

Teacher Reflection

Development:

In my first year of teaching about media bias, I had a “brilliant” idea for an assignment: first, I would teach students about elements to look out for including word choice and story placement and then, they would be tasked with picking any article on Israel and pointing out these components. Needless to say, the assignment was a disaster. Every article that my students found seemed to be relatively neutral in its presentation, and neither they nor I could find any element of bias. I realized I needed to completely redo my lesson and, more importantly, think further about my own understanding.

Throughout the course of that year, I paid close attention to what people meant when they claimed “the media is biased against Israel.” It was also the year leading up to the 2016 presidential election, so terms like “fake news” were being discussed daily. Over time, I began to realize that media bias is much more complex than I had originally believed. For example, when a story is published as it happens, does the omission of details or even inaccuracies mean it is an example of media bias or is it just the inevitable result of communicating news as it develops? In addition, I had always believed media bias was wrong, but how does that belief reconcile with the economic realities of the news world, in which journalists and publishers need to appeal to their bases? As I began to comprehend the complexities of this murky world, I knew my media bias unit needed to be overhauled; my students needed to learn that this is a complicated discussion with a real-world takeaway.

Student Interest and Student Impact:

From the first lesson, my students were engaged and invested in these discussions. Because of the relevance of this issue, students want to learn more. When I took an informal poll at the beginning of class, every student reported that he/she follows the news through social media and that it is sometimes biased. Student buy-in was a nonissue; they wanted to become more informed readers and to learn how to decipher the news. The following reflections parallel my comprehensive narrative:

1. The first part of the unit includes students looking at actual newspapers. I was nervous that this would seem antiquated and irrelevant, but the effect was the opposite. Even the ten students who had never held a newspaper enjoyed navigating the different sections. It was important to begin by explaining the difference between a news article and an editorial because some students did not know that opinion pieces were a part of standard newspapers. By bringing in the Skimm, they experienced that the line between news and editorials is not always clear-cut.
2. The examples of Tuvia Grossman and the video of the 2006 Lebanon War are from my original lesson. Although I have since learned that media bias is more complicated than this, it is important for students to learn that it is sometimes explicit and obvious. I was pleasantly surprised because as we debated these examples, students already began using the lessons we learned from our previous class discussions. For instance, I included a cartoon in which Benjamin Netanyahu is flying a plane into the World Trade Center. In the past, students have always labeled it media bias without thinking further. This time, my students debated whether a cartoon is an opinion piece or not, and does that change how we perceive its bias? At this point, I worried if maybe the conversation was so indefinite that my students would walk away confused as opposed to empowered.

We then switched our discussion to Elor Azaria and looked at two Israeli newspapers. As I expected, my students were unfamiliar with *Haaretz* and *Hamodia*, so this assignment worked well for them. They learned how to fact-check by looking laterally as opposed to vertically and were tasked with evaluating if each of these sources was reliable. While my students did internalize this message as demonstrated in their reflections, my formative assessment was lacking. Next time, I want to ask them to show me how they came to their

conclusions and how this affects their readings of the original articles. I believe this addition will help reinforce the lesson.

3. This part of the unit was the turning point and definitely had the greatest student impact. By having students “act as the journalist,” they gained a sense of how many factors are at play. One student remarked, “Wow. This is so much fun but so much more complicated than I expected.” Another questioned, “I really don’t understand how any article is not biased.” Including this experiential component to the unit enabled students to appreciate a new perspective.

4. The impact of the previous activity was evident based on class discussions that followed here. One student proudly declared, “My article is completely objective!” Her written piece began with describing the “alleged terror attack,” leading to student outcries that the word “alleged” is biased. With 32 students in the room, there seemed to be 32 opinions – which was exactly what I wanted. By hearing the opinions of their peers, students realized that this is a complicated issue without one objective answer. In addition, the inclusion of the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* articles helped students understand that our class conversations were relevant and should have an impact in how they approach future news.

5. As mentioned previously, I worried that this lesson would not leave students feeling satisfied because there were no easy answers. However, their reflections assuaged my fears. Even though they did recognize how media bias is a complex issue, they came away from the unit feeling empowered in their future understandings. For example, the students overwhelmingly commented that their approach to the news had now changed because they knew they needed to check the reliability of the source before just believing it. The skills that my students learned will allow them to move forward as educated consumers of the news and to have a deeper understanding of what media bias means. As a teacher, I am proud of this lesson and look forward to continuing to use it across my social studies classrooms and believe it is necessary to teach in today’s times.