

What is a civic-minded student and how can we foster this in our classrooms? By Heidi Burns

Civic-minded students are those who are both engaged and informed about the realities that exist outside of their world as students. College composition classrooms are a great place to teach students how to engage in conversations on current events. In my own classroom, I accomplish this by using an activity called The News Summary (see below for assignment sheet). This activity incorporates a student learning management system with in-class discussions to foster civic awareness in the classroom while cultivating the skills of audience awareness, primary source evaluation, source summary, content analysis, and engaged dialogue.

The News Summary Assignment emerged several years ago when I realized that my classes weren't quiet because the students had nothing to say; they were quiet because the students didn't know how to articulate what they wanted to say. In addition, their overall writing efforts lacked depth. And again, it wasn't because they weren't bright; it was because they just didn't know how to approach their topics from a practiced critical thinking perspective.

Academia throws the phrase "critical thinking skills" around so much that it has almost become cliché, but the reality is that our students need help cultivating and practicing these skills. A college writing classroom provides an excellent space for students to develop their own ideas and to engage confidently with others on important topics and ideas.

My other drive for creating the news summary activity stemmed from a desire to have my classroom honor the original compact that was created when universities and colleges were first funded by the federal government. The compact was simple: The federal government would provide monetary support if the universities turned out informed, civic-minded citizens.

The first step to create civic-minded students is to help them become better at being informed. Students don't always know how to tease out the fact from the opinion, or worse, they rely on their own tacit knowledge. It's timely that the most recent NCTE journal features an article about our student's tacit knowledge base and how it is negatively impacting their writing.¹ Many of our students' viewpoints are shaped simply by anecdotal experience, editorials, and the opinions of parents, family, and friends. For this reason, it's valuable to spend time discussing with the students the need to "see the bigger picture" within a context that is outside of their own experience. I encourage them to not be satisfied with a superficial understanding of the news story but to look for the innate complexities of the issues.

Discussing current events teaches the students

- to articulate their feelings on big issues,
- to participate in a dialogue with others who might strongly disagree with them,
- to look for and to make connections that aren't immediately obvious,
- and it allows them to "zoom out," if you will, from the snap shot that the media provides in any given news story.

This is how the activity works: At the beginning of the semester, each student signs up for a specific day to post. For each class period the assigned student locates a news story that interests him or her that is relatable to the class in some manner. He or she then writes a summary of the

story and poses two or three discussion questions for the class to respond to individually in the learning management system before the next class period. This provides the students practice in the skills of source evaluation, summary, writing for an audience, and critically analyzing the news story to create the discussion questions. After the news story summary is posted, the rest of the class responds individually to the post, but everyone can see everyone else's response. This further enforces the skills of source evaluation, analyzing the issues presented, and writing for an audience. It also gives the students time to articulate their thoughts on the issue before being asked to engage as a group in class. This creates a richer discussion as students are generally more prepared to discuss the issues.

Here is an example of how the news summary can evolve into a candid class conversation. This particular post occurred in the Fall 2015 semester. The student posting the news summary posted on the yik-yak message that precipitated the University of Missouri's football team going on strike², which ultimately resulted in the President and Chancellor both stepping down. The discussion at first centered on whether or not yik-yak was truly anonymous, then moved to whether or not anonymous social media should be eliminated. Then I asked them to think bigger about the story: Why did a yik-yak message from an anonymous person ultimately result in such huge repercussions for the University? One student quickly did a web-search to see what the demographics of the University are in comparison to the state of Missouri. We discussed that for a bit, and then a student brought up the notion that in the early 20th century, the KKK wore hoods to remain anonymous for the same reason that this student who threatened all of the black people at the University chose an anonymous method to unveil his threat. The discussion quickly turned to this amazing conversation on race equality in the United States.

At the start of the semester, we establish a clear protocol of respect and then practice healthy listening skills to provide a safe place for this type of dialogue to occur. The students don't always agree; in fact, there have been some heated exchanges, but the students have learned an invaluable lesson in listening before responding. The students have been able to thoughtfully discuss religion, gay rights, racial issues, politics, strange human behavior, and more. Because students choose the stories that interest them, and because they have a chance to form their ideas before being asked to engage with other students, they feel a lot more comfortable sharing what they really think.

The best part of this assignment is that the students are forming opinions on issues they didn't previously see as important or impactful to their own lives. They are engaging in the world from a critical thinking perspective. They are learning that if they want to see change in the world, for which they now see a need, they have to work harder to be critically informed.

The learning management system I use is Desire2Learn, but you can easily adapt this activity to any LMS or online platform that allows comments. I am also including my assignment sheet and rubric for you to use in your own classrooms. Feel free to adapt it to your own classroom's needs.

News Summary Discussion using Discussion Forum tool in Desire2Learn

Objectives:

- To engage students in current events topics by interacting in the Discussion Forum
- To teach students to discriminate between current events' source material (editorial versus factual, etc.)
- To teach students effective summary skills for a public audience
- To encourage critical thinking as students analyze the news story and pull out the pertinent points for class discussion
- To encourage students to develop and articulate a personal reaction to the issue
- To show students the value of becoming better informed citizens through the awareness of national and international issues

Actions for News Summary:

Student posting the news story (20 points for one-time post to be assigned on the first day of class):

The student posting is going to start a new thread in the Discussion Forum of Desire2Learn to which the class will respond. On his or her assigned date, the student's task is to locate a news article that he or she finds interesting and can relate to the class. The student will summarize the article effectively (minimum 250 words), consider the implications of the news summary, and then pose two discussion questions for the class to respond to in the Discussion Forum. The student will include the URL for the original story for students to follow up on if they wish. The student posting the original summary will have until 10:00 p.m. on his or her assigned date to post the news summary and discussion questions.

Class participation in response to news summary (10 points weekly):

Everybody in the class is required to respond to the original news summary by joining in the discussion. Each student's task is to read the summary, consider the discussion questions, and write a well-developed and thoughtful 150-word paragraph that responds to the original post. Student participation in this will be calculated in the final homework grade. Students will have until the beginning of the class period to post their response paragraphs.

Follow-up discussion in class (class participation):

Students will discuss the news story and their reactions to the story in a full class discussion. Time allotted for this will vary depending on the complexity of the issue presented in the news summary and the class' engagement with the topic.

Rubric for Semester-long News Summary Activity by Heidi Burns

Criteria	Level 4 10 points	Level 3 3 points	Level 2 2 points	Level 1 1 point
Criterion 1	Shows critical thinking depth of response by submitting a thoughtful, well organized, on topic response that is free of grammatical and proofing errors (minimum word count of 150 required)	Lack of depth in response: engage directly with the news article content Contains fewer than 140 words	Lack of depth in response (under 120 word count submitted)	Failure to address the critical thinking component of the assignment (less than 100 words submitted)
Criterion 2	Shows strong editing (lack of sentence construction errors and other grammatical misconstructions)	Strong editing skills shown	Contains editing errors (sentence construction errors and/or other grammatical errors)	Numerous editing errors
Criterion 3	Shows strong proofing (no misspelled words; correct use of vocabulary; possessives and contractions used correctly)	Strong proofing skills exhibited	Contains proofing errors (misspelled words; incorrect use of possessives and contractions)	Numerous proofing errors
Overall Score	Level 4 11 or more	Level 3 8 or more	Level 2 5 or more	Level 1 0 or more

Notes

¹ To read more about tacit knowledge and its impact on student writing, please read: Rice, Jenny. "Para-Expertise, Tacit Knowledge, and Writing Problems." *College English* 78.2 (2015): 117-138. Print.

² This is the link to the original article. You can see how the students were able to take the conversation well beyond what the news article provided! Yan, Holly, and AnneClaire Stapleton. "University of Missouri Students Report Threats; Police Quell KKK Rumors." *CNN.com*. 11 Nov. 2015. Web. 12 Nov. 2015.