

Guidance for Active, Articulate Citizenship

HOWARD R. ANDERSON

In this approach to the teaching of current affairs, Howard R. Anderson, chief of instructional problems, Secondary Division of the U. S. Office of Education, Washington, D.C., combines an overview of a day's news with some practical pointers for classroom teachers. We believe the suggestions he makes have important implications for those concerned with giving reality to learning related to those issues defined in the previous articles.

WE ARE LIVING in a period when the American people and their government are compelled to deal with a large number of important issues at home and abroad. Under the American form of government it is impossible for a citizen to escape the obligation of dealing with issues. By the opinions he expresses, by the causes he supports, and by the way he votes the citizen helps to create public opinion and to shape action programs. When a citizen for any reason chooses to ignore an issue, by this negative action he helps to determine the outcome.

Issues and problems cannot be "wished" out of existence. In any given situation, the greater the number of inarticulate and inactive citizens, the easier it is for numerically small but effectively organized pressure groups to further policies and solutions which square with their interests.

Prerequisite for Citizenship

In dealing with problems and issues of the day the citizen needs (1) to possess background information, (2) to be informed about most recent developments, and (3) to choose a course

of action which is justified by the facts and which squares with democratic values. The purpose of this article is to consider how the teaching of current affairs in the schools may contribute to these ends. In order to suggest some approaches to this kind of teaching, let me list some of the major stories in yesterday's newspaper.

The News in Retrospect

I. *Stories dealing with domestic problems and issues:* Inflation, Housing, Crowded schools, Labor unrest and strikes, Discontent of farmers, Draft, Civil Service, Loyalty check of federal employees, Question of admitting to United States students and teachers from countries behind the "Iron Curtain," Fishing rights of Maryland and Virginia in Chesapeake Bay, 1948 Election.

II. *Stories dealing with problems and issues relating to foreign affairs and foreign countries:* Relations of U.S. and USSR, Disunity in France, Tensions in India, Food and health problems of Southeast Asia, Civil war in China.

This listing does not include all the stories in the newspaper nor does it list

all the important issues and problems of our time. But the list does suggest the range of issues about which citizens need to be informed, the need for understanding the background of current problems, and the fact that most issues and problems are not likely to be settled in the near future. A more detailed consideration of one of the news stories will serve to make clear the relation of background information to the specific phase considered in the story.

A Look at the Facts Behind Inflation

The story on inflation stated that a federal official had advised banks to exercise great care in granting loans. The story also recalled recent efforts by the federal government to restrict consumer credit and to reduce the money available for loans from banks which are members of the Federal Reserve System. The point of the story was that a conservative lending policy and formal restrictions on consumer credit help to check inflation.

This story deals with one of the great problems of today—how to check inflation. To think effectively about, and to act intelligently with respect to this problem, the citizen needs to know something about what the term inflation means, what causes have contributed to inflation, why prices have risen rapidly since the war, what are some of the basic approaches to checking inflation and the advantages and limitations of various approaches, why the problem of inflation is especially difficult to deal with in an election year, what the citizen can do to cushion himself against some of the worst shocks of inflation, why some persons hold that mild inflation is a good thing for

the country, what would be the results of continued and accelerated inflation, and how inflation complicates the economic relations of the United States with other countries.

From Understanding to Action

Unless the reader knows more about the problem of inflation than is discussed in the story he derives little benefit from reading the story. On the other hand, even if he has a background for understanding the problem of inflation, he cannot afford to be ignorant of most recent developments bearing on the problem. If, on the basis of his understanding of the problem of inflation, he is inclined to believe that inflation should be checked, he will need to know what efforts are being made in that direction, which of these seem most promising, and what further efforts might be made. He will also want to help shape opinion in the direction of his convictions and to support the policies of officials who seek the same goal that he accepts.

Pointers for Achieving Our Goals

Let us consider some implications of what has been said for the teaching of current affairs:

► *Emphasis in the teaching of current affairs should be focused on important issues and problems rather than on fragmented and unrelated news items.* Because each problem or issue has depth, it cannot be understood without an informational background that deals with its over-all aspects and serves to make clear the significance of current developments related to the problem. Such a background of information must be derived

from history, the social sciences, and other fields.

► *The teacher of current affairs should not try to "cover" all issues and problems.* He will want to choose for extended consideration those important problems and issues which are of special interest to his pupils. In making a selection, he will also need to consider whether necessary materials are available and whether the problem as a whole, or aspects of it, are within the range of understanding of his pupils.

► *Although some problems and issues are studied inductively and comprehensively, pupils need also to be widely informed about current affairs.* In other words, they need to read newspapers and news magazines regularly and to listen to newcasts and radio commentators. American citizens need to be widely informed, and habits of keeping informed should be developed in the schools. One of the great dangers to American democracy is suggested by evidence from opinion polls that a majority of citizens do not regard reading as a favorite leisure-time activity, and that a majority frequently are very inadequately informed about important issues and problems.

► *To promote an interest in reading about current affairs, free reading time should be made available and home reading should be encouraged.* No great effort should be made by teachers to determine day by day and week by week through oral questioning and written examination the precise amount of unrelated factual information acquired by pupils through reading and radio listening. The goal sought

is to make reading interesting and to develop habits of keeping informed which will persist into adult life. To the extent that young people and adults enjoy conversational discussion of issues and problems it is worthwhile to provide opportunities for such discussion in the classroom. Several small groups can at the same time carry on informal discussions without seriously interfering with each other.

► *The teacher should not expect pupils to "solve" problems which clearly are beyond their grasp.* In many situations even adults do no more than to identify a point of view which squares with democratic values and is supported by substantial facts. It is relatively easier to make a choice between points of view, plans and policies, than to work out an original solution.

► *The study of current affairs, whether inductive or deductive methods are used, affords opportunities for pupils to learn and practice the skills of critical thinking.* Emphasis on the identification of techniques used by propagandists, however, will not make pupils immune to their influence. For straight thinking pupils need also a substantial understanding of the facts and an awareness of the extent to which points of view and proposed solutions square with democratic values.

► *The ultimate goal sought in current affairs teaching is not the development of informed citizens, but of citizens who, in dealing with issues, act effectively in the light of their information.* At all levels the teaching of current affairs should provide for learning experiences in which pupils are able to "do something" about problems.

Copyright © 1948 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.