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Classroom Newspaper Connections Could Save Our Democracy

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I already knew the answer, but I had to ask the question: “Do you read newspapers?” There was hardly a response from the class. This was not a scientific nationwide study, but rather an informal survey of some 150 northern Michigan high school juniors completing Michigan’s required United States Government course. I surveyed the five US government classes I had been student teaching to complete a master’s degree in education from Michigan’s Ferris State University. The answers were quick—only a few raised their hands in each of the five classes, surveyed just before the end of the school year.

Similar responses were given when asked if they watched the news on television or got some of their news off of the Internet. Yet, a few of those sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds acknowledged they paid attention to the news mostly because their parents did. When I asked how many used online social networks, such as Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>) or MySpace (<http://www.myspace.com>), most popped up their hands. However, they used these sites not for news but to communicate with each other and find out what’s going on in their worlds. When probed further, some students indicated they looked at sports sections for entertainment or classified advertisement sections for jobs and cars, but they had no interest in politics, public affairs or public policy--the main staple of the traditional news media. They identified these subjects as dull.

My guess is that anyone polling the same age group across the United States would discover the similar results based on many newspaper industry studies done during the last decade, as the industry continues to search for ways to capture newspaper

readership, particularly younger readers. It’s not often a veteran journalist gets to spend fifteen weeks with local middle and high school students after retiring as editor and publisher of his community daily newspaper after thirty-four years.

The general student response was only one more alarm of what is happening to a newspaper industry that has been losing circulation since the early 1990s, as people increasingly turn to other media such as the Internet and twenty-four-hour cable news networks for information (Shin). Sadly, the most admired American journalist is not Brian Williams or Tom Brokaw of NBC, Dan Rather, formerly of CBS, or Anderson Cooper of CNN, but fake anchor John Stewart of “The Daily Show” (Kakutani).

With declining audience, shrinking advertising revenue, greater cost burdens and powerful competition, the newspaper industry is getting pulled in every direction and now is wondering what is going to happen after decades of stability and acceptance. Unlike other generations when the average eighteen- to twenty-four-year old joined the newspaper world after college or after establishing his or her life, many young adults today are not subscribing to newspapers, even when the service offered is free. Several newspaper readership studies indicate that while some look at newspapers for hard news and entertainment news, most are looking for information about their lives that they can find more readily from other online sources (Schlagheck). Young adults also reveal that young Americans are becoming increasingly apathetic to public issues (Bennett 535).

These trends are not only troubling for newspapers but also for the future of our democracy. With the apparent indifference to news, particularly political news, the decline in newspaper readership by young adults comes a lessening of available information about government and public policymakers, a key component of basic citizenship needed in a democracy. We need to expose students to good, not dull high school, civics, and try to seek the help of the news media, political parties and public officials. If students do not read, discuss or engage in the issues

through watching or reading the news, a growing number of younger adult citizens will be less knowledgeable about their government and public policy—knowledge of which is important to being a good and responsible citizen.

Similar to what retired Gannett CEO Al Neuharth predicted two years ago in writing about the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) convention in his *USA Today* weekly column, I think newspapers have a bright future, but not without harder work coming from educators, local newspaper editors and publishers working with today's youth. The connections that may lead students to engage more with the news are going to have to come from offering more than different platforms like blogging, niche newspapers, Web sites, podcasts and vodcasts, or other opportunities, although they are part of the equation. Blogging, for example, offers young people many chances to explore a subject of interest to them in greater detail and interact with others instantaneously, unlike a print newspaper (Felix).

What Educators Can Do

Educators, hopefully with the support of local newspapers, need to make news and newspapers real for an entire generation that hardly knows they exist, as many students come from homes that share apparent apathy. If you're not doing so already, you might consider starting with the following activities with your local newspaper or news media outlets. These actions can be employed in a range of courses, particularly English language arts classes, or in collaboration with other schools.

What Teachers Can Do in the Classroom:

- Ask local media professionals to speak regularly at middle or high school government, journalism and writing classes. Make sure you discuss and ask student to prepare advance questions to make the visit beneficial. It is often helpful to send them in advance to your speaker so he or she can focus on the students' and your needs.
- Require regular reading of a newspaper, even sports and lifestyle, during class time to develop a newspaper reading habit. Often local newspapers offer free or low cost subscriptions through Newspaper-In-Education (NIE) programs often

sponsored by local business. Many NIE (<http://www.nieonline.com/>) programs offer teacher guides and professional support. Consider offering a news scavenger hunt, or questions for students to answer while reading, and asking students to share answers in small or whole class discussions.

- Create a "What's in the News" bulletin board, posting several major news stories every day for students to read. This creates news awareness. Don't forget to include articles about your students that appear in the high school or local paper, too.
- Establish a "Reading Minute" (Gallagher), requiring a different student each day to read a text (newspaper, magazine, Web article) that interests him or her for one minute in front of the class, and then requiring the class to write a brief response in their personal journals or log books. This encourages students to search and read texts, think critically and speak publicly.
- Consider using other forms of multi-media communication, i.e., Soundslide (digital images with sound track; see <http://www.soundslides.com/>) or flip video cameras that require students to write scripts on news events and then show them on your class LDC projector, Web site or YouTube.
- Create a classroom "blog" (<http://www.blogger.com>) where students can comment further on the news they have read, discussed or seen during the day or week. You will find many comments on sports, which is a good hook for young readers.

Beyond the Classroom:

- Survey local high schools in your local news market area to identify which middle or high schools have journalism programs, newspapers and electronic opportunities.
- Get existing and potential middle and high school journalism teachers to create a networking community and find out what services they might need.
- Identify community media members that can be teacher contacts and resources during the school year. Encourage local journalism teachers to have students write and photograph events at their school for publication in your newspaper on a regular basis.

- Consider establishing formal relationships with your state (<http://michiganpress.org/>), national press associations like the National Newspaper Association (<http://www.nna.org/>) and American Society of Newspaper Editor's High School Partnership Program and teacher training programs (<http://www.highschooljournalism.org/>). The ASNE site shows not only shows student work with new media, but also offers teachers classroom curriculum ideas that can be used in language arts, as well as journalism classroom teaching.
- Consider working with local media to sponsor workshops for middle and high school journalism, social studies and language arts teachers, featuring an expert or experts on how the newspaper and other media can be used in the classroom.
- Learn about high school and college internships and job shadowing opportunities for your students through local and state professional media associations.
- Most importantly, get the professional media people inside your classrooms to be with students and teachers so long-term relationships can be developed. They just have to be asked and most are more than happy to help.

Making these connections and offering opportunities for students to meet with writing professionals can make a tremendous impact on how students learn to better write, read and think critically, as well as become better future citizens to participate in our democracy.

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About the Author

Ken Winter (kwint@freeway.net) participated in the Michigan State University Red Cedar 2008 Writing Project's "Top-of-the-Mitt" Satellite in Petoskey. Retired in 2006 as editor and publisher of the *Petoskey (MI) News-Review* after working at the newspaper for more than 34 years, Winter completed his master's degree in education with secondary school certification the same year and is an adjunct journalism and political science instructor at North Central Michigan College. He is a retired member of Inland Press Association, American Society of Newspaper Editors and past president of the Michigan Press Association. He currently serves on the Michigan Press and North Central Michigan Foundation boards.