

2009

**About Face International
One Article per Day**

Karyn E. Vostok

[NEED AND VALUE OF CURRENT-EVENT STUDY]

Current-event work gives students insight into their subject matter by correlating present-day problems with what they are learning in the classroom.



Need and Value of Current-Event Study

“Much has been said and written on the utility of newspapers; but one principal advantage which might be derived from these publications has been neglected; we mean that of reading them in schools.” *The Portland Easter Herald*, June 8, 1795

Educators often express their concern on how the material being taught in their classes lacks a personal appeal to the student. Too many students become discouraged in learning, for the material is presented in context of past times or in faraway lands whether it is the characters in required reading, calculations in math, or lab experiments in the sciences. Furthermore, what often gets lost in today’s middle school and high school curriculum is that the idea of concepts, principles and values developed through time are relevant in the student’s present world. Historical perspective is important in preparing the student for college but applying that knowledge to the present will prepare the student as an informed citizen capable of making their own decisions and forming their own opinions in the classroom of life. Everyone can agree that a middle or high school student has limited life experiences simply due to their age. It is for this very reason why these students have a hard time relating to the subject matter in many of their studies. For example, a student named Mike is told by his teacher about the awful character of Nero. Nero had poisoned his courtiers, kicked his wife, killed his mother, and longed to sever the heads of all his subjects with a single stroke of an axe. When the teacher asked Mike what he thought of Nero, Mike replied, “Huh, he never done nothing to me!” Mike’s disconnect with Nero is due to his lack of personal experiences or knowledge of current-events which typify the Nero character. The study of current-events will provide a reference point which would otherwise be acquired through life long experiences. Learning becomes fun and interesting when you can relate the concepts within ones world of experiences or reference points.

In addition to, one of the fundamental criteria for judging good teaching is the opportunity given to students during the progress of their work to do concrete and objective thinking. By noting comparisons and contrasts in past and present-day life, by seeing the beginnings in the past of our present-day institutions and customs, and by the constant illumination of the past by means of the present, and vice versa, the students are afforded much opportunity for concrete and objective thinking –something greatly needed because of the abstract nature of so much of the material with which the students work.

If one vies current-event work in middle school and high school courses from the angle of its value, both teachers and students may consider the applications and implications of the subject matter. This act of concrete and objective thinking will give students insight as to why the subject matter is important and applicable to the “real world.” It will also allow them to engage in the subject matter instead of being passive learners where the student merely memorizes facts and figures. And, lastly, adding current-event work to the subject matter will allow students to understand what long term careers are available for subjects they find of interest. This will allow students to focus on an end-result for their education and career instead of the end-goal being graduating high school or acceptance into college.

For an example of how current-event work benefits students, let us look at the case of Lisa. Lisa is a high school junior who takes Advance Placement and Honors classes and is very involved in campus life. She isn’t the type of student a teacher would see as needing extra attention as she receives almost all As on her report card, serves on student government, and is captain of the track team. However, the hidden reality is that what Lisa has become very good at is working the high school educational system. She is very good at memorizing facts and figures. She knows how to listen in class and put the opinions discussed in class into a reasonably well-written paper. Lisa participates in school activities that are within her comfort zone. Because those were the activities her friends were doing, she too decided to participate. Lisa sometimes becomes bored at school because instead of using high school to actively explore interests, she instead is passively completing mental checkboxes of what she knows will get her



Need and Value of Current-Event Study

into a good college. Advance placement courses. Check. Good grades. Check. Involvement in extracurricular activities. Check. Leadership positions. Check.

It was Lisa's science teacher who began introducing current-events work into his syllabus. Once a week, Lisa was given the assignment of reading a pre-chosen article from a newspaper, magazine, or journal and to write a three to four paragraph reaction paper regarding the piece. The class would also discuss the article of the week for twenty minutes each Friday. By reading and discussing these articles, Lisa learned about Zipf's law and how no one has completely solved it from physicists and biologists to economists and mathematicians. The article she read made an argument about how the movement of the molecules in our body mirrors the decisions we make in urban planning. Lisa had always enjoyed her biology classes in learning how living things worked, but her fainting spells from blood made her conclude she did not want to become a doctor. Her lack of interest in lab work also made her realize that she did not want to be a lab scientist. Excited by the prospect of urban planning, Lisa began to take an active interest in it by researching urban planning via Internet and borrowing books from the library. Through her independent studies, she decided to use her role in student government to better the school environment for her peers. From that point on, Lisa took a real interest in her science, history, mathematics, and English classes. Her education no longer became an item on a list to cross off. It rather became a tool which she knew she would have to understand in order to become an urban planner.

Brian is a high school sophomore at an inner-city school. He never met his father, and his Mom works at both Wal-Mart and Denny's to pay the bills. His Mom's long work-day doesn't allow for him to see his Mom very much, and he spends his after-school time watching his two-year old niece while his Aunt is working. The teachers at Brian's high school know that Brian is a very responsible individual in his personal life. However, they are having difficulty getting him to complete his school assignments on time, if at all. Brian also does not have the motivation to write good papers and get good grades on exams. Because of this, Brian's teachers worry that unless they see significant improvements, Brian will have to repeat his sophomore year.

After first semester, Brian's history teacher began introducing an article per week for his students to read. The students were assigned to write a reaction paper to the article and participate in the weekly discussions conducted every Thursday. While Brian had yet to do well in a course, history was by far his least favorite. He couldn't understand how learning about the past could be important or useful. Through his current-event work, he became particularly interested in the commentary surrounding the dot-com bubble. It amazed him how the dot-com bubble we experienced in the U.S. affected other countries and people worldwide. He could now understand why studying past trends and recessions were not only important but essential in understanding today. Furthermore, he started noticing that economists were referenced throughout his current-event literature. Brian decided that instead of working in the lumber yard like his older brother upon graduating from high school he wanted to become an economist. One day after class, he hesitantly approached his teacher and asked how one becomes an economist. His history teacher explained that in order to become an economist, he would have to get good grades in history and mathematics in addition to his other subjects, continue to read and educate himself about the economy, and get accepted into a four-year university. Depending on the type of economic issues he wanted to study, he may have to go to graduate school and become a doctorate. His history teacher reiterated the fact that Brian would have to begin taking his school work seriously and would have to make changes in his study habits to achieve his new interest in becoming an economist.

It didn't happen immediately, but Brian slowly improved in school. To his teacher's surprise, Brian ended up with a C average his sophomore year. In his junior year, he ended up with a solid B average, and his senior year of high school he held a B+ average all year. Brian was the first person in his family to attend college. He found



college difficult, but he managed to graduate in 4.5 years with high honors in economics. Today he works for an investment bank.

To summarize,

1. Current-event work gives student insight into their subject matter by correlating present-day problems with what they are learning in the classroom.
2. Students who read newspapers and current-event related articles tend to score higher on standardized achievement tests –particularly in reading, math, and social sciences—than those who don't use them.
3. Current-event work can help develop and improve student vocabulary, word recognition skills, and comprehension.
4. Current-event work allows students to understand their school work is practical and in constant demand.
5. Current-event work teaches students that knowledge of the student's relation to current happenings is of first importance to be a good citizen.
6. Current-event work shows students that interest in any work is of prime importance.
7. Students who have current-event study tend to create and sustain an interest in coursework.
8. Current-event work gives the student the opportunity to evaluate a magazine or newspaper article and decide upon its true worth, thus preventing an acceptance of everything read.
9. Current-event work develops the student's power of expression and the ability to make themselves clear and interesting to companions.
10. After thorough training in current-event work, the students will as citizens take increased and active interest in civic, political, and worldly affairs.
11. Current-event work shows the student that most questions have two sides and therefore need much study, fostering the habit of considering questions from the standpoint of reason and judgment.
12. And, lastly, it acquaints young people with the right sort of current literature to read.

This array of values in current-event work is only half the story, however. The real value can be found in what students have to say about it.

1. It not only gives you an idea of what is going on around you but it also gives you a feeling that it is your duty to find out what is going on in your city, state, and nation, and among other nations.
2. It gets one into the habit of reading about important topics, a habit that is pretty hard to get rid of, and one that we don't want to get rid of.
3. It enables one to find out what is going on in foreign countries, and shows the attitude of our country toward other countries.
4. It makes better citizens because pupils begin to look into matters and they will be apt to continue doing so, which will mean that they will not vote a certain party ticket because their father's did.
5. It prepares one for a respectable standing among intelligent men, and enables one to talk about politics and understand when others are talking about the government and daily occurrences.
6. Perhaps the greatest and most forcible reason for studying current events is that to be an intelligent voter one must have a clear idea of the great issues of the day, which can be gained (practically speaking) in no other way than by a study of current events and movements.



About Face International | One Article per Day

Need and Value of Current-Event Study

If you are interested in reading more on how current-event work can improve middle school and high school education, About Face International's *One Article per Day* recommends the book [The Newspaper: A Reference for Teachers and Librarians](#) by Edward F. DeRoche, dean of the School of Education at the University of San Diego.

One Article per Day, www.onearticleperday.com, is brought to you by **About Face International**, www.aboutfaceintl.org, a 501©3 status organization dedicated to changing the world through social entrepreneurship and productive discussion. *One Article per Day* is designed to foster a more robust civil society, a more cohesive and interactive communities, greater literacy, and a more informed and engaged citizenry. One of the ways in which we do this is by offering middle school, high school, and college educators current-event curriculum that will teach students to be active participants in society in addition to supplementing their classroom education. To learn more, call 617.972.2474 or email classroom@onearticleperday.com.