

Thinking Through the Web: Newswise

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Newswise is an online educational resource based on topical news stories. It is designed to improve the literacy and thinking skills of children and young people aged between 8 and 18. It can also be used to encourage thoughtful discussion and provide an online forum where children can go to follow up ideas with help from experienced teachers. Newswise can be used in the literacy hour or for subject lessons such as English, PSHE and Citizenship. It is also a valuable resource for teaching English as a foreign language.

It is quite a task for a teacher to read newspapers, select articles and then prepare and present them to the class. It also seems a waste of time for many teachers to be following a similar procedure up and down the country. Resource files are available to teachers for this purpose, but they inevitably lack immediacy of appeal, being published some time after the currency of the topic. They also, in our view, lack the richness and depth that a reflective approach to such topics can provide. We feel that young people need to think beyond factual stories to be aware of the assumptions, contexts and concepts that lie behind them. We feel there is a demand for having a 'live' current affairs topic tailored to classroom needs.

We also think that Newswise Internet and online discussion projects should be used to encourage and develop dialogue away from the computer. Too many computer programs try to replace live discussion with tricks and tests. If such discussion is to be effective at the computer, children will need to learn to collaborate and listen to each other effectively. Newswise has a similar format for each edition so that teachers can plan a series of lessons in advance.

The story

Each Newswise story is especially written for children. The theme for each story is selected from recent news stories. We suggest that the class reads the story together at least once. The teacher will be able to give support on vocabulary or grammar that any learners find difficult. Articles have included issues about pocket money and happiness, the Twin Towers tragedy and asylum seekers.

Also included are a series of structured activities to develop different skills. These include:

Headlines

Literacy lessons require children to predict from headlines. This is not so easy because a single headline may focus on only one angle of the story. As an alternative, Newswise provides a collection of possible headlines, each with a different angle. This exercise encourages learners to identify the main idea of the story and choose language that expresses it, to work out their own opinions and develop sensitivity to the language and intentions of the writer.

Bare bones

The purpose of this section is to check that everyone understands the basic plot of the story – the 'bones' of the argument – by completing selected sentences correctly. But it can be used for much more than this and can help develop understanding of chronological sequences, awareness of fact and opinion and the relationship between grammar and logical structure of sentences through activities such as classifying the conjunctions (until, when, where, because) according to their meanings like addition (and), opposition (but), time sequence (when, until) or reason (because).

Reporter's deadline

This task encourages learners to attempt a summary of the story. Summaries are difficult so learners are offered the support of a popular underlining technique that is useful in many situations where notemaking, summarising, or rewriting are required.

Hotlines

This activity puts students in the imaginary position of interviewing a significant person in the story. It helps learners to create questions in context. Explanations are given as part of the activity. It is important to give learners the opportunity to decide on questions for the interviewer's clipboard together, in small groups or as

a whole class. This encourages the giving of reasons and lessens the possibility of repetition if a 'live' role-play is attempted. Such a role-play, often called 'hot-seating', sets up the teacher or an able student to answer questions in the role of the interviewee.

Think before you vote

Voting is a way of collecting yes and no answers from a group of people to find the most popular choices. However, votes are often taken with little prior thought. This activity delays the voting process so some thinking can happen even though a full-scale discussion is not required. Both the delaying techniques used in this activity can be used in other contexts.

Key sentences, key questions

Literacy lessons often require children to pick out 'key sentences' that convey information in news stories. But what counts as information? It could be a fact, a guess or an opinion. And what counts as a key sentence? Is a key sentence one that contributes to the bare bones of a story or one that points to the most important issues? A key sentence might also be one that stimulates the most questions and prompts us to think deepest. This activity tries to combine some of these approaches to picking out key sentences.

Hidden Gold

News stories not only contain facts and opinions, they provide a gateway to all kinds of important ideas, values and assumptions. We believe strongly that children will be more likely to gain from reading news stories if scope is given for them to explore some of these concepts in depth. If discussion is followed by writing, this kind of space for exploration will be well rewarded with higher quality work.

In each of the Hidden Gold activities we pick out some key concepts from the story and provide a set of starter questions. These questions can be used in two ways:

1. Read the questions as a preparation for what might emerge from a classroom enquiry where learners choose their own questions.
2. Ask the learner to choose from the questions as

a 'menu', though it is also open to the teacher to pick out any ideas that might link well with other curriculum work.

Some whole class discussion, guided by the teacher should be attempted. Children need models of how to discuss well. In particular they should be shown how to recognise generalisations and make distinctions. It is hoped that children as well as teachers may soon appreciate that plain ideas become 'gold' often by virtue of the creative thought that is produced in a group thinking together – what we designate a 'community of enquiry'.

Classroom use

The materials can be used in at least three ways:

1. Read the story through with a group and then choose some of the activities for them to work through. In this way, *Newswise* can be fitted into a variety of lessons to meet curriculum demands.
2. Use *Newswise* to stimulate extended classroom enquiry and discussion.
3. Combine the previous two. Use the activities provided but also try one or two extended discussion sessions where learners choose their own questions and explore them.

Good classroom discussion stems from questions that learners find interesting. There should be no impulsion to move quickly from question to question in an attempt to finish an activity. A discussion is generally the better for going more deeply into a question than just skimming over the surface – though this may very well demand more patient and careful thought than people habitually give to tricky questions.

Students should be encouraged, therefore, to find and reflect upon the assumptions behind the questions, including the assumption that the key concepts have the same meanings for everyone. In looking deeper, they might, curiously, find themselves looking wider. At least, they should be encouraged to ground their reasoning in examples, and to use comparisons to help them establish generalisations or to draw distinctions.

Further information

<http://www.dialogueworks.co.uk/>