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BLACK, WHITE, AND READ ALL OVER: The Newspaper in Education

Margaret Franson

What's black and white, blue, yellow and green, and read all over Michigan classrooms?

It's **The Detroit News, The Grand Rapids Press, The Muskegon Chronicle, The Kalamazoo Gazette**, and scores of other newspapers.

What's helping students find connections between FDR and Ronald Reagan, between the Wright brothers and the space shuttle astronauts, between the Great Depression of the 1930's and economic recovery in the 1980's?

It's **The Saginaw News, The Lansing State Journal, and The Mount Pleasant Morning Sun**.

What's helping fourth graders skim and scan, sixth graders distinguish fact from opinion, eighth graders discern and interpret, twelfth graders read for pleasure? It's the newspaper — an instructional resource uncommonly rich, accessible, easy to use, effective, and affordable.



Margaret Franson
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I
No doubt the newspaper has served as a tool for learning since the first (and only) issue of **Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestic** was published in Boston in 1690. From the early days of Colonial America, reading the newspaper was a mark of a well-educated person. During the Revolution, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson explicitly advocated newspaper reading as a means of inspiring and educating the public about the vital issues and opinions of the day. Between about 1779 and 1945, the number of newspaper published in the United States grew from about 35 scattered publications to 1,749 daily newspapers.

Following World War II, a dramatic new medium that could be used for the dissemination of information and opinion was born. Television news broadcasts began to offer the American public another way to learn much of what was happening in the ever-widening world around them. TV news viewing quickly became as much a part of the routine of American life as newspaper reading had been for two centuries.

Far-sighted educators and newspaper professionals began to fear that if young people learned to rely on television news programs as their only source of news, the skills, pleasures, and values of newspaper reading that had sustained past generations might be lost to them. As the newspaper industry realized the need to protect and encourage a "future audience" of newspaper readers, the educational community recognized an historic responsibility to teach the traditions of freedom of the press and to provide young people with the tools to understand the newspaper and read it intelligently.

The newspaper in education "movement" began in the 1950's as a result of this shared concern and responsibility. Today, more than half the daily newspapers and many weekly papers in the United States and Canada offer the schools in their communities support for fostering newspaper reading among students. Thousands of schools participate in NIE programs sponsored by newspapers ranging in size from the largest metropolitan dailies to the smallest local papers.

Professional organizations of educators and newspaper people support newspaper in education activities. For example, the International Reading Association and The American Newspaper Publishers Association promote "Newspaper in Education Week" each year. The goal of NIE Week is to help both newspapers and schools focus on the value of the newspaper as an educational aid and promote the development of newspaper reading skills among students.

Educational publishing companies also assist the newspaper industry and the schools with NIE materials and services. In some communities local businesses and institutions lend financial support to NIE programs, viewing these efforts as paths to building civic and economic literacy in their areas.

II

The Goals of Newspaper in Education Programs

Most educators and newspaper professional agree that NIE programs should develop in young people:

- a continuing desire and ability to read a newspaper critically and reflectively;
- a concern for public issues and the motivation to involve themselves in our self-governing process; and
- an understanding of the history and present-day role of the free press in our society.

Thousands of teachers have discovered that the newspaper is also an excellent curriculum resource in the content areas. For social studies and science, economics and art, physical education and home economics the daily newspaper is the most up-to-date "textbook" available.

Today's students use standard textbooks that are, by nature, out of date even before

the day they are published. Textbooks simply cannot be written, published and distributed fast enough to keep pace with the history being made today. The newspaper bridges the gap between the textbook and new developments, and reinforces the textbooks current by supplementing them with new information that has appeared — in the newspaper — since their classroom texts were copyrighted.

III

NIE and the Reading Teacher

Many teachers ask: "How readable is the newspaper for my students? Aren't newspapers written at a sixth grade (twelfth grade, eighth grade, third grade) reading comprehension level?"

Yes! All these and every level in between. A test for estimating readability developed by Edward Fry, Rutgers University Reading Center, New Jersey, and similar instruments indicate that a typical issue of a daily newspaper includes material written at comprehension levels ranging from third grade to upper college.¹

"Pre-readers" can "read" many newspaper photographs, identify the letters in bold type faces, and find pictures of familiar grocery items. Beginning readers can read headlines, picture captions, and advertising copy. Intermediate level readers have skills to understand many feature stories, comic strips, and classified ads. The most advanced readers will be challenged by editorials, syndicated columns, and in-depth news stories.

There are at least three distinct areas in which the newspaper can be a valuable teaching/learning resource for the reading teacher: 1) Motivating reading; 2) Building reading skills; and 3) Instilling a life-long reading habit.

Motivating reading

Each day the newspaper produces a remarkable collection of stimulating and compelling reading material geared to a variety of interests and ability levels. Some section of the paper — the sports, comics, classified ads, features, local news — is bound to motivate even the most apathetic or reluctant reader.

Every teacher who has used the newspaper as a motivating tool has a favorite

"success story." In an essay in **The Journal of Reading**, Laura S. Johnson describes a particularly inspiring case — a boy who would not even come in and sit down the first day. "I ain't readin', period," he said, and then he just stood in the door looking at the clock out in the hall for the entire 45 minutes. He was the head stock boy in a large supermarket with thousands of items. I knew he was bright even though he swore he'd never need to know more than how to read cans.

envelope filled with the cut-up pages of his company's weekly newspaper ads. I asked him to reconstruct the layouts. To prove how well he knew his stock, he did the whole job in record time, right down to the last can of pears."

Johnson concludes, "We went on to become friends, and by the time school was out, he had read enough in the newspaper about campus riots and other school problems to present on videotape a pointed analysis of how schools can fail some children, notably those like himself."²

This is not an isolated example. Yet, teachers who have never used the newspaper are often surprised at how appealing it is to young people and how many different sections of the paper — not just the news stories — can motivate reading. For example, the "personal advice" columns (Dear Abby, Ann Landers) have the highest readership of any newspaper feature — about 97%. Based on this popularity among all readers, many teachers have put the personal advice columns to work to motivate slow or reluctant readers.

Here's an example of a strategy that builds on a student's natural interest in these features and moves to exercising reading and language skills: First, for several days provide each student (or team of students) with a current newspaper containing a personal advice column. Direct students to read the column.

Ask if they might have different advice or commentary on the question posed or opinion offered by the writer; whether or not they have asked anyone for advice, and so on.

Next, you might expand your students' appreciation of the form of these features by pointing out that these columns usually offer character, setting, conflict, resolution, just as

most "book" literature does. Often students will be quick to see and able to imitate the style of the writer's column.

Finally, suggest that students write letters to "Abby" or "Ann Landers" or other advice columnists from the point of view of people in the news or of famous characters in books they have read. For example, a student might use Herman Melville's **Moby Dick** as his inspiration to write: "Dear Abby, Call me Ishmael. I work on a whaling boat. My skipper is a very able seaman, but frankly, Abby, the boys and I are beginning to worry about him. You see, he has this obsession about a huge, white whale."³

Building reading skills: The newspaper is an ideal "real life" medium on which to practice reading skills. Students readily accept it as a resource. An average or above average reader feels "grown up" and important carrying a newspaper and using it in class. A remedial reading student sees the newspaper as an "adult medium" that does not carry the stigma of being "remedial" or identifiably beneath his or her grade level. This makes the job of the reading teacher infinitely easier.

The newspaper is an inexpensive and readily available resource for developing general proficiencies in reading, and a tool for developing critical reading skills and behaviors specific to interpreting the news media. Here are two activities for practice in the general skill of scanning: 1) The front page of the newspaper contains brief statements of useful information that may not be immediately apparent to the young or less able reader. Drill students so they can scan the front page(s) to quickly find the following items: the name of the newspaper, the city in which the paper is published, the price of the paper, the total number of pages in the paper, the date, the weather, the times of tides or sunrise and sunset, and the index.⁴

2) Before your reading session, scan the newspaper yourself and create a "treasure hunt" for information students must find and circle in the newspaper as they begin their reading lesson. Make a list of items to find in the paper or questions to answer from their scanning. You might include: the price of a pound of ground beef in a particular grocery advertisement; the monthly rent of the first two bedroom apartment listed in the classified ads; the name of the mayor of a

local community; an article about an animal; a comic strip that shows a woman at work outside the home; the time a certain movie is playing at a local theatre.⁵

Both of these exercises can help students master a basic reading technique. They also show in a subtle way how much information a newspaper can provide.

A good newspaper reader exhibits skills specific to the comprehension and appreciation of reportage. Here is an activity that introduces a skill specific to intelligent news reading — identifying “qualifiers” in news texts: Explain to your students that newspaper reporters sometimes cannot get all the facts about a late-breaking news story before press time. In such cases they often use qualifiers in their stories such as “*it appeared that,*” “*it is believed that,*” and so on. Explain that careful newspaper readers are aware of these qualifiers and by learning to recognize qualifiers, students heighten their reading discernment. Then, have students read the newspaper and find as many qualifiers as they can. Ask the more advanced students to discuss whether the qualifiers they found were used appropriately.⁶

Instilling a life-long reading habit: Many educators believe that “*aliteracy*” — the lack of a desire to read — is as dangerous as illiteracy. Newspaper professionals often share this view.

In a recent address to newspaper executives, Harvey C. Jacobs, editor of the **Indianapolis News** observed, “*(there) are signs that the typical family is not oriented toward daily reading — in a society saturated with communications. It is ironic that information in depth, as newspapers try to present, is not as popular as it used to be.*”⁷

If this is true, it is especially fortunate that thousands of teachers have already recognized the importance of introducing students to the enormous benefits and pleasures of habitual newspaper reading. Their efforts have had positive results.

A 1977 study of the reading habits of a national sample of adults conducted by the Newspaper Advertising Bureau found that childhood exposure to newspapers at home and in school has a positive effect on adult newspaper reading.⁸

Another NAB study conducted in 1978 with students aged 6-17 showed that using newspapers in school has positive effects on

children's attitudes toward newspapers, their newspaper readership and their social and political awareness and interest.⁹

A 1980 NAB study of America's children and the mass media concluded: “*Use of the newspaper (as an educational tool) engenders favorable attitudes toward it, improves reading competency, and builds in newspaper reading. It contributes measurably to a widening of children's knowledge about and interest in the wider political and social world. In these senses the newspaper makes a real contribution to children's development.*”¹⁰

In a 1984 survey of 500 Michigan teachers participating in the **Detroit News** newspaper in education program, conducted by Knowledge Unlimited, Inc., 100% reported their students were reading the newspaper at least “*a little more often*” as a result of the program. 82% selected the two highest frequency categories “*more often*” and “*much more often.*”

In the same survey, a Farmington teacher called the newspaper in education, “*a wonderful program for special ed students. Their awareness of current events has increased 100%....reading levels have come up.*” An Ann Arbor teacher described the NIE program as an “*excellent stimulator to newspaper reading...broadening students' minds and attitudes.*”¹¹

IV

In this era of dazzling electronic communications, the newspaper is still the most available, complete, and retrievable source of news. It is a living daily record of a living, changing world. From news stories and comics to features, obituaries and want ads, the newspaper is a mirror of the society in which students will spend the rest of their lives. It is the pre-eminent medium of historical record.

Perhaps most important, the newspaper is the most widely and consistently read piece of literature published. It is most likely the only publication the majority of students will read throughout their lives. On this basis alone the newspaper should have a prominent place in elementary and secondary school curricula.¹²

If we educators believe that it is our particular mission to give our students the knowledge and skills to interpret and respond

effectively and sensitively to the world around them, we cannot ignore teaching them to read newspapers intelligently. As Thomas Jefferson declared, "When the press is free and every man is able to read, all is safe." For the teacher, especially the teacher of reading, the key phrase is "every man able to read." No job is more important than ensuring this is so.

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