



# Developing Social Consciousness through Media and Literacy

## SUMMARY

These authors present a portrait of the *Ditmas News Network*; a program that promotes culturally responsive media and provides students with enriching opportunities to investigate, analyze, and report real news stories to an authentic audience of peers, teachers, and school leaders. DNN anchors tackle tough stories, near and far, and always with an eye towards cultural sensitivity and an unyielding commitment to make stories relevant to the student body at IS 62.

### *As the camera*

persons check the audio/mic function and space for the interview, the reporters use their relationship skills to connect with an interview subject or relate their story to an authentic audience. Although the students who shoot the show segments on each team may not have worked together before, they learn to respect one another and to understand and respect one another's capacities as team members.

The Ditmas News Network (DNN) at Ditmas Junior High School, IS 62, is a dynamic program grounded in social justice and relevant world events. Building on important topics, DNN encourages students to take a stand on controversial issues by reporting on a

schoolwide news broadcast to 1,300 public middle school students in Brooklyn. The program is produced, written, and performed by students twice a week before classes begin.

The DNN is a program that engages a diverse team of 33 students in grades six through eight. This team is trained in basic reporting, researching primary and secondary sources, developing scripts, doing still photography, interviewing, editing sound, and producing video. Students working with DNN help to enhance school culture while developing social consciousness through media and literacy. The news-cast is a time when differences shine. The team comprises students from diverse backgrounds, including students from regular education, those

*Rose Reissman is a member of the Literacy Support, Research and Story Ideas Guidance Team at Ditmas Intermediate School 62.*

*Angelo Carideo is a technology specialist and social studies teacher at Ditmas Intermediate School 62.*

*David Liotta teaches social studies and media studio at Ditmas Intermediate School 62.*

*Michael Downes teaches 8th grade social studies and digital media at Ditmas Intermediate School 62.*

*Danielle Schallachi is a 6th grade exploratory guidance counselor at Ditmas Intermediate School 62.*

*Michelle Meyers is a 7th and 8th grade guidance counselor at Ditmas Intermediate School 62.*

*June VonGizycki is an 8th grade high school articulation guidance counselor at Ditmas Intermediate School 62.*

**Rose Reissman, United Federation of Teachers**  
**Angelo Carideo, United Federation of Teachers**  
**David Liotta, United Federation of Teachers**  
**Michael Downes, United Federation of Teachers**  
**Danielle Schallachi, United Federation of Teachers**  
**Michelle Meyers, United Federation of Teachers**  
**June VonGizycki, United Federation of Teachers**

with special needs, English language learners, and gifted learners. DNN participants feel like an integral and respected part of the overarching school community when one of their own becomes the anchor.

In 22 minutes of early morning, school-wide television time, the DNN team delivers the news on issues and concerns from their school community and through their own eyes. These middle school anchors tackle unique and sensitive topics such as the Trayvon Martin case, the Boston Marathon massacre, understanding Uzbek and Pakistani traditions, and confronting anti-Semitism. In the process of pulling together their reports, students gain empathy from directly interviewing and being part of the segment team in a technical and crucial capacity.

The experience for students on the DNN team goes far beyond the average social studies or English language arts class. The program inherently supports the development of social and emotional learning as it promotes collaboration, boosts self-awareness and self-esteem,

and encourages students to develop empathy while facilitating strong bonds and teamwork. Students also engage in creative and critical thinking tasks as they find themselves editing interviews on a deadline, cutting what needs to be cut to make a segment more compelling, and performing other technical tasks. These assignments involve student broadcasters in real problem solving and decision making with an authentic, viewable, audience.

*“Being in this program has transformed the way I think and act. Before DNN, I didn’t know what was going on around the school or the neighborhood. Frankly, I didn’t care. Then DNN came along and my job was to know what was going around, when and where.”*  
— A DNN anchor

A student-run news network can be offered as a differentiated, project-based option for students in the context of the regular full class ELA program or in many other ways. These student media productions can be integrated

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into the curriculum in collaboration with social studies, science, and other content classes. Much of the program would be relevant for students in high school or the upper elementary grades. This program can be offered as an after-school enrichment program, or scheduled to support and/or enhance Common Core literacy learning and even remediation.

## Gathering the News

DNN students have presented their work to diverse audiences around New York City, including Jewish parochial high school students, adult voters, teen media film producers, peer/adult poets, and teacher educators at York College. These presentations allow Ditmas student media producers to engage these audiences face-to-face.

In the process of investigating a story, various people meet together to discuss the facts. Guidance counselors, parents, community leaders and other support staff offer round table commentary or research insights on such issues as: national disasters, grieving, racial profiling, obesity, and bullying.

*“Students use Google docs to share their ongoing scripts and story lines. They use audio recorders. Camera persons do the filming. There are audio sound check persons. Real world broadcasting and teleprompter skills are practiced and learned in service of CCSS Reading, Writing, Speaking/Listening, and Knowledge skills. Of course, they also learn and use special domain broadcasting words such as, continuity, sound check, takes, camera angle, zoom, audio check, editing, framing, and blocking.”*

— Ditmas teacher Angelo Carideo

The DNN program integrates culturally responsive practice into project-based activities that are aligned with the Common Core state standards. In the process, students produce substantial text products including informational, persuasive, and analytical reports, in addition to creative writing pieces. They use the productions to observe and report on rituals and traditions that support the school’s heart and soul by recording school concerts, elections, special guest appearances, dance performances, and community events. All of these are posted online to showcase and share them. They draw audience feedback in a way that is accessible to the students who create them.

*“From my perspective as a literacy and social studies educator, the use of the media studio technique effectively involves students in opportunities to do project-based learning. As the students work together in media teams, they investigate, interview, examine and critique neighborhood, national, and global issues. They work in teams of four and have to outline the story, do the interviews, then edit the material, and come up with intro and closer for it. So instead of just reading local print and online news reports, DNN story writers went on site to interview adult residents in a Kensington, Brooklyn neighborhood about the closing of a local library branch. Students edited the actual neighborhood reaction to this controversial budget cut. Tough local, economic times were concretized for DNN reporters when they stood in front of a favorite pizza shop and read the closing sign plus the posted notice of taxes owed by the shop.”*

— Ditmas teacher David Liotta

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## Aligning DNN with the Common Core Standards

DNN Writing	DNN Listening and Speaking	DNN Reading Informational Texts
CCR.W1 Write arguments to support claims with relevant evidence	CCR.SL1 Engage in collaborative discussions	CCR.RI.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis
CCR.W2 Write informative/explanatory texts	CCR.SL2 Interpret information in diverse media	CCR.RI.2 Determine central idea of the text CCR.RI.3 Analyze in detail how an event is introduced
CCR.W4 Produce clear and coherent writing for task, purpose and audience	CCR.SL4 present claims and findings	CCR.RI.4 determine meaning of words as used in text
CCR.W5 Use technology to produce and publish writing	CCR.SL5 Include multimedia components	
CCR.W7 Conduct short research projects	CCR.SL6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks	CCR.RI.7 Integrate information presented in different media or formats to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue
CCR.W8 Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources		CCR.RI.8 Trace and evaluate arguments / claims in a text to distinguish claims supported by reason and those not supported by reason.
CCR.W9 draw evidence from informational texts		CCR.RI.9 Compare and contrast one author’s presentation of events with another author’s
CCR.W10 Write routinely over time		Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010)

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### **Culturally Responsive Practice and Curricular Integration**

The stories reported by DNN are sometimes “ripped from the headlines” but very often are based on the students’ backgrounds and life experiences. One example was when several anchors joined the team and requested we create segments that would explain various Uzbek and Pakistan traditions. When Vietnamese poet Thanhha Lai visited the school, a fifth grader from Uzbekistan volunteered to cover that story so she could do the translating for students in the ESL class from Uzbekistan.

And Pakistani students were extremely excited and uplifted to be able to function as expert sources when the team focused on the Diane Sawyer interview of teen heroine Malala Yousafzai. ESL teacher Sofia Rashid developed a lesson on argumentation based upon “Would you take a bullet in the head to speak out for the right to education?” It prompted impassioned responses from Ms. Rashid’s bridge class students. These Uzbek, Haitian, Spanish, and Pakistani students inspired DNN anchors to use interviews as catalysts to encourage other students to react to the issue.

Despite their cultural and age differences, Ditmas commentators are often surprised by the extent to which they share common responses to culturally

charged events. For example, in a round table DNN discussion with our Yachad adults wearing black hats and payot (long side curls), an important message was brought home to Ditmas students. Attire profiling can influence people’s opinions of different cultures. The DNN news team and classroom students noted that while they would never have approached ultraorthodox students in their Kensington neighborhood even on the same line at a store, they now would try to strike up conversations. Selasie, a Ditmas eighth grader noted: “They (the IVDU students) told me things that really opened me up to them as individuals.” Another student, Margaret, was surprised that the parochial Jewish high school students were just as touched and as emotional as she was about the 8-year-old boy who was an innocent bystander casualty of the Boston Marathon.

The Spanish foreign language teacher focused literature learning and dual language poetry/memoirs on literature of authors who arrived in the USA speaking only Spanish. She covered Santiago and filtered Spanish phrases for the poetry of Thanhha Lai, the Newbery winner who arrived in Alabama speaking only Vietnamese. The concept of being on-air inspired the sixth grade informational literacy instructor to have the ELA DNN team member support his class’s authoring



DNN teaches 21st century skills or “the three C’s”: collaboration, critical thinking, and communication.

book/movie reviews and product reviews so they could be part of new DNN segments. Their writings could be included in the 3, 2, 1 . . . Action DNN e-book and print publication. These carryovers to classroom literacy instruction expanded cultural conversations focused on cross cultural explanations.

Evaluation tools are regularly embedded in the Ditmas News Network program. Students and teachers develop rubrics based on project-specific literacy, related content, and use of media tools criteria. These rubrics should be continually referenced as the students develop products, and review them. Evaluative criteria must include: presentation of ideas clarity, voice quality, word choice, conventions, evidentiary support, historical/research information, segment flow, on camera team conversation flow, use of opener and closer, and effective interviewing. On-site teacher feedback forms, as well as peer feedback forms are also designed by the students so that they received explicit audience assessment of their products.

DNN teaches 21st century skills or “the three C’s”: “collaboration, critical thinking, and communication (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011).” Students walk away from this program able to design viable marketplace commercials, Power Point presentations, movies, and media

messages. Students become informed and sensitive media users and readers as well as communicators and producers of media and face-to-face presentations utilizing video and audio technology. They become globally aware citizens. Attaching these electronic products to resumés demonstrates career competence as participants in the global media marketplace. DNN also affects the real-life citizenship and civics connection since DNN participants immediately are engaged in social problem investigation.

*I had always pictured myself being a lot of things, but never once had I thought that I could or would dare to be an anchor. Now look at me. I'm writing scripts, coming up with ideas of my own, and helping my partners with their scripts. I won't stop my media work now. Watch out for me, or rather tune in to catch me on air!*

— DNN seventh grader

### **Learning Video Production**

DNN is an effective and replicable program. Students who produce the broadcasts as well as those who listen benefit from social-emotional learning while gaining content knowledge about relevant issues and events.

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## Making video news production in your classroom

- Step 1:** Decide on a curriculum connection as the focus for student News Media products.
- Students in an ELA class can be asked to identify a broadcast news/online news story that connects with informational or fictional texts they are studying. Students in a welcome class can prepare a special feature on their native country or its music or culture to include on a regular show or in tandem with DNN English speaking peers.
- Step 2:** Be willing and ready to accept multiple student creative projects or approaches for your content product goal. Students may opt to poll peers or neighborhood passersby on the story or editorialize an issue. This immediately authenticates the product, making it culturally responsive for the student (Deal and Peterson, 2006) and enhances school climate (Cohen, McCabe, 2009).
- Step 3:** Present the product content goal to the students and allow at least 1-2 periods for them to explore individually or in small groups the ways they might approach it and how they might use the media tools to realize that approach.
- Step 4:** Teach the students how to work with media tools (have a student do the explanations if the student is more expert than the teacher). Then work with them individually or in small groups as they develop their initial media products. Sit back as they present their products.
- Step 5:** Build in focus audiences (other teaching colleagues, partner school audiences online, and peer classes on school site) to provide feedback to the working student producers as they edit media work.
- Step 6:** Model for students, if necessary, how to conduct an interview, in voices appropriate for particular audiences.
- Step 7:** Make certain that their videos are “published” online or showcased at a local, regional or national event for live audiences.

While student media productions reflect the supportive expertise of educators Carideo and Liotta, the basic approach can be adapted and replicated in any middle school using any generally available equipment. As Carideo notes: “The beauty of this is that with

just an accessible audio recorder and use of google docs, plus a working school public address system, much of this can even be done as pod cast or video sharable in schools without time or access to more advanced visual technology.”

DNN uses a Sony HUR 1500 camera and the editing and production software, Magix Movie Edit Pro. Any digital camera and available video editing production software will do for entry level adoptions of the approach.

The DNN program requires that students apply the same skills necessary for real life journalism. However, DNN students don’t receive formal training in the use of: cameras, sound, editing software, script development, and ‘on camera’ presenting. Students learn from doing and from one another, and often, from teacher modeling and demonstrations that arise from the needs experienced in the moment as students put the shows together. They see each other in new contexts as team members working collaboratively toward a common goal. The teamwork inherently promotes a positive and rich culturally responsive school climate. When the students get a news assignment, they do two pilot runs before the show. It may look like chaos and disorder at first, but then the ongoing process of story selection, script development, and production of the videos transforms that to ordered learning.

## Conclusion

Ditmas student media productions promote social consciousness and inspire teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, and the PTA to work together to epitomize a connected school community; a school culture.

These broadcasts help to enhance school culture by provoking meaningful discussions about important topics that promote understanding and acceptance of others.

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DNN encourages bonding on a schoolwide level. The use of common media connects all different groups together through news, issues, and pop culture. It levels the playing field for everyone to demonstrate visual, verbal, performing, technical equipment expertise, teaming capacity and collaboration with someone from another class.

— *Ditmas teacher Michael Downes*