

# **Newsworthy**



Cultivating Critical Thinkers,  
Readers, and Writers in  
Language Arts Classrooms

Ed Madison

Foreword by Renee Hobbs

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## Preface

It is likely that some part of your morning was spent catching up with the outside world through media. Whether through traditional news sources or social media, most people instinctively want to know what the world was up to while they were asleep. From war zone tragedies to celebrity trivialities, as a culture we value news. Yet the significant role of journalism in our lives can easily escape us—especially as educators. We may simply take it for granted.

While some research suggests that millennials are not as engaged in news and politics as baby boomers (Poindexter, 2012), other findings indicate that young people find news important but prefer nontraditional sources (American Press Institute, 2015). Moreover, older adults sometimes fail to realize that young people have a rich variety of interests that are all their own. This book asserts that adolescent concerns provide teachers with a rich and largely untapped reservoir from which to ignite student engagement. Young people who are encouraged to write about their intrinsic interests are not motivated by grades or a desire to please. They write because they care. By emphasizing deeper exploration of non-fiction genres the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provide teachers with an opportunity to engage students in ways that speak to their lived experiences. Journalistic reading and writing assignments can open new doors to self-expression, personal reflection, and academic growth.

How do we get more students to care about learning? That is a critical question teachers ask daily as they face increasing demands from parents, administrators, and policymakers who are dissatisfied with the present state of public education. I argue that teaching strategies that attempt to “get” students to do anything are fundamentally flawed. Engaged students naturally embrace the process of learning, whereas some of their peers may appear to resist instruction. A critical question is: What distinguishes the first group of students from the second? We cannot discount the fact that many young people are burdened by socioeconomic setbacks that can impede their progress, yet some students rise above those challenges. Why? These are the fundamental questions that drive the research

behind this book—seeking to unlock the keys to student motivation that can transcend personal circumstances and transform lives.

In spring 2010, through the wonders of social media, I was invited to serve as a panelist at a journalism conference at Stanford University. I was a first-year doctoral student in search of a dissertation topic, and the panel's focus on innovation, journalism, and education was aligned with my research interests—making my decision to accept quite easy. Seated next to me on the panel was a language arts teacher and four of her energetic journalism students from Palo Alto High.

Given that the school is situated across the street from Stanford's campus, I expected these students to be impressive. Surrounded by the corporate offices of Facebook and Google, Palo Alto is one of the nation's wealthiest and most intellectually elite communities. However, these students were not just a predictable by-product of privilege. Beyond smart, they were poised, confident, thoughtful, and genuine.

Their teacher was Esther Wojcicki. She told me that Palo Alto High School is credited with having what is likely the largest scholastic journalism program in the country. With more than 500 of their 1,800 member student body participating, they produce eight distinct publications mostly managed by student staffs.

As I explore in Chapter 2, when Wojcicki began teaching English at the school in 1984, the program was floundering, with just 19 students participating. As a former journalist, she believed that many of the profession's practices would provide pedagogical and psychological benefits for her students. Wojcicki noted that adolescents come to school with curiosities and concerns that are not often addressed in their coursework. They are managing parental and peer pressures and are shaping their identities—often without a forum for reflection, discussion, and debate. The results of her efforts validated her beliefs; Wojcicki found that her students were intrinsically motivated to write about their everyday experiences. Also, publishing their work led students to make a stronger commitment to the learning process. They were no longer writing solely to get a good grade or to please their parents. Rather, they were discovering an inner ability to use words to inform and influence their community.

Wojcicki and her colleagues did not invent high school journalism. It has a long history, and as you will discover, numerous schools have developed highly successful programs. However, in many schools journalism exists as the after-school “club down the hall” or as an underfunded elective. The distinction is that Wojcicki and her team placed journalism front and center in their school's curriculum. Many of the journalism

teachers also teach general and Advanced Placement English Language Arts (ELA) courses, and journalism strategies inform their pedagogical practices in all of these courses. They have created a culture on the Palo Alto High School campus where the “cool kids” are involved in journalism—and the results are demonstrated by higher levels of participation, productivity, and achievement. The Palo Alto High School program consistently wins top honors in national scholastic press competitions, and their graduates excel in college and in their careers.

As I learned more about Palo Alto High School’s program, more questions came to mind. Was it an anomaly? Or was there something worthy of deeper inquiry, something that could inform communities of teachers and students who struggle to meet learning objectives and function outside the insulated boundaries of privilege? This book seeks to answer these questions.

I spent 2.5 years studying the Palo Alto High School program and another 2 years interviewing English language teachers across the United States who are producing similar results with their students through journalism. They offer inspiring teaching strategies that educators without journalism training can employ. I refer to these pedagogical practices as *journalistic learning*.

In spring 2014, some colleagues and I applied many of these principles in a week-long boot camp at Roosevelt High School in Portland, Oregon. The grant-funded project focused on teaching digital storytelling skills to students with limited previous exposure to new technology. We documented an observable transformation in the student participants with video cameras and created online modules and lesson plans to benefit teachers everywhere through a dedicated website, DigitalSkillsWorkshop.com.

The timing of this research significantly coincides with broader acceptance of new, albeit controversial Common Core State Standards. The CCSS were introduced in 2010 and, as of 2015, have been largely adopted by 43 states. As *Newsworthy* will demonstrate, journalistic learning is uniquely aligned with the English Language Arts Standards that call for teachers to place more emphasis on nonfiction texts and digital literacy skills. Within these pages you will find workable and affordable solutions, as well as resources for professional development. You will discover that journalistic learning principles can be easily applied in a range of English and language arts classrooms, even in challenging economic circumstances.

Chapter 1 explores the commonly used terms *student engagement* and *critical thinking* to get beneath the surface of what these terms seek

to describe. It also defines *journalistic learning*, looking more closely at the theoretical frameworks and research foundations that inform the book. Chapters 2 and 3 draw from extensive fieldwork and interviews with teachers and students across the United States who are experiencing substantial benefits from journalistic learning strategies. Chapter 4 looks at how this pedagogical approach works across contexts and benefits a broad range of students from diverse backgrounds. Chapter 5 chronicles our research team's effort to apply and expand on our discoveries in a weeklong initiative at Roosevelt High School in Portland, Oregon. It also explores new and affordable approaches to teacher training, as educators seek to integrate more media and technology—as prescribed by the Common Core. The conclusion looks to the future and opportunities for further research and action.

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# In Search of Student Engagement and Journalistic Learning

Student engagement is among the most discussed topics in education. But what does it really look like, beyond buzzwords? How can teachers create rich classroom experiences for students that bring conceptual notions to life in more meaningful ways? This, in essence, is the point of this book.

As educators, we want to stimulate deeper levels of learning. It is tremendously satisfying to look out onto a class of students who are attentive and clearly invested in completing assignments or collaborating with peers. Especially rewarding is sensing that we are reaching students who may otherwise be easily distracted, prone to restlessness, or less responsive than their peers.

Fundamentally, in language arts we want students to read and write well. We also want to rouse curiosity, stimulate thinking, and foster understanding. This relates to another common buzzword: *critical thinking*. For many educators, it also remains an elusive concept.

This chapter delves beneath the surface of these buzzwords to offer secondary school educators tangible teaching strategies informed by the practice of journalism. Although journalism is well established within English language arts (ELA), it is often only offered as an elective or extracurricular activity structured as a school newspaper. I argue that journalistic learning offers ELA teachers a broader reservoir of educational resources that are often overlooked. I will define journalistic learning and explore its theoretical and research foundations. I will also specify how journalistic learning supports key objectives stated in the CCSS.

## WHY JOURNALISM MATTERS

Journalism informs our understanding of current affairs and popular culture. Yet many teachers consider it a foreign discipline, in some way separate



from ELA. In fact, journalism was a launching pad for a number of America's most celebrated authors, including Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Katherine Anne Porter, Richard Wright, Robert Frost, and James Agee (Fishkin, 1985). Today, journalism can be a significant resource for ELA teachers and learners that develops the skills fundamental to meeting the CCSS. David Coleman, one of the principal architects of the Common Core, says students should “read like a detective, write like an investigative reporter” (Coleman, 2011, p. 4). His inference points to one of the challenges of our times. Teachers are charged with preparing students for a world that is significantly different from the one they experienced during their formative years. In 2010, Google's executive chairman, Eric Schmidt, famously asserted that every 2 days humans create as much information as they had between the dawn of civilization and 2003 (Siegler, 2010). Half a decade later, wearable and sensor-enabled devices are exponentially increasing the amounts of data at our disposal. Detectives and investigative reporters share common traits. Both are trained to ask tough questions, dig beneath the surface, and distinguish between facts and fraud. These are fundamental skills students need to navigate successfully in an increasingly uncertain world.

Sarah Nichols, vice-president of the Journalism Education Association, asserts, “Student media is not only ‘21st century English’ but the very essence of the new Common Core: rigorous and relevant skill-based standards with emphasis on the 4Cs of communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking” (Nichols, 2014). The Common Core encourages a broader mix of nonfiction- and fiction-based texts to prepare students for college and career placement. The primary intent of this book is to provide a compass and a road map for reaching that objective through journalism-based methods.

Some may question the usefulness of “journalistic” forms of education, citing closures and cutbacks in traditional publishing as indicators of a profession and practice that are in decline. Undertaking journalistic assignments may inspire some students to pursue the profession; however, that is not the intent of this work. Rather, it is to illustrate journalism's ability to benefit a much broader population of students.

Further, I maintain that concerns about journalism's demise are erroneous. Nicholas Lemann, former dean of the Columbia School of Journalism, notes how the rapid growth of digital media is changing the means of distribution, not the demand for information (Moynahan, 2012). Eric Newton, formerly a senior adviser at the Knight Foundation, best articulates why journalism skills are so essential, stating, “The world can now tweet, blog, take pictures, and more. Every workplace in America needs

clear digital communicators. . . . To lead in any field—law, business, non-profits, government—you need to be able to communicate” (Newton, 2013).

Journalistic learning is an approach that resonates and achieves results with 21st-century students. It catalyzes creativity, an essential skill that is enhanced by providing students with opportunities for self-expression, rather than forcing them to memorize facts (Ravitch, 2010; Zhao, 2012). This is a generation that is growing up with pocket devices that can beam images and video around the globe in an instant. It seems commonsensical that media be embraced more rigorously as a tool to improve education. Yet economic challenges and philosophical differences are often roadblocks. Learning how other educators overcome these hurdles helps.

### DEFINING JOURNALISTIC LEARNING

First, I want to introduce the term *journalistic learning*. Whereas journalism is a professional practice, journalistic learning is a research-based pedagogical approach that borrows strategies from journalism to better engage students in language arts. So, what is journalistic learning? And how does it differ from other ELA pedagogical strategies? Journalistic learning is a term I began using to describe the peer-to-peer and teaching–student interactions I first observed at Palo Alto High School. Rather than participating passively, students took ownership of their education and leadership roles during the instruction. Levels of engagement were significantly higher than I had witnessed in English classrooms elsewhere.

At its core, journalistic learning looks to current events, community concerns, and personal experiences to engage students at the level of their intrinsic interests. It seeks to “meet students where they are,” tapping into their rich reservoir of interests. It hooks them on reading and writing about personal and peer concerns, as a precursor to introducing broader, multifaceted, or fictional themes. Journalistic learning acknowledges that adolescence is a critical phase of development for young people, and that many are without healthy outlets for constructive forms of self-expression (Leary & Tangney, 2003). Journalistic practices, which can include identifying newsworthy topics, conducting interviews, and synthesizing information for audiences, engage students as first-person witnesses to matters that are relevant to their lives.

A distinctive aspect of journalistic learning is its emphasis on the power and pedagogical value of publishing student works. Today this enterprise is virtually cost-free, thanks to digital/online platforms such