

# PRESENTOLOGY (The Study of the Present)



**Background:** Early in my teaching career, I was a junior high school social studies teacher. Part of my teaching assignment was teaching a “current events course.” The texts I used were the local and state newspapers. Our intent, at the time, was to engage students in a study of and conversations about what was going on in their community and in the world, and why.

As a result of these experiences, I wrote three books on the use of newspapers in classrooms: [Project Update: The Newspaper In The Elementary And Junior High Classroom](#), [Character Matters: Using Newspapers To Teach Character](#) (co-authored), and [The Newspaper: A Reference for Teachers and Librarians](#).

## WHY Teach Current Events (CE)?

Here are six reasons for having CE become a key part of your classroom and school's curriculum.

- 1) Your students are already talking about what is going on in their world and the “real world” anyway, so under your guidance, take time each day to let them talk about current events—hearing and discussing multiple issues respectfully.
- 2) A CE curriculum will introduce your students to a wide range of new content—*the more you know, the more you grow.*
- 3) A CE curriculum will contribute to creating, hopefully, students who are informed, engage, active citizens as well as lifelong news readers.
- 4) A CE program will provide the opportunity for teachers to help students develop digital media literacy skills, improve reading comprehension, critical thinking, problem solving, oral expression, and listening skills.
- 5) A CE program will encourage your students to improve their language, vocabulary, and writing skills especially using the “news style”—Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How—also an important skill for summarizing and interpreting digital content.
- 6) Most CE teachers report that they tend to use a variety of grouping methods in their classroom as student collaborate to study, discuss, and debate issues and events.

Prior to the advent of digital media and technology, research using newspapers (the print copies) and current events in classroom showed:

- Students who use newspapers tend to score higher on standardized achievement tests—particularly in reading, math, and social studies—than those who don't use them.
- Newspaper use helps teach students to be effective readers.
- Reading newspapers can help develop and improve student vocabulary, word recognition skills, and comprehension.
- Newspapers are effective tools for teaching many math concepts, particularly fractions, decimals, currency, and averages.
- In surveys, students overwhelmingly support the use of newspapers in the classroom and have a positive attitude toward reading newspapers.
- Using newspapers increase awareness of and interest in current events.
- Students who read newspapers in school tend to continue reading them when they become adults.

My original guess was that the findings above would be the same for students in today's schools and classrooms where using technology (online learning), digital media, and social posts, for the teaching and learning of currents events and citizenship is common.

I was wrong.

One of my colleagues sent me an article with the headline: "*Study: U.S. adults who mostly rely on social media for news are less informed, exposed to more conspiracies.*"

Another suggested that I look at the Pew Foundation study that found "*more Americans get their news from social media than from newspapers, that people who use social media for news are less knowledgeable than other news consumers, that they are also more likely to see and believe misinformation, and are not as concerned about it as people who consume news elsewhere.*"

If that was not surprising enough, a CERC advisory committee member sent me an article on the "*state of civics instruction*" in which several surveys found that "*barely one in four Americans could name the three branches of government,*" that "*just one in three Americans could pass the nation's citizenship test,*" and that "*less than one-fourth of eighth-graders were judged proficient on the 2018 National Assessment of Educational Progress civics test.*"

## **Two HOW Ideas!**

One idea: In her article, "The Best Way to Teach Current Events? Let Students Lead," Meghan Selway, notes that one of the problems teachers have in teaching

current events is that students lack the background knowledge required to understand news events.

She asked her seniors what would make current issues more meaningful to them and they said they needed time to learn about the issues and events. Her solution?

- Give students choices—have them select two topics from a list she provided.
- Next she created “Current Issues Groups” of three to five students based on their interests. The groups met in class every other week to read the articles and then discuss the news events posted for their topic with their peers.
- Then, she tracked student participation by “*creating a website for each class on Google Sites where students posted relevant news stories bi-weekly on a blog with accompanying questions.*”

<http://www.kqed.org/education/531646/the-best-way-to...>

Another idea: Heather Wolpert-Gawron is an award-winning middle school teacher and PBL coach. In “Teaching Current Events in the Age of Social Media,” she writes that [edited]:

*“Students have to know about the world around them, and part of our job as educators is to prepare them for the realities of the world outside the classroom walls. We need our students to leave classrooms knowledgeable and critical but also hopeful. Make your classroom one of positivity so that they have a place to go to feel that the state of the news is not necessarily the state of their own lives.”*

She describes four resources that will help you.

**1. Utilize resources that differentiate informational reading levels.**

- Look at resources like [Newsela](#) to filter news stories not by topic but by grade level, so that articles are suited to your students’ emotional stages.

**2. Create an archive of resources that focus on more positive stories.**

- Start with [Common Sense Media’s list of news sources](#) for kids. Remember, however, that every site has articles that need to be vetted.
- [DailyGood](#): This is a great resource of straightforward pieces with an emphasis on the amazing and interesting.
- [Yes! Magazine](#): The tagline for this magazine is “Powerful Ideas, Practical Actions.” It focuses on problems, yes, but also on how people are solving those problems.
- [Positive News](#): This site focuses on challenging stereotypes and sharing what people are doing to tackle the world’s challenges.

3. ***Help students read critically to tease apart the true from the questionable and the false.***
  - From [PBS](#) to [KQED](#), from [Common Sense Media](#) to [The New York Times](#), there are many outlets out there to help teachers tackle this challenge.
4. ***Teach students the necessity of unplugging sometimes.***
  - Teach students that unplugging is healthy for their hearts and heads.  
Unplug, recharge, and oxygenate your brain with exercise.  
<https://www.edutopia.org/article/teaching-current-events-age-social-media>

### **Three Additional Resources**

Besides using your local news sources, here are a few sites that will help you plan with a current events curriculum and instructional activities.

- Twenty-five great ideas for teaching current events  
[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_lesson/lesson/lesson072...](http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson/lesson072...)
- NEA - Teaching With The News  
<http://www.nea.org/tools/lessons/64789.htm>
- CNN Student News Today  
[www.info.com/Cnn Student News Today](http://www.info.com/Cnn Student News Today)

Ed DeRoche, Director, Character Education Resource Center  
University of San Diego  
BLOG, August 2020