



Intersection Content Example

Areas: Journalism, Writing, Language Arts

Content: “Developing Critical Thinking Skills through Journalism Instruction”
by Tobin Beck

General: Intersection content examples provide samples of course content from a program or discipline with suggestions about how one or more insights from the Lutheran (and, more broadly, the entire Christian faith) perspective can inform that content.

Good instructional methods are always a part of effective teaching. But the examples do not provide a formula or recipe, and their use is not about some particular teaching method, a set of criteria, or a list of rubrics for “the right Lutheran or Christian” instructional solution. (Such an approach would put us, as Lutherans say, “under the Law rather than grace.”) The examples do indicate opportunities where the instructor and student can explore and apply specific themes related to the Gospel and a biblical world view as these may relate to course content.

To use the example, simply scan or read it for content and the featured intersections. Doing so will help acquaint you with direct and indirect ways by which the instructor can carry over some of these ideas into her or his own course work. For further background on the Lutheran tradition, see the materials at <http://twokingdoms.cune.edu/> under the menu tabs for the Grad Programs, the Lutheran Tradition, and the About page. For additional content ideas see the tabs for Content Areas and for Resources.

Developing Critical Thinking Skills through Journalism Instruction

By Tobin Beck

The teaching of journalism is an outstanding way to help students develop critical thinking skills, especially if those skills are defined as the ability to evaluate and prioritize information, discern fact from opinion, and weigh the credibility of facts.

In the news writing and reporting courses I teach, students progressively learn how to process information and write so they can distill the essence of that information for the benefit of their readers, listeners and viewers. The reporting class in many ways picks up where the basic news writing classes end, and there is substantial practice and review to hone the skills that have been learned.

The courses begin with exercises designed to help students prioritize information – how to look at a set of facts and figure out which are the most important ones, how to present the key points in ways that are logical to readers, and which facts are missing and need to be included. A great exercise for doing this is writing a news story from an 800-word stenographic summary of a

school board meeting. Beginning students frequently start their leads by saying the board met to discuss various issues, among them a \$300 million budget. By the end of the exercise they have learned to focus on what their readers will consider to be the most important information – and to lead with the fact that the board voted to pass a \$300 million budget that includes \$9 million for a new middle school.

Now that students have learned to prioritize facts in order of importance, the next set of exercises gives them practice in prioritizing as new facts emerge in a breaking story. They practice writing leads based on the timeline for the fast-changing events of Sept. 11, 2001. Once they have written leads for the first set of facts – the first plane striking the World Trade Center – they have to update their leads to account for the next set of facts, and so on for the major developments of the day. By the end of this exercise, they have gained some expertise in how to figure out what’s most important amid a swirl of changing facts, and how to clearly communicate that information. I include in the discussion the stories that I wrote in directing UPI’s coverage of 9-11.

Students next learn how to recognize and separate their opinions from facts when they write stories. We also discuss the importance of balance – getting all relevant sides of a story – and fairness, which is ensuring that each side of a story is presented in proper context. We discuss the importance of accuracy – making sure that stories faithfully recount the facts – and the importance of precision, meaning a reporter seeks out and quotes sources who are as directly relevant to the facts as possible. I often think about Luther’s explanation of the Eighth Commandment, to “put the best construction on everything.” To me that means being honest and fair in the reporting of news, to make sure all relevant sides are presented in a way that is accurate and gives readers, listeners and viewers the appropriate context to understand what’s going on.

See Luther’s Small Catechism for his brief explanation of the 8th Commandment on bearing false witness and “speaking well of others, defending them, and explaining their actions in the kindest way.” See also Luther’s longer, complex analysis on truth and false witness in his Large Catechism. Luther’s catechisms are among the Lutheran tradition’s chief confessional documents and are regarded as classics in theological literature. They can be found in the Book of Concord and many places online such as <http://bookofconcord.org/index.phpFor>

In class we also talk about credibility – how to gauge whether sources and what they say are credible, and the importance of transparent sourcing wherever possible – letting readers know where the information originated. We discuss how to discern what is a fact from what is a source’s opinion, and how to properly attribute each one. This particularly is important in science coverage, which requires the reporter to have an understanding of the scientific method.

For a biblical instance of source credibility and weighing the veracity of eyewitnesses and testimony, see several texts in Acts such as Acts 17:10-11, Acts 23:1-11, and Paul’s interesting testimony before the Roman and Jewish authorities in Acts chapters 24 – 26.

The science-and-religion issues are important, and the Lutheran two kingdoms doctrine provides a versatile approach to engaging in and sustaining the discussion. Among the various approaches to these debates--which can often collapse in controversy--the two kingdoms approach provides a robust and effective way to hear multiple views, yet ultimately sustain a biblical perspective. For an outline of the science and religion disputes see Science--and-Religion: A Detailed Discussion Outline on the Content Areas Natural Science page.

Students also learn the importance of ethics – and why major news organizations use codes of ethics to guide their employees. For example, we discuss whether a picture that shows a drowned boy surrounded by his grieving family should or should not be published, and how to answer that question using the guide of who is helped and who is hurt by the decision. We discuss how decisions are made – and how they should be made – in deciding whether a story should be covered, and how it should be covered. One example I use is the German surrender at the end of World War II. In May 1945 there were 15 reporters flown from London to Rheims, France, to cover the surrender. They were required to take an oath that they would agree to whatever embargo was imposed – which turned out to be an embargo of 18 hours. One reporter, Ed Kennedy of the Associated Press, broke the embargo by phoning a 300-word story that was the first word of the surrender. General Dwight Eisenhower was furious, contending the premature announcement jeopardized the agreement, particularly with the Soviets. We discuss whether Kennedy was right or wrong in his actions. Initially Kennedy was censured by the AP, but later was praised. I also show the class my interview with Boyd Lewis, who covered the surrender story in 1945 for United Press and insisted Kennedy’s actions were wrong. It’s always a lively class discussion.

The Lutheran tradition has a distinct though not rigid or dogmatic approach to ethics. This approach is located in such themes as Lutheranism’s biblical anthropology of *simul iustus et peccator*, our two kinds of righteousness, and Christian liberty. Luther, for example, addresses several important issues for ethics in his Commentary on Galatians and in his Treatise on Christian Liberty. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian who opposed the Nazis in WW II, wrote two widely respected books that address ethical matters: *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Ethics*. A brief, well-written (though somewhat older) little volume on Lutheran ethics is called *The Ethics of Decision* by George Forell.

Here’s some of the feedback students have given me on what they’ve learned about critical thinking skills from the journalism courses that I’ve taught:

- The most valuable things I have learned from this course is how to look at a set of facts and determine what is the most important and what is the least important in accordance with the audience I am addressing.

- This class has taught me about the parallels between news writing and essay writing. Both require strong theses, but for news writing it is much better to be concise and clear rather than relying upon rhetorical skill.
- If there was only one thing I took from this class it would be to stay focused: Ask questions, meet people and never let people dictate what your writing should be or about. I am my own person and I have to make my own paths in this career.
- This semester has been a building time for me. I learned the fundamentals in the two previous classes, but this class was a time for serious amounts of practice and to hone my skills further. If there is one important thing I learned in this class it was how to write a lead that sums up the whole story that I need to write.
- I learned the importance of checking sources, and that a reporter has to be completely objective, because our job is to inform, not inject our opinions in our stories. I think I'll apply this class to my real-life situations because I am graduating in May and I am hoping to begin working for a newspaper soon.
- Being able to look at a collection of information and zero in on the facts, then distill all the facts down to the one most important fact is a skill that is valuable not only to news reporters, but to anyone who has to evaluate information for any reason.

Tobin Beck is a professor of political science at Concordia University-Nebraska. His journalism experience includes having been a reporter, editor and manager at the Sidney, Neb., Telegraph; and a reporter, editor, writer and senior manager with United Press International in Lincoln and Omaha, Neb.; Milwaukee; Miami; and Washington, D.C. He has taught journalism as an adjunct at American University in Washington, D.C., and at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. At Concordia he teaches classes in journalism and political science.