

TEACHING WITH POLITICAL CARTOONS IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

By

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Teaching with political cartoons is like eating potato chips—once you begin you just can't stop. Each year my collection of favorite political cartoons grows, my files bulge, and my very favorite cartoons, copied on transparency acetates, yellow with age. This year is no exception. The presidential election is sure to host Olympian-like duels where events, such as verbal gymnastics, mud-slinging, and image bashing, will be pictorially displayed, reaching their pinnacle in the arena of the political cartoon.

When using political cartoons to teach the election, two instructional approaches should be applied.

First, teach the techniques cartoonists use to develop their visual message. Start with **caricaturing**, the exaggeration of a person's physical characteristics for the purpose of making a visual statement. Go to the newspapers published during the Iowa caucuses and have students look for the "key" to each personality depicted. A bow tie, a pair of glasses, a high forehead will provide ample material for the cartoonist. I often show a series of old Reagan caricatures to illustrate exaggeration. His pompadour hairstyle, an elongated lower face, his much-wrinkled neck have each been used by cartoonists. Also, have students create a classroom bulletin board by collecting copies of political cartoons as they appear in the newspapers. You may also wish to start each day's social studies lesson by displaying and discussing a cartoon dealing with a current issue.

Another technique deals with the cartoonist's **message**. To illustrate this technique, I bring to class several single-box comics such as Dennis the Menace or Family Circus. By contrasting these entertaining comics with political cartoons, students graphically recognize that comics are designed to entertain while political

cartoons are designed to educate by presenting the cartoonist's opinion of an event or person.

Because a cartoon message generally deals with either a state, national, or international topic, I present examples of each type to provide students with practice interpreting the message of cartoons. Iowa cartoons are especially fun! One Miller cartoon of 1981 shows a bundled-up, angry Iowan standing behind a gadget marked "big expensive Christmas present" with not a snowflake in sight. I ask students to tell me about the weather of that winter.

On the national scene, I bring to class several samples which we interpret as a class. A Frank Miller cartoon of 1981 shows President Reagan in cowboy clothes riding an elephant around a cactus-filled yard near a cabin labeled "Little White House on the Prairie". The caption reads, "Nancy, I'm going to ride around our new ranch to see what we've got." Students will quickly identify the man, the cowboy clothing, the elephant, the ranch, the cabin, and Nancy Reagan. Many students will also associate the cactus field with problems the President will face—the cartoonist's basic message.

On the international scene, topics such as political relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, world famine, and nuclear dangers are often addressed. Frank Miller won a Pulitzer Prize for his cartoon depicting two lonely figures on a nearly destroyed earth. One says, "We sure settled that dispute, didn't we?" Cartoons such as these not only encourage critical thinking, but also provide rich opportunities to teach global awareness.

Second, integrate cartoons into the social studies curriculum. As an American History teacher eager to help students think critically about social issues, I find numerous opportunities to illustrate particular historic perspectives using cartoons. Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre is a marvelous example of a cartoon which states an opinion, but stretches the truth to make a point. I like to show students the Boston Massacre cartoon while I read aloud the factual account of the event. Fifth-grade students will easily identify the bias in Revere's work.

When teaching about the violent racial times of the 1950s with its forced integration of schools, Frank Miller's cartoon of four little



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black girls walking to school past angry white mobs in Arkansas speaks volumes.

A whole unit on Herbert Hoover could be based on Ding Darling's cartoons. His life is pictured from the early days as an orphan through his World War I food conservation work to his years in the White House.

Iowans have enjoyed a legacy of excellent cartoonists at the Des Moines Register. Several collections of cartoons have been published over the years which provide an illustrated history of the state and nation. As Ding Saw Hoover, by Ding Darling and the Des Moines Register's Frank Miller Cartoons as Commentary: Three Decades at the Register are but two which every elementary teacher will find helpful.

While I am not trying to sell the Des Moines Register, I am trying to sell the frequent use of political cartoons to teach American history and important current events such as the presidential election. However, be forewarned: collecting political cartoons is habit-forming. Clear out space in a file drawer and start clipping!

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