

Tracking Current Events: Using the Internet to Explore Unfolding Stories

Introduction

War on terrorism. Conflict in the Middle East. Challenges to individual rights. The roller coaster ride on the stock market. ...and the list of domestic or international stories that are unfolding before the eyes of students goes on. Often though students only are able to discuss snippets of these stories, such as the capture of a terrorist involved in 9/11 or a suicide bombing in the West Bank, as part of current events. While efforts are made to place such events in a larger context, too often by the next week a new round of events dominates the headlines and inhibits further consideration of the events from the prior week. As a result, students not only are unable to place each week's events into a larger context, but fail to understand the often deep and complex history of the issues underlying such events and to anticipate the implications of how these events might influence future ones. The purpose of this presentation is to discuss how to use a website, *Track Current Events*, to enable students to follow current events and to explore the deeper issues embedded in those events and to present the website's application in four classrooms.

Web-based & Issues-centered Instruction

Ironically, while 9/11 and its aftermath have spawned a host of articles on how to address this tragic event, and thereby how to address current events, little attention has been paid to ways to investigate events related to 9/11 in a systematic manner. As noted by Newmann (1988), Onosko (1991), and Weaver, Jantz, Farrell & Currincione (1985), the nature of the social studies curriculum typically results in superficial and disconnected coverage of the content with few opportunities for in-depth investigation into and discussion of that content. Larson (1999) suggests that a similar state of affairs exists for the study of current events. An issues-centered approach to the study of current events offers one viable option to engage students in an ongoing investigation of news stories as they unfold. While there is a rich history of issues-centered instruction, Parker and Zumeta (1999) made the most recent and strongest case for public policy issues instruction. In making their case they argue that not only are all students capable of benefiting from public policy issues instruction, we perform a disservice to students by not preparing them to engage in public policy discussions. As Engle (1996) concluded, issues-centered instruction "is the way that all education should be approached to produce informed

citizens who are involved in working out better solutions to our problems" (p. vii). Tracking current events offers students an opportunity not only to learn about the dynamic, complex nature of current events, but also to realize the contemporary and historical issues underlying those events and to participate in discussions about those issues and possible solutions to them.

While in the past students needed to rely upon local newspapers and nightly news shows for information about current events, the Internet provides ready access to breaking and ongoing news stories, as well as a means to investigate the background to those stories. Few examples of technology are more pervasive and offer more opportunities than the Internet. According to Education Week's 1999 National Survey of Teachers' Use of Digital Content, 90% of K-12 public schools have Internet access and 71% of the schools have Internet access from one or more classrooms. As Braun and Risinger (2000) noted: "[T]he Internet makes available an unparalleled, and seemingly unlimited, repository of resources and ideas for social studies teachers." (p. 7). The implications for social studies instruction are exciting, yet challenging. Technologies such as the Internet make it more possible and imperative that students learn to access information, compare and evaluate different perspectives and critically reflect on decision making (Rose and Fernlund, 1997), skills also critical to issues-centered instruction. This requires students not simply to learn how to use the technology, but to evaluate their use of it. Mark Windschitl (1998), for example drew a distinction "between the effects of using technology and the effects of using information, as well as differentiating between accessing information and having a learning experience" (p. 28). Developing research and analytical skills by learning to find and access information on the Internet, evaluating the validity of sites, asking critical questions, and communicating with others represent the best uses of instructional technology in classrooms. Using the Internet to track current events not only develops these skills, but also builds upon Bruce Larson's suggestion to tie "headline news" to perennial issues and to use the Internet as a vehicle for further research by students into the headlines and the issues embedded in them (1999).

Justification for and Description of Website

When designing the website, we sought to blend several pedagogical features of instructional technology as identified by Barab, et al (1998) with those of issues-based instruction by Rossi and Pace (1998). (Refer to <http://trackcurrentevents.org>.)

First, the current event(s) selected by the students would involve an issue that is problematic and persistent and contains elements of doubt (Rossi and Pace) and the material gained from the use of information technology situates the issue in an actual event (Barab). Middle school students, for example, are examining whether a locality should approve the proposed route for a bypass around a small city. Since the proposed bypass is to pass through a wetlands near a former burial site of American Indians, the bypass raises cultural, economic, environmental, and religious issues.

Second, by tracking the current event students study an issue in-depth and explore information from diverse sources (Rossi and Pace). When creating a Tracker the students conduct a preliminary search of the Internet and determine the sites that provide the most information and insight about the current event and the issues involved in it. In assisting the students with this task the teachers uses several skills related to information technology that Barab considered critical: use of problem centered inquiry; use of collaborative groups to generate and evaluate hypotheses; and, use of teacher questioning to coach and model inquiry skills.

Third, student centered inquiry is encouraged and supported by lesson opportunities and assessments, such as those facilitated by information technology. Rossi stated that “the learner’s mental construction of the information is at the heart of instruction,” while Barab might suggest that the technology served as a "construction kit" for building understanding of ideas. Locating and selecting Internet sites and placing them on the Tracker enable the middle and high school students to “construct” the issue. In turn, by researching the issue online, the high school students gain a richer understanding of the issue in general and, by using the technology to communicate with each other they acquire a greater appreciation for the importance of discussing issues with others.

With the issue as the focal point for the inquiry and the use of technology to assist the inquiry, Engle and Ochoa (1988) provided the instructional model that serves as the basis for the inquiry process. During this process students engage in these steps: create a context for the current events and related issues; identify and select issues; conduct online research and select Internet sites; and, present results of research and take a position on current event. (Refer to the Inquiry Process model that follows.)

Lay the Groundwork

Outcomes: Explore current events & Capture and determine students' interests
Match with course content & Introduce students to approach

Question: Of what importance are these events? & How are events related?

Purpose: to introduce students to a range of events & to capture their interest.

Explore the Nature of Contemporary Issues

Outcomes: Discuss the breadth and depth of two or three sample issues
Draw relevance of issues to students' daily lives
Connect to ongoing instruction & Introduce students to Tracker program

Question: What might make an issue important and/or lasting?

Purpose: to explore sample issues with students and to model use of Tracker

Activity: Use sample Tracker with students

Select Events/Issues to Track

Outcomes: Decide upon important issues & how they might influence students' lives
Explore implications of the issue & possible directions the issue might take

Questions: What are the most exciting events now occurring in the world?
Which ones are worthy of further study?/What might happen to them?

Purpose: to provoke student interest and to select 3 or 4 events/issues to track

Activity: Create and take Current Events Survey on Tracker site

Collect Information & Create Tracker

Outcomes: Decide what events might relate to issue
Decide what are sources of information about issue
Determine ways how to record information and to organize it

Questions: What exactly is the issue?
What information is needed to better understand the issue?
What are sources of information and how to manage the information?

Purpose: to enable students to organize actual tracking of issues

Activity: Conduct research on Internet and begin creating a Tracker

Progress Report: Make Preliminary Sense of Issue

Outcomes: Report on what has occurred
Explore with other students what the changes might mean
Connect to ongoing instruction & Ask students to evaluate their work and thinking

Questions: What information was it possible to collect & what info still is needed?
What are some specific changes that have occurred & why they have occurred?
What might happen next? & How has your thinking on the issue changed?

Purpose: to allow students to organize their thinking on the issue and to receive feedback on their work

Activity: Publish background newspaper articles on the issue and events related to it

Take a Stand

Outcomes: Analyze evolution of issue & Discuss what occurred and why
Finalize thinking on issue & Present results

Questions: How is the event/issue different from when the study first began?
What are the major changes that have occurred & why have they occurred?
How has your thinking changed? & Where do you think might happen with the issue in the future?

Purpose: to trace the evolution of the issue and to present their thinking on it

Activity: Publish Opinion Page & Letters to Editor

Description of TRACKER

TRACKER serves as an organizational tool for students to research, analyze, debate, discuss and present their thinking about a current event through an online newspaper. The concept of the newspaper conveys to students the real world application and relevance of the lesson or assignment. As with a newspaper, TRACKER serves two purposes. First, the newspaper format enables students to become an editor and to present the results of their research and thinking on the current event. Second, certain interactive features of the site allow other students to respond to what the student-editors have created and posted online. There are five main features of the online newspaper:

1. The “editor” selected articles
2. The “editor” created “Front Page”
3. The “editor” created “Opinion Page”
4. “Letter to the Editor Page”
5. Discussion Board

Student as Editor

Each user (student or teacher) can become an “editor” of his or her own unique online newspaper. Anyone is able to become an “editor” of a TRACKER newspaper by going to <http://trackcurrentevents.org> and registering as a user. An editor has the capability to create a TRACKER by simply filling out forms with the necessary information to dynamically create a TRACKER newspaper with personalize content. The TRACKER software creates a unique URL that is the location of the editors web site (ex. <http://trackcurrentevents.org/login.php?trackerid=1>).

Editor Selected Articles

The editor must first select and research a current event to find quality online articles (ex. <http://cnn.com>). If students are creating the TRACKERS, teachers should review basic source evaluation methods to ensure quality information.

Editor Created Front Page

The “editor” is able to create a “front page” article that summarizes the issue or controversy of the selected web articles. A good summary will take into account multiple perspectives and opinions concerning a current event.

Editor Created Opinion Page

The “Opinion Page” allows the editor to provide arguments for two different sides of the current event, controversy or issue.

Student as Reader and Online Discussant

The most powerful aspect of TRACKER is the ability to view and discuss current events with others. The editor of the TRACKER has published a newspaper with the intent to be viewed by others. This can be done among colleagues, students, teachers or any combination of people. The goal is to increase awareness and discussion of current events. The editor is given a unique URL (ex. <http://trackcurrentevents.org/login.php?trackerid=54>), which should be given to others in order to view the TRACKER and participate in the debate and discussion of a current event.

View the Selected Articles

Viewing the editor selected articles is done by clicking a “Next Link” button that takes the user to each selected article. The first page that is shown after the login is the “front page” of the TRACKER online Newspaper. The editor of the TRACKER has the summary and/or introduction to the current event located on the front page. Each selected article is accompanied by a question or comments the editor created in order to elicit response from each user.

Respond to the Selected Articles

Each editor-selected article has a question or comment that users may respond to by clicking on “Answer the Question.” A popup window will provide space for the user to type in a response that the editor can view after logging into the TRACKER.

Participate in the Discussion Board

The discussion board allows for all users of the TRACKER to discuss and debate the issue. Discussion boards allow users to participate in an asynchronous discussion that fosters quality, well thought responses.

Write a Letter to the Editor

Writing a Letter to the Editor is meant to be a culminating activity for users to write a final response in which they convey their opinion or perspective. Writing the letter should help the student analyze all the information in order to create an educated response.

TRACKER Screen Shot

The screenshot shows the TRACKER NEWS website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a dropdown menu labeled "CHOOSE A LINK" and a "NEXT LINK" button. The main header features the "TRACKER NEWS" logo and the date "Tue 08/20/2002". A sidebar on the left contains a navigation menu with options: "FRONT PAGE", "Discussion Board", "OPINION PAGE", "LETTER TO THE EDITOR", and "WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR". The main content area displays a "Top Story" titled "State of the Union Address" with a sub-heading "Bush Names Axis of Evil". The article text begins with "George W. Bush gave his first state of the union address after a busy year in office..." and includes a bio of the editor, a student at the University of Kansas School of Education. Annotations on the left side of the screenshot identify these elements: "Dropdown menu for navigation of selected websites" points to the "CHOOSE A LINK" menu; "Navigation for the paper" points to the sidebar menu; "Issue name" points to the "Top Story" section; "Title of Intro" points to the "State of the Union Address" title; "Intro/summary of the current event" points to the first paragraph of the article; "Navigation to the next selected web site in the TRACKER" points to the "NEXT LINK" button; "Link back to Online Newspaper when navigating selected sites" points to the "CLASS ONLINE NEWSPAPER" logo; and "Optional 'Bio' Information that can be entered at registration" points to the "Bio of the Editor" section.

Teacher Features & Lessons: Classroom Applications

We learned several invaluable lessons when we piloted the site in the four classrooms. We will describe the lessons that we learned and suggests some teaching tips that grew out of this lesson, as well as provide representative vignettes from the classrooms.

Lesson 1 – Balancing Selection of Current Events & Issues: While the nature of current events often captured the students’ interest, they often were unprepared to address the issues underlying the issues. We realized the importance of selecting the current event not simply for the event itself, but for the issues embedded in it. In working with students on the selection of events to research, what we considered matched closely the work of Parker and Zumeta (1999). Their work, along with that of Evans (1996) and Ross (1995 & 1998), suggest that the selection of the issues to present to students is a critical component of public-issues instruction. Parker and Zumeta suggest criteria on how to select public issues for students to investigate:

1. *Interest* : current event addresses issue(s) that capture attention of students.
1. *Authenticity*: the event not only addresses easily recognizable public problems, but ones students recognize as of importance to them.
2. *Value Conflict*: the event involves diverse and competing values, ones that students, possibly with some coaching, are likely to identify.
3. *Pluralistic*: the event represents different cultural and political perspectives and enables students to recognize them on a personal and societal level.
4. *Perennial*: the event encompasses one or more enduring public issues that find voice in multiple public settings.
5. *Curriculum Match & Materials*: the issues embedded in the event are threaded throughout the curriculum and are supported with resources (pp.32-33).

What adds poignancy to learning about the issues embedded in the events is their authenticity since students not only are investigating at the time of the events, but also because the "future" of the issues and the outcome of the events are unknown and unfolding before the students. The contemporary nature of the issues addressed is a hallmark of Oliver and Shaver's jurisprudential model, Evans' social issues model, and Parker and Zumeta's public policy deliberation model. This article suggests taking these models a step further by asking students to

investigate and make hypotheses or predictions about the political or legal fate of issues as the individuals and groups respond to the events and these responses wend their way through the public policy process.

Lesson 2 – Selection of Web Articles: Selecting quality Internet sites is challenging for teachers and students alike due to the vast amount of information available on the Internet. As students began to research events online, we quickly realized that while students were familiar with surfing the net for entertainment purposes, they virtually were ignorant about using the Internet for academic purposes. As they searched for information about the event and issue, they encountered these difficulties:

1. Finding age ability level appropriate sites represents one of the most challenging part of creating a Tracker.
2. Locating sites that adequately and fairly represent varying perspectives on the issue.
2. Locating interesting, yet informative, sites. Students encountered sites that were rich in human interest stories, for example, but weak on substance. Also, students gravitated toward sites that supported their already formed opinion
1. Locating sites that broadened and deepened the issue, yet not did not distract from it

Based on the lessons learned from the students' experiences in researching on the Internet, we the following set of Guidelines to consider as students search for quality news web pages.

1. *Establish Web Site Authority:* a quality news source should be from an objective and reputable authority. It is important to check the authority of the company, group or individual responsible for presenting the information on the Internet. As students try to establish a website's credentials, they might ask themselves:

Who is the company, group or individual responsible for posting this information?

If the person or group is not easily recognized as associated with a reputable news source, is the author's point of view readily apparent?

Is the information provided in a different format? (Such as a printed newspaper or

TV broadcast)

2. *Check for Accuracy & Timeliness*: information is as good as its source. It is important that the web site is clear as to who, what, when and where the information was gathered. Just like a reporter, students need to ask questions such as:

Who is reporting the story and from where?

When did the news story occur and when was it reported?

What are the sources of the author's report?

If a site's credentials are less clear than those of a recognized news source, what sources of information are identified on the site?

Is it possible to verify the information on the site?

Is the site evaluated or edited?

3. *Search for Objective Sources & an Appropriate Balance of Biased Sources*: while most major news sources are recognized as representing a particular political position on their op ed pages, typically their news sources are accurate and fair in their news reports. Other sites though are maintained as a means to present information that best represents the position of a particular group. Such sites are as credible as the more typical news sources so long as students' research includes several such sites that represent a range of positions on the event.

What is a company's, group's or individual's motive for posting the information?

Are multiple perspectives represented in the sites as a whole?

Are sites included that present a position other than my own?

4. *Distinguish between Style and Substance*: a well designed, state of the art site might mask a lack of substance. Students need to consider not only how the site's content is presented, but also the content's importance and how it fits with the overall research. In a prior experience with high school students with Internet research, one group of students researched a state legislature's consideration of making the failure to wear a seatbelt a primary offense and a second group researched a drive to make the use of cellular phones while driving a traffic offense. In both instances the students became so captivated with websites about individual experiences with the use of seatbelts or cell phones that they lost sight of the larger issues.

5. *Select Sites that Are Informative, Interesting, and Relevant:* the end goal is for students to post on their Tracker sites that capture the user's interest, provides accurate and timely information about the event without overwhelming the user, and draws connection between the event and underlying issue to the students' lives. Unquestionably, such sites are difficult to find. As a result, we learned that while this was a noble goal, students needed much time and practice to achieve it. Typically, the more time efficient technique was to provide students with a teacher-sorted collection of sites and to allow them to choose from this limited sample. We also realized though that students needed to engage in the Internet search process from the outset. When this was attempted, it proved quite messy, yet invaluable, since the students began to realize the distinction between surfing the web for fun versus for an academic purpose.

Course Applications: It is vital that utilizing this online software is applicable for a wide variety of teaching and learning methods. We learned that TRACKER can be used effectively with varying levels of teacher control. While first time student users found it helpful to take a TRACKER created by the teacher and act as a reader and discussant, more experienced students enjoyed the challenge of becoming an "editor" of their own newspaper. Also note: We learned that TRACKER is most effective when only four to five articles are used. Any more and students will often become overwhelmed with the amount of material to read.

Teacher as Editor, and Students as Reader and Discussant:

- **Introducing the students to TRACKER:** The most common way to introduce the website to students is by creating a TRACKER and having students go to the given URL (i.e. <http://trackcurrentevents.org/login.php?id=54>). Teachers generally showed the basic functions of the website (i.e. Navigating the selected links and responding) before giving the URL to the students. Students can then read and respond to each web site, and "Write a Letter to the Editor" as a culminating activity.
- **Tracking a Current event over the semester:** As a current event unfolds in the media, URL's can be added to the TRACKER to allow new articles to be added

throughout the semester. Teachers can have students periodically go to the TRACKER to discuss the breaking news on the provided discussion board.

- **Tracking Elections:** Elections often give teachers the chance to discuss issues in class based on politicians campaign platform. A class can look at a specific election race to view each candidates website along with current articles in the local or national online newspaper. Students could then “Write a Letter to the Editor” discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate, or expressing a political stance.
- **Tracking Nations:** Specific nations often become the spotlight in our media and cause students to become involved in the dialogue. Historical events of a country become key issues when learning about controversial issues, a conflict or war that is the focus of that country. For example, Iraq has become the focus in the media, which is strongly linked to the Gulf War and the events that happened over the past decades (or centuries, millennia, etc.).

Teacher as Editor and Students as Researcher, Reader and Discussant:

- **Introducing the students to Online research:** We found that students do not always decipher between surfing the internet for fun, and researching for academic purposes. Introduce students to research using Lesson 2 – Selecting Web Sites. Then have the students research a specific current event and turn in 3 – 5 quality web sites that meet the given criteria, along with a question/comment for each site. From all the given web sites, select the highest quality web sites and create a TRACKER from the student researched

Student as Editor:

- **A Class Project:** The ideal use of the site is to have students create their own TRACKER in order for students to research, analyze, debate, discuss and present their thinking about a current event. Having students create their own TRACKER helps them use a broad range of cognitive ability. Bloom's taxonomy of the cognitive domain includes 1) knowledge, 2)comprehension, 3) application, 4) analysis, 5)synthesis and 6)evaluation with knowledge as the lowest order of the cognitive domain and evaluation as the highest(1956). The following is a sequence of activities and the corresponding level(s) of Blooms taxonomy that each activity fulfills.
 - Select a current event. 1
 - Research the current event. 1, 2, 4
 - Select web sites and create questions/comments for each site. 2,5
 - Write an overview of the current event. 5
 - Write an editorial in support of two opposing sides of a current event. 4, 5
 - Create the TRACKER. 5
 - Trade TRACKER URL with other students in order to respond and discuss current event. 1,2,4,5,6.
 - "Write a letter to the Editor" of another students TRACKER. 3,5, 6
 - Discuss the current event on the TRACKER discussion board.4,5,6
- **Create Political Philosophy:** Students could use TRACKER to select articles and web sites that reflect their political philosophy. A broad range of issues could be derived and formed into a political philosophy base on current events such as war, elections, natural disasters, local policy changes, federal policy changes... etc. Students could then write the "Front Page" as their own justification for the selected articles and their own political philosophy.

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Unfolding Stories of Yesterday and Tomorrow

Overview: Often we study current events based on the latest newspaper headline or the breaking story as reported on television news. While an important way to stay informed, we tend to lose sight of yesterday's headline or story as new ones appear. What happened to the news of yesterday? How do we know that it soon will not become the story of tomorrow? The survey below is the first step toward tracking these stories in an attempt to investigate current events as unfolding stories with both a history and a future. Also, we will study the stories not simply as a headline, but as a complex set of issues that affect us on a societal and personal level.

Purpose: We will use the survey results to narrow the possible events to track.

Directions: Attached is a description of a current event. You are to read the description and to decide three things.

First: You need to rate your level of interest in the current event. Use the following scale:

1. I am very interested in this current event
2. I am somewhat interested in this current event
3. I need more information before deciding how interested I am in this event
4. I am not very interested in this event
5. I am not interested in this event at all

In this space provided on the survey put one of the numbers above. While you only may put one number for each current event, you may rate more than one event with the same number. For example, you may be very interested in three events and put a 1 by each event.

Second: You need to put in the appropriate box an interesting piece of information that you know about the event that is not already in the description. For example, you might know that one of the crimes committed by a defendant in the case before the U.S. Supreme Court was the theft of several children's videotapes from a store.

Third: You need to answer the question about what you think might happen with this event. Please keep in mind that since each question asks you about something that has not yet happened that there is not a right or wrong answer.

Current Events Survey

Description of Current Event	Rate Your Interest	What Do You Know?	What Do You Predict?
<p>"Three Strikes & You're Out!" - California has one of the stiffest 3 strikes laws in U.S. If a person is convicted of 3 felonies, they are sentenced to life in prison after the 3rd conviction. A major purpose of the law is to remove career criminals from society. A criticism of the law is that a person can receive a life sentence for being convicted of 3 non-violent felonies. Several inmates have challenged the law and the case is before the U.S. Supreme Court.</p>			<p>Do you think the Supreme Court will rule for California or the inmates?</p>
<p>Iraq-Where are Your Weapons? - In early November the U.N.'s Security Council passed a resolution that restarted inspections in Iraq. The purpose of the inspection is to determine if Iraq is producing weapons of mass destruction. The arms inspection is but one effort by the U.S. & the U.N. to prevent either the exporting of terror or the destabilizing of gov'ts in the Middle East by Iraq.</p>			<p>What do you think will happen with the arms inspection?</p>
<p>Homeland Security in a New Congress -the November elections reshaped Congress, giving the Republicans control of both houses. While both parties have supported creation of a Department of Homeland Security, the rights of workers in the new department have divided them. Democrats want the workers to have collective bargaining rights, the President wants to be able to fire, demote and transfer workers due to national security reasons.</p>			<p>What are several major agencies that you expect to become part of the new department?</p>
<p>State Budget Crises & Public Education- As state after state confronts a shortfall in revenue, many state legislatures face a grim time meeting the budgetary needs of public education. Several school districts are wondering if they will be able to continue athletic programs. Since an increase in funding is unlikely, how should school districts cut their budgets to meet the decrease in state funding?</p>			<p>What are school districts likely to cut to meet the decrease in state funding?</p>