

Deepen your students' understanding of critical events

by Sandra Wozniak, NJREA Member

Today's wide-eyed, fast-fingered, button-bashing students are the leaders of tomorrow's global world. Members of this "Net Generation" know that information is just a click or two away. They don't want to be told what to think; they need to be guided on how to think. Teaching for tomorrow requires preparing students to utilize critical thinking strategies that will deepen their understanding of complicated issues, both historical and current.



this step, students must prioritize their issues. The "N" step asks, "Now, what are your next steps?" This step expects students to create solutions while they detail the necessary steps one must take to resolve the issues. Working through these four steps, students gain a deeper understanding of significant issues and events, as well as learn how to communicate, collaborate, and negotiate. Teaching a visible thinking process provides students with a framework for information gathering and

Use the SCAN online discussion tool

Two such guides working to prepare students are media specialist Cynthia Cassidy and language arts teacher Michelle Cook from Mt. Olive Middle School in Morris County. This pair used Web 2.0 tools to integrate the "Four Cs" of the 21st century (critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovation) with the "Three Rs" (reading, writing, and relevancy) in their classroom. The result was an award-winning interdisciplinary unit designed to guide the Net Generation through the critical thinking process necessary to lead the next generation. Cassidy and Cook were honored by the International Society for Technology in Education (go to (www.iste-conference.org/ISTE/2011/program/iste_awards.php) to learn more).

The right tool

Knowing that they couldn't lead the Net Generation with antiquated tools, Cook and Cassidy decided to use the SCAN online discussion tool (found at TregoED.org) as the centerpiece of their unit. This valuable tool guides students through a four-step critical thinking strategy using a Facebook-like discussion format. Cook and Cassidy chose the tool because it gave them the flexibility to develop the differentiated lessons necessary to meet the diverse needs of Cook's language arts students. Their unit titled "Who

Owns History," asks students to examine various media elements in order to decide who should own Egypt's numerous artifacts that are on display throughout the world. The two worked to adapt the lesson to different reading levels, enrich it with authentic online videos and articles, and introduce the lesson according to the needs of their students.

Using the SCAN tool was critical because it allowed students to select a specific point of view (Egyptian citizen, American museum curator, U.S. archeologist, and Egyptian director of antiquities), and then use the four-step critical thinking strategy to explore the viewpoint. By adding links to resources, Cook and Cassidy were able to use the SCAN tool to integrate reading and writing skills while guiding students through the critical thinking process.

What is SCAN?

SCAN helps students examine complex situations. It consists of four, easy-to-follow steps. In the first step, "S," students "Stop and think." They must determine what the key elements are from their specific point of view. The second step, "C," asks students to "Clarify" the issues or explain why the issues are important. The next step, "A," requires students to "Ask what is most important." In

analysis while developing a common vocabulary that can be used across all content areas.

Beyond the common core

When using SCAN, students are practicing their reading and writing skills, but each scenario selection enables teachers to help their students move beyond the common core. Whether students are taking on the roles of historic figures, community members, or scientists, tackling a real-world situation gives relevance to their research and writing.

According to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, students should be able to "read and make logical inferences and write arguments to support claims using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence." Having students take on the perspectives of stakeholders and giving them a critical thinking strategy supports the practice of these important skills.

The newly released National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies requires teachers to meet a similar standard. It states that students should be able to, "Identify, seek, describe, and evaluate multiple points of view about selected issues noting the strengths, weaknesses, and consequences associated

with holding each position as well as participate in the process of persuading, compromising, debating, and negotiation in the resolution of conflicts and differences.”

Imagine the increase in students’ depth of learning and engagement when they evaluate those points of view by taking part in the conversations that may have occurred in history or are occurring today! Giving students the tools to find deeper understanding of an issue or situation can improve their writing, even as it helps them to explore bias, points of view, and context.

Writing with purpose

Cook understood that deeper understanding could directly translate into better writing. She found that most of our students were familiar with the writing process, but did not know how to flesh out the content into meaningful and detailed prose, a skill required on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK). Studies show that students’ writing improves when they have an audience and purpose, an interest or passion, and time to think about it. Cook and Cassidy used the SCAN process to include all of these motivating factors. The SCAN tool gave the students a framework to prewrite, elaborate, and incubate ideas to include in their writing. After completing the online SCAN session, students wrote thoughtful, persuasive essays that included well-developed positions and defenses with supporting evidence.

For your information

- New to SCAN? Visit www.TregoED.org/teachers/new-to-scan.html for a short video on the SCAN tool and how to set up a lesson. Register at www.TregoED.org to use the free lessons.
- While you can use the SCAN tool for free, you can e-mail info@TregoED.org and put *NJEA Review* in the message line to obtain access to the full SCAN library for one month.
- Cynthia Cassidy and Michelle Cook will be demonstrating how they use the SCAN tool and other technologies to increase engagement, and develop reading and writing skills, at the 2011 NJEA Convention. “We’re Getting Engaged!” will be presented on Thursday, Nov. 10, 9:30-11 a.m., in Room 322.
- Student artifacts from the “Who Owns History” project can be found at www.TregoED.org/files/Student-Resources-and-Written-Work-Samples.pdf.

Integrating technology

The nonprofit company, TregoED, developed the online SCAN tool specifically to get critical thinking skills to students by combining relevant and content-rich scenarios (thereby increasing the educational value) with the familiar Facebook-style interface our students know and love (to increase student engagement). After the teacher completes three simple steps to set up a scenario for a class, students go to the web address provided by TregoED. There aren’t any passwords to remember, codes to assign, or student names to import. A teacher can use the session for as few or as many students as they have in their class.



Language arts teacher Michelle Cook (left) and media specialist Cynthia Cassidy work at Mt. Olive Middle School in Morris County. Learn more about their award-winning interdisciplinary project, “Who Owns History,” at www.TregoED.org/

Once the students access the URL, they create a user name and select an avatar to use for the discussion. They then read the controversial or complex scenario and select a perspective.

Students begin the session by identifying their issues and posting them, discuss their perspectives in a “chat” format with their classmates, and are guided through clarifying, assessing, and naming next steps by the tool. Cook found that students who never participated in class discussions or activities became actively engaged in this format as others responded to what they were saying rather than


who they were. Even the quietest students can find an online voice using SCAN.

Digital citizens

As the media specialist, Cassidy strives to help students become responsible citizens in the digital and real world by teaching them how to communicate reasonably with people who have different perspectives and by giving them steps to resolve problems that they face. She saw this integrated lesson as an opportunity to reinforce the “Interact with Tact” rules found at www.onlineguard.gov and teach the fundamentals of netiquette in online communication.

Since SCAN enables all students to post anonymously, students had to rely on their persuasive writing skills to make their arguments. Students quickly realized that by making effective word choices and supporting their arguments with statistics and facts they were able to make more of an impact online. As students find their online voices while role-playing, they are continually reminded that avatars are people, too. These types of realizations help make students better online (and offline!) citizens.

Teach for tomorrow

At Mt. Olive Middle School, teachers have used the SCAN process and online tool to teach young people the social skills they will need to become effective participants in our technology-driven world, even as they organize their thinking for better understanding and writing skills in their core classes. The unique tool found at www.TregoED.org provides teachers with an easy way to integrate 21st-century skills in the context of state and national standards. Besides the integrated lesson that Cook and Cassidy developed, the SCAN process has been used to teach character education, practice netiquette skills, jumpstart advisory programs, hone writing skills, and develop a deeper understanding in core areas such as social studies and science. *TregoED.org* is an excellent resource for teachers who wish to integrate technology, 21st-century skills, and ISTE NETS standards in their social studies, debate, language arts, science, or character education classroom. 

Sandra Wozniak recently retired at the top of her game in 2010 as the N.J. Middle Level Educator of the Year. Wozniak taught at Mt. Olive Middle School for 33 years. While there, she and her students worked with the nonprofit TregoED organization to develop and evaluate their critical thinking tools. You can contact her at sanwoz@gmail.com.