

**USING INFORMATIONAL BOOKS IN THE CLASSROOM:**

**LETTING THE FACTS (AND RESEARCH) SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES**

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**W**e live in an age fueled by information. When we slide out of bed in the morning we begin managing information about our day. *What should I wear?* (based on the weather forecast, work or social calendar information, etc.). *Which route to work should I take?* (based on radio traffic reports, signage along the roadway, or your observations of traffic flow). *How should I design tomorrow's reading lesson?* (based on state standards, the school schedule, trade and textbook resources, future student needs, and how well this week's lessons went). *Should I buy that new sofa for the family room?* (based on the checkbook ledger, district check stub total, bank statement, credit card statement, and prime interest rate).

And just when we've "burned" through one day's supply of information, another is on the horizon. Almost as an afterthought, we manage all this information for years, forgetting all the preparation and practice it took to become proficient at it. As educators, our job is not to forget; it is to remember what it's like for a kindergartner, fourth-grader, or middle-schooler to learn how to manage information, and to then help them learn to do it better and better, so that one day when they have burned through a day's supply of information they will have done it in a way that was almost an afterthought.

Nonfiction books are the centerpiece in helping students become better and better at managing information. Nonfiction books serve a number of purposes – especially if used well. In the pages that follow I outline many reasons *why* nonfiction books should be used with students in all grades and *how* to use the books well. Knowing this will not only energize your own teaching, but broaden the vision of colleagues when they see the difference it makes for students – both now and in their information-fueled future.

### WHY USE NONFICTION BOOKS?

The evidence from everyday experience suggests that informational books:

- satisfy and broaden curiosity,
- provide breadth and depth of information,
- offer accurate information,
- provide models for informational writing,
- challenge readers to read critically,
- help present familiar things in new ways,
- promote exploration,
- simulate direct experience, and
- connect readers and reading to the real world.

In other words, nonfiction books help students feel, see, and know in ways that no textbook can. Students can learn facts from a textbook, but they learn to read passionately and critically with

nonfiction trade books. Textbooks have so many authors that they end up having no unique voice or point of view; nonfiction trade books directly reveal the author's point of view. Textbooks cover many topics but none of them in-depth; nonfiction trade books focus on a topic with greater resolution.

For example, a textbook may mention Booker T. Washington, who started the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. But a nonfiction trade book such as Margo McLoone's (1997) Booker T. Washington makes the Institute's founding and Washington's part in it real, vivid, and important to students. McLoone tells the story of Washington's early life, the events that lead him to found the Institute, and the ideals that guided his leadership. A textbook may say that Washington founded Tuskegee Institute, but a nonfiction trade book like Booker T. Washington places students where they can feel, see, and know what it would be like to start a school. It brings perspective and life to the two-dimensional textbook.

There are also research-based reasons for using nonfiction books in your classroom.

**Motivate Students to Read.** If you want to motivate a reluctant first grader to read more, find a path into literature that fits the child's interests and experiences. The research evidence indicates that many emerging (and experienced) readers find that path through nonfiction books (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Children can be enticed with narratives and other forms of text,

but in the end *nonfiction* books pave the way for the thrill of reading more.

By using informational books like Smelling (2000), Clouds (1998), Vibrations (2000), or an entire set of books on plant life, you can interest children in reading more because they want to do so – not because they are rewarded by someone for doing so. And once a child's enduring interests are set loose, that child is likely to read more – now and in the years to come (Alexander, 1997).

**Prepare Students for Later Academic and Adult Life.** If you really want to prepare a middle schooler for later success, teach that student how to fluently read, write, and critique informational discourse. The research on workplace, community, and academic performance all indicate that nonfiction literacy is central to long-term success and survival (Hull, 1997; Spiro, Vispoel, Schmitz, Samarapungavan, & Boerger, 1987; Stuart, 1999; Whetzel, 1992). You can be an avid reader of fiction, but your employers, council members, and professors will expect you to locate, sort, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and produce *nonfiction* texts with great ease and skill.

By using nonfiction books like The Grizzly Bear (1997), The Civil War (2001), Mountaineering Adventures (2001), or an entire set on American civics, you can equip your students to read and write informational texts critically and well. Without this skill, they will lack the most important tool for contemporary survival – how to gather, work through, and communicate

knowledge-based information (Hartman, 2000).

**Expand Student Vocabulary.** If you want to help fourth graders expand their vocabulary, they need to read, read, read *and* talk, talk, talk – especially about information-based topics. The most recent reviews of research draw the same conclusion: voluminous experience with rich, information-based language (written and spoken) enhances student vocabulary growth (Anderson & Nagy, 1991; Nagy & Scott, 2000). *Nonfiction* books provide the rich vocabulary necessary for the reader to encounter new words repeatedly so that vocabulary knowledge grows with each reading.

By using nonfiction books like Grasslands (2001), Wetlands (2001), Deserts (2001), or an entire set on ecosystems, you provide students with repeated opportunities to encounter naturally occurring language that is information-based. Without these opportunities, they will be limited to the direct instruction of vocabulary words typically taught before reading a text – which has little effect on overall vocabulary growth (Beck & McKeown, 1991).

**Improve Students Academic Achievement.** If you want to help struggling young kindergartners achieve in the long run, they need to start learning early how to be proficient users of nonfiction text. The research evidence is clear on this point: students who achieve academically also have strong informational reading and writing skills (Bernhardt, Destino, Kamil, & Rodriguez-Munoz, 1995). You

might have fluent readers of every leveled story and poem in print, but unless their *nonfiction* reading skills are strong they will continue to struggle throughout their school years.

By using nonfiction books like Ladybugs (1999), Ants (1999), Grasshoppers (1999), or an entire set on insects, you can create opportunities to develop the necessary informational processing skills – even as early as kindergarten. Without these opportunities, many students are likely to experience the infamous fourth-grade “slump” – when the amount of nonfiction text increases dramatically but a student’s skills for using it won’t be strong enough to deal with the heavy dose (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990).

**Support English Language Learners.** If you want to help a second grade English learner become more fluent in academic English, then that student needs experience with materials – like *nonfiction books* – that tap into his or her interests, experience, and cultural values. Your task, of course, is to scaffold the use of these books so the next steps in learning are taken. The research evidence on English language learners identifies a clear pattern: fluency in English comes more completely and quickly when teachers: (a) use materials that provide background knowledge and build on previous knowledge, (b) value these materials in light of the student’s home culture and language, and (c) balance the use of these materials with responsive and sheltered instruction in both basic and higher-order skills (August & Hakuta, 1997; Brisk, 1998; Greene, 1998; Mayer & Fienberg, 1992).

A child can be a fluent speaker and reader in his or her home language, but unless the English learning at school is a tailored set of material and instructional components that work from the resources in the child's particular language community, fluency in English will be leaner and take longer (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000).

By using nonfiction books like Mexico (1997), The Pueblo Indians (1999), Cesar Chavez (1998), or an entire set on weather and seasons, you can create opportunities for English language learners to develop fluency in English—and in their home language too. Without the rich content knowledge and language that informational books can provide, students are likely to experience the so-called “achievement gap” — where the lack of academic content knowledge and English language proficiency keep them from learning like their native-English-speaking classmates (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002).

### **Balance the Core Reading Program.**

Finally, if you want students to have a balanced diet of narrative *and* informational text, then supplement the core reading program with nonfiction books. Recent research identifies a clear pattern: commercially produced reading programs contain little informational text (Hoffman, McCarthy, Abbott, Christian, Corman, Curry, Dressman, Elliott, Matherne, & Stahle, 1994; Moss & Newton, 1998). As a result, your students can spend more time on reading/language arts than any other subject during the day, but still spend less time with informational text

than they do standing at the drinking fountain.

By using nonfiction books like Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce (1998), Harriet Tubman (1997), Susan B. Anthony (1998), or an entire set of photo-illustrated biographies, you can tip the balance between narrative and nonfiction reading by linking core program selections with nonfiction books. Without this balanced “diet,” the health of your reading curriculum is at stake—and while your students' literary stomachs won't be empty, they will still be consuming an unbalanced diet (Hartman & Hicks, 1996).

## **HOW TO USE NONFICTION BOOKS**

A number of concepts and practices are central to creating a classroom environment where informational books are used effectively.

**Select Quality.** How do you distinguish an excellent nonfiction book from a mediocre one? Three sources should be consulted when selecting quality nonfiction books (Bamford & Kristo, 1998):

First, check out the national committees that use criteria to evaluate and produce lists of outstanding books published each year. For example, the *Children's Book Council's* committees are made up of children's literature and content-area experts who evaluate books of all types according to professionally rigorous criteria. They answer the question: *How well does The Iroquois Indians (1997) measure up against the criteria of accuracy, organization, style, design, and author's expertise?* CBC's book lists provide a

way to measure a book's quality against a common *universal* standard (Kristo, 1998).

Second, use the recommendations of your district and building colleagues to select books that will help students meet state and national standards. The committees and teachers in your district that create these tailored book lists evaluate them according to the curricular goals and objectives that must be met in your locale. They answer the question: *How well will Looking at Shapes (2002) help our students understand the math standard on analyzing characteristics and properties of two- and three-dimensional geometric shapes?* The books they choose determine a book's quality against a *functional* standard (Fredericks, 1998).

And finally, follow the trail of books that students create themselves. Student book preferences reflect their evaluations of books according to their own needs and interests. They answer the question: *How well does Caving Adventures (2002) speak to me about the things I want or need to know?* These choices provide a way to determine a book's quality against a *personal* standard (Avery, 1998).

These three sources contribute to the overall assessment of a book's quality. Where the *universal*, *functional*, and *personal* standards intersect, quality nonfiction books are found.

**Level Appropriately.** How do you match that "just right" nonfiction book with a student or group? Two sets of characteristics should be considered when matching the appropriate book

level to students (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

The first set centers on three questions about the student(s):

- What is their *language knowledge*? (i.e., aural and reading vocabulary, syntax structure, interpretive practices)
- What is their *background knowledge*? (i.e., direct and vicarious life experiences with books, music, TV, art, film, etc.)
- What are their *literary experiences*? (i.e., books, magazines, newspapers, mail, etc.)

By asking and then answering these questions with evidence from running records, observations, informal reading inventories, and other measurement tools, you can gauge what students do and don't know for appropriate leveling (Johnston, 1997).

The second set of characteristics centers around three questions about the book(s):

- What are the print features of the book? (i.e., length, print size, layout, illustrations)
- What are the concepts in the book? (i.e., content, themes, ideas)
- What are the language and literary features of the book? (i.e., perspective, language structure, literary device, vocabulary, word types)

By asking and then answering these questions with evidence from the

book(s), you can gauge its appropriate level (Fountas & Pinnell, 1999).

The purpose for matching appropriate student characteristics to book levels is to help students use what they already know to get to what they need to know. To work “at the edge” of their learning and literacy, we need to know the “deep” characteristics of our students and books (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Plan Proactively.** How do you plan for the use of nonfiction books? A few simple, straightforward ideas can help (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

The first step is to *identify the learning outcome(s)* that these books naturally lead to (Tyler, 1950). With state and national standards in one hand and nonfiction book(s) in the other, you can match the book and your instruction to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the standards. For example, a first-grade teacher browses a set of nonfiction books on family relationships and considers the social studies standards and finds a perfect match: the content in the 14-book set parallels the social studies standard for individual development and identity.

The second step is to *determine the evidence* that will tell you how well students have learned from the books to achieve the desired outcome (McTighe & Ferrara, 1998). For the first-grade teacher mentioned above, this means deciding which forms of assessment will provide information directly related to how well the students understand the concepts included in the development and identity standard.

The final step is to *plan instruction* with the books in mind (Gagné & Briggs, 1974). The activities should be designed so that they provide evidence for assessing how well students have learned. This means imagining how one day’s activities fit together with another’s into an integrated unit. Starting with the unit’s launch, then moving through the connected activities, until the final project is complete, the products and records resulting from each activity can be used for evaluating how well students are moving toward the desired learning outcomes.

**Integrate Completely.** How do you fully integrate the nonfiction books being used? The best answer indicates that three layers of connections characterize learning and teaching that are fully integrated (Petrie, 1992).

The first layer is integrating the content areas – social studies, science, mathematics, literature, art, and music. Using nonfiction books that logically lend themselves to making connections across the curriculum is the first step toward realizing complete integration (Wineburg & Grossman, 2000). For instance, suppose a class of kindergartners wanted to learn how math is used by many people. To find answers, they will need to read across nonfiction books from many content areas:

### **Math**

Everyone Uses Math (2002)

Many Ways to 100 (2002)

Counting Many Ways (2002)

Time to Estimate (2002)

**Science**

The Wright Brothers (2000)

Robert Fulton (2000)

Robert Goddard (2000)

The Doctor's Office (1998)

**Social Studies**

We Need Farmers (2000)

We Need Mail Carriers (2000)

People Work (2001)

Some Kids Are Blind (2001)

**Health**

We Need Dentists (2000)

We Need Doctors (2000)

We Need Nurses (2000)

We Need Veterinarians (2000)

The second layer is integrating the language arts – reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Designing language-based activities that prompt students to make connections among nonfiction books is the next move toward complete integration (Gavelek, Raphael, Biondo, & Wang, 2000). For example, suppose small groups of third graders were asked during a unit on ecosystems to use four nonfiction books to create a chart that compares information about temperate forests in three countries across the northern hemisphere.

- Temperate Forests (2001)
- Canada, (1998)
- Germany (1997)
- Russia (1999)

To accomplish the task, students will need to *read* the books, *speak* and *listen* to each other's ideas, and *write* the information they've selected on the chart – thereby using the four language arts together.

And the third layer is integrating the student – internally and externally. Developing Renaissance students who can skillfully draw on information from numerous resources to solve personal, social, and intellectual problems in a constantly changing world is the final step toward complete integration (Hopkins, 1937). For example, suppose a classroom of second graders was asked to demonstrate what they know and can do with information from seven nonfiction books on water.

- The Water Cycle (2000)
- Water as a Gas (2000)
- Water as a Liquid (2000)
- Water as a Solid (2000)
- We Need Water (2000)
- Keeping Water Clean (2000)
- Drinking Water (2000)

To carry out this project, they will need to develop a unified (internal) understanding of what water is, how it works, why it is important, where it is located, when it is needed, and who regulates its use. They can then use this information (externally) to shape the world by helping to clean a nearby stream, lobbying for stronger clean water policies, or conserving water for future generations.

**Teach Strategically.** How do you decide which teaching method is best suited for the nonfiction book(s) you are using? Start with the end in mind. *What is the goal?* What knowledge, skill, or strategy are students to develop by using these nonfiction books? With the end in mind, you can select a teaching method that strategically moves students toward that goal or objective (Hartman, 2000). For example:

- If you want second graders to develop *declarative knowledge* – core vocabulary, concepts, facts, and information (Pearson & Fielding, 1991) – for reading a nonfiction book like How Things Move (2001), then use a teaching strategy like *list-group-label* to help them visualize the often abstract physics-related vocabulary concepts (Taba, 1967).
- If you want fifth graders to develop *procedural knowledge* – processes for carrying out intellectual tasks and projects (Pearson & Fielding, 1991) – for reading a nonfiction book like Caving Adventures (2002), then use a strategy like *PORPE* (Predict, Organize, Rehearse, Practice, Evaluate) to help them actively plan, monitor, and evaluate their content learning (Simpson, 1992).
- If you want seventh graders to develop *textual knowledge* – how texts are organized and hang together (Meyer & Rice, 1984) – for reading a nonfiction book like Elections in the United States (1999), then use a teaching strategy like *expository text structure maps* to help them recognize and use the organizational patterns used by authors to present ideas (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 1995).
- If you want first graders to develop *conditional knowledge* – knowing when to use declarative, procedural, and textual knowledge (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983) – for reading a set of nonfiction books on looking at simple machines, then use a teaching strategy like *K-W-L* to help them learn when to flexibly apply particular learning skills and strategies (Ogle, 1992).
- If you want sixth graders to develop *discursive knowledge* – knowing how to put ideas together, integrate one with another, and compare declarative, procedural, and textual ideas (Harré & Gillett, 1994) – for reading a set of nonfiction books on law enforcement, then use a teaching strategy like *questioning the author* to help them learn how to query the reasons why a text is assembled as it is (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, and Kucan, 1997).
- And if you want eighth graders to develop *social knowledge* – knowing how to work with others on a project (Gee, 1999) – for reading a set of nonfiction books on dangerous adventures, then use a teaching strategy like *conversational discussion groups* to help them develop a repertoire of participation skills for constructing meaning with others (O’Flahavan, 1989).

By keeping the end in mind and selecting instruction that moves learning toward it, students will gain the knowledge, skills, and strategies essential for navigating informational conversation.

**Discuss Intelligently.** Pose questions that are likely to initiate intelligent discussion. While there are many taxonomies for categorizing question types, one of the more useful schemes divides questions into three types (Hartman & Allison, 1996).

- **Intratextual** – These questions prompt students to connect information *within* a book. They ask students to construct responses that draw on information from several parts of a book. For example, an intratextual starter question for fourth graders discussing the nonfiction book Rain Forests (2001) is: *How do the author's views of the rain forest ecosystem change from the beginning, to the middle to the end of the book?*
- **Intertextual** – These questions prompt students to connect information *from* two or more books. They ask students to construct responses that require integrating information from several books on a common topic. For instance, an intertextual starter question for third graders discussing Everyone Is a Scientist (2001), Henry Ford (2000), Alexander Graham Bell (1999), Thomas Edison (1999), Veterinarians (1997), and Zoo Keepers (1998) is: *How have the books on inventors and community helpers helped you understand how everyone is a scientist?*
- **Extratextual** – These questions prompt students to connect information from *the world* to information in a book. They ask students to construct responses that make connections between their background knowledge and information from a book (or books). For example, an extratextual starter question for seventh graders discussing Sheryl Swoopes (2001) and Kevin Garnett (2001) is: *How would you compare either one of these athletes to your own sports hero?*

Then lead the discussion in such a way that it is likely to sustain intelligent discussion.

- **Let students talk.** Talk is central to all effective learning and literacy (Green & Dixon, 1993). The challenge for teachers is to cultivate a *responsive* and *collaborative* form of talk where the teacher *and* students are jointly talking, reading, writing, and listening (Gutierrez, 1993). For example, after posing an intertextual question about two books that students have read on land and sea transportation, a teacher can invite students to respond by talking in pairs or trios before sharing their ideas with the entire class.
- **Offer support when students are stuck.** Most often students get frustrated because they are doing something that is beyond their current ability, so they need a teacher to “scaffold” what they cannot do alone (Bruner, 1986). Slowly encourage the student(s) to take over parts of the learning as he or she is able to do so (Rogoff, 1990). For example, if fourth graders are struggling to decode and understand many key terms in the book Rock Climbing (1996), then you can scaffold by reading the book aloud the first time or two and defining a few of the terms out loud while reading. As students become more familiar with the technical terminology of extreme rock climbing, they can take on the role of reading the book with peers or alone.

**Assessing Accurately.** How do you accurately assess what students learn from informational books?

First determine what the *goal* is for assessing students (McTighe & Ferrara, 1998).

- What do we want students to understand and be able to do?
- Why are we assessing and how will the assessment information be used?
- For whom are the assessment results intended?

For example, if a second-grade teacher wants to find out what students have learned from a set of nonfiction books on the galaxy, it will be necessary to identify:

- the *content standard(s)* the assessment will measure.
- the *purpose(s)* for doing the assessment. (To inform and guide instruction? To provide practice applying knowledge and skills? To determine program effectiveness?)
- the *audience* for the assessment information. (Teachers? Parents? Students? Board of Education? General Public?)

The second decision—determining how to assess student learning—should logically follow the conclusions made from the first decision (Wiggins, 1998). For instance, if the goal for assessing student understandings midway through a unit on plant life is to provide *formative* feedback so you can determine how well an explanation-based content standard in science is being met, then

the method for assessing needs to be aligned with that goal.

Typically, two formatting methods are used for assessing: *recognition* or *construction* (Cambourne & Turbill, 1994). Recognition formats prompt students to select a response (e.g., multiple-choice, true-false, matching). Construction formats prompt students to construct a response, create a product, perform a task, or describe their learning (e.g., short answer and fill-in-the-blank; stories and models; oral presentations and dramatic readings; observing, interviewing, and learning logs). In the first-grade example on plant life, the learning log format is probably the method of choice, because it aligns with the goals by providing formative information about the learning strategies and thinking processes students are using to explain plant life cycles.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This overview is grounded in the best research and scholarly-based evidence to date. In the first section I outlined the rationale for using nonfiction books, highlighting their importance for our student's learning and lives. In the second section I outlined seven concepts that are central to creating a classroom environment where nonfiction books are used effectively. In both cases, the concepts are intended to be suggestive rather than prescriptive, and the examples are intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Educators who avidly use nonfiction books offer three suggestions for getting started. First, *start smart*. By selecting

nonfiction books that feature topics aligned to your standards, you will get a higher return for your instructional time. Second, *talk with others*. Find the ardent users of nonfiction books in your school or district. Their ideas and feedback are the best professional development you can find. And third, *start now*. Find the books that will fit with what you are teaching today. Putting off for tomorrow – or next year – what students need today is limiting their future.

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Research Quarterly, the *Journal of Literacy Research*, and other scholarly journals. He received national recognition for his dissertation, including the *Outstanding Dissertation Award*, the *Student Research Award*, and Finalist recognition for the *Promising Research Award*. Dr. Hartman is the author of numerous journal articles and book chapters. He has been a visiting Assistant Professor at the University of California at Berkeley, Division of Education in Language and Literacy. His current research centers on literacy learning from informational, technological, cognitive, sociocultural, and historical perspectives.

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