

Current events as empowering literacy: For English and social studies teachers

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Current events are an engaging hook for teaching students critical thinking skills that may transfer from the English classroom to the social studies classroom. Such skills are useful in passing state-mandated tests.

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At the beginning of the 2005 school year, I gave my students an article on the United States administration's policy on global warming (see Figure 1, Revkin, 2005) as an exercise in critical thinking. This lesson, and successive ones based on other current events, is such a rich source of learning for students that I wanted to share this technique and my insights with a larger audience. The intense engagement of the class is exemplified in one student's reaction. She said in part:

When I was reading and analyzing this article, I felt like at first I was confused to a point, but after reading over and over again, I started to drift away from "surface meaning" and started to go beyond the words. Asking about tone, point of view, and missing opinions really helped me to understand the writing. Without using these questions, I wouldn't have been able to find the true meaning of the article. Also what actually took me by surprise was the fact that while I was reading, writing, and analyzing, I paused for a minute and actually realized that I was enjoying my work! I felt as if it wasn't school work at all. I felt as if

it was play, something I would have chosen to do on my own time. If I could do these every day I would.

This student's unsolicited response to the activity is the reaction every teacher hopes to hear about a lesson. The "questions" she alludes to were posted on my bulletin board to guide our reading and thinking, and were suggested by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004b) in a recent article on critical literacy. (See Figure 2.) Questions like these encourage my students to actively engage with text, going beyond simple comprehension. When students think critically, they interact with the text by skillfully analyzing the message, comparing that message with their previous knowledge, considering alternate positions, and synthesizing the information gained into a richer knowledge base.

For example, when students respond to questions such as those in Figures 2 and 3, they show evidence of reflecting. In order to respond to questions about alternate viewpoints and how those viewpoints would influence what they believe, they have to engage in research. They actively engage with text when doing so. They think critically. When using these techniques, it helps to think of "text" in a broad sense; as any written, spoken, or visual presentation of a position, attitude, or belief.

The idea of critical literacy, however, goes a step beyond this. It is based on Freire's (1970/1993) notion that for social change to occur, citizens must not only think critically about

Figure 1
Text of the *New York Times* article

Bush Aide Softened Greenhouse Gas Links to Global Warming

ANDREW C. REVKIN / *New York Times* June 8, 2005

A White House official who once led the oil industry's fight against limits on greenhouse gases has repeatedly edited government climate reports in ways that play down links between such emissions and global warming, according to internal documents.

In handwritten notes on drafts of several reports issued in 2002 and 2003, the official, Philip A. Cooney, removed or adjusted descriptions of climate research that government scientists and their supervisors, including some senior Bush administration officials, had already approved. In many cases, the changes appeared in the final reports.

The dozens of changes, while sometimes as subtle as the insertion of the phrase "significant and fundamental" before the word "uncertainties," tend to produce an air of doubt about findings that most climate experts say are robust.

Mr. Cooney is chief of staff for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, the office that helps devise and promote administration policies on environmental issues.

Before going to the White House in 2001, he was the "climate team leader" and a lobbyist at the American Petroleum Institute, the largest trade group representing the interests of the oil industry. A lawyer with a bachelor's degree in economics, he has no scientific training.

The documents were obtained by The New York Times from the Government Accountability Project, a nonprofit legal-assistance group for government whistle-blowers.

The project is representing Rick S. Piltz, who resigned in March as a senior associate in the office that coordinates government climate research. That office, now called the Climate Change Science Program, issued the documents that Mr. Cooney edited.

A White House spokeswoman, Michele St. Martin, said yesterday that Mr. Cooney would not be available to comment. "We don't put Phil Cooney on the record," Ms. St. Martin said. "He's not a cleared spokesman."

In one instance in an October 2002 draft of a regularly published summary of government climate research, "Our Changing Planet," Mr. Cooney amplified the sense of uncertainty by adding the word "extremely" to this sentence: "The attribution of the causes of biological and ecological changes to climate change or variability is extremely difficult."

In a section on the need for research into how warming might change water availability and flooding, he crossed out a paragraph describing the projected reduction of mountain glaciers and snowpack. His note in the margins explained that this was "straying from research strategy into speculative findings/musings."

Other White House officials said the changes made by Mr. Cooney were part of the normal interagency review that takes place on all documents related to global environmental change. Robert Hopkins, a spokesman for the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, noted that one of the reports Mr. Cooney worked on, the administration's 10-year plan for climate research, was endorsed by the National Academy of Sciences. And Myron Ebell, who has long campaigned against limits on greenhouse gases as director of climate policy at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a libertarian group, said such editing was necessary for "consistency" in meshing programs with policy.

But critics said that while all administrations routinely vetted government reports, scientific content in such reports should be reviewed by scientists. Climate experts and representatives of environmental groups, when shown examples of the revisions, said they illustrated the significant if largely invisible influence of Mr.

(continued)

Figure 1 (continued)
Text of the *New York Times* article

Cooney and other White House officials with ties to energy industries that have long fought greenhouse-gas restrictions.

In a memorandum sent last week to the top officials dealing with climate change at a dozen agencies, Mr. Piltz said the White House editing and other actions threatened to taint the government's \$1.8 billion-a-year effort to clarify the causes and consequences of climate change.

"Each administration has a policy position on climate change," Mr. Piltz wrote. "But I have not seen a situation like the one that has developed under this administration during the past four years, in which politicization by the White House has fed back directly into the science program in such a way as to undermine the credibility and integrity of the program."

A senior Environmental Protection Agency scientist who works on climate questions said the White House environmental council, where Mr. Cooney works, had offered valuable suggestions on reports from time to time. But the scientist, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because all agency employees are forbidden to speak with reporters without clearance, said the kinds of changes made by Mr. Cooney had damaged morale. "I have colleagues in other agencies who express the same view, that it has somewhat of a chilling effect and has created a sense of frustration," he said.

Efforts by the Bush administration to highlight uncertainties in science pointing to human-caused warming have put the United States at odds with other nations and with scientific groups at home.

Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, who met with President Bush at the White House yesterday, has been trying to persuade him to intensify United States efforts to curb greenhouse gases. Mr. Bush has called only for voluntary measures to slow growth in emissions through 2012.

Yesterday, saying their goal was to influence that meeting, the scientific academies of 11 countries, including those of the United States and Britain, released a joint letter saying, "The scientific understanding of climate change is now sufficiently clear to justify nations taking prompt action."

The American Petroleum Institute, where Mr. Cooney worked before going to the White House, has long taken a sharply different view. Starting with the negotiations leading to the Kyoto Protocol climate treaty in 1997, it has promoted the idea that lingering uncertainties in climate science justify delaying restrictions on emissions of carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping smokestack and tailpipe gases.

On learning of the White House revisions, representatives of some environmental groups said the effort to amplify uncertainties in the science was clearly intended to delay consideration of curbs on the gases, which remain an unavoidable byproduct of burning oil and coal.

"They've got three more years, and the only way to control this issue and do nothing about it is to muddy the science," said Eileen Claussen, the president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, a private group that has enlisted businesses in programs cutting emissions.

Mr. Cooney's alterations can cause clear shifts in meaning. For example, a sentence in the October 2002 draft of "Our Changing Planet" originally read, "Many scientific observations indicate that the Earth is undergoing a period of relatively rapid change." In a neat, compact hand, Mr. Cooney modified the sentence to read, "Many scientific observations point to the conclusion that the Earth may be undergoing a period of relatively rapid change."

A document showing a similar pattern of changes is the 2003 "Strategic Plan for the United States Climate Change Science Program," a thick report describing the reorganization of government climate research that was requested by Mr. Bush in his first speech on the issue, in June 2001. The document was reviewed by an

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Figure 1 (continued)
Text of the *New York Times* article

expert panel assembled in 2003 by the National Academy of Sciences. The scientists largely endorsed the administration's research plan, but they warned that the administration's procedures for vetting reports on climate could result in excessive political interference with science.

Another political appointee who has played an influential role in adjusting language in government reports on climate science is Dr. Harlan L. Watson, the chief climate negotiator for the State Department, who has a doctorate in solid-state physics but has not done climate research.

In an Oct. 4, 2002 memo to James R. Mahoney, the head of the United States Climate Change Science Program and an appointee of Mr. Bush, Mr. Watson "strongly" recommended cutting boxes of text referring to the findings of a National Academy of Sciences panel on climate and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a United Nations body that periodically reviews research on human-caused climate change.

The boxes, he wrote, "do not include an appropriate recognition of the underlying uncertainties and the tentative nature of a number of the assertions."

While those changes were made nearly two years ago, recent statements by Dr. Watson indicate that the administration's position has not changed.

"We are still not convinced of the need to move forward quite so quickly," he told the BBC in London last month. "There is general agreement that there is a lot known, but also there is a lot to be known."

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Figure 2
**Questions I have posted in
my classroom to develop
critical literacy**

Whose viewpoint is expressed?

What does the author want us to think?

Whose viewpoints are missing, silenced, or discounted?

How might alternative perspectives be represented and/or found?

How would alternative perspectives contribute to your understanding of the text?

What action might you take on the basis of what you have learned?

Note. Adapted from McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004b, p. 53).

Figure 3
**Questions for article
on global warming
and hurricanes**

What does the writer want us to believe?

How "balanced" is he in his presentation?

Does he have an agenda?

What other points of view are needed?

How would you find them?

what they read and view, but they must also *react* to transform the world. Critical literacy involves ways of thinking about the written and spoken word that go beyond the surface meaning in order to discern the deeper meaning, ideology, and bias expressed therein. It means taking a critical stance toward “official knowledge,” and it is an understanding of how word choice and language creates meaning and influences our thoughts. Critical literacy involves “applying that meaning to your own context and imagining how to act on that meaning to change the conditions it reflects” (Shor, 1992, p.129). It offers a way to speak out against injustice and unfairness. Critical literacy builds awareness of how power is used to marginalize and silence certain groups in a society, and engenders a willingness to reveal that situation in order to bring about change. Critical literacy is an active engagement with the world as well as with text and requires the ability to think critically.

Critical literacy is fundamental if one is to be a thoughtful and responsible participant in a democracy, and *participant* is the crucial word here, because it underscores an active orientation toward and engagement with society. It helps one avoid relinquishing the power each of us has to investigate and examine an issue from multiple perspectives so as not to be manipulated by any one (Freire, 1970/1993; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004a, 2004b). Therefore, actively engaging with text is a first step for developing a critically literate standpoint. In short, critical thinking skills involve reflecting and research, but critical literacy goes one step further: the formation of citizens who are empowered and emboldened to act as a result of their conscious enlightenment.

Many teachers voice their beliefs that guiding students to be critical thinkers is an important goal. However, in today’s accountability climate, as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, critical thinking activities can take a back seat to test preparation. No matter what the subject matter, there exists the tendency to “fill” students with a wealth of information, data, or skills in order to successfully pass the accounta-

bility exams. But critical thinking does not have to be sacrificed. In fact, I believe that actively engaging with text through critical thinking is a helpful technique for my high school students, who are faced with exit exams in social studies and English in New York State. Therefore, I have always tried to develop critical thinking in my students, and it is my belief that adding the study of current events to my English curriculum has helped me attain this goal.

A concrete example: Reflecting

In the article and report on global warming I found in *The New York Times* (Revkin, 2005; see Figures 1 and 4), I saw that there were a number of ways they could be used with my 11th-grade English classes. At that time, I was taking a doctoral course in education and was thinking about issues of hegemony, oppression, and the power of language to persuade. I believed that working with these documents could teach students to perform the following skills, which meet Standard 3 of the New York State English Language Arts Standards, “Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation” (available online at www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/ela/elastandards/elamap.html):

1. Identify tone, point of view, and bias and the techniques of writing that reveal those aspects
2. Compare and contrast drafts of a piece of writing
3. Develop critical thinking skills that could lead to critical literacy

As I thought about newspaper articles, editorials, commentaries, and political statements, I realized these were a rich source not only of timely topics but also of style, bias, and point of view, and that critical thinking skills were often necessary to unlock total meaning. Of course, I knew that critical thinking was a helpful technique for my 11th-grade students who were required to pass the

Figure 4
The edited sections of the memos

An Editor in the White House

Handwritten revisions and comments by Philip A. Cooney, chief of staff for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, appear on two draft reports by the Climate Change Science Program and the Subcommittee on Global Change Research. Mr. Cooney's changes were incorporated into later versions of each document, shown below with revisions in bold.

"STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE U.S. CLIMATE CHANGE SCIENCE PROGRAM," DRAFT TEXT, OCT. 2002

k 14 wetlands will expand in areas where meltwater resulting from deeper and longer thaw
 15 periods does not have a natural drainage path to the ocean.
 16 ~~Warming will also cause reductions in mountain glaciers and advance the timing of the melt~~
 17 ~~of mountain snow peaks in polar regions. In turn, runoff rates will change and flood~~
 18 ~~potential will be altered in ways that are currently not well understood. There will be~~
 19 ~~significant shifts in the seasonality of runoff that will have serious impacts on native~~
 20 ~~populations that rely on fishing and hunting for their livelihood. These changes will be~~
 21 ~~further complicated by shifts in precipitation regimes and a possible intensification and~~
 22 ~~increased frequency of extreme hydrologic events. Reducing the uncertainties in current~~
 23 ~~understanding of the relationships between climate change and Arctic hydrology is critical~~
 24

straying from research strategy while spending funding wisely here.

PUBLIC REVIEW DRAFT, NOV. 2002

Warming **could** also lead to changes in the water cycle in polar regions. Reducing the uncertainties ...

FINAL REPORT, JULY 2003

The paragraph does not appear in the final report.

"OUR CHANGING PLANET," DRAFT TEXT, OCT. 2002

019 the next, and perhaps even beyond.
 020 The challenge for the USGCRP is to provide the best possible scientific basis for documenting,
 021 ~~diagnosing,~~ and projecting changes in the Earth's life-support systems, and the role for CCRI is to
 022 facilitate full use of ~~the~~ scientific information in policy and decisionmaking on response strategies
 023 for adaptation and mitigation ~~at the international, national, and regional scales.~~ **possible**

understanding

024
 025
 026 ~~From "Discovery" to "Comparative Analysis"~~
 027 ~~Because of the scientific accomplishments of USGCRP and other research programs during the~~
 028 ~~last decade, a period that could be termed a productive "period of discovery and characterization,"~~
 029 ~~the CCRI, in coordination with the USGCRP, will move into a new "period of comparative~~
 030 ~~analysis of response strategies." In this new phase of the climate science programs, information~~
 031 ~~that compares the potential consequences of different responses to global changes, including~~
 032 ~~climate change, will be developed in a form useful to national debate and decisionmaking. This~~
 033

might allow

reduce the significant remaining uncertainties associated with human-induced climate change and

FINAL REPORT, 2003

The challenge for the USGCRP is to provide the best possible scientific basis for documenting, **understanding**, and projecting changes in the Earth's life-support systems, and the role for CCRI is to **reduce the significant remaining uncertainties associated with human-induced climate change and** facilitate full use of scientific information in policy and decisionmaking on **possible** response strategies for adaptation and mitigation.

New York State Regents exams in both English and U.S. history at the end of the year. I decided to redesign my curriculum to focus on critical thinking through the use of current events articles, believing that critical thinking instruction would support the English and social studies curricula. The article on global warming was the first one I used, in September 2005.

The article in *The New York Times* concerns an aide in the Bush administration who edited drafts of government reports on global warming. Handwritten notes by Philip A. Cooney (see Figure 4) reveal the editing he made on the original reports and the resultant final reports. To begin the lesson, students were asked to brainstorm what they knew about global warming and the greenhouse effect. Then, for comparative purposes, we

created a list of all of their ideas. We read the drafts of the reports that showed Cooney's editing. Focusing on lines 14–24 in the "Strategic Plan for the U.S. Climate Change Program" draft of October 2002, the students worked in small groups to analyze the draft through the following questions.

- What is the meaning of the original writing?
- Who might have written the paragraph?
- What is the writer's concern?
- What is the writer's tone? (Consider verb choices, adjectives, specifics)
- What changes were made?
- What effect was created by changing the word *will* to *would*?

- Notice the margin note: Does the editor (Cooney) have a point?
- Does the paragraph have a sense of “straying”?
- What happened with the original paragraph in the Public Review Draft from November 2002?
- What effect is created by removing the paragraph and replacing it with a single sentence, and by replacing *would* with *could*?
- What happened to that sentence in the Final Report, July, 2003?

The next section of editing that the students examined involved lines 019–023 in the “Our Changing Planet” draft of October 2002. They noted the changes in wording, additions, and deletions. In this section the substitution of *diagnosing* for *understanding* is the crucial change. The students considered the following questions.

- Why would Cooney take out *diagnosing*?
- Is the implication that science cannot diagnose?
- What are the connotations of *diagnosing* and *understanding*?
- Do you think it is Cooney’s goal to take away the active nature of the word *diagnosing* and replace it with the more passive nature of *understanding*?
- What effect is created by removing the word *this* in line 22 and adding the word *possible* to the Final Report?
- What effect is created by adding the phrase *significant remaining uncertainties* to the Final Report?
- What do the additions in lines 028–033 do to the meaning?
- Based on these changes, what do you think is Cooney’s point of view on climate change?

- What reasons would you give for Cooney having this point of view?

The students next examined the accompanying article from *The New York Times* (Revkin, 2005; see Figure 1). The title of Revkin’s article reveals his position: “Bush aide softened greenhouse gas links to global warming.” This is an accessible article for students because it is easy to understand but powerful in its message. Revkin discusses Cooney’s editing of the climate report along with his interpretation that Cooney has created a tone of uncertainty through the changes. However, Revkin goes further to provide background information on Cooney’s previous job as a lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute.

I asked the students to work in groups to summarize Revkin’s position by documenting it with three to five of his strongest arguments, and each group created an outline for an essay. I wanted to know if the students could determine Cooney’s agenda, as suggested by Revkin. They also were asked to determine Revkin’s tone.

I thought it would be fun for the students to imagine themselves as senators or representatives whose job it was to make a legislative decision about global warming. I presented them with the following framework.

- Given these documents, can you make a decision about policy concerning global warming?
- If these documents don’t provide you with enough information to decide, what other information would you require, and to whom would you turn?

In addition, I presented a constructive connotative activity in which the students were asked to choose one of the following words to describe what Cooney did to the original documents.

- Did Cooney *edit, transform, manipulate, maneuver, deceive, change, tamper, or lie*?

Students tried to determine the differences between the words and whether their choice of one of the words was an indication of their own point of view on the issue.

Researching and reacting

As my two classes worked through this lesson by reading Revkin's article, their interest in Cooney's editing increased. The students worked in groups to analyze Revkin's writing. They identified his tone variously as one of anger, outrage, frustration, or concern. One group raised the possibility that Revkin himself might have an agenda. Another student voiced her belief that the Bush family had some connections to oil. Still other students pointed to the fact that we needed to hear more from scientists on this issue. One student wanted to know how many scientists believed in the threat of global warming and wished that Cooney had presented opinions from both sides in the final draft. Others desired to hear more from Cooney himself.

Because one student had mentioned a Bush family connection to oil, I asked the students if anyone knew what Dick Cheney's previous job was before becoming Vice President. No one did. All of our questions led the students to decide that more research was needed. Students immediately volunteered to search the Internet for anything related to global warming, the greenhouse effect, Dick Cheney, Andrew C. Revkin, and Philip A. Cooney. Students also searched for the title of Revkin's article to ascertain if there had been any responses. They chose among these research topics on the basis of their interests.

The students' desire to do research led to a discussion about reliability of sources. They had seen firsthand how a policy statement could be written to reflect an agenda and point of view. Now they needed to realize that this could happen more often than not. We discussed how careful they must be to determine the qualifications of the writers of articles and web pages that they might discover, and not to jump to conclusions

based on a first finding. One student found me in my office within an hour after the research assignment had been discussed. She was excited to tell me that she had found out that Philip Cooney left the Bush administration a few days after the Revkin article appeared in print—to go to work for Exxon Corporation. She believed that this vindicated Revkin's assertion of Cooney's bias.

Once the students reported on their research, they felt that they understood more about global warming and the greenhouse effect than they had previously. They read a position statement from representatives of the world's science academies that stated definitively that global warming is occurring (National Academies, 2005). These scientists established their belief that it would be the poor who will suffer the most from the effects of global warming in the future. Because we were doing this activity in September of 2005, my students immediately made the connection to the poor in New Orleans and the difficulties they faced in attempting to evacuate the city before and after Hurricane Katrina struck. Further research revealed to them that some people in the United States believed that these people were unimportant in the administration's eyes and so evacuation, relief, and rescue for them were nonexistent or untimely.

Many of the students were surprised to learn about the Bush family's connections to the oil industry and Dick Cheney's previous job at Halliburton. Every research discovery seemed to lead to still more questions, and a search of Halliburton, in particular, spurred further research. Discussions were lively, and it was clear to all of us that there were many different points of view within the classroom. Some students were outraged at the government and wondered what other things were being kept from them. A few were not sure what to think. But it was clear to everyone that Revkin's undergraduate science degree, his career as a science writer, and his book on global warming established his bias but also qualified him as a more appropriate spokesperson on the issue than Cooney, with his economics

background and connections to the oil industry. We all could see that there was no simple, quick, or clear way to view this complex issue.

We continued to read and analyze articles and editorials in local and national newspapers. Because this project happened in the fall of 2005, there was much in the news on hurricanes. One article (Kristof, 2005) prompted more research and thought because it dealt with a possible connection between global warming and an increase in the number and magnitude of hurricanes. I asked even more specific questions of the students. (See Figure 3.)

Without my suggestion, a few students decided to take action about what they had read and learned during the previous week. The devastation in the Gulf of Mexico region as a result of hurricane Katrina bothered many of the students, so ideas for fundraising were brainstormed, a committee of five was formed, and the students presented ideas to the principal. They worked closely with some seniors who also wanted to become involved in some form of relief for Katrina's victims, and eventually they all decided to "adopt" a school in Metairie, Louisiana, providing the students with school supplies and clothes.

I can say with confidence that my students were able to discern the tone of Revkin's article as well as the effect of Cooney's editing. Their group work indicated this. Their research on other aspects of the issue was a solid first step in revealing to them the complexities of any position. Many of the students were excited by their findings. I was pleased to see that the discussion held the interest and attention of all. On one occasion, a spirited discussion was cut short by the end of class, but the students were reluctant to leave. They wanted to keep talking about all of the facets, connections, and questions that were occurring to them. Just as quickly as one question was raised by a student, another would point out a different point of view or another angle we had not yet considered.

By their statements, it was clear to me that most of the class empathized with the Katrina victims' situation, although only a third of my students participated in our collection of clothes and school supplies. Three or four students showed up in their free periods to help me box up our donations. One student wrote an article for the school newspaper, others wrote to the editor of the local newspaper, and two girls decided to write to the state senators. I was pleased and surprised by these responses, which indicated to me that some students were moved to action because of their reflection and research.

The students' letters summarized Cooney's editing and the students' concern over the government's weakened policy statement. Unfortunately, the local newspaper declined to publish any of the letters, which was disappointing. However, the state senators did reply to the girls' letters. It is important for teachers to discuss with students the possibility that their actions will not always be received with enthusiasm, and to encourage their ideas and continuing efforts despite this. I believe that my students were beginning to act as responsible and thoughtful citizens, capable of critically analyzing the written word and developing feelings and opinions that would spur them to action.

The lesson described in this article provided students with an example of language at work. Cooney's bias was evident in the changes he made to the documents. The resulting report was much less powerful and quite innocuous. The students saw this, and determined how the language changes affected the resulting tone. As often as I have facilitated a discussion of point of view, word choice, and tone in a literature piece, I had seldom experienced students working so effectively with the concepts as they did with this news item.

Because of the students' interest in writing letters, I felt that it was important to discuss the tone of their writing and how word choice could help establish the tone they wished to set. The students wanted to show their concern and even

anger, but they also wanted to be convincing. Asking them to consider what influenced them encouraged them to use research findings in their letters. In fact, we decided that the letters should begin with a summary of the article that prompted the letter, and the research students did for this lent credence to the opinions they expressed in their conclusions. One student discussed in her letter how Cooney created uncertainty in his editing by adding the adverb *extremely*. We also discussed slang, informal, and formal language. For example, instead of writing “the editing was bogus,” we discussed the use of words other than *bogus* because it might not be comprehended by all readers. So the students suggested the word *dishonest* as a replacement. Writing a letter to the newspaper required an awareness of audience and precision of language. It was a real-life situation upon which I could build further experiences with critical thinking.

I continued with this strategy in my classroom throughout the year. My students worked with articles on national parks, coal mining, poverty, random searches and seizures, prisoner abuse, and Pakistan, among others. Sometimes we worked together; sometimes they were required to work by themselves and record their responses in journals. I kept a bin of articles in the room that I constantly replaced with new ones, from which students chose depending on their interests. To be honest, no other issue affected them quite as powerfully as the global warming documents.

Looking for tone and point of view became second nature for at least half of my students. They noticed the effect that word choice could have on meaning. They were aware of the missing points of view in an article, and they sometimes told me that their own views were strengthened or challenged by the work they were doing with a particular story. Their critical thinking skills were developing. When the students worked with poems and stories, some automatically began thinking about word choice and point of view. The skills slowly transferred to social studies. A few

students considered bias and point of view when analyzing historical documents. All of the students passed the U.S. history Regents exam, and all but one of my students passed the English Regents exam at the end of the year.

Critical literacy + current events = empowering literacy

Finn’s (1999) work has provided me with the concept of “empowering literacy.” For Finn, literacy is more than learning to read and write. In his view, the literacy that students acquire can empower them or domesticate them. It can develop in them the ability to create new knowledge that is relevant to their lives. It can give them “cultural capital”—the ability, knowledge, and skill to manipulate, strategize, and position themselves in the culture to maximize their gain (Anyon, 1981)—or it can keep them powerless. It can free them, or it can keep them tethered to the reins of the system. Finn (1999) suggested that teachers should go beyond teaching to a test to give students the opportunities to think critically about the material in text books and the media, to research other points of view, and to apply the lessons to their lives. This is a critical literacy that is ultimately empowering. It goes beyond thinking critically to internalizing the lessons in individual ways and becoming a catalyst for action when one sees injustice or oppression. In other words, critical literacy is a way of thinking and a way of living. This is the basis for my strategies of reflecting, researching, and reacting.

As I acquired an understanding of and commitment to this literacy, I envisioned advantages for teachers and students alike. I especially see relevance and advantage for social studies and English teachers, and my reasons are based on the curricula in those two disciplines as well as the current thrust toward accountability as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In other words, it is easy for teachers to become focused on exit tests defined by state education departments in accordance with mandates that function

as the criteria for measurable student achievement. After all, teachers are placed in the position of guarantors of public accountability based on the results of these tests, and when school report cards are published in local newspapers they become the visible and tangible record of teachers' successes and failures. Given this situation, it is understandable that both veteran and novice teachers may succumb to the practice of teaching *to the test*. This can amount to drill and practice around specific test-taking skills for the exit exams. Given the fact that there are rubrics and models that define quality essays in the different subject areas, teachers can spend a good deal of time having students write essays according to the pattern that will bring the best results. In many cases, students are taught how to take and pass a test. One optimum educational scenario, however, is that students are presented with experiences that develop their critical thinking and reading skills in such a way that when faced with an exit exam, they will be successful. They will have been prepared *for* the test.

The social studies and English curricula

The social studies curriculum becomes more complex each year. Every year, there are more historical events to think about and discuss. In addition, teachers must be fairly conversant in economics, history, sociology, political science, psychology, and anthropology (Wineburg, 2005). According to Wineburg, excessive focus on all of the material in social studies does not guarantee a literate reader in the field. He believes that we must develop a way of thinking about and analyzing text and historical documents

that allows us to find truth in the cacophony of voices that confront us in the social world. To ask where information comes from and why texts are written is to confront the written word as an empowered agent, not a passive consumer (p. 658)

In fact, Loewen (1995) has suggested that history textbooks try to cover too many topics and fail to acquaint students with controversies and historical arguments effectively. He believes that often texts supply information that is irrelevant, wrong, or boring. Ironically, the history texts that Loewen (1995) analyzed present issues in ways that eliminate the controversial, complex, and multifaceted aspects of the real historical experience. Students are left with a watered-down and dry retelling of historical people and happenings that they must commit to memory in order to pass their tests. Rarely, if ever, are social studies students presented with a complex issue that demands research, questioning, and an awareness of various points of view and bias. In short, some textbooks do not facilitate the development of critical thinking. If the textbooks often fail to deliver, current events activities can fill the void, but where can the social studies teacher find the time to add this to an already filled curriculum?

Because the English curriculum in my school does not specify which texts must be used, I have the freedom to choose literature that I feel will help students meet the state language arts standards and, more important, develop critical thinkers. I can use poems, short stories, biographies, novels, and even current events or historical documents and writings that supplement the social studies curriculum and present my students with opportunities to develop critical thinking.

I believe that English and social studies teachers can work together to develop a critical and empowering literacy, and in so doing, will foster skills that enhance student performance on exit exams in both subjects. It is the English teacher who works with students on analyzing a writer's style and craft through literary techniques such as word choice, point of view, tone, and structure, so the English classroom is the natural place to develop an orientation that leads to Wineburg's (2005) "empowered agent."

Improvements on mandated tests

One task on the state's English Regents exit exam requires students to read two pieces of literature that share the same subject or theme such as love, beauty, peace, or parental expectations, and write a unified essay discussing the authors' techniques. Students need to determine a comprehensive sense of the meaning and tone. The two pieces could be revealing a similar theme, such as "beauty can be found in unlikely experiences."

However, just as frequently the literature choices could reveal two differing aspects of the same subject, such as "love can be a life-giving experience or it can be destructive and stifling." Close reading is needed to analyze, interpret, and develop a controlling idea that encompasses the themes in both passages. The literary elements of tone and point of view and the technique of word choice are the primary tools for analysis. For example, a character in a story is not always transparent. The reader must be aware of the character's words and the subtle clues given in his or her descriptions to determine his or her thoughts and feelings. Being aware of the point of view of a story is almost always significant. As readers, we are presented with a version of the facts from a certain character's vantage point. Thinking about the limitations of the character's knowledge throughout the story demands a critical awareness of missing points of view. An author's use of symbols will frequently aid the students as well. All of these considerations are significant tools for students. Clearly, they must juggle many factors to arrive at an interpretation.

Students usually find tone a difficult concept to understand. In fact, they often confuse it with mood. Tone in fiction is a subtle and difficult determination. A reader must realize that the speaker or persona in a poem or story does not always represent the author's attitude, so clues to an author's tone must be inferred from a number of sources. A newspaper article or editorial is an instructive first place for students to experience tone because writers of those pieces have the goal of revealing their attitude to others, and they

commonly use sarcasm. It is helpful for students to identify a writer's attitude or tone in each passage for this exam task and then to explain how that tone was achieved or point of view revealed in order to write a successful essay. I am free to choose any effectively written passages to provide students with the necessary experience to be successful on this task, and I use poems, short stories, current events articles, editorials, essays, and historical documents.

Detecting author tone or bias and making inferences are important skills for the document-based question on the U.S. history Regents exam as well. Students are sometimes given political cartoons to analyze. They must look closely at the caricatures and the words used, and must be aware of the possible use of symbols. They then answer multiple-choice questions regarding the historical significance of the cartoon. The entire document-based question, however, could include up to 10 documents—passages from primary source material, political cartoons, broadsheets—that must be read and analyzed. One theme runs through all of the documents (e.g., immigration), and the students must discern the various positions inherent in each document. The final task is to write a coherent essay using a number of documents in response to a question such as, What have been some of the reasons for immigration to this country? Because the determination of tone, bias, and point of view are the basis for excellent analyses in both the English and history exit exams, why not coordinate efforts in teaching critical awareness? Lessons planned by the teachers will underscore for the students the effectiveness of skills transference. But the choice of lessons for this coordination is a vital step in the strategy.

Using current events for the lessons can spark students' interest, develop critical thinkers, and provide students with the tools to be successful on their exit exams. Issues in the news are complex, and solutions for problems are unclear and complicated by a variety of points of view and interpretations. Current issues and problems are still in flux and do not have the advantage of

time and distance to solidify meaning or interpretation. It is impossible for students to turn to a textbook for an interpretation. Therefore, the social studies curriculum is enhanced by actively engaging students in logical analysis of concrete and timely issues.

If social studies and English teachers work together, they can provide opportunities for students to develop the skills of critical thinking. They will have the added benefit of feeling that they are no longer teaching *to* a test, but rather *for* a test. Moreover, raising students' awareness of the social, political, racial, and economic overtones and ramifications in current news stories helps to empower them with the cultural capital to be effective and powerful citizens. Through careful reading of news stories and through class discussions, students can raise questions that require further research. This research can perhaps reveal some of the forces that marginalize and stifle certain groups in society. Understanding the forces that keep certain groups in a subordinate position is the first step toward action that brings about social change. This is an empowering literacy that can have clear relevance to students' lives.

My next step

I will develop these ideas more effectively as a colleague in the social studies department and I co-teach a joint English and U.S. history class. In the year reported on in this article, my 11th grade students had two different teachers for U.S. history and so it was much more complicated to coordinate and plan activities.

With this new configuration, we can present strategies of critical thinking together to our shared class, showing the students how they can be applied to a history text, editorial, or short story. Because it will be possible for the students to view our class as a combined venture in learning, it will be interesting to see whether there are more instances among the students of transference of critical thinking skills from one subject area to the other. This is an area that concerns me because I

did not see as much evidence of transference as I had hoped. I suspect that through the combined presentation of examples, joint discussions, and coordination of subject matter there will be wider application of such things as point of view and bias. At any rate, I will document our experiences in order to evaluate this new opportunity.

It would be exciting to see more instances of the students reacting to an issue the way they did with global warming. They may decide to participate as young citizens in this society and express their opinions and concerns. As their teachers, we will foster their thinking, support their actions, and advise them when needed, but we will not mandate that they become actively involved in the issues we read about and discuss.

Engaged students become engaged citizens

There are always items and editorials in the news that can be used effectively as a strategy to develop critical thinking. In the beginning, it is important to use articles that have an obvious bias, perhaps revealed through word choice, to give students clear examples to analyze. Word choice reveals tone and the bias, thus establishing the point of view. Articles on almost any political issue are a place to start. Providing both conservative and liberal sides to an issue or providing one side and asking students to research the other are excellent opportunities for students to become literate in political science. The English and social studies teachers can share the responsibility for finding those articles or editorials that will require analysis, inference, logical thinking, and research on the part of the students, or the teachers can ask students to bring in articles. When using this strategy, the teacher becomes more of a facilitator and a guide in the investigative process, providing the students with a more active and responsible role in their learning.

Ultimately, the goal of this strategy is more than just being able to compare and contrast

pieces of writing, determine an author's tone, or pass a test—it is to see literacy as a powerful tool. Being able to read closely, write fluently, and use language advantageously can—as shown by the global warming article (Revkin, 2005)—influence policy and the lives of millions of people. Teaching students to be alert to the power of language and aware that we all have an agenda or point of view can help them guard against being manipulated by what they see, read, and experience in all aspects of the media. This current events strategy refocuses teachers from teaching only to the exit tests to building an empowering literacy that will nurture the critical thinking that will bring success on the tests. The strategy has the added benefit of fostering engagement in the public interest rather than just self-interest, enabling young people to become significant forces for change.

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