
Making News Connection

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Making news connections

Bobbi Swiderek

■ I have always used newspapers in the classroom for teaching writing skills, especially when I taught social studies. But lately, I've been using news articles to teach connections between the present day real world and the world of books that my students read. The intent is to help readers transfer concepts from one domain (their reading) to another (real life).

A "perfect" society

The easiest book with which to start "connections" is *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. *The Giver* is about a "perfect" society. The elders maintain this by making everyone the same. When children reach the age of 12, they are assigned their future career directions. Jonas has been selected to receive from the Giver the memories of the society prior to this controlled existence. In the course of his instruction, Jonas begins to doubt the ethics of maintaining the present society.

Although the book is written on a fifth-grade reader level, the concepts are applicable to many grade levels. Personally, I would recommend the book as a read-aloud before Grade 7, then after that to be read by students and discussed in various classes through their school career. It can be paired with George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, *Watership Down* by Richard Adams, and other books using a perfect society concept.

I have multiple copies of the book and encourage several students to read it simultaneously. I give plenty of background on the book to launch readers into thinking about a "perfect" world. I usually meet once a week with anyone reading the book and discuss points of interest. I make sure enough other students overhear the discussions, which will pique their interest in

reading the book as soon as a copy becomes available.

Students must each keep a response journal on their books, and I read and comment in these journals weekly. It is because of a student's comment that I began using news articles as a connection to thinking about the book. Jessica wrote in her journal that she was glad Jonas escaped to the "real" world. I asked her what she thought the "real" world was, and she replied "one where people make up their own mind."

Controversial issues

That night I clipped several articles from the *Portland Press Herald* newspaper and put a piece of chart paper on the classroom wall. I made this a whole-class activity. I wrote "The Giver—Connection With Real World" at the top. Then I wrote the word *euthanasia* on the paper, and we spent a few minutes discussing its meaning and spelling strategies.

Students quickly responded that we euthanize an old or sick pet and that, although it's difficult, it's a kindness to the aging or ailing pet. I wrote "Dr. Kevorkian" on the chart paper and asked if they knew who this was. Some did. (He assists suicides.) I stapled two news articles on the chart paper about Kevorkian and a referendum on legalizing doctor-assisted suicide.

Next I produced an article on abortion rights and asked students if they could see a connection between euthanasia in *The Giver* and this controversial issue. One student remembered a woman who refused to abort any fetus from her multiple pregnancy despite the risks to a healthy term delivery.

The next connection I made to *The Giver* was surrogate parents. Although

I had no news articles on this, some students recalled cases involving the issue. Children in *The Giver* were carried by surrogate mothers, and each family could have a son and then a daughter. I told students about China's one-child policy. This led to a discussion of zero population growth. One student remarked that there were "good reasons" for some government control, and that it was not easy to decide whether some issues were right or wrong.

Jessica commented that even though there were similarities with the "real" world, she was glad there wasn't a "giver" who kept memories from everyone except the receiver. I produced an article about medical experiments done on handicapped people in the 1940s, and a critical report withheld from Australian aborigines by their government. I asked the class if they knew what the term "classified top secret" meant. Students mentioned areas of the Internet that were off limits to them.

I finished the discussion with a comment on some governments restricting citizen travel at different times, such as during curfews, block-

ades, and before the Berlin Wall came down. Then I asked students to look for other connections to *The Giver* in the newspaper or books they were reading. If they brought these articles in, I asked them to tell me the connection, then I added it to the wall chart and rewarded them with an "A" in my rank book.

I use wall charts for books dealing with discrimination and tolerance issues. Not every student brings in an article, but everyone sees the connection as it is added to the chart. More students start to make connections in their response journals about their reading with either present day situations or other situations and concepts in other books. Because of this, several students have asked if they can reread a book (especially *The Giver*) because they have more ideas. I always encourage this and give academic credit for the second read.

The "fun" connection

In addition to the more serious connections that the newspaper offers, I use it to find parallels in humor. For example, one newspaper cartoon showed the Cookie Monster Muppet character sitting in an easy chair with a "cookie patch" on his arm. I asked the students to tell me the connection. They readily compared it to the nicotine patch worn by people trying to stop smoking. I asked them to think of a habit they wished to eradicate and to draw another similar cartoon. Within a class period, I had wonderful humorous examples of teenagers wearing patches to stop swearing, gum chewing, and "attitude."

Newspapers offer excellent opportunities to teach higher order thinking skills. After a couple of weeks of modeling what you want students to connect, they can often scan a paper and select an article to clip.

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