

October, 2003 - Katherine S. Wydner, Biology

A useful method for enhancing teaching is to make frequent use of current events in the news. In courses that are "required" as part of the core and therefore not electives, students often have mixed feelings about their involvement. They may feel they are not especially interested in the subject, or are expecting to be bored by the repetition of material they already know. Even in courses that students have elected to take as part of a package for a chosen major, they will sometimes lose sight of their goals and enthusiasm, or question the relevance of sections of material that appear dull or difficult to master.

We live in a time when headlines in the news continually surprise us, shock us, and sometimes amaze us. From local to national to international, the stories impact our lives in numerous ways. News of stunning advances and progress in science, medicine, and technology herald delightful promises of a better world but also frighten us at times because what we are now becoming able to do is outpacing our established views on morality and ethics. Government agencies, judicial systems, insurance companies, and other private corporations, make their own pronouncements in the printed media and the airwaves. Despite the vital importance of many of these issues, college-age young people are often unaware of the substance of these matters, having only a superficial familiarity from a headline or "sound-bite."

Incorporating relevant current events into a course can accomplish a variety of beneficial outcomes. Students taking "required" courses can see that the course material is relevant to their lives. For example, in a course such as Scientific Literacy, students should be able to see that becoming scientifically "literate" will give them an edge in understanding complex issues they will face in their increasingly technologically-dependent future. Students enrolled in courses they elected to take for their major can benefit because a focus on current events pertinent to their major can reinforce their belief that they have chosen a vital and relevant career path; it can help motivate them to get through stretches of course material that they may find difficult or less interesting. In addition, discussion of current events in the media is often "cross-disciplinary," and is a reminder that although different areas of study in academe are "compartmentalized," the reality is that life itself is not. In our day-to-day real lives we are simultaneously confronted by issues from many different fields of study.

How can current events be woven into the fabric of a course? Be prepared to be flexible in your lecture topic schedule. Spontaneous class discussion can be a stimulating experience, an attention-grabbing device and perhaps a welcome break from the seemingly relentless march of the expected lesson plan. A professor's perceived "tangent" can turn into an important and memorable learning experience. If appropriate, and even if the topic is not on the syllabus, the instructor can let the class know that the news topic can pop up in some

testable format in some future measure of what they have learned in the class, such as an essay or exam question.

One formal structured way that I have incorporated current events makes use of the Writing-to-Learn (WTL) teaching approach. (The goals of WTL are to reinforce understanding of subject material and develop critical thinking skills, while the approach itself makes use of frequent writing assignments.) In core courses such as Scientific Literacy and in introductory major courses such as General Biology I, I have sometimes assigned a WTL "Current Events News Journal" to be completed over the course of the semester. The journal will consist of ten journal entries, each entry about one page long and worth 10 points. For ten weeks, each student will select a current news article on any topic related to science. "Current" means dated within 1-2 weeks of the date the assignment is handed in. The news source can be a newspaper, popular magazine, Internet news site, science journal, etc. I advise students to avoid questionable and unreliable sources such as the National Enquirer! In terms of length, the article should be long enough to give the student something to discuss intelligently. Each journal entry should contain both summary and analysis. The summary should present the major points or highlights of the article: be clear but concise. The analysis should include some elements of the following: What is the significance of the news reported here? Are you skeptical at all? Does this article raise any further questions? The student must Xerox, clip out, or print the article and attach it to the written (typed or neatly handwritten) summary and analysis of the article. This assignment can be modified to fit into a more advanced upper-class course curriculum by abbreviating the number of summaries and analyses due over the course of the semester (e.g. two), requiring that the summary and analysis go into more depth and detail (2-3 pages in length), and requiring that the "news topic" be taken from a peer-reviewed source such as a journal in a discipline related to the major. A majority of students do excellent work on this assignment, as evidenced from the quality of what they have written. Their thoughtful comments and analyses give me a satisfied sense that they have learned something of value that adds to the topical subject material they are studying as well as to the complex issues they face, and will continue to face, in their real day-to-day lives.