



NUI MAYNOOTH  
 Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

*Higher Diploma in Education 2003-2004*

# *Civic, Social and Political Education*

## Teaching and Learning Workshops

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### The Medium is the Message – Using newspapers in the CSPE classroom

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1. One of the **goals for the CSPE teacher** is to produce *‘ knowledgeable pupils who can explore, analyse and evaluate, who are skilled and practised in moral and critical appraisal, and capable of making decisions and judgements through a reflective citizenship, based on human rights and responsibilities ’*. The syllabus introduction continues: *‘ Such pupils should be better prepared for living in a world where traditional structures and values are being challenged, and where pupils are being confronted with conflicting interests, impermanent structures and constant questioning ’*.
2. In working to achieve these aims, **newspapers can be a major resource**. Almost every edition of every newspaper carries examples of the key course concepts in action. The four units set out in the syllabus can be easily identified in a newspaper. Frequently, newspapers present topics and issues in ways that are fresh, immediate and accessible. Newspapers can be seen as complementing textbooks, and even replacing them!
3. Despite their undoubted commercial, consumerist and political biases, newspapers can also be seen as one dimension of a community or **society in conversation with itself**. Human behaviour is continually explored, analysed and evaluated. If we see citizenship as an activity as well as a status, democracy as a value that does not maintain itself automatically but has to be constructed and maintained, then newspapers are part of the oxygen which keeps society alive, vibrant and developing. Newspapers are a conduit through which we keep informed about our fellow citizens and the rest of humanity. A ‘free press’ can also be seen as the right to ‘free speech’ in action. Try to imagine life without newspapers!
4. We know from research (IEA 1999) that *‘ among 14 year olds in almost all nations, news broadcasts on television are the most prominent sources of political information, with 86% of respondents indicating that they sometimes or often tune it. Newspapers rank second (68%) followed by news broadcasts on the radio (55%). ’* In the classroom,

when striving towards a **critical appraisal of news** in general, newspapers tend to be more versatile and easily managed for learning purposes than TV news.

5. Teachers often report that many classes include students who live in homes where newspaper are neither bought nor read. The **very handling of newspapers**, even at the most basic level of cutting out headlines or pictures, connects the student with a paper. It normalises and legitimates the activity of using newspapers. The student is introduced to a newspaper's structure, layout, presentation, journalistic style and so on.

6. Learning through newspapers fits well with a **constructivist view of classroom teaching and learning**. For example: student autonomy and initiative can be encouraged; students have to manipulate and interact with raw data; newspapers can nurture students' natural curiosity; their responses to newspaper material can drive classes; newspaper items can spark dialogue between students and encourage them towards clarifying their own understanding of the world around them as well as developing oral skills.

7. Exploring newspapers offers wide scope to teachers interesting in taking a **Multiple Intelligence approach** to their teaching. Those committed to active learning methodologies in teaching and learning, to Teaching for Understanding (TfU) usually find some of the practical suggestions outlined below helpful.

8. Newspapers can be seen as a **metaphor for connecting with the world** beyond the individual classroom, with the wider CSPE goals of *developing 'knowledge and understanding of processes taking place at all levels of society which lead to social, political and economic decision-making'*. It is not so much that students are learning about newspapers, but rather through them.

## SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

9. Forging a co-operative relationship with a **local newsagent** can be very practical. If you can get copies of unsold newspapers after their mastheads have been removed but before they are discarded, an extensive resource for you and your students can be at your fingertips, usually for no charge. This gathering task can also be delegated to students.

10. When starting any topic, a **newspaper search activity** is nearly always an effective beginning e.g. 'For the next class you should bring in, pasted into a copy or on a poster, six headlines/articles from newspapers relating to Children's Rights/community/ Law etc. This can be developed into a poster making exercise if you wish (See separate handout *The Case for Posters*)

11. **Issue tracking** will usually capture the imagination of quite a few students. This involves identifying a news story and tracking it over a few days, a week or longer. The issue to be tracked may arise from class work and can be a useful follow-up activity to a lively discussion.

This methodology is very effective at engaging students with particular issues but also with the wider one of news: what's important? What's not? What gets reported? Whose

voices are heard? and so on. A particular advantage is that individual students, or small groups of them, can be given particular responsibility for tracking different issues. This can be done with them working through a bundle of newspapers in class or tracking the issues between classes. Material can be used in a scrap-book, to make a collage, wall chart or poster and as the basis of a written or oral report.

Issue tracking can also lead into a more detailed focus on a particular organisation or visiting speaker.

12. Looking at and analysing **newspaper photographs** can be a relatively easy but highly effective learning methodology. (See separate handout *Using Photographs in the Classroom*) Collecting and posting images of public figures is always a useful way of ensuring that students have some familiarity with people 'in the news'.

13. **News reports relating to particular course concepts** have a special relevance. For example, any court case, preferably with something about the charge, the evidence and the verdict, can be useful when exploring the concept of 'law'. Similarly, an election report can illuminate a class related to 'democracy' or an account of a protest march or demonstration can spark discussion about 'rights and responsibilities', and so on. Again, getting students to make posters on particular concepts or issues based solely on newspaper headlines is usually very effective.

14. **Local newspapers** can be especially relevant when teaching Unit 2 of the CSPE course, *The Community*. At a most basic level, a local paper can provide the non-local teacher with valuable perspectives. It can also help bridge the very real deficit which sometimes exists between the teacher's knowledge of the local community and the students' knowledge. Cuttings from local newspapers can often connect well with larger national and international issues, highlighting a particular concept or issue.

15. **Compare the treatment in different newspapers**, locally, nationally or internationally, of the same story. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 or the War in Iraq are international examples that can connect with the concepts of interdependence, law, development and stewardship.

16. An **Internet** search can give the teacher – or the researching student – access to numerous newspapers worldwide.

17. Using a photocopier, reduce a **newspaper front page** to A4 size, and then make a **transparency** of it for use on an OHP. This can be effective when teaching how to analyse a newspaper page: layout, the role of headlines, pictures, mastheads etc. Front pages reporting on particularly significant events are also very powerful in the classroom, as many teachers of History have discovered..

18. Use a brief – two or three lines are often enough – report of an incident to prompt a **student role play**. E.g. *'Gardai in Newtown are investigating the contents of a mysterious metal box which could be over 100 years old. The slightly damaged box which measures 20 cm<sup>3</sup> was discovered by three teenagers yesterday near the ruins of Oldtown*

*castle.*’ The role-play then leads to a discussion about issues, in this case: ownership, rights and responsibilities, the role of the Gardai, heritage, justice and law etc.

19. Getting students to **write a news report** of a particular incident or issue can be an effective way of reinforcing topics, issues and concepts, for example, after a classroom visitor or a trip outside the school. Clear guidelines – write as an impartial reporter; try to state the main point in the first sentence; keep the report under 200 words – will help students. A development of this activity is to print it using a word processing package so that it can be inserted into an actual newspaper column using typefaces of identical style and size. Hence you might get a page with one headline about the US President, another about an international meeting and another with the headline *Class 2X quiz local Politician*. The revamped page can be photocopied and circulated.

20. **Content analysis** is a quantitative approach to what appears in newspapers. It involves students working systematically through one of more newspapers and recording the number of times a particular name, issue, place or word occurs. The data that results from such activities can then be interrogated by the class and can be very powerful in exposing some of the patterns that characterise media output and the values which are embedded in newspapers. This methodology is also good for developing critical thinking skills. The possibilities are endless. Some examples include: count the number of times the word ‘school’ occurs (this can be followed up by looking at the context but that can get quite sophisticated and difficult at Junior Cycle!); how often ‘Afghanistan’ or ‘Venezuela’ is mentioned; the gender and age of people photographed; the frequency and context in which ‘traveller’ or ‘asylum seeker’ is used; the businesses engaged in by advertisers; patterns of addresses within the Death notices.

21. Critical analysis of an issue, or of a particular newspaper’s treatment of an idea, can sometimes lead to students, individually or collectively, **writing a letter to the editor**. Realistically, this can only be an occasional activity. If the letter being sent is from a particular class group in the school, then courtesy demands that the Principal be informed. The teacher needs also to be aware of possible parental sensitivities, especially if student’s names are being used. This activity can have a very powerful focusing effect for students and teachers, especially if the editor responds.

22. Devising **captions for photographs** can be one way of exploring the possibility of bias and prejudice within newspapers; this activity is also useful in that it often exposes our own biases and the inclination to ‘rush to judgement’. This methodology involves you getting a newspaper photograph either in triplicate or photocopied three times. Cut off the original caption and replace it with three different captions, one neutral, one positive, one negative e.g. *Lucy Hamilton, just one of thousands of shoppers in Grafton Street yesterday; Lucy Hamilton, her prompt action in raising the fire alarm saved the lives of two elderly residents in a Grafton Street apartment; Lucy Hamilton, charged yesterday with embezzling £2m from her Grafton Street employers*. Ask individual students to describe the person in the photograph without revealing what the caption says. Then discuss what has been happening, making sure to connect with the core concept.

23. Learning how to **distinguish between fact from opinion** is an important skill of analysis for the CSPE student. This can be facilitated by the teacher finding a newspaper item, preferably short, which clearly advances a particular point of view. The students are asked to read the piece, identify the points of view which are presented and ones which might have been presented but which are not, whether an accompanying photograph adds to the meaning/interpretation, how particular words convey particular understandings and so on. A useful follow-up is to get students to re-write the piece in a more balanced fashion.

This can also be linked to exploration of the issue of **representation** in the media: how are particular politicians (local, national and international) presented by words and images? Comparisons can be made with representations of other groups of people e.g. children, farmers, bishops, non-nationals, judges, poor people, environmental activists, etc.

24. When we understand newspaper **cartoons** it is often an indicator that we appreciate the more subtle nuances of a particular news story. For example, you can visit another country, read and understand most of the news stories and still find a cartoon totally unintelligible. A cartoon which relates well to a course concept will always be a useful CSPE resource. Students who have a talent for illustrating can also be asked to devise their own cartoons/ comic-strips relating to aspects of the CSPE course.

25. The process of **putting a school publication together**, whether a single page newsletter, a magazine or actual newspaper, can bring students into contact with many of the issues faced daily by journalists and newspaper editors. What's important? What's less important? Why? What fair and balanced? What's biased? And so on. This task promotes knowledge, deepens understanding of concepts, provides opportunities to practise skills and express themselves creatively and, with guidance, can promote positive attitudes to human rights and responsibilities. Furthermore, self-directed learning, co-operative learning, negotiated learning, and problem-solving are all facilitated when a class engages in such a practical activity. Students' self-esteem and self-confidence is usually boosted when they take part in producing a publication. A publication can also provoke learning activities e.g. surveys, interviews with people outside the school, expression of controversial views, airing of topical issues inside and outside the school etc. Many teachers who have experience of producing school newspapers tend to give three pieces of advice: don't be too ambitious, schools can't really compete with 'real' newspapers; be clear about your learning goals for the students; remember the 80:20 rule – you get 80% of the work done in 20% of the time, the final 20% can take forever!

26. A **visit** to a newspaper office and/or a **classroom visit** by a working journalist can be the basis of a useful project, provided thorough preparation is done by teacher and students and the course concept being connected to is clear to all. Such activity might arise from an issue tracking activity or the identification of a particular bias or local controversy.

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