



the news literacy project  
how to know what to believe

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## THE NEWS LITERACY PROJECT IN 2009: A YEAR OF ACCESS AND IMPACT

Just one year ago, the News Literacy Project was little more than an idea waiting to happen. Today, it is exciting to look back upon our successful first year with programs now under way in New York City, Bethesda, Md., and Chicago, plans for expansion in those locations in the months ahead, and a growing team of professionals dedicated to the success of the venture. Eleven months after launching our inaugural pilot, we have reached more than 1,200 students in six middle schools and high schools, worked with 16 history, government and English teachers in three regions, and engaged more than 70 volunteer journalists in our classroom and after-school programs, video productions and special events.

The News Literacy Project has demonstrated that our innovative model and original curriculum heightens students' awareness and understanding of what to believe in a digital age where they face a daily tsunami of news and images. Whether they are reading a newspaper, watching television news or clicking on search engines, viral e-mail or Wikipedia, we have taught them how to ask the hard questions. From inner cities to suburbs, from 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, from English to social studies classes, we have demonstrated NLP's effectiveness in giving students the critical thinking skills needed to effectively navigate today's world of new media and help them both consume and create credible information across all platforms.

As Kristina Wylie, an English teacher at the Facing History School in New York said, "The News Literacy Project offers students the skills, strategies and resources to enable them to question sources and make informed decisions" and provides teachers with "the resources, activities, vocabulary, and real-life journalists to inspire students!"

We believe that a national commitment to promoting news literacy will lead to a better-informed citizenry and a stronger democracy. On that score, we want to recognize the generous support of the Knight, Ford and McCormick Foundations as well as the David and Katherine Moore Family Foundation, the Philip L. Graham Fund, the Kovler Fund of The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region, and the Gannett and Chicago Tribune Foundations, all of which share our vision and have made so much possible during our first critical year.

We also want to express our deep appreciation to all of you who have been vital to our launch and early success. Whether you have volunteered in our classrooms, after-school program or video productions, donated other services, taught our unit, attended one of our special events or contributed financially, we could not have had such an impressive beginning without you. Thank you!

### AN AUSPICIOUS BEGINNING

The project's first pilot — at the Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School in Brooklyn — was unveiled Feb. 2 with a memorable event featuring CNN's Soledad O'Brien.

Later that month, we introduced our brand of authentic real-world learning at Facing History, a high school in Manhattan, and at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda. Time magazine's Mark Halperin and Pierre Thomas of ABC News, both NLP journalist fellows, headlined the Whitman kickoff.



From the start, we enrolled outstanding journalists in our online directory, trained them and the participating teachers, and introduced, tested and revised our curriculum materials. The materials include a “word wall” of basic journalism and news literacy terms, more than two dozen engaging activities for teachers and journalists to do with students, and a series of hands-on projects for students to undertake themselves.

Teachers commit to cover our four pillars: why news matters, especially to students; what role the First Amendment and a free media play in a democracy; how to know what to believe across all media and all platforms, and what challenges and opportunities are being created by the Internet and the digital world. We instruct journalists to incorporate these principles in their presentations as well.



Initially, teachers presented the project as a two- to three-week unit. This was supplemented by paper copies of The New York Times and The Washington Post that the news organizations provide to the classrooms during the NLP units. Print, broadcast and online journalists began connecting with students as soon as they began to visit the schools.

Ryan Miller, who taught the first NLP unit to his 8<sup>th</sup>-grade history students at Williamsburg Collegiate, said, “Three weeks ago, a lot of my students didn’t know what to look for in a newspaper article or didn’t know what Google actually did. And they know that now. And I can go build on that in class from here until the end of the year, and they’ll build it on throughout high school.”

## AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM

The project has been active outside the normal school day as well, partnering with Citizen Schools, a national after-school apprenticeship program, in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City.

In the spring, working with six NLP journalist fellows, a dozen middle school students at STARS Prep Academy 45 produced a mini-documentary about their changing community. The students presented “East Harlem IS” to an audience of 75 at the Museum of the City of New York in May. It can be seen at

[http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/blog/news\\_literacy\\_project\\_after\\_school\\_production\\_on\\_youtube/](http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/blog/news_literacy_project_after_school_production_on_youtube/)

Three NLP fellows worked with Citizen Schools and 14 students during a second apprenticeship at STARS Prep. The students built “Reporting Live from M.S. 45,” a school website that includes news and views on current events (and even campus fashion!), and gives students an opportunity in real time to put their news literacy lessons into practice. It also gives them the chance to work on their interviewing skills and includes a blog on what it means to read and report news in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The site is testament to the energy and commitment that is generated when students’ imaginations are ignited by NLP’s unique programs.

## IN THE MEDIA

By the conclusion of our initial pilots, national and local news media were paying attention. NLP received positive coverage in the Los Angeles Times, Teacher Magazine and the Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

The Columbia Journalism Review focused on the project in a thoughtful cover story in its July/August issue: [http://www.cjr.org/feature/leap\\_of\\_faith\\_1.php](http://www.cjr.org/feature/leap_of_faith_1.php). “News literacy has the potential to transform itself from the cause of a committed few into a powerful national movement,” the article concluded. “Now more than ever, journalism has a marked opportunity to reinvent itself and its role in the community.”

## MOVING TO THE NEXT LEVEL

This past fall, the project took major steps to move to the next level.

We launched a pilot at the Marquette School in Chicago following a kickoff event featuring Clarence Page, a Pulitzer Prize-winning Chicago Tribune columnist and television commentator. We worked with 150 6<sup>th</sup>-grade history students, our youngest participants. With our Chicago partner, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC-Chicago), a neighborhood revitalization program that is a national model, we will expand to additional schools in 2010. This expansion will include providing journalist advisers to help upgrade a student newspaper in on school and start one in a second school.



At Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School and Walt Whitman High School, teachers decided to embed the NLP in their curriculum throughout the school year, introducing activities and bringing in journalists to mesh with specific topics. Twelfth-grade English teachers at Whitman joined the project and have taken the same approach (“This is nirvana,” exclaimed veteran teacher Marilee Roche. “I’d give up *Hamlet* for this!”). Westland Middle School in Bethesda will offer the unit in 8<sup>th</sup>-grade world studies classes in 2010.



to consume and create credible information.

Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School has taken additional steps to ingrain the project in its DNA. In September, two NLP journalists began working extensively with students at the middle school to establish the school’s first student newspaper; in 2010 we plan to create a companion video course. And current 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students, who took the unit in 7<sup>th</sup> grade in the spring, are digging more deeply into how

## JOURNALISM PARTNERS

We’re proud of our other partners as well.

We continue to add participating news organizations, including our two most recent – ProPublica and Slate. They have joined The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, ABC and NBC News, CBS News’ “60 Minutes,” the Associated Press, CNN, NPR, the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune and more than 130 journalists who have enrolled in the project’s online directory: <http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/journalists/>.

Our journalist fellows have both fueled the project’s success and borne witness to it.



“I’ve seen these results firsthand: engaged students who have completely changed the way they assess and digest information,” Peter Eisler, an investigative reporter at USA Today, wrote in an e-mail. “They’re having fun with this (and, frankly, so are the journalists

## VIDEO PRODUCTIONS

Collaborating with NLP journalist volunteers from coast to coast, the project created its initial video one month after initiating the program. “Check It Out,” which had its premiere in March at the first national conference on news literacy at Stony Brook University, can be seen at: [http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/blog/news\\_literacy\\_project\\_video\\_on\\_youtube/](http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/blog/news_literacy_project_video_on_youtube/).

During the summer, we created our second video, which featured exemplary videos, raps and games about news literacy produced by students at Walt Whitman. “Students as Teachers” can be viewed at: [http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/blog/the\\_news\\_literacy\\_project\\_produces\\_new\\_video/](http://www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/blog/the_news_literacy_project_produces_new_video/).

doing the teaching) and they're coming away with a far keener and more nuanced understanding of both the promises and pitfalls of the new media landscape.”

The Poynter Institute for Media Studies became our partner and fiscal agent this year; we will continue that relationship in 2010.

NLP’s board is deeply engaged in the program. It is led by Vivian Schiller, the president of NPR, and John Carroll, the former editor of the Los Angeles Times and The Baltimore Sun. The project is building active local advisory committees with distinguished members in New York, Washington, Chicago and Los Angeles. These groups will play important roles in nurturing the project’s growth, performance and funding in their areas.

Seeking to raise our profile and funds, we have held three events in Bethesda, Los Angeles and New York since June. We’ll close out the year and start the New Year with three more in New York, Chicago and Bethesda to recognize and thank the journalists, principals and teachers whose efforts have made our initial year so successful.



## LOOKING AHEAD

Looking to 2010, we plan to expand our existing projects in New York, the Washington area and Chicago. We are also laying the groundwork for bringing our project to the West Coast with a proposed launch in Los Angeles in 2010.

Prominent journalism and educational organizations have approached us to collaborate on promising ventures involving the use of educational video and television productions and innovative digital platforms to reach wider audiences. We will continue to grow our online journalist directory. And we’re exploring exciting ideas to create additional video productions and use digital media, online training and videos to increase our national reach and meet the growing demand for our services.

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE



We remain committed to channeling as much of our resources as possible to the students. In surveys, interviews and other feedback, they have told us that they are getting a tremendous amount from the News Literacy Project.

“When I check my e-mail now, I get the gossip and everything else,” said Daysha Williams, who took the unit as an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade student at Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School in the spring. But now, she added, she’s more skeptical: “OK, cool. But were you there? Were you *really* there? Or did you just get that from someone else?”

Alexa Ciesinski, who participated in the project as a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student at Walt Whitman High School, said: “We got an in-depth look at how media is produced. ... It was really important to a lot of people. It helped us in finding reliable sources. That’s a lesson you will keep with you into your college years.”

