

ASNE Reference: Hiestand session: “Scholastic Press Law”

General Topic: Media Law

Overview and Rationale for Lesson 2:

Last year’s experience teaching scholastic press law for the first time in Journalism 1 showed me that students are generally unconcerned about this topic at first mention. They told me they felt it only applied to professional journalists, and didn’t feel it was likely that they, as young student journalists, would be in a position to libel anyone, and therefore didn’t see how it could apply to their writing personally. Their attitude wasn’t blasé, but it was a bit disturbing that they were so unconcerned about it. I am determined to change that this year, and not only show my students how relevant this is to ALL journalists, no matter what their age, but how this ties in with media ethics and the overall legitimacy of our school publication through personal examples and an activity where they can see the divide between libel and ethical coverage. I will teach this early in the year, after they have learned about ethical journalism, so they can pull from prior knowledge as they work on the warm-up activity.

Essential Question:

What is libel?

Critical Engagement Questions:

- Why is libel so potentially dangerous for journalists?
- How can a journalist avoid libel? How does media ethics relate?

Activities (Performances of Understanding) (class is 86 minutes long):

1. Warm-up: Students will gather into small groups. The students will receive different fictional scenarios involving their Journalism teacher. A few are just silly and

- inaccurate (“Ms. Benere is a full-blown Trekkie who speaks fluent Klingon”), and a few are libelous (“Rumor has it Ms. Benere doesn’t just have coffee in that mug”).
- The groups will then form a plan of how to cover their topic, including research they plan to include, sources they plan to talk to, and interview questions. They then will present their plan to the class (25 minutes).
2. As the students present, we will discuss as a group which stories are libel that the journalism teacher could potentially sue over (20 minutes).
 3. Then, students will watch/take notes from a “SPLC Media Law Presentation: Libel Law”. This formally defines libel and libelous situations (30 minutes).
 4. I will distribute the Student Press Law Center handout “Know Your Rights: Libel and Privacy” and “Advice for avoiding libel suits” from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. We will briefly discuss the contents of the handouts (10 minutes).
 5. After discussion of libel and libel law, as a whole group the students will discuss how they might cover potentially “red flag” stories in an ethical way based on the handouts (10 minutes).

Assessment:

As homework, students will find a famous case of libel, print the source, and prepare to present the 5W/1H of the libel situation to the class.

Recommended Readings/Sources:

- “Know Your Rights: Libel and Privacy” <https://www.splc.org/presentations/kyr-libel.pdf>
- “SPLC Media Law Presentation: Libel Law” <https://www.splc.org/presentations/pplibellaw.pdf>
- “Advice for avoiding libel suits” <http://www.rcfp.org/first-amendment-handbook/advice-avoiding-libel-suits>