Survey Says…

Summary

Can 50 million Elvis fans be wrong? We often rely on polls and surveys to take the temperature of the population—how better to find out what people think than to ask them? But depending on how the polls are constructed and conducted, we might end up with misleading answers. This lesson examines two polls that asked Iraqis about the quality of life in their country, one which showed an alarmingly negative outlook and one a more positive assessment. Students will look at the conclusions offered by the organizations that sponsored the polls and their methodologies. They will also conduct their own survey and see how poll results can be skewed by how, when, where, of whom and by whom the questions are asked.

Objectives

In this activity students will:

- Compare and contrast the findings of two surveys of Iraqi citizens.
- Develop research questions on similarities and differences in the polls’ results.
- Do the research to address their questions and draw conclusions from their findings.
- Compare their findings with the statements of the White House press secretary.
- Learn about the variables that can influence the results of a poll.
- Perform their own poll on a question of local interest. (Note to the teacher: We will NOT venture into statistical aspects of polling in this lesson.)

Background

In early 2007, the U.S.-led war in Iraq was plagued by sectarian strife and violence. News reports described the country as unstable and unsafe. At this time, two agencies polled Iraqi citizens on the quality of life in Iraq. One poll was conducted by Britain’s Opinion Research Business Group (ORB) and the other by ABC News. Though their data reported similar results on related questions, ORB’s conclusions seemed generally more optimistic that ABC’s. This fact wasn’t lost on White House Press Secretary Tony Snow, who, when questioned by reporters about the ABC survey, was quick to cite the British survey as one that came to “different conclusions.”

In this activity, students will examine the two surveys’ construction, results and summaries in light of Mr. Snow’s comments and draw their own conclusions as to whether the polls had diametrically opposed results.

Materials

1. Student Handout #1: (Two articles plus a graphic organizer)
   - ABC News Survey article excerpts.
   - British ORB Group Survey article.
   - Graphic Organizer.
2. **Student Handout #2:** Excerpts of White House Press Secretary Tony Snow’s March 19, 2007, press briefing.
3. **Student Handout #3:** Side-by-side comparisons from the two Iraqi polls.
4. **FactCheck.org article** (handout #4), “White House Spins Iraqi Polling.”
5. **Student handout #5:** “Don’t Be Fooled” guide to avoiding deception.

**Procedure**

Before class, determine how many copies of the handouts you will need for small groups of 3 to 5 students each, and make packets of the supporting materials. You’ll distribute the two articles on the surveys along with handout #1, and you’ll pass out handouts #2, #3, #4 and #5 separately with the appropriate exercises.

In the full class, ask students some general questions:

- What do you know about public opinion polls? How are polls conducted?
- How can factors such as sample size or the way questions are phrased affect a poll’s results?
- What do polls tell us about a larger population?

Now explain to the class that they will be examining two polls conducted in 2007 that asked Iraqis about the quality of life in Iraq and that they will evaluate the White House’s reaction to those polls. Explain that they should apply the five steps we have outlined in “Don’t Be Fooled: A Process for Avoiding Deception.” Have them refer to their handout on this. Specifically, they should:

- Keep an open mind. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking a claim is correct just because it fits your biases.
- Ask the right questions. Look for the conclusion of the argument and then ask yourself what reasons you are being given for believing that conclusion. Examine each factual claim and ask what evidence would prove it right or wrong. Then ask whether the premises logically support the conclusions.
- Cross-check. Look for more than one source of evidence before making up your mind.
- Consider the source. Think about which sources of information are most trustworthy.
- Weigh the evidence. Do the facts support the ad’s message?

**Exercises**

**Exercise #1 – Keeping an open mind, asking questions**

*To the teacher: Although most of us are accustomed to seeing results of polls, few students will have thought analytically about what goes into getting those results. Pollsters spend significant time and energy creating unbiased questions, selecting representative samples and calculating margins of error. Emphasize to the students the importance of selecting questions and sets of people to survey.*
Have students create and conduct their own poll on some issue of local interest. Have students form large groups of 6 to 8 students. Students should come up with general subject areas in which to develop questions. Then have these larger groups split into two smaller groups and work independently to develop their own questions, conduct the surveys and write their conclusions. Before they begin their interviews, students should write down their predictions of what the surveys will find.

The students should survey similar groups of students and teachers but not the same individuals. Tell them that each small group should question a minimum of eight people. Students should then meet with their counterpart group and compare their results, which they can assess and discuss using the following questions:

- Do you think that the two polls are generally similar or generally different?
- Did the polls yield different results? If so, why do you think that happened?
- Do you think that the difference between the poll questions and the people surveyed had an impact on the outcomes? If so, which methods do you think were more accurate? Why?
- Does one seem more credible? Why or why not?
- How did your predictions hold up when compared with the actual results?

**Exercise # 2 – Asking questions**

To the teacher: Emphasize to students the need to keep an open mind in their research and analysis. People tend to accept any information that supports what they already believe and reject information that conflicts with those beliefs. Also point out to students that to be good critical thinkers, they need to ask questions. Who is making the statements? How did they get their information? Can the statements be proved or disproved?

Tell the students that they’ll examine some results from two polls conducted in early 2007 asking Iraqis similar questions on the quality of life in Iraq.

Divide the class into small groups of 3 to 5 students and distribute copies of the ABC News Survey article excerpts, the British ORB Group survey summary and Student Handout #1, the graphic organizer.

Give students time to complete the organizer and discuss their reactions. Ask students to assess their reactions in light of the lessons they learned in analyzing their own polls. (If necessary, this activity could be completed as homework.)

When these two polls were released, White House Press Secretary Tony Snow was asked by reporters about the results of the ABC poll, which found so much pessimism in Iraq that it was subtitled “Ebbing Hope in a Landscape of Loss.” Mr. Snow responded by citing the British poll, which he said offered a “different conclusion.”

Distribute to students Student Handout #2, “Excerpts of White House Press Secretary Tony Snow’s March 19, 2007, Press Briefing.” Have students review White House Press Secretary
Tony Snow’s responses to questions about the two polls. Students should assess Snow’s response to the polls and his possible motives.

**Exercise #3 – Cross-checking / Consider the source**

*To the teacher: It’s important that students review several sources when verifying information. When political officials or sources make statements as fact, these should be verified through different, preferably neutral sources. Two or three reliable sources independently reporting the same fact is a good indication the information is accurate. If two sources report different information, then more investigation will likely be needed.*

In this section students delve a little deeper into how the two polls were constructed, whether this has any bearing on the conclusions, and the results of specific questions related to the topic areas students have been examining.

Have students review their comments in the graphic organizer in Student Handout #1 and Tony Snow’s comments in Student Handout #2. Using those earlier handouts and Student Handout #3, “Side-by-Side comparisons from the two Iraqi polls,” students should remain in their groups and discuss the following questions.

- Who did the poll? (Students might want to do some Internet research to answer this question more fully). Do you think a poll’s results can be influenced by the motives of the person or group who designs it?
- How many people were surveyed in each poll? How many questions were asked in each poll? Might this have a bearing on the polls’ results?
- When were the polls conducted? Why might that matter?
- What is the margin of error for each poll?
- How close are the results of the questions in the side-by-side comparisons? Can you draw any conclusions from these comparisons about the credibility of the two polls?

**Exercise #4 – Weighing the evidence**

*To the teacher: Help students understand what all the evidence means. They need to evaluate the credibility of the sources of information presented, the difference between random anecdotes and real scientific data based on credible studies.*

Hold a debriefing session with all groups over the following questions. Make sure students support their statements with evidence they have gathered from this activity and any research they may have conducted.

- Do you think the results of the two polls are generally similar or different?
- Why do you think the British poll seemed more optimistic than the ABC poll?
- Why do you think White House Press Secretary Tony Snow preferred the British poll?
- If your class has completed the FactCheckED.org lesson on fallacies: Did Tony Snow commit any of the major fallacies that were discussed? Are there any booby traps for the unwary reader? Does Snow make proper use of statistics?
As a final assessment, have students write an op-ed piece on the two polls and the White House reaction to them. Then have students compare their conclusions to the FactCheck.org article “White House Spins Iraqi Polling.”

About the Author

Greg Timmons has been a social studies teacher for more than 30 years in Portland, Oregon, and now resides in Washington and Montana. He is executive director of the Constitution Project, which produces educational materials and workshops on the U.S. Constitution. He is also a freelance curriculum writer and educational consultant for various PBS programs and other education publications. He is a member of the board of directors of the Oregon Council for the Social Studies and has served on committees for the National Council for the Social Studies.

Correlation to National Standards

National Social Studies Standards

I. Culture Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.

VI. Power, Authority, and Governance Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance.

IX. Global Connections Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of global connections and interdependence.

X. Civic Ideals and Practices Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic

Essential Skills for Social Studies

Acquiring Information

A. Reading Skills

1. Comprehension

2. Vocabulary

B. Study Skills

1. Find Information
2. Arrange Information in Usable Forms

C. Reference & Information-Search Skills

2. Special References

D. Technical Skills Unique to Electronic Devices

1. Computer

Organizing and Using Information

A. Thinking Skills

1. Classify Information

2. Interpret Information

3. Analyze Information

4. Summarize Information

5. Synthesize Information

6. Evaluate Information

B. Decision-Making Skills

C. Metacognitive Skills

Interpersonal Relationships & Social Participation

A. Personal Skills

C. Social and Political Participation Skills

Democratic Beliefs and Values

A. Rights of the Individual

B. Freedoms of the Individual

C. Responsibilities of the Individual
National Mathematics Standards

Number and Operations Standard

Algebra Standard

Data Analysis and Probability Standard

Process Standards

Problem Solving Standard

Reasoning and Proof Standard

Connections Standard

National Educational Technology Standards

Profiles for Technology Literate Students

Performance Indicators

2. Make informed choices among technology systems, resources, and services.

7. Routinely and efficiently use online information resources to meet needs for collaboration, research, publication, communication, and productivity.

8. Select and apply technology tools for research, information analysis, problem solving, and decision making in content learning.

Information Literacy Standards

Information Literacy

Standard 1 accesses information efficiently and effectively.

Standard 2 evaluates information critically and competently.

Standard 3 uses information accurately and creatively.

Social Responsibility
Standard 7 recognizes the importance of information to a democratic society.

Standard 8 practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.

Standard 9 participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.

**English Language Arts Standards**

**Standard 1** Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary work.

**Standard 3** Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

**Standard 5** Students employ a wide range of strategies as the write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

**Standard 6** Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

**Standard 7** Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

**Standard 8** Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

**Standard 12** Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).