Two Sides and a Compromise:  
A Strategy for Analyzing Information and Drawing Conclusions

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Introduction

One difficulty students often face when discussing or writing about current events is that they do not easily identify that there are two sides to the conflict they have read about. They usually chose to write about one side alone, unless the two sides have been reported on with equal emphasis. One theme I try to focus on in my classes is that there are always at least two sides to each historical and modern conflict. I want to lead students to decipher the two sides in the conflicts they read about in news articles and to identify what each side in the conflict was trying to accomplish in the long run.

Another difficulty students face is that they do not see alternative possibilities for how situations could be resolved. By focusing on alternatives and possible compromises, I attempt to show students that history was not predestined, but that historical figures faced real choices, as do modern peoples, as do the students themselves in their own lives.

Step 1: Identifying the Strategies

This strategy was designed to help students better comprehend a news article by leading them to collect information and to use knowledge they already have about the two sides in the conflict they have read about. It will also lead them to identify a new possible compromise or alternative that the people in the article could create and act upon. These have been difficult tasks
for students to complete when directly asked the questions of who are the two
sides, and what could they do to resolve this situation.

I have used this strategy with eighth grade, heterogeneous classes.

Step 2: Modeling the Strategy

The teacher will present the thinksheet to the students using a large
visual, such as an overhead projector or PowerPoint. At first, the teacher
should go through the thinksheet without using a specific current event article
to explain the purpose of each section. He or she will demonstrate how both
boxes for main people must be separately filled in with two different people or
groups of people. In the case where an article discusses only one side of a
conflict, the teacher should demonstrate and lead the students to brainstorm
what kind of person would oppose that side and why. For example, if an article
describes a Democratic president of the United States supporting a bill to raise
taxes to pay for domestic programs, one could imagine Republicans,
Congressional members, and anti-tax activists opposing the president and the
bill, even if they are not specifically mentioned in the article. Then, the teacher
should call attention to the fact that the alternatives/compromises box is
separate from and situated between the two sides already discussed. This
should help students realize that what only one side desires is not an acceptable
alternative, but that instead the alternative should take into account what both
sides could "live with." The teacher should present the two boxes at the bottom
of the page as an opportunity for students to express what their opinion on this
issue is, giving them practice in backing up their opinions with facts (from
either the values boxes, or the article itself) and to show their knowledge of how
to participate in their government. The class should at this point discuss
realistic ways that students in their age group could honestly become involved
in local, national, and international issues. Suggestions include writing a letter,
email, editorial or compiling a petition. Then, the teacher should lead the class
through the thinksheet together with a significant current event story which all
are somewhat familiar with.

Step 3: Scaffolding the Strategy

The entire class should be given copies of the same article and a blank
thinksheet. Either in class, or for homework, students should read the article
and fill in the thinksheet. When the thinksheets are complete, the teacher
should go over the answers with the students to ensure that students understand
the process and have found acceptable answers.
Step 4: Providing Additional Practice

Depending on the course, and the plans of the teacher, this exercise will be repeated multiple times a quarter or a year, using the same thinksheet for different articles. In my twelfth grade Participation in Government course, each student would be required to write a current events essay once a week. The first week I would select one article for the whole class to complete and have them fill out the thinksheet only. The second week, I would have the students select their own articles and fill out the thinksheets. The third week, and the rest of the weeks of the course, I would have them select their own article and then use the thinksheets they fill out as an outline for an essay. In the middle school grades, I would not use this assignment for writing, but more as a reading exercise and having students prepare oral presentations on the information they have learned from the articles of their choice.

Conclusion

After unsuccessfully using a worksheet which asked students to list the two sides in each conflict, I found this thinksheet much more valuable. It forces students to realize that they should be looking for two different groups of people and to look for their values, as well. The students themselves enjoyed this thinksheet more, and felt that they understood what they were trying to accomplish more. I also believe that the visual nature of this thinksheet, versus a regular worksheet with a list of questions, is more appealing to students. Of course, the students also enjoyed being able to give their opinion on the issue.

Suggestions for Adapting the Strategy in other Grades or Content Areas

This strategy can be used both as a reading strategy to help students understand and process what they have read better, and as a thinksheet for a writing exercise. This thinksheet could be used directly or adapted somewhat for any situation where the teacher wants students to pick out two sides to a situation, to identify the people’s, group’s, or character’s motivations, and to create solutions. This could be used for current events in health and science courses, or to help dissect literature. I could foresee this type of thinksheet being helpful when keeping track of the characters and motives in a play, such as a Shakespearean piece.

Thinksheet

Copy is attached.
Literacy Across The Curriculum:
Problem-Solving Strategies For The New York State Learning Standards

Thinksheet

Name: 

Date: 

Main Issue

Side 1: Main People and what do they value in this situation?

Side 2: Main people and what do they value in this situation?

Different possible alternatives:

Your opinion and an explanation of why you feel that way:

How you could currently get involved in this situation: