children about terrorism (Comer et al. 2008). However, because they are so unpredictable and can intersect uncomfortably with national party politics, many educators in K-12 settings tend to shy away from using news and current events in their teaching.

In order to harness the power of news and current events to connect to students' lived experiences with media and popular culture, educators need great sensitivity for a variety of factors in a given lesson. The first is a spirit of *inquiry*, drawn from the Reggio Emilia education model (Rinaldi 2005), in which students and teachers alike ask questions about the media they use in their everyday lives—a topic that can be uncomfortable for educators for reasons relating to content, knowledge, personal values, distance from student culture, and fear of retribution (Moore 2011). Still, connecting with students' popular culture has been shown to facilitate

students' understanding about themselves and others in the context of mass media representations (Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood 2003), supporting a culture of inquiry.

Secondly, to use current events, teachers often face *ambiguity and uncertainty* in their own lessons to adapt to the highly unpredictable and sometimes galvanizing nature of classroom discussions and activities that center on news and current events. In in-service professional development settings, teachers feel empowered when they feel more comfortable tolerating uncertainty and their own lack of total knowledge about their subjects through continuing professional development (CPD) (Snow-Gerono 2005). However, most technology- and digital-media-based CPD for educators focus primarily on developing specific subject-based skill knowledge (Meier 2005; Wayne, Yon, Zhu, Cronen, and Garet 2008), often taught in a brief or "one-shot" manner that has been shown to be ineffective for lasting change (Flint, Zisook, and Fisher 2011).

Third, though teachers do not need to be experts in all aspects of instruction, the *scaffolding and structure* of their lessons may dictate the sense of chaos that teachers experience while teaching. Mary Kennedy (2006) notes that for most teachers, maintaining lesson momentum and keeping an aura of tranquility in the classroom is essential to feeling confident and effective in their everyday teaching practice, even when perceived threats of disruption or chaos are not obvious to observers. The balance between order and chaos in the classroom can be crucial to a successful lesson from a teacher's perspective, but often it is difficult to distinguish productive chaos toward learning from off-task engagement, especially when teachers are leading engaging media activities that involve popular culture.

Finally, teachers' understanding of their own values, and the connections between using news and current events and the values they hold for themselves and their students, is necessary prior to teaching with and about news media. Addressing the direct needs and values of teachers is accepted as an important component of effective professional development programs (Lawless and Pellegrino 2007). Similarly, a decade of contemporary research on teacher education has shown that successful professional development for teachers, despite contextual and cross-cultural differences, requires long-term, context-specific CPD engagement that moves away from the normative standard of teacher educators as "masters" and toward

reflective learning communities (Avalos 2011).

Background and Context

The following three case studies trace the continuity of *inquiry, uncertainty, structure, and reflection on teacher values* across the teaching practices of different types of teachers. The case studies are drawn from three years of work of the Powerful Voices for Kids (PVK) program, a media literacy enrichment program of the Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island. Between 2009 and 2011, PVK operated in public, public charter, and independent schools in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, area. Using a multifaceted school integration approach, PVK sought to increase the comfort that a variety of educators felt in using mass media, popular culture, and current events as components of their in-school and after-school instruction. PVK worked with three types of teachers: (1) classroom teachers at one of the PVK partner schools, Russell Byers Charter School (RBCS), through a six-month CPD program; (2) in-school mentors, mostly drawn from graduate and post-graduate service organizations, who worked alongside school administration and faculty; and (3) summer enrichment instructors, mostly drawn from undergraduate and graduate communications and education programs at Philadelphia area universities. All three case studies involve the work PVK did in enrichment, mentoring, and CPD at RBCS between the summer of 2009 and the spring of 2011.

Russell Byers Charter School is a public charter school that serves four hundred PK-6 students in Center City, Philadelphia. Students are selected via lottery from forty Philadelphia neighborhoods, the majority of which are low income. Seventy percent of RBCS students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and median family income is between \$14,000 and \$38,000.

Bill's Story: Reflecting on and Adapting to Teacher Values

Bill is an experienced educator in the Philadelphia public school system and had been with Russell Byers Charter School for several years when he joined the Powerful Voices for Kids professional development program in 2011. He had strong opinions about current events and politics, often spontaneously bringing up news coverage and controversial recent events—such as the Arab Spring revolutions in the Middle East—in the course of discussions about readings and concepts in media literacy. Like many

teachers, Bill had uneven computer skills; he lacked familiarity with slideshow software and, though he had online search skills and could find lots of resources from news websites in his own work, he struggled with the logistics of using digital media drawn from the Internet in his classroom work beyond viewing and discussing online videos or printing out news articles.

Bill's ability to build a successful lesson required the PVK professional development facilitators and mentors appreciating and understanding Bill's values as a teacher. Often in community-school partnerships, facilitators act as "experts" who transmit knowledge to "novices." However, in the professional learning community model (Dufour, Eaker, and Dufour 2005), facilitators learned more about school culture and teacher attitudes while classroom teachers learned about formal and academic concepts in digital and media literacy. As a mentor, I provided support to Bill as he created a long-term lesson about childhood obesity and connections between civics and nutrition with his sixth grade class, but also tried to find connections between Bill's personal interests, digital media, and the lesson he wanted to teach.

Bill reflected on the power of televised editorials from his own past, by journalists like Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite. He told me that he appreciated the concise and clearly-labeled editorial format of Cronkite's editorials, as opposed to the mixture of editorial and reporting that often sustained the 24-hour news cycle. In the spirit of these editorials, Bill planned a lesson in which students would write their own editorials about a local current event, using the five-paragraph essay structure. Building on a production skill learned in the professional development program, Bill would also have his students create *screencasts*—simultaneous recording of a computer screen and voiceover, like in a "director's commentary"—using media drawn from online sources like YouTube and news aggregator Red Lasso (<http://www.redlasso.com>). Screencasts had proved to be a useful tool for student analysis (Moore 2010), but here they were used as a presentation tool, as students rehearsed editorials and recorded them over video selections from the local news.

Fifth-grade students researched a topic selected by Bill—a controversial proposed tax on sodas in Philadelphia. The children began to write five-paragraph essays on their subject. However, in engaging students in reading newspaper articles and watching local news videos on the topic, students began to take their own

interests in related controversies. One student saw on the local news that an advocacy group in California launched a campaign to ban Ronald McDonald as a mascot for the McDonalds fast food chain. Some students in his class had strong opinions about this campaign. Bill, gauging their enthusiasm and interest in learning more, let students change their topics and voice their opinions about this new controversy. Some students who did not have a strong opinion were guided in researching other people's positions, such as the positions of Philadelphia City Council members.

Bill's success with the lesson hinged on his openness to student inquiry, his willingness to deal with uncertainty and unexpected current events altering his lesson plan, his ability to structure writing and production assignments with standard teaching tools like graphic organizers and worksheets, and his understanding of how his own values helped shape a meaningful learning experience despite his reservations about using technology. Upon reflection, he was pleased with the results and thought about ways to improve the technology experience and hone the lesson in the future. In his written reflection at the conclusion of the CPD experience, he noted:

Overall I was happy with the lesson. The students had a chance to research various topics concerning childhood obesity (causes and effects) and government initiatives on health. The students developed "pro" and "con" viewpoints on the different topics. They were able to read articles and view videos on the topics and develop their own opinion, which is based on their research. I think I would have started the editorial process earlier in the lesson. It seemed a little rushed at the end, and there wasn't enough time to share all of the editorials. I also would have taken time to allow the students to view editorials, and not just read them. Cam Studio [an open source screencasting software] worked well, but I would like to find a program where the student can also appear on the "screen" while the video [is] playing, like you may see on a television newscast. I thought the lesson went well and the students did a good job considering it was the first time this lesson was presented. I can also use the completed editorials as models for the next class that works on this lesson.

Here, Bill articulates some of the common pitfalls of in-classroom production while noting the connections

to his own goals, such as modeling the editorial format for students. A modest success like this may be crucial, particularly for those teachers who see technology as a daunting hurdle to their classroom instruction.

In professional development environments, experienced teachers are sometimes uncomfortable with disruptions to their teaching process. In this example, the digital media component of an otherwise pen-and-paper lesson helped one teacher who was less inclined to integrate digital media and technology tools into his assignments find a way to learn a new skill (screencasting) and to think differently about the process through which his students developed and expressed opinions about current events. Following up with teachers from the professional development experience would reveal whether teachers in the professional development program have continued to implement media and technology into their classroom teaching.

John's Story: Negotiating Unpredictability of News Events with Structured Media Projects

John began his work at Russell Byers Charter School as a summer instructor in the Powerful Voices for Kids program and subsequently served as an in-school mentor, during which time he helped teachers integrate technology and media into their lessons. In 2010, he contributed to three teacher projects that incorporated media analysis and production into the scope of science, English, and history lessons. In 2011, John was hired as a full-time Technology Coordinator at RBCS, where he was given one period per week with every class in the school. He continued to consult with administration about media and technology development and occasionally co-taught lessons with teachers.

In the summer of 2010, John brought his experience as a mentor and instructor at PAC to instruction of rising fifth and sixth grade students in the PVK summer program. He wanted to continue to develop their understanding of the basic computer programming software Scratch, developed by the MIT Media Lab to encourage beginning programmers and students unfamiliar with programming to develop their own videogames. In the first year of the PVK program, John had an ambivalent experience with integrating current events into his teaching the previous year, when students created Scratch videogames about an incident in which Philadelphia African-American children were denied access to a private pool in an affluent community.

Upon reflection, John believed that his 2009 lesson was too unstructured, and that the resulting learning experience was uneven.

For his new project with rising fifth and sixth graders, John worked carefully on thinking of new ways to scaffold learning and support students through the process of learning key concepts and technical skills in basic programming. He planned paper-based and "off-line" lessons to help students become more familiar with reading news texts and doing pre-production for a choice-based storytelling mode. The only thing missing was the current event, which students readily supplied by talking about flash mobs—coordinated gatherings of anywhere from a dozen to hundreds of people in a common location like a shopping mall or public park, to do anything from performing a choral recital to starting a playful snowball fight. In 2010, flash mobs were synonymous with public pranks, as when a choir gathered in a mall food court or people dressed as zombies descended upon Manhattan. However, in Philadelphia, flash mobs were portrayed in local and national media as violent gatherings of young hooligans; police activity was increased in Philadelphia and a youth curfew was instated (Bailin 2010).

John's students, who were too young to participate in flash mobs in Philadelphia, nonetheless had complicated feelings about them. In their first assignment, which involved making paper flowcharts to map out a set of choices in their videogames, students struggled to break out of simplistic storylines. For instance, if a choice was either to go to a flash mob or to choose not to go, students might write two simple outcomes—if a character attends, he or she gets arrested by the police; if the character stays home, he or she does not. Over the course of two flowchart activities and two days of instruction, students' observations became more complicated. One student noted that if you stay home from a flash mob, your friends will make fun of you, leading to a more informal, but more embarrassing, form of punishment, whereas there is some social status in being reprimanded for doing something transgressive. Another noted that it is not a foregone conclusion that someone who vandalizes in a flash mob will be arrested. It would be, he said, like flipping a coin. This observation led students to integrate probability into their flowchart designs. For instance, if a participant vandalized, he or she might be arrested in 70% of scenarios or go unpunished in 30% of scenarios.

All student pairs were able to translate their

flowcharts to a narrative videogame format designed on Scratch software. Some learners focused on aesthetic elements of a single scene, as in one piece in which you can frame elements of a flash mob in a camera overlay. Others created long narratives that relied on programming probability and chance into a “Choose Your Own Adventure” style game. In one game, even benign participation in a flash mob can result in arrest, albeit a low-probability outcome. Only repeat plays of the game reveal this complicated and intentional design of its young authors, despite the cartoonish graphics and simple mechanics of the game (see appendix 2).

After gaining experience using news events as a stimulus for student-centered creative multimedia production activities, John subsequently incorporated some of the structured lessons in decision-making, probability, and the basic operations of computer programming into his in-school computer class and Computer Club after-school elective. This teaching experience helped him to develop a structured scope and sequence for presenting and reinforcing programming concepts while allowing students to experiment with ambiguous and unpredictable real-world events.

Rachel’s Story: Using Inquiry to Introduce Students to Messy Realities

When Rachel began her work as a Powerful Voices for Kids summer media enrichment instructor in the summer of 2009, she spent the majority of her time figuring out how to manage to get twelve eight-year-olds to complete a media production project: a conventional news broadcast written and performed by rising third grade students. In a reflection on her 2009 work, Rachel noted that she was somewhat disappointed with the ways in which students replicated mainstream news aesthetics and commercial parodies without challenging what they already knew about current events and the world around them (Hobbs, Cohn-Geltner, and Landis 2010). In this two-week project, students watched local news, learned how to operate a camera and frame shots, and wrote original newscasts about their school, which were then edited by Rachel. These formal elements are common features of student newscasts in K-12 settings, often typified by student announcements and school news programs.

In her second year as an instructor in the summer of 2010, Rachel wanted to challenge herself to a higher standard of reflective practice as she taught rising third and fourth graders in the PVK summer enrichment program. She chose as her subject comics creation, a

longstanding personal interest of hers. She began her instruction by helping students understand the unique semiotics of comics—panels, speech bubbles, narration, and layout. She used the Apple comic design program, ComicLife, to show her students how to combine their own original writing and drawings with photographs that they took themselves or found online according to fair use standards for media literacy education (Hobbs 2010).

Rachel believed that her new approach integrated inquiry more fully into her lesson planning. She chose daily art and production activities that connected to students’ expressed interests. Now that Rachel had a sense of classroom management and the school culture of RBCS, she expressed through written reflections that she was more confident about her ability to maintain structure in her lessons. Also, by integrating the language of comics into her lessons, her own values were more organically woven into her lessons. However, an unpredictable event revealed how profoundly the unexpected can shape, alter, and enrich learning experiences. The story of her final project offers media educators a powerful lesson in improvisation and risk-taking (Hobbs 2013), but also shows the importance of balancing the ambiguous and unexpected in current events and social issues with careful planning, scaffolding, and support.

On a daily production assignment during which students were asked to photograph a local fountain, children were disturbed by the interaction between two people nearby. Based on visual observation, Rachel and much of the class presumed these individuals were homeless. They noticed the man’s shopping cart full of various items; they noticed a woman sorting through these items. Rachel approached the two individuals and had a brief, uncomfortable conversation. Afterward, the students had many questions.

Here was an opportunity for learning, not only for students but also for Rachel. Rachel wrote about the productive reflection among students:

One girl said that she feels bad because I feel bad about this situation, she shares my feelings of sadness. I explained empathy, and then [one student] says: “is this a life lesson?” I told them that this is a life lesson, this is part of how we learn about what to do and what not to do in certain situations. The kids explained to me that they understand why what I did was not the safest choice, and they explained that sometimes dealing with homeless people in the

city is complicated. Then [one student] told me what he would have done, and this started the whole class talking about what we should have done.

Rachel acknowledged limits of her own knowledge about homelessness in urban environments. The next day, she engaged students' inquiry and answered questions along with them by doing careful online searches for information about homelessness, which she previewed at home prior to instruction. When she tried putting keywords about homelessness into a web search, the first results were a popular online series of "homeless fights" staged by teenagers—material that she deemed too disturbing and inappropriate for her students.

Over the course of two weeks, students researched homelessness online, interviewed homelessness advocates, watched depictions of homelessness in mainstream media like Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) and the Will Smith vehicle *Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), drew their own pictorial narratives and essays on what they had learned about homelessness, and finally created a multimedia comic on ComicLife that integrated their words, drawings, and online imagery (see appendix 1).

One young girl from Rachel's class had the opportunity to present this work by participating in a student panel at a conference of the National Association of Media Literacy in Education in Philadelphia (NAMLE 2011). When asked by an audience member, "What would you say to people who think that homeless people are lazy and need to work harder?" she responded, "I would say that that person probably hasn't met any homeless people" (NAMLE 2011). Though afterward this student admitted to me that she remembered only parts of her instruction from the previous summer, what she did remember was that homelessness is a complicated social issue that affects individuals, families, and children, and is often invisible to the outside world.

Rachel's students did not engage directly with mainstream news media as they had explicitly the previous summer for their newscast. However, Rachel's practice of honoring students' inquiry, even when it made her feel uncomfortable according to her own values and knowledge, led to a pedagogy that, though structured enough to avoid harmful or disturbing content, still incorporated the unexpected into regular teaching.

Implications for Integrating News and Current Events into Elementary School Professional Development

Given the external pressures of standardized testing and assessment on public and public charter schools by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, it is imperative to find multiple ways to engage new and experienced teachers in innovative forms of teaching and learning that connect new literacies in a variety of media forms to the kinds of print literacy that are measured to assess school performance. However, engagement with teachers differs depending on the values, experiences, and contexts of each teacher and his or her students. In after- and out-of-school enrichment environments, new and inexperienced teachers have a wide latitude to create innovative curriculum, experiment with new teaching styles, and take risks free of retribution from administration. Mentors and non-classroom teachers often have flexibility to use popular culture, current events, and new technology tools where their classroom teacher counterparts may be more limited. But elementary classroom teachers interested in integrating news, current events, and popular culture into their curriculum must find ways to integrate unpredictability into rigidly structured classroom environments, often with more students and more curriculum demands than non-classroom teachers.

In our professional development work, however, we have found that four factors explored in the above case studies—which encompass the work of new enrichment teachers, unconventional technology mentors, and classroom educators—seem to be consistent. A spirit of inquiry engages students in dialogue with teachers and with the many ideas and events represented in their media worlds. Embracing uncertainty and gaps in teacher knowledge counter-intuitively empowers teachers in learning communities to take risks in their teaching that change and improve their pedagogy, as we know from learning community-based professional development research. While out-of-school contexts often lack the kind of structure that classroom learning has—relying instead on an informal learning process of "hanging out, messing around, and geeking out" (Ito 2010)—a balance between structure and freedom is characteristic of each of the lessons described here. Finally, an understanding of values—both self-reflection from teachers and reflection between teachers and university partners—also bolstered the confidence teachers had in their

ability to help elementary school students make sense of issues and current events in the world around them.

Our experiences with professional development are, somewhat frustratingly, still largely anecdotal in part because we lack consistent assessments of how integrating news and current events through media literacy initiatives affect learning with elementary-aged children. In running enrichment programs and working with classroom teachers, we notice that children, particularly children in urban environments, are up-to-date with television news controversies, and are often thrust into debate on complex adult issues when major events occur. However, there is little regular practice in integrating news and current events into the classroom even when these events become a locus of children's attention, as in the case of the flash mob story, or when students have complicated responses to pertinent topics in their environment, from urban homelessness to health policy. It would benefit practitioners and scholars interested in the potential of contemporary non-fiction media—a common thread in mainstream education guidelines like the Common Core curriculum (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010)—to find methods of assessing how connecting the use of non-fiction texts drawn from current events engage students in meaningful and spontaneous learning, as in all three of our examples. By connecting to the “city as classroom” (Hobbs and Moore 2013), students in *Powerful Voices for Kids* were motivated to learn more about some of the pressing issues that, even at a young age, are important in their development of identity, world knowledge, and competencies in reading, writing, and communicating.

Appendix 1: Comic Strip

THIS COMIC IS CALLED "HOMELESS IN THE MEDIA"

I DON'T CARE ABOUT HIM.

GIMME YO MONEY FOOL!

HOPE YOU ENJOY!

SOME MEDIA TYPES MISREPRESENT HOMELESS PEOPLE BY MAKING THEM SEEM MEAN

COME AND GIVE US BACK THE BREAD YOU LITTLE RAT!

THEN COME GET IT!!

ALADDIN IS HOMELESS AND HE HAS TO STEAL FOOD AND ESCAPE FROM THE LAW.

SEE YA LATER ALLIGATOR

ALADDIN DOES NOT REPRESENT HOW HOMELESS PEOPLE ALWAYS ACT BECAUSE NOT ALL OF THEM STEAL.

NOT SO FAST YOU LITTLE STREET RAT

THE MOVIE ALADDIN DOES NOT REPRESENT HOMELESS PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT WAY BECAUSE IT SHOWS ALADDIN AS A THIEF AND STREET RAT.

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