

History Teachers' Forum

VALUES IN THE STUDY OF CURRENT EVENTS

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The valid reasons for teaching current events in the schools seem to be three in number: as a device for motivating study and arousing interest; as a means for increasing civic and social intelligence; and as a method of giving training in problem-solving as regards social matters. A discussion of each of these in the order named follows.

Two of the besetting difficulties in Social Studies instruction, especially history, in the schools are: the conception of Social Studies material as being of a static, as contrasted with a dynamic, nature; and the over-formalism into which the work usually lapses. The teaching of current events tends powerfully to minimize both of these. There is a strong under-current of feeling among many students that history is dead, that the events with which it deals have happened long ago and that is the end of it. The study of current events enables students to see that there are social matters with which man must struggle today as he has struggled in the past. They can see the same effort for improvement, the same trial and error, the same nobility here and baseness there that their study of history reveals. This helps to make historical study alive and meaningful to the present generation.

Then again this same finality of tone which historical study is likely to assume causes over-formalism in class work. Teachers often contribute to this condition by using the same methods over and over. Students also promote it by the handing down of books from older to younger members of the family and by the growth of a body of historical knowledge, which, although valid enough in itself, becomes traditional and, by being uninterpreted, sterile. Examples of this which may be cited are the discovery of America and Paul Revere's ride. Current events study lends to both teacher and student a freshness of viewpoint and an exploring attitude which work wonders with classes.

In addition to all this, current events study increases social intelligence. Current happenings form the last chapter in history—"the end of life for which the first was made." Historical study is meant to give a third dimension, the depth

of time, to social knowledge. It is meant to show that human affairs are in the eternal process of becoming, that nothing is constant but change. What then is the point to the study of history if it leaves off at a time so remote from today that its problems have all been solved or have ceased to be problems at all? Social intelligence begins when students see that the conditions in the world about them are the end-points of historical change. These conditions are then meaningful because they are the results of development involving people long dead and places far away. The study of current events contributes to this appreciation of the continuity of past and present.

Lastly, current events study gives training in the solving of social problems. Individual life and social life are alike full of problems which cry for solution. In current events the student sees the accumulated wisdom of the ages being brought to bear upon present day problems. He sees the usefulness of studies about which he was skeptical before. He appreciates the unity of social life. Even if the problems which he studies now do not turn out to be the problems of his maturer years—and in many cases this will be true—still he will have a chance to view the technique of social direction, the manipulation of social affairs, in the light of established laws of social behavior. He gains in positive ability as a citizen by the possession of this knowledge.

To summarize, then, the study of current events furnishes an important motivating force in social studies instruction, arouses interest, enhances social intelligence, teaches the technique of social adjustment, and contributes therefore, in all these ways to the acquisition of traits of good citizenship—a high goal of modern instruction.