

# Real Teaching in an Era of Fake News

BY WILL COLGLAZIER

Against the backdrop of our country's current political climate, I sometimes wonder if I'm doing my job as a high school history teacher to the best of my ability. I don't see my role as simply covering what's in the textbook or helping students analyze current events. Rather, I believe it's my professional responsibility—my civic duty—to teach students the democratic ideals necessary for an enlightened citizenry.

This statement may sound dramatic, but it's something that has often come to mind since I saw the play *Hamilton* last spring. Wowed by the grand themes of grit, democracy, identity, and agency, I experienced a moment of self-doubt common to many caring educators: Am I doing enough to prepare my students for life after school? As the education writer Denise Clark Pope claims, many students are merely "doing school," so am I only "doing teaching"?

I'd like to think my focus on explicitly teaching the elements of argumentation is one way I can keep students and myself from merely "doing school." By helping them learn to make a valid claim, marshal evidence in support of it, and critique others' views, I'm imparting to students some of the real-world knowledge and skills they will need to succeed not only in college and in career but also in an increasingly uncertain world.

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"How do you know what you know?" The question intrigued me when I took Sam Wineburg's social studies methods class in the summer of 2005, while I was enrolled in the Stanford Teacher Education Program. It wasn't until Wineburg's class that I realized I had never before been asked to explicitly discern reliable evidence from suspect evidence, even as a history major at the University of Virginia.

Wineburg took the class through a series of investigations—Where did Rosa Parks sit? Who fired the first shot at

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Lexington? Why were Japanese Americans interned?—and, in so doing, opened up a whole new way to teach. Instead of straight lectures about the facts or how one should interpret a historical event or modern-day policy issue, I learned to teach through inquiries. Questions would soon anchor my lessons instead of content memorization before regurgitation.

Hired to teach U.S. history at Aragon High School in the San Francisco Bay Area, I introduced my students to this approach. My hope was that I could share my passion and knowledge of history through questions that students would begin to recognize as vital for historical analysis and crucial for navigating present-day controversies that affected their day-to-day lives. If they asked whether Pocahontas saved Captain John Smith's life and thoroughly researched that question, I assumed they would be able to take the same approach to deciphering whether vaccines would save their future children. My assumption, however, proved a bit misguided.

I found that some of my highly skilled students were able to decipher credible information but other students were not. Why? To some degree, I was to blame. I had spent countless hours creating documents that allowed my students to access and wrestle with a historical controversy. But for the sake of brevity and clarity, I kept excerpts of documents to only a few hundred words, provided header notes that explained sourcing information and relevant historical context, and included guiding questions. My scaffolds, though, did not mimic the real-world scenario my students experienced when they went online. Was President

Obama really born in Kenya? Websites that perpetuated the myth that he was did not acknowledge on their "about us" page that they were created by partisan snake-oil salesmen allergic to credible evidence.

If I were going to help my students decipher fact from fiction online, I would need to explicitly teach them how to discern who is behind information online, analyze the evidence presented, and cross-check information with other sites. While this approach might seem obvious, it took a decade of teaching since I had taken Wineburg's class to figure out.

Ten years into the development of my craft, I began the difficult but necessary process of retooling my curriculum. With the support of Sarah McGrew (the lead author of the article on page 4 of this issue) as well as one-to-one computing support from my school district, which gave me computers for my class, I got to work.

"Fudge-nuggets!" Two years ago, that was the response from one of my most successful students. Why the outburst? I had given him, along with my more than 90 Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. history students, the minimum-wage task referenced in McGrew's article. Essentially, I had directed students to "Denmark's Dollar Forty-One Menu," an article on [minimumwage.com](http://minimumwage.com), and asked them if it was a reliable source for information about the minimum wage. And it wasn't easy for them to tell if it was.

I wanted to see if they could, with the World Wide Web at their fingertips, figure out that a hotel and restaurant lobbyist had created the "nonprofit" website that conveniently claimed an increase in the

minimum wage would lead to higher prices and unemployment. Needless to say, the student who shouted “Fudge-nuggets!” was duped, along with a majority of my AP students. When I showed them who was behind the website and how I went about finding out, they were surprised and somewhat embarrassed they had initially considered the site credible.

I realized then and there that I can’t lament my students’ inability to decipher fake news if I haven’t given them a chance to practice doing it.

So I continued to experiment. In the next unit, on the 1920s through World War II, I deleted the multiple-choice question on my summative test on why Italian immigrants Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were executed in 1927. The answer: contextual prejudice against radicals and immigrants during the Red Scare post–World War I. But in place of circling a bubble on a Scantron sheet, I created a Google form. I sent my students to an article online (available at [www.nodeathpenalty.org/new\\_abolitionist/august-2002-issue-25/sacco-and-vanzetti](http://www.nodeathpenalty.org/new_abolitionist/august-2002-issue-25/sacco-and-vanzetti)) and asked them if this is or is not a reliable source to determine if Sacco and Vanzetti were guilty. I told them they could search anywhere online for their answer.

As with many historical events, there are multiple perspectives on the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Successful students recognized the controversy and questioned the objectivity and expertise of [nodeathpenalty.org](http://nodeathpenalty.org), while at the same time finding different, more scholarly sites to support both a guilty and an innocent verdict.

With my new approach, my students performed admirably. While by no means perfect, they did show significant improvement from the [minimumwage.com](http://minimumwage.com) assessment, as they were practicing the three explicit strategies I modeled. First, I showed them how to read *laterally* by leaving the website and seeing what other sites say about the site they found themselves on. Professional fact checkers use this tactic rather than reading vertically, which is essentially reading the article before finding their bearings about the site they were on.

Second, I encouraged them to move beyond the “about us” page, to recognize the inherent bias in a description of an organization written by the very organization one is trying to vet. Third, when searching for information about an organization, I emphasized the importance of scrolling through the search results, using even the second or—*gasp!*—third page of search results before clicking on a site. When I did this, my students were incredulous at first; they seemed to fear I would

break the Internet! But their reaction made sense, because no one had modeled for them why such an approach was necessary.

In addition to formative assessments like the [minimumwage.com](http://minimumwage.com) one and summative assessments like the Sacco and Vanzetti one, I found that educators like me were lacking curricula that embedded online investigations. Instead of tossing out lessons I’ve used for years, I found that a better approach was to modify them to include opportunities to teach students how to discern credible content online.

## If I were going to help my students decipher fact from fiction online, I would need to explicitly teach them.

For example, I tweaked an online lesson I had created years before, on whether President Franklin D. Roosevelt allowed the bombing of Pearl Harbor to happen (see [www.bit.ly/2wGdEAK](http://www.bit.ly/2wGdEAK)). Document #1 was a diary entry that Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote two weeks before the “day of infamy,” alluding to the fact not only that FDR knew a Japanese attack was probable, but that he wanted to “maneuver them into the position of firing the first shot” to convince Americans to support a U.S. entry into World War II. The lesson included other materials: a declassified Japanese telegram, a History Channel documentary clip, and two accounts from noted historians.

But instead of stopping the lesson there, as I had done for years, I was only at the midpoint. Rather than merely asking students, hypothetically, “Which sources do you wish you had to further answer the central question?,” I unleashed students onto, as I joke, “the Google machine.” The task was to find a site that answered the

central question about whether FDR allowed the Pearl Harbor attack to happen. The students had to source the site and information for reliability, using the techniques explicitly modeled after the [minimumwage.com](http://minimumwage.com) assessment.

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By teaching students how to decipher credible information, educators can empower them with what the authors on page 4 call “civic online reasoning” skills. For years, I had inadvertently robbed my students of the chance to practice and develop these skills, when I merely provided them teacher-vetted lists of sites to use in researching various topics.

But these strategies don’t just apply to history, and they’re not ones that need to wait until students reach high school. They can work in many disciplines where students must learn how to separate fact from fiction. For instance, students in science classrooms could investigate answers to phenomena online and wrestle with divergent opinions on important issues such as GMO (genetically modified organism) food production, stem cell research, or global warming. Because students in English classrooms engage in evidence and analysis with literary and nonfiction texts, it would be natural for teachers to extend lessons to incorporate online research opportunities. And students in math classrooms should have numerous opportunities to go online to examine the misuse and manipulation of numerical data.

While the upsurge of fake news in the past year sadly isn’t a new phenomenon in American or human history, the Internet has emboldened its perpetrators and expanded their influence. In May, I came across the *New York Times* article “Climate Science Meets a Stubborn Obstacle: Students.” The article recounted the experience of a biology teacher in Ohio who was confronted with skeptical students, a majority of whom thought he was “wasting their time” with evidence of man-made global warming. One parent even went so far as to say the teacher was “brainwashing” his daughter.

As teachers, it’s easy to get discouraged with these responses. But the answer isn’t to shy away from the controversy—or the additional work that comes with teaching these strategies. I’m sympathetic to the fact that educators must devote much of their time to covering critical content. But to ensure our students become questioning and resourceful citizens, we must also make time for systematically teaching them the sleuthing skills they need to wade through misinformation online.