



The Rainbow Sourcebook
WWW.SPJ.ORG/rainbowsorcebook

Get to the Source: A Teaching Plan



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Get to the Source: Teaching Source Development

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Overview

This teaching module is designed for use in classroom exercises for training in source development. It employs the Rainbow Sourcebook, created by the SPJ Diversity Committee to make it easy for reporters to expand the voices and perspectives in the news. Instructors may use the Sourcebook to help journalism students sharpen their analytical skills and learn about source credibility, authority, perspective, and other related issues. With this and other training tools, SPJ's goal is to help instructors integrate diverse sourcing across the journalism curriculum. (The Sourcebook and associated diversity resources can be found at <http://www.spj.org/divsourcebook.asp?>.)

This series of assignments teaches students about sourcing and how to cover public agencies through exploring education. You may adapt the plan to focus on other topics such as government, law enforcement, AIDS prevention and treatment, or drug abuse prevention and treatment. It can be used for any reporting class, whether print or broadcast. Concepts covered in the module include:

1. Third-place reporting (a civic or public journalism concept),
2. Judging a source's credibility,
3. Story framing,
3. Ethics in choosing sources and interviewing them.

Sourcing in Education Coverage

Time Required: Up to 4-6 class sessions of 90 minutes each

Courses this could fit: Any reporting and some advanced writing courses, especially ones that focus on public issues and agencies.

Note: This teaching plan uses a

group format. If you like, you may group and regroup several times to ensure that the end product is a single student's work.

Class One: Third places

News reporters often gather information by telephone, going out

in the field only for a spot news story. Rarely do we explore the nature of the communities we report on. As a result, we often find our knowledge of the people and places we cover to be quite limited.

The first way to develop a deeper understanding of the local content of news is to get outside the newsroom. "Third places" are locations where people gather and often talk about things that are important to them. Such places include churches, community centers, an auto service center, sidewalk benches, a diner, a coffeehouse or a bingo hall. Journalists with listening skills and a healthy curiosity can join the conversation and tap the thinking of ordinary people. In doing so, they can learn about community concerns, interests and flashpoints.

Stimulate thinking about education with a class conversation about each student's pre-conceived notions of the public schools.

1. When they think of public school education in the community, what words come to mind?
2. Which elementary, middle and high schools are the best in their view?
3. Which schools are the worst in their view?
4. Why?

Explain the "third place" concept to students as a means of going into the community to check their per-

ceptions. Also describe how they can use third place conversations to identify sources who are active on the issue but not so in any official capacity.

Ethics of sourcing. Use this opportunity to begin a discussion on the ethics of sourcing. What is news and who generally gets to determine this? Why should journalists attempt to include a variety of perspectives when covering the news? Discuss what students might learn from sources they find in "third places," compared to people known as experts or policymakers. Do "regular" people really know anything relevant to the story? Emphasize the importance of going to third places students themselves don't usually frequent. Help them think about ways to select third places that may offer a different perspective than their own — for example, a union hiring hall, a coffee shop where older people gather, or services held by a religious group other than their own.

Ethics of interviewing. This is also the time to discuss the basics of approaching unfamiliar people and setting the ground rules for an interview. Explain the concepts of trust and fairness. At this stage students are going out to have conversations with community members, not conduct interviews. What is the difference? Do the rules of interaction change? Do the questions change? Remind students not to interview their friends and explain why this is a problem. Consider other issues that arise when a journalist has a

beat -- for example, what happens when you build a relationship with someone you interview regularly?

Break the students into teams of 3 to 4 each. Have them review the discussion on items #1-4 with each other and determine which school(s) they want to focus on. Finally, they should brainstorm about "third places" where they might learn something about residents' views of local schools. They can also discuss good questions for the conversations they seek.

Homework assignment:

Students should visit a "third place" and gather views and concerns about local schools. You may want to incorporate a walking tour in which the instructor provides background on the neighborhood; the socioeconomic factors at work; schools, churches and other community institutions; and points out "third places." Students should collect names and contact information for people (not officials) regarded by community members as experts or activists on schools. They should each prepare a one-page summary of their findings.

Class Two: Story framing and reporting

Framing. Introduce the elements that go into framing a story and how

these influence both the article at hand and the narrative that is understood about a community or people. Venise Wagner of San Francisco State University suggests breaking it down this way:

- Story angle,
- Types of sources used,
- Questions asked,
- Quotes and anecdotes used,
- Other information used and how it is placed within the story.

Ask the students to return to their groups and identify the five most important conversations they had. This should help them get a sense of the best stories to tell. Ask them to consider: Is there a theme that emerges from these conversations? What is the most surprising thing they heard? What seems to be the most pressing issue about schools that they learned about?

After each group has identified its five key conversations and any themes or questions that emerged, have students report the results to the entire class. Ask them to select a prevailing theme from the conversations. This will be the focus of the story that each group will do.

Still working in groups, send the students to the Internet or the journalism library to gather more information. They should look for background on the concerns they have identified, plus additional sources in the community.

Rather than official sources, they should focus on:

"Catalysts": People who get things done but don't carry titles. Examples: Merchants, religious leaders, community activists for small groups.

"Connectors": People who connect one group or level of society to another. Examples are PTA members and leaders; school pep club leaders; alumni group leaders and members.

Discuss how they will find these sources. You may suggest local newspaper archives, PTA newsletters, and phone calls or to other community and parents' groups. Students should leave the class with a list of sources they have gathered in person and via tools such as the Internet.

Homework assignment:

Before the next class session, have the students call these catalysts and connectors, set up appointments to see them in person, and complete the interviews. Tell the students to ask about the issue they have identified, the related history of the school, and others in the community who have a stake.

Class Three: In a general discussion, have the students tell the rest of the class what they found out. Next ask the students to identify officials that need to be consulted: The school superintendent or chancellor, deputy superintendents, principals, assistant principals, and

teachers who are leaders. Discuss how students can get names and contact information for these sources. Use most of this class to explain and discuss concepts about sourcing including the following:

1) For complete reporting, reporters must consult:

People who are involved with the story.

People who are affected by the story.

People who have a stake in the outcome.

And often, people who are unaffected experts on the subject.

2) What is the best way to use sourcing to incorporate a diversity of opinion in a story? Why is this important? How might attention to diversity by race, gender or religious belief affect the way the story is framed? Should journalists always seek an opposing viewpoint? What does "balance" really mean?

3) Despite the diversity of the U.S. population, many demographic groups are commonly left out of the news. In a 2001 study of four national network news programs by Media Tenor, an international media analysis company based in Germany, 92 percent of sources the networks used were white and 85 percent

were male.?How does this type of sourcing affect the news?

Introduce the SPJ Rainbow Sourcebook, the national database of diverse experts on a variety of news topics. Students will use it to identify national sources. At this time, you may want to explain the movement within journalism to improve content to reflect the diversity of the U.S. population. What perspectives do they notice missing in their local news? What perspectives are missing in their own stories?

As a resource for teaching about inclusive methods of reporting and the thinking behind them, consult the SPJ Diversity Toolbox (Click "toolbox" on the Sourcebook page: <http://www.spj.org/rainbowsourcebook>.)

Homework assignment:

Have the students add to their source list, then set up and complete phone or in-person interviews with all or some of these new sources. Ask them to identify three national sources through the Rainbow Sourcebook and add them to their list. They should interview at least one by phone. They should use the conversations they had with the community catalysts and connectors as a basis for their questions.

At home or in class, have students write their stories. The instructor

can give feedback on a draft. Then students should present the completed version at the next session.

Final class: Credibility

Now it is time to do a little post-mortem to reinforce concepts about judging the credibility and authority of sources. Instructors may use several criteria to help students analyze their choices. Here's one set, borrowed from Melvin Mencher's *News Report and Writing*:

Track record: Has the source been accurate in the past? (This is easier to apply to "official" sources.)

Confirmability: Can or did the source provide the names of other people or documents that confirm the information?

Proximity: Was the source in a position to know with certainty the facts that he or she relayed?

Motive: What is the source's motive for supplying the information?

Context: Does the information fit other known facts?

Believability: Does the source seem to be stable, in control, and telling the truth?

Also ask about **perspective:** From what vantage point does this source understand and interpret the information?

Break the students into teams of two or four to read each other's sto-

ries and discuss whether the sources used met the credibility criteria. Besides answering the above questions honestly, ask them to consider: How might a different choice of sources affected the outcome of the story? What perspectives were missing? What point of view might have been over-represented? Is there a part of the story not being told?

This session is intentionally held after the stories are done as a way to get students into the habit of thinking: We can do better next time. Your framework for judging credibility can be applied again to stories assigned later during the term.

Conclusion

Ask the students to record their new sources in a database that they all can access. Over time, the class will develop its own Rainbow Sourcebook – a list of people from different thematic areas. The class can adopt the same format as SPJ’s sourcebook or come up with its own, then donate the sourcebook to the journalism school’s library for use in subsequent terms in different classes. If the sources have national prominence, the students can contribute them to the SPJ Rainbow Sourcebook by entering them directly onto the site.

(http://www.fair.org/extra/0205/power_sources.html and <http://www.mediatenor.com/index1.html>)

Sources used:

The Society of Professional Journalists Rainbow Sourcebook and Diversity Toolbox
<http://www.spj.org/divsourcebook.asp>

“Tips for Smarter Reporting,” by Jan Schaffer, executive director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism. <http://www.spj.org/dtb9.asp>

“Tips for Better Sourcing,” by Yanick Rice Lamb, Howard University School of Communication. <http://www.spj.org/dtb6.asp>

“Finding, Cultivating and Using Sources,” in News Reporting and Writing, 9th Ed., Melvin Mencher

Writing and Reporting News, 2nd Ed., Carole Rich

For more information on the Rainbow Sourcebook and other Society of Professional Journalists’ diversity project, please contact:

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When you need a good source, who do you call?

Society of Professional Journalists' Diversity Toolbox

It's not easy to break into an unfamiliar community and find great sources on demand. If reporters develop some background first, they will be ready to hit the streets when they're on deadline. **Here are some ways to learn more about community issues and develop a broader sector of possible sources.**

1) Bring in the community or go to them.

Reporters can organize a meeting with people from communities they don't usually include in their stories. First, acknowledge that there may be some longstanding and legitimate problems with trust. Then ask these questions:

- What do you wish we covered more?
- What do you think we get wrong?
- What is the history of your community in this issue area? (For example, a Latino medical reporter could ask why so many African Americans distrust the medical system.)
- Who are a few leaders in your community?
- Pick up flyers and brochures from community organizations to find out what they do and what issues the community finds most compelling.

2) Go out and look around.

Encourage reporters to do at least one activity every week that takes them into another community but that doesn't have anything to do with a story they're working. They could:

- Attend a cultural event.
- Go to church or another religious gathering.
- Go to a community meeting and just listen.
- Go to a professional networking meeting and talk to people.
- Go to a community barbeque or picnic.
- Volunteer for a day at a community center for elders.
- Go to an activist meeting for people with disabilities.
- Go to an exhibit that features transgender youth or a museum about African American history.
- Go to a coffeehouse or bar.

- Seek out voices beyond the self-appointed leaders in the community – they may not represent the community well.

3) Listen, read and learn.

Ask reporters to read more magazines and newspapers, and to listen to talk shows or music format stations that serve populations they want to learn about.

They could:

- Subscribe to newspapers or magazines targeted toward the gay, black, Latino, or Asian or Asian American communities.
- Listen to a local bilingual station.
- Listen to a Christian evangelical station.
- Read the newspaper sold to you by a homeless person.
- Read poetry or fiction written by urban youth.

4) Ask the question.

Race, sexuality, gender and disability often are topics that we skirt around. Urge your reporters to spend some time with sources they are developing and to consider direct questions like this, even when demographics don't seem relevant to the story. The answers might push the story into interesting new places.

- Do you think your race or ethnicity (age, gender, religion, economic background, etc.) affects the way you think about this issue?
- As someone not of your community (race, ethnicity, gender, other) what do you think I might miss when reporting about this?

5) Pay attention to language.

Consider learning a new language if your area has a sizable community that speaks another language.

If the community is primarily immigrant and speaks English as a second language, develop a relationship with organizations that serve immigrants to open doors for you, ease fears and help with translation.

Be cautious in selecting interpreters when reporting a controversial issue or when your interpreters may have a stake in the story.

For more ideas, go to:

<http://www.spj.org/rainbowsourcebook>

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