Keeping Current: Media Literacy Education as a Tool for Critically Examining Current Events in a High School Government Classroom

Kasey Moore

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Keeping Current: Media Literacy Education as a Tool for Critically Examining Current Events in a High School Government Classroom

Kasey Moore

University of Mary Washington
Abstract

The use of current events in the classroom can promote students’ political efficacy and knowledge, but these assignments need to be used meaningfully. One way to make current events education meaningful is to combine it with media literacy education. Media literacy encompasses other literacies such as reading, writing, computer, and information literacy, but applies them specifically to the analysis of media. This study aims to show the effect of media literacy on students’ ability to critically examine current events in a high school government classroom. Students partook in a four-lesson unit focusing on different aspects of media literacy as they relate to current event media sources. The data was triangulated with three types of data: pre-test and post-test current event assignment, lesson activities, and informal conversations and observations. All eight participants demonstrated improvement in their critical questioning of current events.

Keywords: media literacy, mixed-methods study, current events education, secondary, history, government.
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Keeping Current: Media Literacy Education as a Tool for Critically Examining Current
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The educational system evolves in order to engage a new generation of students who are immersed in technology and media. Studies have shown that “before most children are six years of age, they spend about two hours per day with screen media, something that doubles by age eight, and before they are 18 they spend approximately 6 hours daily with all types of media (National Council for the Social Sciences, 2009, p.1). This generation of technologically savvy children is referred to as digital natives (Prensky, 2001). Digital natives have been socialized from birth by media; as a result they “think and process information fundamentally differently than their predecessor” (Prensky, 2001, p.1). Essentially they have developed their own subculture and language, for instance, students “google” information, “mouse over” digital sources, and “tweet” their findings. These technological words have been added to the Oxford English Dictionary in the twenty-first century as recently as 2013, demonstrating their growing commonplace in society. However, simply being exposed to media does not necessarily equate to a digital native’s ability to critically examine the content and determine its impact.

Literacy has become a multidimensional skill encompassing the ways in which people make and communicate meaning through media. In turn, media literacy is one of the new literacies which are “grounded in students’ ability to use reading and writing to learn but require new strategic knowledge, skills, and insight to meet the conceptual and technology demands inherent in completely networked environments” (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2014, p.13). The new strategic knowledge required for fluency emerges from the
increase in media outlets which cloud students’ abilities to assess the appropriateness of sources. Media literacy, therefore, can be seen as an expansion of other literacies such as reading/writing literacy, computer literacy, and visual and information literacy. In order to fully engage digital natives, schools must integrate technology into the classroom and teach media literacy skills.

One way a teacher can integrate media literacy into the social studies classroom is through current events. In US Government courses, teachers expect students to follow current events as a way to create political awareness. Historically, current events education involved students reading a newspaper clip and writing a summary, both skills associated with traditional literacy. However, today’s digital natives can access current events from a variety of sources including radio, television, and internet. Each of these media outlets presents a new set of challenges for students including identifying perspective, tone, purpose, and audience of the source. On the other hand, they provide an opportunity for students to practice their critical reading and thinking skills to determine the authenticity, authority, and credibility of sources (Arke & Primack, 2009). All too often, current events are overlooked in the classroom. By pairing media literacy with current events, teachers can help create more critical citizens, consumers, and communicators (Pescatore, 2007).

Teachers often struggle to balance engaging students in their digital tongue and teaching them classical content such as reading, writing, logical thinking, and understanding. The digital and traditional literacy skills are not mutually exclusive. For example, the ability to differentiate between relevant and irrelevant information within primary and secondary sources, as well as the ability to identify authenticity, authority,
and credibility of sources, are key skills in the Virginia Standards of Learning at all levels in History and Government courses and associated with traditional literacies (e.g., "Standards of Learning (SOL) & Testing: History & Social Science," 2008, US1.1a, WHII.1a, VUS.1b, & GOVT.1d-e). These critical thinking and reading skills can translate directly to media literacy skills.

The present study aims to demonstrate how media literacy affects students’ ability to critically examine current events. Students were given a news article and asked to recall information, to identify purpose, to explain viewpoints, to describe technique, and to evaluate the article. These assignments were graded according to a rubric. Then, participants partook in a series of media literacy lessons which taught students how to summarize and evaluate the sources by identifying purpose, point of view, and production technique. After these lessons, students received a similar article with the same task and rubric. While the literature review will demonstrate the greater implications of a media literacy protocol, this study aims to measure students’ attainment of literacy skills due to the implementation of a media literacy unit. The hypothesis was that the media literacy protocol would have a positive effect on students’ ability to critically examine current events.
Literature Review

As technology increasingly permeates our society, teaching media literacy skills becomes increasingly important in the classroom. This literature review aims to define media literacy and provide insight into how media literacy skills can affect students’ critical thinking and civic engagement. The research was obtained through University of Mary Washington’s databases including Educational Research Complete, ERIC, and JSTOR. The research was limited to studies on high school students or college freshmen in order to more closely align with the subjects in my study, twelfth graders in US government courses. The research is divided into three main topics: Theoretical Framework of Media Literacy, Measuring Media Literacy Skills, and Current Events in the Classroom. The first section provides a historical overview and theoretical framework of media literacy. The second section synthesizes a handful of studies of media literacy in order to identify methods for measuring media literacy skills. The final section explores studies on the utilization of current events in the classrooms.

Theoretical Framework of Media Literacy

Media is a prominent feature in our society; it is nearly impossible to avoid its presence in our lives. Therefore scholarship on media literacy falls into two theoretical frameworks, protectionist and empowerment (Hobbes, 2011). Hobbes (2011) distinguishes between protectionist and empowerment perspectives on media literacy, stating that the protectionist perspective aims at “reducing negative effect of exposure to mass media,” whereas the empowerment perspective emerges from a constructivist theory in which “media-making can be a means for building self-esteem and forming identity, developing critical thinking skills about media and technology, and promoting
intercultural exchange” (Hobbes, 2011, p.422-3). Scholars (Potter, 2004) that fall into the protectionist school of thought believe in arming students with the skills necessary to mitigate the influence of media in their lives. Empowerment scholars (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbes, 2011; Mihailidis, 2011) believe in teaching the art of media manipulation in order to create social and political change. The figure below illustrates how both the protectionist and empowerment scholars shape the modern definition of media literacy.

Figure 1: Media Literacy Theory

Potter (2004) is the leading scholar in protectionist theory (Hobbes, 2011). He advocates that researchers and educators approach media literacy with cognitive theory. Cognitive theory emphasizes the individual and believes that by creating awareness of individuals’ cognitions or thought processes, they can change their behavior (Potter, 2004, p.266). Potter focuses on how individuals make or match meaning to the sources
they are examining. By helping individuals understand their thought processes, Potter (2004) believes they will be better insulated from the potential harm media can inflict.

Protectionist theorists (Potter, 2004) emphasize the power of individuals in media interpretations. In highlighting the individuals’ power, Potter argues that media responds to individuals, stating media is, “much more reactive than proactive” (Potter, 2004, p. 267). This statement while following the individualistic foundation of cognitive theory alludes to possibility that individuals can change media. While Potter’s (2004) conclusions are more protectionist, his use of cognitive theory intersects empowerment theory as they both accentuate raising awareness to bring about change.

However, empowerment scholars (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbes, 2011; Mihailidis, 2011) embrace media literacy as a social phenomenon rather than an individualistic approach. These scholars believe in the importance of examining the social constructs by which media is created, distributed, and consumed. According to Buckingham (2007), “digital media represents the world, rather than reflecting it,” meaning media sources purposefully choose to highlight specific ideologies and values (p. 48). These scholars believe media creators target a particular meaning to represent to individuals. Proponents of this cultural perspective of media literacy education emphasize four components of study: representation, language, production, and audience (Buckingham, 2007). The skills associated with representation include identifying authority, reliability, and bias of a source. Students’ analytical and meta-cognitive skills are improved in language and production components of study. Therefore, it becomes essential to teach students how to access, analyze, and evaluate a variety of sources in order to get a more complete representation of the world (Hobbes, 2011).
Media by its very nature is social; it involves the collaboration and communication of a variety of people. Therefore, in addition to accessing, synthesizing, and evaluating sources, these scholars promote a hands-on component stating, “Media literacy involves ‘writing’ the media as well as ‘reading’ them” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 49). By including media creation as a part of media literacy education, educators empower students’ self-efficacy and promote democracy (Hobbes, 2011; Mihailidis, 2011).

Researchers that come from the empowerment perspective promote students’ active participation in media. They believe that extending media awareness to students’ conscientious creation of media results in a “more vibrant and diverse information landscape with growing emphasis on collaboration, sharing, and dialogue via inherently social media platforms” (Mihailidis, 2011, p.4). These scholars (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbes, 2011; Mihailidis, 2011) are supporters of media interpretation as representation of the social constructs by which the media was produced. In their theories, they promote socio-cultural analysis of media that requires the students to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. They view the creation of media as an essential step to students’ ability to critically read media. Ultimately, they understand media as a source of empowerment which encourages students to critically evaluate the world around them by being active consumers and producers of media.

**Defining Media Literacy**

In defining media literacy and media literacy skills educational associations - the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), Center for Media Literacy (CML, and the National Council for the Social Sciences (NCSS), turn primarily to
empowerment theory. At the foundation of all their definitions is the skill to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. Even more important than these concrete skills is the ability for students to understand the implications of media on today’s society such that “Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy” (CML, “Media Literacy: A Definition and More”, 2011). The educational system recognizes the power of media to shape public opinion. Media outlets become the center of social and political change and, therefore, are a source of democratic participation. It becomes necessary for students to have media literacy skills in order to “critically participate as active citizens with the abilities to intelligently and compassionately shape democracy in this new millennium” (NCSS, “Rationale”, 2009). Media literacy offers a framework to engage students not only in academia, but also in society.

The NAMLE outlines six guiding principles for media literacy education which include the political, social, and individual levels of media education. By including all three levels, the NAMLE borrows from both the empowerment and the protectionist perspectives. Much like the empowerment definitions set forth by the NCSS and CML, the NAMLE believes that media literacy education is an essential component for creating engaged citizens. Their position statement aligns itself with cultural theorists (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbes, 2011; & Mihailidis, 2011) as they recognized that media is “part of culture and function as agents of socialization” (NAMLE, “Core Principles”, 2014).

However, the NAMLE incorporates some protectionist perspective, warning that media literacy “affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to
construct their own meanings from media messages” (NAMLE, “Core Principles”, 2014). In this instance, the NAMLE aligns itself with cognitive theorists (Potter, 2004) who stress the individual’s role in media interpretation. The NAMLE quiets the debate between empowering and protectionist perspective by demonstrating that these theories are not mutually exclusive. The NAMLE believes that by teaching students media literacy skills, students will be more critical of their own personal bias as well as empowered to use these skills to reconstruct the media for a more culturally aware world.

**Measuring Media Literacy Skills**

Measuring media literacy skills is problematic because there is a large set of skills associated with media literacy and these skills vary slightly between different types of media. For example, Hobbes and Frost performed a quasi-experiment, year-long study of 293 eleventh graders to determine the impact of a language arts curriculum on students’ reading, listening, and viewing comprehension, writing, and analysis of media messages (2003, p.335). The researchers differentiated between the various types of comprehension skills associated with diverse media sources. It is important to be explicit about the type of media usage in a study as being able to visually comprehend content does not guarantee an individual’s ability to auditorily comprehend the same content. Radio and television programs have different components that must be dissected in order to full comprehend the message. These skills represent different types of literacies depending on purpose, tone, and output method.

Scholars (Arke & Primack, 2009; Ashley, Lydon, & Fasbinder, 2012, Hobbes & Frost, 2003) take special care to differentiate between media outlets in their study. They specify that reading comprehension was applied to a news magazine article, listening
comprehension was specifically applied to radio news, and visual comprehension was applied to television news. By differentiating comprehension into these three subsets, they determined the internal constancy of their comprehension scale. Although they categorized their results by these forms of comprehension, they universally define comprehension skills as the ability to grasp the main concept and identify the supporting details or the “who, what, when, where, and why” of a story (Hobbes & Frost, 2003, p.342).

In addition to assessing media comprehension skills, the researchers employed an open-ended question protocol consisting of five key analysis points: identify the media construction techniques, identify point of view, identify omissions, compare-contrast story in different mediums, and identify the purpose and target audience (Hobbes & Frost, 2003, p. 336). The protocol used in this study was developed from a previous study by the same scholars; they determine their measures to be internally consistent. The researchers found that students who were exposed to the media literacy education had significantly higher scores than those in the control group suggesting their measure has criterion validity.

The structure of Hobbes and Frost’s (2003) measurement was adapted in later studies on media literacy (Arke & Primack, 2009; Ashley, Lydon, & Fasbinder, 2012). Unlike Hobbes and Frost, these studies aimed at assessing students’ natural media literacy skills in order to help educators tailor media literacy programs to their students. No treatment was applied in either study; “Rather than attempting to illustrate the effectiveness of media literacy education based on … prescribed treatments, we simply sought to gather baseline data” (Ashley, Lydon, & Fasbinder, 2012, p. 239). The two
studies aimed at validating measurement techniques used identical assessments with slightly different methodology for scoring students’ responses. Yet, both methods proved to be internally consistent with criterion validity based upon theoretical models.

**Quantitative measure.** Arke and Primack streamlined the five points of analysis set forth by Hobbes and Frost (2003) to recall, purpose, viewpoint, technique, and evaluation (Arke & Primack, 2009, p.57). These five new categories mirror the levels of Bloom’s learning taxonomy in which students are scaffolded from knowledge to comprehension, analysis, evaluations and synthesis. Students were exposed to radio, television, and print media and asked open-ended questions based on the five analysis points. Their responses were scored on a 0-5 scale. Arke and Primack provide a “means of gauging where an individual’s current state of media literacy is placed on the continuum of scores” (2009, p.63). The purpose of this study was to create a valid method to measure students’ media literacy skills. They conclude their measures had both internal consistency and content validity based on a five factors structure correlating with the conceptual model. Arke and Primack’s research is important because it demonstrates that “quantification of media literacy can be achieved” (2009, p.63). They believe media literacy skills should be quantified to help move the field of research beyond ambiguous definitions and vague teaching protocols to precise data.

**Qualitative measure.** Arke and Primack’s (2009) study was replicated by Ashley, Lydon, and Fasbinder (2012) with one minor adjustment. Instead of quantifying the open-ended response, they qualitatively coded each response. While both studies provided internal consistency of their measurements, the latter study (Ashley, Lydon & Fasbinder 2012) provided more robust data that demonstrated nuances in students’
analysis. Ashley et al. (2012) concluded that students had a cursory knowledge of media literacy skills. In particular, students were able to summarize the message across mediums but they lacked interpretive skills to understand the purpose and construction of the message. Interestingly, the students were able to identify omissions in all three mediums which “could relate to the proliferation of talk about bias, fairness, and balance in today’s media culture” (Ashley et al, 2012, p 239). Overall, the researchers believe that students’ higher order thinking about media needed improvement. By using qualitative data the researchers were able to provide “insight into how students see the world of media message and how they construct meaning from it” (239). This study was more adept than Arke and Primack’s study at establishing a baseline for students’ natural media literacy skills because it valued students’ critical thoughts. Their study not only provides a reliable and valid measurement of media literacy skills, it demonstrates gaps in students’ skill set that media literacy programs should spend more time addressing.

**Current Events in the Classroom**

Programs aimed at incorporating news into the classroom date back to the 1830s and 1840s when newspapers such as the New York Times supported the delivery of their newspapers to schools (Gardner & Sullivan, 2004). These types of programs continue to exist today. Schools believe that students’ civic engagement and political knowledge will increase with the implementation of a newspaper program. Unfortunately, current researchers (Claes & Quinterlier, 2009) have found that simply incorporating newspapers into students’ education does not increase their political knowledge or civic engagement.

The researchers (Claes & Quinterlier, 2009) conducted surveys after student participation in the newspaper program. They found no significant correlation between
utilizing newspapers in the classroom and increase in private newspaper utilization. Similarly, participation in the program did not increase students’ political or social engagement. There is a positive but weak correlation with participation in the program and increased political knowledge. The researchers hypothesize that the limited changes were caused by “the short duration of the program itself: a period of two weeks is just too short to bring about changes” (Claes & Quinterlier, 2009, p.355). They suggest not only lengthening the duration of the program, but also increasing the scope of study. In particular, they advocate the use of media sources, stating, “the educational system should not go against the stream, but should provide you children with critical research strategies and reading habits” (Claes & Quinterlier, 2009, p.357). According to the researchers, students are more comfortable with digital media than with print media. Therefore, they postulate that news programs which meet the students in the comfort levels will result in an increase in students’ civic engagement and political knowledge.

In fact, researchers have found that switching from print media to digital media did increase students’ political efficacy (Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014; Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012). Students who regularly viewed the news through Channel One, an audio-visual news program for students, self-reported high levels of political knowledge and civic involvement (Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014). The researchers believe that the audio-visual nature of Channel One appealed more to students’ affective knowledge increasing their motivation to actively participate in news analysis.

**Media Literacy and Current Events**

In addition to measuring the effects of utilizing current events on students’ political awareness and engagement, scholars (Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014; Kahne,
Lee, & Feezell, 2012) have begun to examine the role of media literacy in this relationship. Researchers found that by implementing a media literacy protocol in conjunction with the audiovisual news yielded in significantly higher levels of political knowledge, civic engagement, and news and advertisement skepticism than simply having students view current events (Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014). The authors state that media literacy “magnified potential benefits” of regular news media in the classroom including making students more aware of the creation and distribution of media (Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014, p.431).

With the obvious benefits of media literacy education in increasing students’ civic awareness and political efficacy, scholars wonder about the prevalence of these programs in the public school system (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012). These researchers examined the amount of exposure to media literacy activities and the equity of these exposures based on demographics in California state high schools. They find over 40% of students are exposed to media literacy in their high school education. Background factors (SES, race, gender, and intent to attend college) account for 2.6% of variation in experiencing digital media literacy activities in high school (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012, p.11). Like other scholars in their field (Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014; Claes & Quinterlier, 2009), they found that participation in media literacy activities boosted civic engagement and was positively associated with exposure to diverse viewpoints. They believe that media literacy education helps students by “fully tapping the affordances of new digital media to enhance the quality and quantity of their online civic and political participation” (Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012, p.19). This study demonstrates the prevalence of media
literacy in the public school system and the positive impact it has on developing well-informed and active citizenry.

**Conclusions and Areas for Further Study**

Scholars (Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014; Claes & Quinterlier, 2009; Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012) have found that students who participate in media literacy programs as they involve news media are empowered to higher levels civic of engagement. As part of their education, students are trained to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media (NAMLE, 2014). Unfortunately when scholars assess students’ media literacy skills, they almost solely focus on students’ ability to analyze and evaluate sources. The five most common skills assessed are the ability to comprehend or recall information, to state the purpose, to identify the viewpoint, to describe production and distribution techniques, and to evaluate the credibility of the source (Hobbes & Frost 2003; Arke & Primack 2009; Ashley Lyndon, & Fasbinder, 2012).

**Skills brushed aside.** The focus on these five points leaves two fundamental components of media literacy education unmeasured - access and creation of media. Media literacy education has become paramount in the twenty-first century as a way of protecting our students from the impact of media and empowering them to civic engagement (Buckingham, 2007; Hobbes, 2011; Mihailidis, 2011; Potter, 2004). Arguably, if intervention protocols are ignoring the skills of assessing media, then students are not fully equipped to protect themselves from the impact of media. Students need to be proficient in research habits that allow them to find alternative sources for comparison to the main source.
Similarly, it is through creation of media that students more readily understand the problematic nature of media. Furthermore in the twenty-first century, political engagement and social change begin through social media (Pescatore, 2007). For example, in 2010 the civil protests in the Middle East referred to as the Arab spring proliferated through social media. Similarly, the 2011 economic protests in the US, Occupy Wall Street, utilized social media Facebook and Twitter to recruit supporters. Both of these movements heavily relied on social media as a way to promote their concerns by constructing meaningful media. Therefore, in order for students to be civically engaged, they must partake in conscientious media creation.

**New direction.** The studies in this literature review do not implement a comprehensive media literacy intervention. Some studies (Hobbes & Frost, 2003; Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012) look at existing curriculum that address media literacy skills, while others (Claes & Quinterlier, 2009; Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014) create protocols emphasizing media bias but ignoring other key components of media literacy. Future research must be done in order to better assess the impact on media accessing and creation on students’ civic engagement. Studies have shown that media literacy education and current event education are beneficial in creating civically aware students. Therefore, future research should explore the use of an explicit media literacy protocol as it specifically relates to the use of current events in the social studies classroom.
Methodology

Scholars (Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014; Claes & Quinterlier, 2009; Kahne, Lee & Feezell, 2012) have demonstrated the importance of current events in the classroom as a way to instill students with political knowledge and efficacy. In order for students to successfully gain from current events education, they need extensive practice in summarizing, analyzing, and evaluating current events. These skills are also the cornerstone of media literacy education. While scholars (Arke & Primack 2009; Ashley, Lyndon & Fasbinder 2012; Hobbes & Frost 2003) have confirmed the positive correlation between media literacy and critical thinking skills, very few have actually implemented a media literacy protocol. This action research study aims to inform the way current events are utilized in the classroom by pairing current events education with media literacy education. The researcher seeks to answer how participating in a media literacy protocol affects students’ ability to summarize, analyze, and evaluate current events in the media.

Site and Participants

This study was conducted in a 12th grade government class in a suburban high school located in Virginia. The researcher used convenience sampling based on the school, grade, and students who she was assigned for her practicum internship. About 75% of students at this high school identify as Caucasian, 10% identify as Hispanic, 15% identify as Black, and less than 1% identify as Asian. Roughly 20% of students in the school are considered economically disadvantaged and less than 1% of students are classified with disabilities that require accommodations (504 plans). Of a total population of 60 students, only eight students handed in the consent and assent forms and
were able to participate. The eight students come from two Government 12 classes that are taught by the same teacher and on the same pacing guide.

**Procedure**

The researcher had planned to implement a weekly media literacy program as designed by media literacy educational expert Chris Worsnop (1989). The protocol consisted of six lessons designed to encourage students to critically think about media sources. The first lesson was an overview of media literacy, which included teaching students the various purposes and target audiences. The second lesson focused on the physical construction of media and teaching students how to read these sources. In the third lesson, students were to determine the point of view taken and omitted in media. By the fourth lesson, students were to understand how their personal perspective affects the meaning of the message. Then, students examined the media industry’s effect on media meaning in the fifth lesson. Finally, in the sixth lesson, students explored the ideological agenda hidden in the media’s message.

The protocol was adapted to focus exclusively on current events news media (Appendix A). Each lesson would have been given as a stand-alone lesson focusing on one of the five elements of media literacy: summarizing, identifying point of view, describing the purpose, examining production and distribution technique, and evaluating the source. However, due to inclement weather, the unit had to be condensed. The revisions as well as implications of these changes will be addressed in future sections.

**Data Collection**

Data was triangulated through three different collection procedures. First, students were given a pre-assessment prior to being exposed to the media literacy protocol. The
pre-assessment assignment required students to show their media literacy skills in five areas: recalling information, stating the purpose, identifying the viewpoint, describing production and distribution techniques, and evaluating the credibility of a print news article; students demonstrates these skills by constructing a five paragraph write-up (Figure 2). The same task was given to students with a different print news media article as a post-assessment. Each of the five areas was assessed by a rubric (Appendix B). The rubric translates each of the five media literacy components onto a 0-3 scale (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Content of Five Paragraph Write-Up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paragraph</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Summary of the article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Analysis of Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Analysis of Author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Evaluation of the Article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Opinion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lessons’ activities were collected as the second form of data. While not formally graded, these activities showed students’ understanding of each component and added context to the pre/post-assignments. Finally, students were to be interviewed as the third form of data. Again, due to inclement weather, the formal interviews had to be replaced with informal conversation during class. These students were purposefully selected to represent students who succeeded, stayed the same, or struggled with the overall project. The students’ responses will add perspective to the quantitative data collected.
Data Analysis

The pre/post-test assignments were broken down into five key components as taught in the lessons. Each of these components were graded based on a rubric scaled 0-3 (Figure 3). The researcher performed a paired t-test to determine if the variances in grades from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment are statistically significant. In addition, the lessons’ activities were assessed to add body to the pre/post-tests data. The activities demonstrated students’ understanding of each media literacy component. These activities shed light on specific components that students grappled with and determine whether students understood and completed the work necessary to grasp the concept.

Finally, by utilizing informal observation and conversation, the students received an opportunity to explain their thought processes. Their thoughts informed the study’s success, identified gaps in the educational process, and aided in determining the future direction of effectively utilizing current events and media literacy in the classroom.

Methods Alterations

Originally the data was to be triangulated between pre-assessments and post-assessments, in-class activities, and exit interviews. Unfortunately, due to a week and a half of consecutive snow days, the eight-day unit was compressed into a three-day unit (Figure 10 and Appendix C). While the constraints will be examined thoroughly in the discussion section, it is important to note that the data collection process altered slightly. Students still partook in the pre-assessment and post-assessment, although the pre-assessment was completed in-class and the post-assessment was completed outside of class over a weekend. The new in-class activities were collected and evaluated. However, the independent in-class activities became group activities which required observation to be added to the data collection to note the subject’s level of participation during the
activity. Finally, with the time constraints as well as some extenuating circumstances within the school community, the formal exit interviews became informal conversations with subjects during class.

The students were given 80 minutes to complete a write-up on a current event. They had a selection of four different, one-page articles. The articles were selected because they represented some common challenges for students in previous current event write-ups such as unidentifiable author, article’s vagueness, or author’s bias. All students were asked to complete the five paragraph write-up based on a rubric and an outline of questions which guided students through the critical examination of the article. The same assessment was given to the students after the unit of study except they were to select their own article. Students were given five days to complete the post-assignment and return it. Each paragraph was graded with a mark of one, two, or three based upon the student’s thoroughness in answering the questions provided; a three representing higher order thinking and analysis (Appendix D). The student’s achievement on both the pre-assessment and post-assessment were averaged with the highest possible score of three and a lowest score of one. The meaning of the average scores is loosely based upon Bloom’s taxonomy (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Meaning of Average Scores on the Pre and Post-Assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Numerical Average Score</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Student demonstrated critical analysis of the article by addressing bias, authority, and credibility of both the author and source. The student provides additional research and evidence from the article to defend his or her claims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Student had some analysis of the material, author, and source. The student posed questions about the credibility and reliability of source, but did not demonstrate a deep understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Student showed no critical thought about the source. The student relies heavily on paragraph filler and use noncommittal words; for example “sort of”, “possible”, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

The majority of the students improved from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. The aggregate average from the pre to post-assessment rose 0.8 points from 1.7 to 2.5. However, the greatest improvement by an individual student was a net gain of 1.8 points, which is a 60 percent increase from the pre to post-assessment. One student did not demonstrate improvement from the pre to post-assessment, earning a 1.8 on both assessments. After running a paired t-test on the group's pre-assessment and post-assessment, the average was statistically significant with a p value of 0.0019. A p-value less than 0.05 indicated that the change in average from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment were not random. From this quantitative data, it is unclear the cause of the students’ positive improvement as a number of variables could have resulted in the increased grade. It would be easy to attribute that success to the implementation of the media literacy unit, but a qualitative analysis complicates the picture providing more vigorous data.
Figure 4: Student Averages from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment.  
* M indicates that the student is male; F indicated the student is female.

Case Studies

To provide more context to the students’ improvements, four of the eight students have been selected for a case study. These students represent some common attitudes, pitfalls, and successes exhibited in the over 60 students who partook in this unit of study but provide assent or obtain consent to participate in the research. The students include three Caucasian males, one African American male with an IEP, and one Hispanic female. Their names and identifying information have been kept confidential. The four students will be referenced by their code found in Figure 3 and a pseudonym. Each case study compares the student’s progress from pre and post-assessments, examines the quality of work provided during the two in-class activities, and assesses the students’ attitude and effort based on the researcher’s observations.

M1: John. The first student is a Caucasian male with the pseudonym John. In class, he is relatively quiet as he conscientiously completes all work on time. During this
unit of study, he earned a net gain of 1.8 points from his pre-assessment to his post-assessment. His net gains partially stemmed from his change in attitude towards the pre-assessment and post-assessment. During the pre-assessments, the student was reluctant to start. I reminded him to focus on his work, even going as far as hand selecting an article for him to read. The article I selected for him was an editorial piece. Being an editorial, the student should have been able to cite several examples of bias as well as discuss the purpose of the piece. There was a hyperlink to the author’s organization named the “Volokh Conspiracy”. John noticed the hyperlink to the group, but did not critically address the issue stating, “The author seems more or less credible, but he is a part of the ‘Volokh Conspiracy’ which seems to be a sort of sketchy organization just by the title.” The Volokh Conspiracy consists of a group of lawyers who contract with the New York Times to write op-ed pieces focused on federal legislation. They have years of legal experience at top ranking law schools. The student assessed the credibility of the author based solely on the name of his organization, not based on the list of qualifications found on the hyperlink. Additionally, as an editorial piece, the article is inherently biased as it is written as an opinion. However, John stated that because the piece comes from the Washington Post, the article is “fairly unbiased”. John’s analysis of the author and the source was superficially based on the notoriety of the newspaper and the connotation of the writer’s guild.

John’s pre-assessment reflected his apathy toward this assignment. His paragraphs average two long sentences which barely scraped the surface of the article. Additionally, he used flowery language as space filler. For example, when discussing the credibility of the author in paragraph three, he writes, “I believe the author should go to the closest
Walmart, purchase a game of Scrabble, throw all the letter pieces into a bucket, then proceed to shake the bucket and dump it onto the floor. After that, the author should record what he sees exactly, as it will undoubtedly produce a more well-written and coherent article.” This one sentence composed the entirety of his third paragraph and does not reflect any critical thought. Additionally, the student wasted his in-class time as he started 15 minutes late and ended 20 minutes before the bell rang. His work ethic indicates that his primary focus was on achieving the five paragraphs in the fastest way possible, rather than truly exploring the source thoroughly.

**Figure 5: John’s Points Earned**

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*in-class activities.* Following the pre-assessment, John generally appeared more focused. He completed every assignment in a timely and thorough manner. His article annotations consisted of critiques of the piece, connection to class, as well as questions about the author. For example, in the article, he underlined the following: “President Barack Obama would not meet the prime minister when he comes to the U.S. to address a joint session of Congress” (Pace, 2015) and wrote in the margin, “this shows the prez [president] as chief diplomat even though he refusing to welcome him.” The student demonstrated higher order thinking when he applied the current event to the unit of study. Additionally, the student circled the names of those who were quoted in the article, like John Boehner, and indicated whether they were republican or democrat by
placing an R or D by their name. While it is important to pay attention to the sourcing within the article, the student could have gone a step further by relating the source types to the bias or lack thereof in the article.

Similar higher order thinking was exhibited during the second in-class activity where students worked in groups to assess the credibility of the source and author. John appeared to lead his group, asking essential questions like, “Well, if the vice president and the president do not approve of this visit, why is the ambassador going to speak to Congress? Do all democrats disapprove of this issue for party politics reasons?” He was able to pinpoint a key piece of information missing from the article: the reason why the president refused to meet with the ambassador. Secondarily, it appears that John’s annotations from the previous day, where he indicated the political party of those quoted, were a building block for his question of whether this was an individual’s vendetta or a party politics issue. Beyond asking this hard-hitting question, the student led his group on a research mission to find an article that answered this question.

**post-assessment.** John improved dramatically from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment. His writing contained none of that flowery filler language which composed the majority of his pre-assessment. His pre-assessment seemed to be an anomaly as John’s post-assessment followed the style of his in-class activities including essential questions and outside research to support his claims. For instance, he described the author as being an authoritative source on the Obama administration citing that she, “wrote two books and has been working for the Washington Post for seventeen years… [She] is also the newspaper’s White House bureau chief.” The student acclaims the authority of the author by providing examples where she diversifies her sources. Again mimicking the
work on the in-class assignments, the student indicated the political affiliation of the author’s sources and, then, determined that her sourcing split evenly between liberal and conservative officials creating a well-rounded article.

Although John indicated that the article was unbiased, he still included an additional source that provided more information on the topic. He states that, “The article from The Guardian gives more insight on the public opinion by referencing Ed Mailbach, the director of the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University, who describes the ways in which he believe Obama’s plan was a good idea.” While the student does not provide a full explanation of this second article, the fact that he found an additional source which provided different information on the same topic indicated that he grasped the main objective of this unit: that no single source can be the perfect source and it’s important to expose yourself to a variety of news outlets.

M4: Derick. Student 4, Derick, is an African American male. He requires academic accommodations because he struggles with nonverbal reasoning such as following multi-step directions, decoding novel words, and formulating logical arguments. The student benefits from verbal instruction as he has strong verbal comprehension. During this unit of study, Derick received all his accommodations except during the pre-assessment due to time constraints.

During the pre-assessment, the student was required to complete the assignment within the 80 minute block. Under the time constraint, the student performed as expected. He was able to complete all five paragraphs with the average length of each paragraph being two to three sentences long. His summary was rudimentary with little original phrasing. For example, the article states that, “that 875-mil pipeline would carry tar sands
oil from Alberta, Canada, to the US state of Nebraska where it joins the pipeline running to Texas” ("Obama Vetoes Keystone XL Pipeline Bill, Defying Republicans," 2015). Derick wrote, “A pipeline which would carry tar sands from Alberta, Canada, to the US state of Nebraska where it joins pipes running Texas.” When asked what the Keystone XL pipeline was, the student stumbled over his words and simply read the line again. His inability to use his own wording or explain why the Keystone Pipeline was important after reading the article is symptomatic of his challenges with nonverbal processing skills.

Similarly, he struggled in his evaluation of the source. Derick was able to include some outside research such as the date the BBC was founded. However, he did not explain the correlation between credibility and the newspaper being a 95-year-old establishment. Finally, in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the article, the student initially said that the author does “not really takes sides,” but later on described the article’s weakness stating, “the article is so one sided.” The student’s contradictory statements represent confusion between informative-unbiased and persuasive- biased arguments.

**in-class activities.** Following the pre-assessment, Derick completed two in-class activities focused on deepening the student’s ability to critically evaluate news media. For the first assignment, the class practiced reading critically and annotating news articles. I explained that annotating needs to be more than just highlighting the main idea and names. Instead, annotations should include their opinions, connections to class, and questions to the author. After practicing annotating as a class, the students annotated their own articles. I noted that Derick showed tremendous effort in staying on task, taking
notes, and asking questions. He was given extra time and returned the article with color-coded highlights. He highlighted key nouns in blue and main ideas in yellow. Unfortunately, he did not include any margin annotations or explain his highlights. With over 90% of the article highlighted and no written annotations, the student did show evidence that he could differentiate between fact and opinion, relevant and irrelevant information. Additionally, his work did not show critical questions of the text or author, or connections to class or the other world events.

During the second in-class activity, Derick worked with the same article to assess the credibility and reliability of the source and author. He was partnered with an academically advanced student with the same article. The two of them worked well together with the advanced student modeling the thought process by asking questions of the article’s author and indicating bias within the source. It appeared that Derick was responsible for the recording of answers more so than the actual researching portion. However, he appeared genuinely interested as he asked his partner to clarify key ideas. For example I noted the student asking, “Well if it doesn’t have an author listed, wouldn’t that mean that the author is ashamed of his work?” His partner was able to give several reasons for an unnamed author to which the student replied with, “Ooh, that makes way more sense.” The pairing of this student with an advanced student worked well because the advanced student was able to verbalize the thought process.
Figure 6: Derick’s Points Earned

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**post-assessment.** By the end of the unit, Derick improved gaining 0.8 points from the pre to post-assessment averages. The chart above compares the student’s points earned out of a possible three points for each paragraph of the pre-assessment to his post-assessment. The length and detail included in each paragraph doubled. Additionally, the student was able to include direct evidence from the article and some additional research on the author earning the maximum points on the third paragraph, analysis of the author. While the student included outside research, it was not always in a meaningful way. For example, he identified that author as dealing with, “work related to advertising, marketing and economic,” but failed to connect that to the credibility of the author. Instead he stated, “I assume he [the author of the article] did his research and caught up on Obama.” Although the student did not critically evaluate the source, his positive gains stemmed from his ability to ask critical questions of the author and source indicating positive progress toward acquiring media literacy skills.

**M5: Steve.** The sixth student is a Caucasian male referred to as Steve. Steve is typically a strong student having a high B average in the class. However, he surrounds himself with students who have lost motivation in this last seven weeks before graduation. I have had to stop class multiple times during the period in order to gain their attention. However, Steve was always the first to apologize. In addition to being an amicable student, he worked diligently to complete work correctly and on time.
On the pre-assessment, the student earned mostly twos which represents middle level critical analysis. For example, in his analysis of the author, Steve argued, “The author seems to be Republican, having strong opinions against immigrants due to their tendency to steal American jobs.” Steve correctly identified that author bias against Obama’s immigrations plan. He applied his knowledge of political ideology to demonstrate bias of the author to be aligned with the Republican agenda. Unfortunately, this sentence is the only critique of the author. The student could have earned a three if he had included direct evidence from article of the author’s opinions and explained how that ties to the Republican platform.

Figure 7: Steve’s Earned Points

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_in-class activities_. During the in-class annotations, Steve diligently filled the margins with every thought that entered his mind. His annotations include connections to class, underlining main ideas, and his opinion. The annotations varied from essential questions such as, “Does mentioning his daughter manipulate the reader to sympathize with Obama?” to general reactions such as, “This is stupid.” With over 90 % of his article annotated and the majority of annotations referencing essential questions and a critique of the article, the student proved his ability to critically read the article.

Similarly, Steve excelled in the in-class group activity where he led the group in discussing the credibility and reliability of the source. He continuously referenced the article and made connection to class. He would pose questions like, “Does this represent
political bias or word-choice bias?” He inspired his team to think more deeply about the reading and offered suggestions on better word choice for googling answers.

**post-assessment.** In his post-assessment, Steve improved in in his summary and opinion paragraphs; the first and fifth paragraphs respectively. His summary and opinion of the article quoted important information like statistics with full in-text citations. Steve only wrote four paragraphs, but each paragraph averaged six sentences. By meaningfully incorporating direct quotes from the article, the student demonstrated that he critically read and understood the content.

However, critical reading is only half of the assignment. Steve needed to critically evaluate the entirety of the source. Instead of demonstrating the same quality work from the in-class assignments, his write-up was completely devoid of any critical evaluation of the author or source. He seemed to forget the work he had completed during this unit and default back to my mentor teacher’s format and expectations for current event write-ups. The format for the write-up required a five paragraph evaluation consisting of a summary, examination of the author’s credibility, explanation of the source’s credibility, suggestions on article improvements, and opinion.

Instead, Steve opted to write a three paragraph write-up consisting of a summary, connection to class, and opinion. Based on my mentor teacher’s rubric, the student would have received the maximum credit. Not only was his summary and opinion thoroughly explained with supporting evidence from the article, but his connection to class exemplified his attainment of the content and ability to apply that to current events. Unfortunately, this format did not provide him space to address the credibility and strength and weakness of the article, which was required for this unit of study.
On the other hand, in Steve’s opinion paragraph, he briefly addresses the strengths and weaknesses of the article. He originally examined a Fox News source and identified the article as, “reporting the positive, friendly discussion between President Obama and President Ghani.” Then, he found a similar article published by CNN, describing it as, “obviously more democratic” as the authors “chose to use statistics to appeal to supporters of Obama.” Including a second source reflects the student’s understanding that no news article stands alone as the authority on issue. Although his comparison between the two sources touched on the reliability of the sources, it did not provide enough evidence from either source to prove bias. Instead of explicitly discussing the sources in detail, he used the sources to support his opinions, making that paragraph very well written, but missing the objective of the assignment. When asked if he remembered the rubric and format were available online, Steve responded “well, both versions were online so I thought I could choose.” The miscommunication about expectation could possibly rest with me as the instructor or with the student as a means of receiving credit by doing an easier assignment than prescribed. Either way, Steve showed, through the in-class assignments and his post-assessment, he can think critically about news media, but he failed to articulate his ability in the post-assessment. Steve did make positive strides with certain topics (Figure 6), but his inability to follow instructions left him led to the exclusion of all necessary information. His average from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment did not change.

**F1: Stephanie.** Stephanie, the seventh student is a Hispanic female, but she is not one of my ESL students. She is extremely diligent and conscientious about her work, earning a credit of 118 percent for the third nine weeks. Stephanie always goes the extra
mile including completing every extra credit opportunity, coming in after school to talk
about a study guide posted for a quiz, and emailing questions over the weekend. Her
work ethic never faltered during the media literacy unit. Her net gain of one point
represents a 33 percent increase between averages.

Stephanie’s work on the in-class pre-assessment averaged a 1.8, which is slightly
above the group average. As she analyzed the source, she highlighted the use of statistics
as a method to manipulate the consumer to believe the author to be correct. She
recommended that the authors include more qualitative data stating, “To get the complete
story, the investigators should include quotes from the Obama administration as well as
the story of immigrants.” In the students’ analyses, they often identify quotes as being
biased, but rarely do they address statistics as problematic. Stephanie addressed concerns
toward quantitative data expressing that a convincing argument would need both
quantitative and qualitative data. Her opinion paragraph continued to express concern
about the topic, stating, “It is very difficult to have an opinion on immigration when the
statistic seems so convincing, but the impact on immigrants’ lives is missing.” Her
analysis and opinion bordered on high-level thinking, she did not include evidence from
the article to support her claims that the author was only telling one side of the story.

Figure 8: Stephanie’s Points Earned

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Similarly, Stephanie was able to address the possibility of credibility concerns when the author is unnamed, but she never provided examples where the credibility might be questioned. In her author evaluation, she writes, “Since the article lacks to provide the name of the author bring up doubts about the author and the source. The credibility, authority, and the reliability of the author is low since there is no one to look up to see their history.” Stephanie’s inability to provide evidence for why the author and source lack credibility, authority, and reliability leaves questions about her understanding of the meaning of credibility, authority, and reliability. Her idea to research the author to assess their qualification as a method to measure credibility is valid, but it is not the only way. She might have examined the validity of the statistic or the lack of quotes to support her claims that the source is reliable or unreliable. Additionally, she might have looked more critically at Fox news and their journalistic integrity to make her case. Her paragraph indicates that she is grappling with higher level thinking, but she has not mastered it.

**in-class activities.** During the two in-class activities, Stephanie paired with another student, Nora (F2), from this study. Nora happens to have a very similar work ethic to this student and they both push each other to think more critically. As a result, these two students represent the ideal results of this unit of study. As part of practicing critical reading skills, the students were asked to read the headline of their article, and then ask five questions and predict what they believe should be contained in the article. Most students struggled to come up with three substantial questions, but these girls came up with eight questions. These questions include, “How old is this treaty? Why is this issue coming up now? What is special about the island in question? What is the history of
the relationship between Japan and the U.S.? How might the U.S. be torn between their economic depending on Japan and China?” The questions represent essential understanding questions the students hope to be able to answer at the end of the article.

By asking these questions in advance, Stephanie was more prepared to annotate and evaluate their article. In her annotation, she was able to address concerns about the bias of the article given the sources the author uses. For example, when the article quotes President Obama and then lists four different sources that disagree with Obama, Stephanie annotated, “What is so wrong with Obama’s statement? Aren’t there people who agree with him?” In this one annotation, the student addressed a huge sourcing issue and related it to the possibility of bias. When she went back to write an evaluation of the article, she was able to directly reference the places in article where she had made annotations. She utilized her annotation as building blocks to the evaluation, showing a natural progression from critically reading to critically evaluating sources.

*post-assessment.* Stephanie’s post-assessment showed marked improvements from her pre-assessment. Her summary and analysis included more direct evidence from the article. Again, it was evident that she used her annotation as a building block for her analysis. Stephanie quotes and directly references her annotations in her write-up correlating her questions and concerns. For instance, she writes, “The article is bias toward the republican party as the author uses words like thwarting, warned, and fierce skepticism to justify the GOP writing to Iran [sic].” In her annotations, she circled these words and wrote “word-choice, manipulation of reader to feel that the GOP had no other choice [but to write directly to Iran].” Her attention to process during the in-class activity reflected in the post-assessment. Her ability to identify bias in the smallest words
demonstrates her diligence and consideration in critical reading. Then, her ability to articulate and explain her findings exemplifies her distinct ability to critically evaluate and support her claims.

Data Summary

Of 62 students who partook in the media literacy unit, only eight students opted to participate in this study. The data from these eight students served as a convenience sample of the larger population of 62 students. As evident in Figure 4, the majority of students made some improvement from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment with an overall 26 percent increase between averages. From these eight students, four were selected as case study to provide context to these improvements. They represent specific characteristics such as having an IEP but also point out common trends in students’ successes and pitfalls. In the following section, the case studies will be discussed in the larger context of the research and its implications.
Discussion

Each of the eight students had a unique response to the media literacy unit. Overall, every student showed some improvement from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment; although, only seven of the eight had net gains. Several variables impacted the students’ growth, namely students’ academic motivation and rapport with the teacher, different teacher expectations on the pre-assessment than on post-assessment, time constraints and environmental changes (Figure 9). In the following sections, the four students from the above case studies will be examined in relation to how these variables affected their achievement. Then, the limitations and implications of the study will be discussed in greater detail.

Figure 9: Variables Impacting Student’s Achievement
Stephanie
Students, like Stephanie, performed extremely well in this unit. They were able to show positive growth in critical analysis from the pre- to post-assessment. These students scored well namely because of their nature as students. Stephanie self-regulates her behavior and learning, often coming to me with questions about the directions or material. Her dedication to education resulted in her openness to the learning process and pedagogical challenges. While other students struggled with the transition from my mentor teacher to me, Stephanie assimilated with ease. She went from being an A student with an average of 93 to having a 118 average in my class. Granted, the increase did not change her overall grade, it does reflect a smooth transition from teacher to student teacher, which cannot be said for all students. Her acceptance of my pedagogical style benefited Stephanie in this unit, as she was more compliant to directions and deadlines. She was able to follow my scaffolding through the in-class activities to demonstrating critical thinking skills on the post-assessment.

Steve
On the other hand, some students struggled with the transition from my teacher to student-teacher. For example, Steve, while typically a strong student, had no net gain from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment because he turned in the wrong assignment format. Steve’s work during the in-class assignments is similar to that of Stephanie’s work. Both students stayed focused and asked higher order questions of the news article. Steve even demonstrated in his post-assessment that he was capable of critically evaluating news sources providing pros and cons of an article and supplementing it with a secondary article. Unlike Stephanie, Steve resisted the
pedagogical and organizational changes which came with the transition from my mentor teacher to me. He refused to apply the new formatting which I required, thus hindering his overall performance.

Resistance to my instruction was not surprising, as there is bound to be some growing pains with changes. However, Steve’s resistance was not completely unintentional. Steve claimed he followed the old directions which required less writing and critical analysis because they were easier than my directions. In fact, it was probably more difficult to incorporate my requirement into the old format than it would have been to follow my new format verbatim. For example, Steve attempted to incorporate all he had been practicing in class, including the evaluation of the author and source, into the three paragraph format established by my mentor teacher. He placed his evaluation of the source in his opinion section but was unable to find a place to evaluate the author.

Because Steve was able to incorporate what he learned in class, I was able to award him points based on the information he included even though it was not structured and formatted correctly.

I do not think Steve was openly refusing my assignment, nor do I believe he used the old format because it was easier, as he claimed. Instead, I believe that he used the old format because it was more ingrained into his writing process or because the directions for the old format were easily accessed. The students were required to complete six current event write-ups using the old format. In a matter of three days, I dismantled that format and created a more rigorous one. The students had little time to adjust to the new format. Additionally, I should have differentiated between the mentor teacher’s format and my format more explicitly. I called my format “media analysis”, but my mentor
teacher called his “current event analysis”. The title given to my format was somewhat misleading because we only examined web-based news outlets. Additionally, on the webpage, my directions were on the bottom of the page and the mentor teacher’s remained on the top of the page making old directions more accessible to students. I believe if Steve and other students who fell into the same mistake had followed my directions they would have been scaffolded by the format to critically analyze the source.

John

While Steve did not intentionally ignore the instructional changes, other students like John did. One of the disadvantages of being a student-teacher is being unsure how to enforce behavior. At this point in my placement, my only means of behavior modification was rewarding or removing points from students’ grades. During the pre-assessment, John and others were unfocused. They goofed off and held side conversations. Their behavior indicated that did not believe this assignment to be worthwhile. I fault myself for this attitude because I did not explain the rationale of the assignment beyond it being a pre-assessment for the unit of study. I reminded John several times to stay focused, but my words fell on deaf ears. I could not threaten to take points away because the assignment was a completion grade which awarded 10 points per paragraph written by the student. Additionally, I did not provide any supplemental instruction or aid during the pre-assessment to avoid inflating students’ base grade and confounding the research.

John had a 60 percent increase in scores in part due to his low achievement on the pre-assessment. His pre-assessment use of flowery language and uncritical critique of the author marked superficial thinking at best. As mentioned in the data, John’s pre-assessment was uncharacteristically lower-level thinking. There is a high probability
that, due to the lack of rationale and supplemental instruction on my part and my inability to enforce behavior, John did not put his full effort into the pre-assessment. While I do not believe that the student would demonstrate the highest level of critical analysis on the pre-assessment, I do believe he is capable of mid-level analysis. Therefore, his pre-assessment represented grade deflation and resulted in greater percentage gains than expected.

**Derick**

Finally, a group of students like Derick were low performing because of the lack of time and support given to them during the unit. Derick was the only student with an IEP, therefore, his hiccups with the assignments were not uncommon. The unit of study was originally eight lessons on media literacy focused on several main types of news media. However, due to snow and computer issues, the unit became a three lesson critical reading and analysis unit with sole attention on web-based news articles. Admittedly, the last minute alterations to the lesson had me flustered and this panic transferred to the students. My weaknesses disadvantaged the student with the IEP the most because there was not enough time to devote more attention to his specific needs.

Derick represents several of the students who felt the pressure of those changes. The time limitations eliminated hopes of remediation or additional support. Derick, who would have benefited from a slower paced unit with more instructional time, fell behind. The unit was student-led, as small groups were the primary avenue of learning. The only written feedback students received came from peer evaluation. In hope of providing Derick with the support he needed, I was careful to place Derick with a group member who could help scaffold him to higher level analysis. Still, I was not able to monitor him
as closely as I would have liked. Derick seemed to grapple more than other students; he was
overwhelmed by the amount of material needing to be covered each day. For example, the original unit spent a day discussing the content of each paragraph but the new unit, under the shorter time limits, examined the content of each paragraph in one 80 minute class block. It was near impossible for Derick to develop a deep understanding of how to critically evaluate the sources given his IEP and the time constraints. However, in the short time frame, he was able to show that he understood the types of questions to ask of a source to determine credibility. Overall, Derick improved but it was not the improvement I had expected to see with the original plan which allowed for more instructional time and scaffolding.

Limitations

A couple of limitations were encountered during this study, namely time and relationship constraints. The lack of time impacted my study in two ways: 1) I had to alter my unit drastically in order to remain on track, and 2) Students were given exponentially more time on the post-assessment than the pre-assessment. The second limitation to this study was the quality of my relationship with my students at the time of the research. Studies (Dembo & Seli 2004 and Margonis 2004) have shown that students are more open to learning if they have a good relationship with their teacher. In the following sections each of these constraints will be elaborated on in the context of the data.

Time constraints. As previously mentioned, the study was greatly impacted by a week’s worth of snow. My once meticulously-planned eight, 80 minute lessons which carefully scaffold students through each paragraph had to be scrapped. With the snow, I only had four class blocks to complete the pre-assessment, post-assessment, and the 6
lessons originally planned. On top of that, I still had content to teach to remain on pace for the school year. Thinking back to the original research question (how does participating in a media literacy protocol impact students’ ability to summarize, analyze, and evaluate current events), I decided to rework my protocol to focus on three things: critical reading, credibility of source and author, and evaluation of the source. I believe that these three areas could be taught in their own 80 minute lesson (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Unit Modifications

Then, when I went to reschedule the computer carts so that students could complete both assessments and research the credibility of the author and source, there were no carts available. I was able to secure the computer lab for one day and ten computers for another day later my unit. I made the decision to use the computer lab as my pre-assessment day in order to ensure that every student completed the assessment. Additionally, it allowed me to get a better feel for their natural ability watching them grapple with reliability questions in person.

The ten laptops were obtained for the second lesson where students research the credibility of the author and source. Instead of asking students to complete this work individually, I had to place them in groups of three; each student was given a role as a
scribe, a researcher, or an article consultant. By placing students into groups, it made it slightly more difficult to determine individual participant’s work from that of their group members. However, using general observations and informal conversations during the assignment, I was able to pick up on their level of understanding and contributions to the group work. The other assignments were made into paper-and-pencil assignments.

The second concern with time constraints was that the pre-assessment and post-assessment were not given under the same circumstances or with the same expectations. The pre-assessment was to be completed in an 80 minute block period of which students had approximately 60 minutes of work time after setting-up and shutting-down time were incorporated. In those 60 minutes, students were required to read one of four articles, each roughly a page or two long. Then, they wrote a five paragraph write-up which summarized, analyzed, and evaluated the source. The students were under pressure to complete the assignment as each paragraph was worth 10 points, making it a 50 point assessment.

With the time constraints and the resulting panic in their eyes, I decided to make it a completion grade. I continually reminded students’ that completion meant they attempted to answer each questions in the protocol. Generally, I believe that all the students did a decent job at coming up with an answer for each question. However, very few of their answers were supported with evidence from the article or additional research; some answers were downright silly, such as John’s response to the credibility of the author. The qualities of the pre-assessment answers were naturally lacking because of the time constraint and because students were told that they were graded for completion.
On the other hand, I gave students five days to complete the post-assessment. They were told that the assignment would be graded on the quality of answers rather than for completion like the pre-assessment was graded. The students were given the same rubric and question protocol as the pre-assessment. Additionally, they were asked to only spend 80 minutes on the assignment. Because the assignment was completed at home, there was no way to ensure that students only spent 80 minutes on the assignment. The data could have been positively skewed as students were able to spend more time constructing better quality answers.

However, research (Corno, 2000) shows that assigning homework does not guarantee better quality work. Homework relies heavily on students’ ability to self-regulate and monitor. It is an important step in students’ quest to gain academic autonomy. However, because “homework infiltrates family and peer dynamics”, the quest to quantify the importance of homework can be inundated with obstacles (Corno, 2000, p. 529). Students often have to prioritize homework with their social lives especially sports and after-school clubs. They also have to balance homework across curriculums and with their home lives. Often, students have to prioritize certain homework assignment lower in order to make the right decision for their circumstances. Thus, students may turn in low quality work on particular homework assignments for any number of reasons, but that should not be mistaken for a lack of understanding. While my eight participants all demonstrated some growth from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment, it is unclear how much of that was the condition in which the assessment was given especially providing that the pre-assessment was an in class assignment and the post-assessment was assigned homework. Ideally, the pre-assessment and post-
assessment should be given under the same set of circumstances to control for a number of outside variables. However, with the time constraints, I could not use another day of class for this project.

**Rapport constraints.** The unit started four weeks after I had taken control of my mentor teacher’s classroom. The students had met me previously, but there were still some growing pains as I began to develop my own management strategies, implement my own pedagogy, and develop my own expectations. The transition from my mentor teacher to me, could account for some of the difficulty in the helping students reach their full potential. Researchers (Maslow & Lewis, 1987) have found that a positive relationship between students and teachers directly correlates to students’ academic achievement and behavior modification. Students have a hierarchy of needs beginning at the basic level of physical survival to self-esteem and self-actualization. Unless, the most basic needs are met, students will not be able attend to higher needs (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). Stressful situations or situations where there is a lot of change in a short period of time can result in students’ regression away from self-actualization toward basic survival. In the classroom, this regression can manifest in a resistance to change.

In my classroom, there was some evidence of resistance namely in the case of Steve who completed the incorrect assignment, but also, with numerous other students who never turned in the consent forms or unit assignments. Their resistance was often accompanied by questions such as, “Why does it matter?” This metacognitive question is the crook behind education research on students’ resistance to change. Researchers (Dembo & Seli, 2004; Margonis, 2004) found that students resist change for two reasons; one, they don’t believe they can change or, two, they don’t understand why they have to
change. In order to combat their apathy, the teacher must be very explicit in explaining the change and provide emotional support in the transition (Margonis 2004).

In hindsight, I was so focused on making up for lost time, that I did not spend enough time introducing the concept of media literacy to my students. I believe my students’ resistance stemmed primarily from their inability to answer, “Why does it matter?” Additionally, because I did not have a strong foundation with these students, I don’t believe I was able to provide enough emotional support through the transition. With the rush into the new unit, students picked up on my apprehension and, stressed about the changes, they resorted to survival mode. They knew the unit was temporary and that it was for my research, but they did not quite understand how it would benefit them. Therefore, all they wanted to do was to get through the unit with the least amount of impact on their lives. This survival mode explains why students, like Steve, continued to follow the routine and formats of the mentor teacher.

Implications

Unfortunately, the unit of study and data collection took place over four days, which limited the results significantly. The longitudinal effects of this media literacy protocol on student’s political awareness and critical thinking skills were unobservable. However, researchers have found the implementation of a long term media literacy protocol yields significantly higher levels of political knowledge, civic engagement, and news and advertisement skepticism than simply having students view current events (Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014). The scholars state that media literacy “magnified potential benefits” of regular news media in the classroom including making students more aware of the creation and distribution of media (Austin, Chen, & Johnson, 2014,
Therefore, this study offers students another avenue to practice their critical reading and thinking skills while increasing their political awareness. Through the regular practice of media literacy as it relates to current events, students will become more critical consumers and citizens, which can lead to stronger democracy.

**Future Research**

Due to weather constraints and the resulting modification, I had to teach the government course content at the same time as I was conducting this research. In order to make certain that the population of 60 learned the same content as my other 100 students, I oriented the news articles toward the executive branch. As such, a secondary research question emerged: can students learn curriculum content through current events? From a glance, the population of 60 performed just as well on the test and the other 100, but it would have been interesting to break that data down and look at how this subset of 60 performed in the content areas of their news articles.

Again, this research would benefit from having a larger N and being more long term. Future research should be done to assess students’ growth and retention of media literacy skills. For example, at the end of the year, the senior class is writing a research paper based on current events. It would be fascinating to see if the students who participated in the media literacy protocol choose higher quality news sources than those who did not participate in media literacy. It would also be beneficial if students could be contacted after graduation to complete a survey to assess their political awareness and engagement after a long-term media literacy protocol.

The time constraints encountered in this study posed a very real limitation to the scope of the study. The study aimed at only assesses students’ attainment of media
literacy skills, putting up blinders to other viable outcomes such as increase political awareness, increased empathy, and increased content knowledge. Other studies (Claes & Quinterlier 2009) had similar difficulty in assessing students’ skills and knowledge attainment after a two-week newspaper program. They felt that a two-week program examining students’ content knowledge, skills, and political engagement was not sufficient to assess the true impact of the program on students’ lives. Comparably had this study taken place over a longer period of time, I could have provided more support and practice resulting the students’ ability to innately utilize the media literacy skills. With more instructional time and practice, the scope, depth, and implications of this study could have greatly increased.
Conclusion

The implementation of a three-lesson media literacy protocol resulted in higher levels of critical thinking and analysis of current event articles. Seven or the eight participants improved from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment with an average improvement of 26 percent. After running a paired t-test for the group’s average from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment, it was determined that this improvement was statistically significant. Upon careful evaluation of the in-class assignments, even the student with no net gain made strides in critical thinking and evaluation within particular paragraphs. Generally speaking, the unit was successful, but future research should look at long-term retention.

Media literacy and current event education in the 21st century go hand-in-hand. Today’s students were born in a world inundated with technology. When students are asked to research current events, they first turn to the internet. However, just because they are digital natives does not mean they understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate sources. Additionally, web sources can be challenging to analyze as the tone, purpose, and credibility of the source can be difficult to determine. Thus, it becomes crucial to teach students how to be critical consumers and implement positive change in the world. Media literacy is the fulcrum to this type of education as it focuses on teaching students how to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and participate in media in variety of forms in addition to the internet. These five skills align themselves to the Virginia Standards of Learning for Government 12, which makes the case for incorporating media literacy into the government curriculum, especially as a way to evaluate current events.
References


Pre-test Assignment & Post-test Assignment | Students will be asked to critically examine a news article. They will be given a rubric and time in-class to complete the assignment (Appendix B).

Lesson 1 – Introduction to Media Literacy | This lesson introduces the importance of media literacy to students. Students will explore the difference between print and digital sources. They will be able to identify strengths and weakness of each type. Students will learn about media construction techniques such as appeal to reason, false logic, avoiding the issue, identification/analogy, and popular appeal.

Lesson 2 - Comprehension | Students will explore how news media is formatted. They will observe the picture-to-text ratio, headlines, fonts and other stylistic choices. They will examine the format of news articles. Then, they will identify the main idea and supporting details of news articles.

Lesson 3 – Purpose | This lesson explores the different purposes of media: to argue, to inform, to profit, to persuade, and to explain. Students will understand the role of target audiences in media production. They will be able to identify the purpose and audience of different pieces of news media.

Lesson 4 – Point of View | There are two points of view involved in media literacy: the point of view of the author and the point of view of the reader. Students will begin by critically examining the point of view taken by the author. Students will examine one news story as written by different perspectives. They will explain the perspective each article is written in and, then, explain which article they agree with more. Students will understand that the type of news they follow reflects their personal point of view.

Lesson 5 - Production | This lesson highlights the production techniques and how it affects the readership, point of view, and purpose. Students will understand the agenda behind media production and distribution.

Lesson 6 –Evaluation | In the final lesson, students will practice assessing media sources. Students will use their knowledge from prior lessons to discern the authenticity, authority, and credibility of news media. Students will practice writing and grading analytical responses to news media.
## Appendix B
### Unmodified Rubric

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>1</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Recall Information</strong></td>
<td>Student is unable to identify the main idea, they provide little to no supporting evidence, and they rely exclusively on the language in the text.</td>
<td>Student is able to identify the main idea and provide some supporting evidence, but he relies heavily on language in the text.</td>
<td>Student successfully identifies the main idea and supporting details. He uses his own language to summarize the article.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td>Student is unable to identify and provide evidence the purpose, tone, or target audience of the text.</td>
<td>Student identifies part of the purpose, tone, or target audience and provides some evidence to support his findings.</td>
<td>Student identifies and provides evidence of the purpose, tone, and target audience of the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Point of View</strong></td>
<td>Student is unable to identify and provide evidence of the point of view of the author. Student gives a meaningless opinion on the topic.</td>
<td>Student identifies author’s point of view but provides little evidence. Student identifies their point of view and gives some supporting evidence of how it affects the way they read the article.</td>
<td>Student identifies and provides evidence of the point of view of the author. Students identify and explain how their point of view affects how they read the article.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Production/Distribution</strong></td>
<td>Student does not consider production or distribution of the source.</td>
<td>Student considers the potential production or distribution of sources.</td>
<td>Student explains how the potential production or distribution of sources affects author, reader, and the topic.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>Student provides an opinion on the article, but does not provide any critical analysis.</td>
<td>Student provides an opinion of article. They offer some critical analysis of the article’s authenticity, authority, and credibility.</td>
<td>Student critically discusses authenticity, authority, and credibility of the source using examples from the text.</td>
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**Appendix C**  
Modified Lesson Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-test Assignment &amp; Post-test Assignment</th>
<th>Students will be asked to critically examine a news article. They will be given a rubric and time in-class to complete the assignment (Appendix D).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lesson 1 – Critical Reading</strong></td>
<td>Students will explore how news media is formatted. They will observe the picture-to-text ratio, headlines, fonts and other stylistic choices. They will examine the format of news articles. Then, students will practice their thinking voices as they critical annotate articles making connections to class, providing their opinion, or asking questions of the author.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lesson 2 - Credibility of Source and Author</strong></td>
<td>Students in groups of three examine the credibility of the author and source using a critical thinking worksheet. Students are given a computer and encourage to research the author and source to better assess their authority, purpose, and point of view.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lesson 3 – Evaluation of Source</strong></td>
<td>In the final lesson, students will practice assessing media sources. Students will use their knowledge from prior lessons to critique the authenticity, authority, and credibility of news media. Students will practice writing and grading analytical responses to news media.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paragraph 1 - Summary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student is unable to identify the main idea, they provide little to no supporting evidence, and they rely exclusively on the language in the text.</td>
<td>Student is able to identify the main idea and provide some supporting evidence, but he relies heavily on language in the text.</td>
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<th>Paragraph 2 – Credibility of Source</th>
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<tr>
<td>Students concludes the source is credible or not credibly without providing evidence from the article.</td>
<td>Student addressed the credibility of the author. He identifies several possible areas of concern, but does not explain how those concerns pertain to the article in question.</td>
<td>Student successfully identified two or more credibility concerns. He use his own language to evaluate the source and provide additional research to support his claims.</td>
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<th>Paragraph 3 – Credibility of Author</th>
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<tr>
<td>Students concludes the author is credible or not credibly without providing evidence from the article.</td>
<td>Student addressed the credibility of the author. He identifies several possible areas of concern, but does not explain how those concerns pertain to the article in question.</td>
<td>Student successfully identified two or more credibility concerns. He use his own language to evaluate the author and provide additional research to support his claims.</td>
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<th>Paragraph 4 - Evaluation of Article</th>
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<td>Student concludes the article is appropriate or inappropriate without identified any strength or weakness. Student does not provide evidence from article to support claims.</td>
<td>Student addressed a singular strength and/or weakness in the article. Student provided little evidence from the article to support claims.</td>
<td>Student addressed the multiple strengths and weakness of the article. Student provided evidence from the article to support claims.</td>
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<th>Paragraph 5 - Opinion</th>
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<td>Student provides an opinion on the article, but does not provide any critical analysis.</td>
<td>Student provides an opinion of article. They offer some critical analysis of the article’s authenticity, authority, and credibility.</td>
<td>Student critically discusses authenticity, authority, and credibility of the source using examples from the text.</td>
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