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Newspaper Stories: Creating a Newspaper for a Fictional Community

Donna Duda

Middle school students have a notoriously short attention span; however, they are curious and enthusiastic in active learning environments and have a broad range of interests. Therefore, as a middle school teacher I am especially interested in ways to combine skills with subject matter, individual work with group activities, imagination with information. I also try to integrate the disciplines to create a more complete picture for my students. In the middle levels in particular, it is important to provide students with an atmosphere that really educates them—that not only informs them, but makes sense to them, increases their confidence and self-esteem, and engages them intellectually and imaginatively.

When I first began teaching seventh grade, I tried to remember some of the things that we had done in my own middle school English class that had really interested me, and one of the first things that came to mind was the newspaper we had created for the Yukon Territory community of London's *Call of the Wild*. Of course, then, we did not have much if anything in the way of computer resources or even a Xerox machine. I remember typing up my own little stories, or carefully printing them in my neatest handwriting, and drawing whatever illustrations were needed for the group newspaper. Then, we literally cut and pasted the thing together. I still have a rather wounded purple ditto of this collaged newspaper. I remembered it because it was creative, it was community

building, and I had a product that illustrated the skills and knowledge I'd gained which I could take home to show Mom and Dad and save in my scrapbook. I not only fulfilled assignments; I truly learned by fully participating in the process of acquiring skills, working cooperatively in a group, writing imaginatively.

I created a similar unit for my seventh grade students in an effort to encourage them to enthusiastically enter into the process of learning and provide with them a final product that would demonstrate for them and others what they had learned. In doing this unit with my classes, I have found an amazing breadth and depth of possibilities. The connections between reading and writing, thinking and feeling, fact and opinion, fiction and nonfiction, individual and community, classroom and real life seem limitless, and while they cannot be fully explored in the class, they are demonstrated in various ways throughout the project.

The Assignment

Students are then instructed that they will be writing a local newspaper for the fictional community in a novel. The audience for the newspaper will be the characters from the book, including their neighbors, friends, and families, so the articles should appeal to events and issues that would be important to these people. I have used

Call of the Wild and *Julie of the Wolves* for this project. These novels are rich in setting and storyline; the dramatic events make for good news articles, and the community audience is clearly identifiable in its differences from our own culture. The northern environment and society can be further explored through a trip or two to the library to learn and use library skills or done in conjunction with Social Studies units.

Students are placed in groups of four to create the staff of the newspaper. Each student has a role within the group; the group will work together to accomplish the tasks, but each student is responsible for overseeing a particular part of the process and making sure that it is being completed. The jobs are as follows:

Editor-in-chief makes sure that all the work is equitable, that all requirements are met, and that everything is completed in a timely manner. The editor-in-chief is the primary coordinator and coach for the group.

Proof-reader insures that the articles are edited and the final copies are correct.

Typesetter is in charge of seeing that everything is typed up accordingly. (In my class, we used the Macintosh word processing program and did much of this work in the computer lab both during English and computer classes.) The typesetter's job was to make sure that all articles were saved on a single disk and to help anyone who needed assistance with typing their stories.

Layout Designer designs and prepares, on PageMaker or with scissors and tape, the final layout and hard-copy of the paper. The group helps to decide where stories and photos go, but the layout designer is the one in front of the keyboard (or with the tape).

In addition to these group responsibilities, each student is a staff reporter and must write three papers: a news story based on an event in the story (about 300 words), a feature article that would appeal to a person of the fictional audience (about 200 words), and an editorial reflecting some issue brought up or implied by the text (about 100 words). Groups hold staff meetings to brainstorm ideas for each type of article and then negotiate reporter assignments.

Reading

In this unit, students are simultaneously exposed to fiction and non-fiction and are challenged to discover the similarities and differences in their reading process for various kinds of readings.

Skimming and Scanning

While the students are reading the novel on their own, the class is introduced to the local newspaper. Students learn skimming and scanning techniques for finding information in the layout of the newspaper and in the articles, and they learn how to "read" illustrations, photos, graphs and other forms of listed information.

After an introduction to the vocabulary of the newspaper and skimming and scanning techniques, students get into their groups, each group with an edition of the local newspaper. Students are then given a list of questions about the newspaper which will require them to skim and scan the newspaper and handouts in order to answer. Some of these questions include:

1. What is on the nameplate of your newspaper?
2. What is in the ears of the newspaper?
3. What are the date, edition, cost of the newspaper? Where do you find this information?
4. What is the by-line of the major front-page article?
5. Look at the datelines. How many articles on the front page are not from the area? Why are these stories included in a local paper?
6. Do all of the photographs in a section go with an article? If not, why are they included on that page?
7. How many photographs are on the front page? Measure the area of the front page. Measure the area of each picture on that page. Add the areas of the photographs together. What percentage of the page is used for photographs? Why do you think photographs are important?
8. Where is the main index? How is the index important?
9. List the different sections of your newspaper. What kinds of information is included in each section?

Barrow Today

Friday, January 23, 1994

Price: 15 cents

Girl Missing

By Lisa Garthrite

Alaska-Eskimo girl Miyax Kapugen is lost. She has been missing since autumn. Her father Kapugen has been looking for her for months, and has set up a search crew.

Miyax, a thirteen-year-old girl, is presumed lost. Her recently married husband Daniel has been searching for his wife with his father-in-law since the beginning of autumn. The night before she left, a number of towns people, and a friend of Miyax's told reporters that she and Daniel always fought. Naka, Daniel's mother, also told reporter that when Miyax was five years old she and Kapugen arranged their marriage. The search crew has been searching in the city of Barrow.

Yesterday the people in the search crew had a meeting and

have made the search wider by getting more people, and will also start searching in other parts of Alaska. If you can join the search crew, there will be a meeting on Monday at Adam's General Store in Barrow.

Alaskan-Eskimo girl Miyax Julie Edwards, before she was lost.

Father Returns from Grave

by Erica Girarid

Last year Kapugen Edwards, Eskimo hunter, was presumed dead after he didn't return from a fishing trip, and his damaged canoe was found on an eastern coast.

Last week he was discovered by his daughter, Miyax. Who was quoted saying after the discovery, "It was terrible! I trudged across the frozen tundra to find my father in airplanes! He as given up our traditional ways." Some people were very upset after finding Kapugen after all these years. His sister, Martha, tells us what she thinks: "If you are going to disappear as dead, then stay dead because one day

(Continued on page 2)

Bladder Feast

by Dawn Sokolowski

The Bladder Feast is next week at the seal camp, and the inhabitants of the camp will be performing the annual ceremony. A few days walk from Mekoryuk. The Bladder feast is an old Eskimo tradition that is still celebrated every year.

(Continued on page 2)

Barrow Today Staff

Lisa Garthrite

Erica Girardi

Dawn Sokolowski

Rachael Vinocur

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At the seal camp Kapugen and Naka are with a seal that they have killed.

Bladder Feast (Continued from page 1)

Seal bladders are blown up and returned to the ocean. It is believed that when the seal bladders are put into the ocean, the spirits that lived in the bladders go into the new baby seals.

At last year's feast, Naka, who is a resident of the seal camp, played one of the spirits. He said, "The Bladder Feast is very important because it lets the spirits into the baby seals so that we may have more seals for the future."

Miyax, a little girl who attended the Bladder Feast last year, said that she was frightened of the spirit mask. When she had the courage to look under the mask, she saw Naka who was a friend of her father.

Atic, who was one of the older men at the Feast, said that when they took the bladders out to the ocean, his spirit felt uplifted.

Kapugen blew up the bladders at the Feast and thought that the Bladder Feast was wonderful because it was rewarding to let the baby seals have a soul because they needed to have someone who cares about them.

When we honor the seals and make them a part of our life, we learn to love them as if they were our own.

Girl Lost in Wilderness

by Rachael Vinocur

Thirteen-year-old Eskimo girl, Miyax Julie Edwards, was lost for six months, on the North Slope of Alaska, but survived with a pack of wolves adopting her.

Miyax survived on the North Slope of Alaska with only a ulu, a pot, a sleeping sack, matches, and some food that quickly ran out. She hunted for her food with help from her wolf friends. After being lost she was quickly adopted by a pack of wolves, who brought her meat and protection. Some of the wolves she named were Amaroq, Kapu, Silver, and Jello. Amaroq was the leader of the wolf pack. Miyax's favorite wolf was Kapu. She liked him because he is "Smart, adorable, and brave. He takes after his father."

Miyax left her home because of her husband, Daniel, and because the people she lived with at that time were very abusive to each other, and Miyax couldn't take it.

Miyax was on her way to San Francisco to meet her pen pal friend Amy Pollock. They had exchanged letters for a long time before Miyax left.

Miyax learned her Eskimo ways from her father Kapugen,

brave and smart towards Mother Nature. When Miyax was nine, she and Kapugen spend their days on the Seal Camp. Miyax stayed with her father until she had to go to school. She stayed with her aunt and went to school, until she was thirteen and then she went to live with Daniel and his parents, until she left to live in the wilderness.

So, Miyax Julie Edwards survived, and now that's all that matters. She is now living in Alaska with her father. Miyax is now a her, and people call her "Julie of the Wolves."

Return from Grave

(Continued from page 1)

you will really die, and we have to go through this all over again. Poor Miyax, she'll have to go through it all over someday."

We took a survey of all the people who knew Kapugen. 34% said it is great that he came back and made himself known. Another 66% say he should not have come back after all this time. Miyax would not take a survey.

For the past year Kapugen had been living with a gussack that he had married. She has greatly influenced his life style. She had changed the Eskimo hunter into an eastern pilot. His daughter Miyax after hesitation, has decided to stay with him. It has been put into the city file that he is alive, yet a lot of people are not happy.

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JOB WANTED!

Apply now for a job on the Barrow Today staff as a copy boy or girl.

10. What is the difference between major news articles, feature stories, and editorials?

While students energetically search through the pages of the newspaper, I circulate around the room to field questions. The scavenger hunts not only familiarize students with the terminology of the newspaper and give them practice with skimming and scanning, but they also familiarize the students with the layout of a newspaper. Questions for class discussion might include: How has the role of the newspaper changed throughout American history? What role does the newspaper play in our society?

Differentiating between Fact and Opinion

The distinction between what is real and what is imagined, or created, can become very hazy in our world today. Students need to learn how to discover clues and techniques to read critically and form their own opinions. By comparing news articles to editorials, feature stories, and advertisements, students can better see the differences between fact and opinion. One of the techniques I use is to have the students compare a news article from the front page of the local paper and an editorial or feature story. Students circle all of the judgmental statements or words, including all adjectives and adverbs and compare their frequency in the different kinds of writing. By summarizing what the articles are saying, students can then see what the author is trying to accomplish. This provides a perfect opportunity to discuss purpose, style, and audience.

A good group activity to demonstrate the relationship between informing and persuading is to create a product for their particular audience, to list factual characteristics of the product, and then determine a persuasive way to present it in a newspaper ad.

Beyond the Text

By working as members of the fictional community on the "local" newspaper, students discover an added dimension to the novel. By revisiting the events in the novel as a "reporter," students not only gain insight into character, but in circumstance, environment, and culture. They step into the setting and become participants "observing," "interviewing," and "reporting." By

role-playing or imagining themselves as characters, students are able to explore the text from an inside perspective, and the horizon of the story is expanded beyond the pages and the plot line to encompass the whole world of the characters, in time, place, associations, and possibilities.

Writing

The News Story

Students learn the differences between an essay and a news article; how to use the "inverted pyramid" form and write a good lead. Students use whatever information is included in the novel for the facts of their article, but they are encouraged to imaginatively expand upon the news story by creating additional details or role-playing interviews with other students who pretend to be characters from the novel or "eyewitnesses" to make the article more realistic. Rewriting and expanding upon the events depicted in the story give students a chance to write creatively within a clearly-guided format.

Feature Articles

In groups, students explore the different kinds of feature stories in their local newspaper, and we discuss the differences between a feature story and a news article. Each student will write a different kind of feature story for their newspaper. One student may write a review of an imaginary restaurant that would serve local cuisine; another may write a story on the fashions of the time or area; another may report on a local sporting event, like the Iditarod. Students also gather information from outside resources, their social studies class or the library, to research possible topics for feature articles, such as the food, fashion, sports, festivals, and concerns of the culture or community depicted in the novel.

Editorials

For the editorial story, students may choose one or two issues that are touched upon in some way in the novel. In *Julie of the Wolves*, it could be a comment on the tradition of arranged marriages, the influence of American culture on the native Inuit way of life, the problems of alcohol in the village, or cruelty to animals. Within each

group, students may choose to write as specific characters in the novel or as imaginary citizens. Students may also choose to write in response to an editorial written by someone else. In this way, students are encouraged to try to understand and see through the perspectives of others.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a big part of this activity, but it is not overwhelming. A spirit of cooperation rather than competition is fostered through their common goal and the fact that each student has specific functions as an individual reporter and as a member of the newspaper staff.

Staff Meetings

Students meet as a group regularly in class to determine who is writing what articles so that there is no repetition in their newspaper. They also use this time to help each other brainstorm article topics and ideas and offer suggestions to each other. Once the articles are drafted, they are brought to the group for peer response to determine whether the form and language is appropriate for the assignment (news article, feature story, or editorial) and for proofreading by the group. At this stage I usually take up copies of the articles as well to make sure that they are on the right track and offer additional feedback before their final grade.

Collaborative Writing

In addition to their individual feature assignments, the group will collaboratively write a review of the novel itself to include amongst their feature articles.

Putting It Together

The time in which students work most closely is when they put the newspaper together, whether it is on the computer or pieced together from articles printed with the appropriate column width. Although this activity can be accomplished without computers, as I did myself in the seventh grade, this is a perfect opportunity to introduce students to desktop publishing. This would provide an excellent opportunity for team-teaching

or "working together separately" with the computer teacher or other knowledgeable person.

I taught at a seventh through twelfth grade school, and the middle school students often felt left out from many of the school activities. Giving them the computer skills using PageMaker or the layout capacities of the word processing programs provide them with the confidence and know-how to volunteer for yearbook, newspaper, or literary magazine staffs. Because I have done a lot of desktop publishing myself, I was able to conduct much of the necessary introduction to PageMaker myself. Students were enrolled in a computer class at the time and had learned the basics of word processing and even some graphing and illustration. I was able to work in conjunction with the computer instructor to make further connections between our subjects. Students began to understand the possible uses of computers beyond using it as a glorified typewriter. Using the computer not only provided students with practical applications of the technological skills they acquired, but also helped them to recognize the exciting possibilities of such technology.

When the final newspapers were printed up, I made enough copies for each student in the class as well as for various members of our school community. In addition to the benefit to the students, the final culmination of all the activities in the students' newspapers can document for the community and administration the more sophisticated application of both the hardware and software of the school's computer facilities. Such work can be impressive evidence for students, parents, administrators, and community of the skills and knowledge the students have gained as well as the effective use of available technology.

Evaluation

Students are evaluated according both to their individual work and their participation in the group. As a reporter, each student is evaluated individually; the stories that they are assigned are graded according to purpose, content, and form. The newspaper itself and the efforts of the staff also receive a grade reflecting general participation, cooperation, and presentation. Additional work, such as a weather report, advertisements, advice columns, and classifieds could

be included for extra credit. The students enjoy this part almost more than the articles, not only because it is extra credit, but also because they can really go crazy and get very creative with them.

I have found that this unit provides students with not only the tools to read, interpret, and understand the different kinds of texts, but also to demonstrate in a culminating project, the

students' ability to both assimilate and create similar texts, making it a successful learning experience for all.

About the Author

Donna Duda taught ESL and English at The Andrews School, Willoughby, OH , was Visiting High School Teacher at Ohio University and is currently teaching English at Webb School of Knoxville in Tennessee.