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The Classroom Library: A Place for Nonfiction, Nonfiction in Its Place

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Abstract

This manuscript provides a rationale for classroom libraries and the need to include nonfiction with them. Guidelines for effective libraries, selecting nonfiction books, and strategies for promoting them are also shared.

Shelley Harwayne, well-known literacy consultant and administrator, notes, “No matter the grade level, when I walk in and out of classrooms, I expect to see classroom libraries brimming with nonfiction texts” (1999, p. 24). All too often, however, classroom libraries contain little nonfiction literature (Duke, 2000; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Kletzien & Dreher, 2004; Stead, 2002; Young & Moss, 2006). According to Daniels (2004), “language arts teachers have done a great job of hooking kids on all kinds of novels...but

students also need to engage with nonfiction genres that represent 84% of adult, real world text (and a similar percentage of the reading passages of high stakes standardized tests)” (p. 44).

Of late, more and more experts have noted the importance of providing students with access to nonfiction texts. Some reasons for including such books in the classroom include:

- invite browsing, spark curiosity, and promote inquiry;
- create a sense of wonder by building on student interest in the natural world;
- provide students with authentic reading experiences that connect to their lives;
- motivate reluctant readers by engaging them with visual supports and attractive formats;
- expand background knowledge needed to understand the core content area concepts presented in textbooks;
- contribute to student mastery of content area standards;
- build vocabulary by introducing readers to content terms and academic language not often found in narrative texts;
- provide readers with exposure to a variety of text structures and features;
- develop critical reading skills and strategies while extending content area knowledge;
- prepare students for the future by contributing to the development of information literacy;
- combine reading for pleasure with reading for information;
- expose students to text types found on standardized tests, thus contributing to improved achievement.

This article considers the place that nonfiction can and should assume in the classroom library. It attempts to answer the following questions: How can nonfiction in the classroom library help teachers meet student interests? How can teachers build a collection of nonfiction books? What strategies can teachers use to promote reading of nonfiction titles?

A Place for Nonfiction

In a study of the content of elementary classroom libraries across a large school district in Canada, Doiron (2003) found that children were presented predominantly with fictional paperbacks as reading choices. Interestingly, Doiron found that counts from the school library automated circulation records indicated that students were actually choosing twice as many information books as novels from their school library, but that access to such books was limited in their classroom libraries. A study by Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) confirms these findings; they found that while middle grade students identify nonfiction titles as one of their preferred types of reading, they seldom find these books in their classrooms.

This finding points out the critical importance of expanding the “canon” of library books to provide access to nonfiction texts. In this way, teachers can more effectively bridge the gap between students’ in- and out-of-school reading. In addition, nonfiction trade books can deepen student engagement with topics addressed in science, social studies, music, and art. They can provide students with the chance to examine issues related to these content areas in depth, which is seldom possible with the broad range of topics covered by today’s textbooks. In addition, nonfiction trade books related to various content areas introduce students to the academic vocabulary they must master if they are to be successful readers of content area materials. Furthermore, nonfiction trade books can promote student engagement with a variety of text types, a practice that may be associated with improved reading achievement (Campbell, 1995). Access to nonfiction trade books can provide students with essential exposure to the expository text that will comprise most of the reading they will do as they move through the grades and into adulthood (Moss 2005). Finally, student interest in topics addressed in nonfiction trade books can provide the catalyst that turns reluctant readers into ravenous readers.

Reading Interests

Student reading interests must be considered when selecting books for classroom libraries (Routman, 2003). “In most classrooms, the opportunity for student book choice based on interest occurs far too infrequently” (Reutzel & Fawson, 2002, p. 99). Access to interesting books is critical to student reading engagement and reading comprehension (Guthrie, 2002). Routman notes, “A wide variety of captivating choices increases reading motivation. Engagement is

not to be taken lightly: Reading comprehension test scores are more influenced by students' amount of engaged reading than any other single factor" (2003, p. 69).

Elementary-school children of both genders choose nonfiction over fiction text nearly half the time, provided they are given access to quality trade books of both types (Kletzien & Szabo, 1998). Children in the primary grades and male students were even more likely to prefer informational texts to fiction, which is contrary to what the students' teachers predicted. They thought, as many of us would have, that the students would overwhelmingly prefer narrative texts (Kletzien & Szabo, 1998). Sebesta and Monson (2003) note that by fourth grade student interests diverge. At this point, boys typically show stronger preferences for nonfiction, but by middle school both genders demonstrate an increased interest in nonfiction among other genres.

Doiron (2003) reported preliminary findings of a three-year study in which teacher-librarians tracked all books students in grades one through six checked out of their school library. Researchers recorded information about each student's selection, grade level, number of fiction and information books, and subject area of information book choices. Doiron found that while all students borrowed more fiction (60%) than information books (40%) for independent reading, boys checked out more than two-thirds of all information books.

How Many Nonfiction Books in the Classroom Library?

Regardless of the number of books in the classroom library, it is imperative that nonfiction makes a prominent showing. Indeed, Moss (2003) notes, "About half the collection should be devoted to engaging information books and biographies, and this percentage should increase as children move through the grades. Some books should be pertinent to classroom topics of study, while others should have a broader appeal. Students can use these books for voluntary reading, in inquiry study, reference, or browsing" (p. 63).

What Kinds of Information Books Should I Include? Building a Nonfiction Collection

As is true with works of fiction, teachers need to carefully evaluate nonfiction books for inclusion in the classroom library. When evaluating nonfiction trade books, teachers should consider the five A's: 1) the *authority* of the

author; 2) the *accuracy* of the text content; 3) the *appropriateness* of the book for its audience; 4) the literary *artistry*; and 5) the *appearance* of the book (Moss, Leone, & DiPillo, 1997; Young & Moss, 2006).

- *Authority* relates to the author's qualifications for writing the book. The best authors consult authorities in a variety of fields to ensure credibility.
- *Accuracy* of content as well as visual features is the lynchpin of good nonfiction.
- The best nonfiction books are *appropriate* to their intended audiences. They do not talk down to readers but are successful in making complex concepts comprehensible.
- Literary *artistry* refers to the need for quality writing in nonfiction. The best nonfiction books contain engaging information presented through the use of narrative devices like similes and metaphors, "hooks," and others.
- A book's *attractiveness* matters to today's students, who are accustomed to an array of visual media. They expect materials with a strong visual impact. Attractive presentation of information can mean the difference between a book students will select rather than reject. (Moss, Leone, & DiPillo, 1997, p. 420)

A quality nonfiction library collection should include a range of titles provided for a range of purposes. Many school libraries contain large sets of "series" nonfiction titles, ranging from the *Smithsonian Kids' Field Guides* (2001) to *American Indian Biographies* (e.g., Wallner, 2003). For teachers who need help in evaluating the quality of these series, The American Library Association website provides reviews of nonfiction series books (<http://www.ala.org/ala/booklist/youthseriesroundup/SeriesRoundup.htm>) that can help teachers select series books for their classrooms.

A variety of other sources can guide teachers to excellent nonfiction titles. Two awards that specifically honor outstanding nonfiction titles include the NCTE's Orbis Pictus Award, and the American Library Association's Robert F. Siebert Award, which recognize the most outstanding information trade books of a given year. Nonfiction titles are regularly included on lists of best books, including the ALA Notable Book list, and are often recipients of other

books awards, including the Coretta Scott King Award, the Pura Belpre Award, and the Newberry and Caldecott Awards.

Small specialized text sets of books should have a special place in the classroom library. These can be books related to a topic of study in the classroom, current events, or an area of great interest to individuals or groups of students. These text sets should include books from a variety of genres including picture books, realistic and/or historical fiction, biography, information titles, poetry, and perhaps traditional literature. For example, a text set related to Mexico and Mexican-American life would be of particular interest to students in classrooms with large Mexican American populations. It might consist of Mexican folktales like *Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book* (Morales, 2003), contemporary stories of Mexican American life like *In My Family* (Garza, 1996), nonfiction accounts detailing Mexican-American celebrations of customs such as the Day of the Dead (*Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration*, Hoyt-Goldsmith, 1994) or books of poetry like *Angels Ride Bikes and Other Fall Poems* (1999), a bilingual poetry collection in which Francisco X. Alarcon revisits childhood memories of growing up in Los Angeles.

Other specialized collections might include fiction/nonfiction pairs. By combining fiction titles with nonfiction ones, children can deepen their understanding of the styles of both genres (Moss, 2003). By linking a nonfiction text with a historical novel, for example, student appreciation for a particular time period will increase. Popular upper-grade titles like Karen Cushman's (2003) *Rodzina*, for example, could be paired with the factual *We Rode the Orphan Trains* (Warren, 2001). Similarly, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Fever, 1793* (2000) could be paired with Jim Murphy's (2003) award-winning nonfiction title *An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793*. Finally, teachers may want to link chapter eight, "Mill Workers: The Last Generation" from Deborah Hopkinson's (2006) *Up Before Daybreak: Cotton and People in America* with Katherine Patterson's *Lyddie* (1991).

It is extremely important that nonfiction collections span a range of reading levels. Because nonfiction books tend to be more difficult than fiction for children raised on a steady diet of stories (Langer 1985; Duke & Bennett-Armistead 2003), it is essential that teachers meet the range in reading abilities found in the classroom. For this reason, Stead (2002) recommends varying reading levels for books on given topics. For example, a fifth grade class studying

the Lewis and Clark expedition would need books on a variety of different levels on that topic. Titles like *A Picture Book of Lewis and Clark* (Adler, 2003) or *Lewis and Clark* (Stein, 1997) would be ideal for struggling readers or English language learners. More challenging titles like *The Incredible Journey of Lewis and Clark* (Blumberg, 1987) could be available for more accomplished readers. These titles and others related to Lewis and Clark spanning a range of levels can be found in Figure 1.

- Adler, D. (2002). *A Picture Book of Sacagawea*. New York: Holiday House.
- Adler, D. (2003). *A Picture Book of Lewis and Clark*. New York: Holiday House.
- Blumberg, R. (1987). *The Incredible Journey of Lewis and Clark*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Blumberg, R. (1998). *What's the Deal? : Jefferson, Napoleon, and the Louisiana Purchase*. New York: National Geographic/Random House.
- Blumberg, R. (2004). *York's Adventures with Lewis and Clark*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Erdrich, L. (2003). *Sacagawea*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda.
- Hinshaw Patent, D. (2002). *Animals on the trail with Lewis and Clark*. New York: Clarion.
- Hinshaw Patent, D. (2003). *Plants on the trail with Lewis and Clark*. New York: Clarion.
- Morley, J. (1998). *Across America: The story of Lewis and Clark*. New York: Franklin Watts.
- Pringle, L. (2006). *American slave, American hero: York of the Lewis and Clark expedition*. Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek Books.
- Santella, A. (2001). *Lewis and Clark*. New York: Franklin Watts.
- Stein, R. C. (1997). *Lewis and Clark*. New York: Children's Press.
- Sullivan, G. (1999). *Lewis and Clark*. New York: Scholastic.

Figure 1. A Lewis and Clark Sampler

The largest portion of the nonfiction collection, however, should be devoted to books for student voluntary reading. Ideally, these titles should span a wide range of interests and reading abilities and should include books that appeal to students of both sexes. Biographies of contemporary people as well as historical personages should be part of the voluntary reading collection, as should books about perennial topics of interest to students. Obviously, these areas of interest will depend upon the students and their ages, levels of maturity, geographic location, cultural heritage, and much more. Maria Bowden is a fourth grade teacher in an ethnically diverse San Diego neighborhood. Her students, who are primarily Mexican American, often expressed preferences for nonfiction texts. They particularly enjoyed nonfiction titles about volcanoes, animals such as bears, dinosaurs, rhinos, cheetahs, and iguanas, skydiving, black holes, and motocross, titles from the *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* series, biographies of baseball players and musicians, and articles from *Kids Discover* magazines.

It is important to provide students with books in their home language whenever possible. Nonfiction books written in students' native languages can support English learners as they transition from their first language to their second. Biographies such as *Diego* (Winter, 1991) and alphabet books like *Calavera Abecedario: A Day of the Dead Alphabet Book* (Winter, 2004) can support Spanish speaking students who need to read in their first language. Picture dictionaries with illustrations and labels can be helpful tools for both building vocabulary and for writing when students need to find the English label for a concept known in their home language (Jobe & Dayton-Sakari, 1999). "Developing literacy in the primary language is an extremely efficient means of developing literacy in the second language. To become good readers in the primary language, however, children need to read in the primary language" (Krashen, 1997/1998, pp. 20-21). Such reading can certainly include well-chosen nonfiction titles.

In addition, it is important to have multiple copies of some titles so that small groups of students can experience the same text together. Judith Henderson, an Ohio sixth grade teacher and children's author, regularly engaged her students in large and small group study of nonfiction trade books. Students participated in small group study of particular titles through literature circles (Daniels 2002). Her students particularly enjoyed literature circle experiences with the following titles: *Buried in Ice* (Beattie, 1992), *Secrets of Vesuvius* (Basal

& Tanaka, 1990), *The Incredible Journey of Lewis and Clark* (Blumberg, 1987) and *Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade Against Child Labor* (Freedman, 1998).

Organizing Nonfiction Books in the Classroom Library

Simply having great nonfiction books in the classroom is not enough to entice students to read them. Involving students in actually reading the books in the classroom library involves creating effective library areas as well as displaying books in enticing ways (Reutzel & Fawson 2002). Think about a most recent trip to the bookstore. Adults, as well as children, are naturally drawn to comfortable chairs and cozy reading environments. In the same way, we are drawn to books that are enticingly displayed.

It is important to think about the best way to organize books and make them accessible to students. All too often, the few nonfiction trade books found in classroom libraries typically rest on a single shelf labeled "nonfiction," reflecting the misperception that all nonfiction books are alike. Nonfiction represents a broad spectrum of book types and topics, and as a result, as Stead (2002) notes, such organization is inadequate. Students need access to biographies, concept books, life cycle books, photo essays and survey books on topics ranging from animals to zeppelins, and the organization of books should reflect the diversity of nonfiction books available. Teachers can make it easier for students to find nonfiction by involving them in organizing and maintaining the classroom library even when existing systems work well (Routman, 2003; Stead, 2002).

Stead (2002) recommends using separate baskets, shelves, or tubs to hold books grouped by various topics. Students can sort the nonfiction library books by topics to determine the best label for each nonfiction grouping. Through these experiences, students will increase their understanding of the diversity of the nonfiction genre and begin to understand that not all nonfiction books are the same. The tubs, baskets, or shelf space can be labeled and assigned numbers. Corresponding numbers can be placed on stickers for each book to make it easy for students to find and reshelv books. Teachers often note the reading levels of books to insure all students have access to "just right" books that meet the needs and abilities of their students. Indeed, Calkins (2001) recommends color-coding a third of the books according to level to help students choose "just right" books and, at the same time, allows children to make decisions about which books are best for them.

Strategies for Promoting Nonfiction in the Classroom

The Role of the Teacher

For avid readers, access to books is all that is necessary to promote reading. Other students, however, need multiple experiences with books before they will read them (Bruning & Schweiger, 1997; McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi, & Brooks, 1999). Likewise, Morrow (2003) notes that “without the teacher who introduces the materials and features books in their daily routines” classroom libraries will not succeed (p. 864).

Clearly, the role of the teacher is an essential one. When it comes to non-fiction books, teachers may themselves unconsciously promote fiction titles at the expense of nonfiction. It is important for teachers, to ask themselves: “Do we see reading for pleasure as predominantly reading stories and novels? Can we not get pleasure from reading good quality information books? Do we see information books solely as resources we go to when we do research or have an information problem?” (Doiron, 2003, p. 14).

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud is one of the most effective ways of drawing students’ interest to a book (Neuman, 2006). The last book read aloud by the teacher often becomes the most sought after text for independent reading. Teachers generally choose fiction for reading aloud to students and rarely read nonfiction to their students. Students enjoy listening to quality nonfiction. Just hearing the first sentences of Jonathan London’s (2000) *Panther: Shadow of the Swamp* hooked a class of fifth-graders: “The blinding heat of summer quivers above the swamp. A long, thick tail twitches in the saw grass. A shadow flows. It is a panther” (u.p.). Similarly, after his teacher read aloud *Buffalo Hunt* (Freedman, 1988), a fourth grade boy responded “I want to read another book by Russell Freedman.”

Many researchers provide rationales, guidelines and many strategies for reading aloud nonfiction to students (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002; Moss, 2003; Vardell, 2003; Young, 2006). The following sections highlight related strategies for promoting nonfiction.

Readers Theatre

Readers theatre is an engaging way of introducing students to books. Nonfiction readers theatre scripts also breathe life into the content areas (Young & Vardell, 1993). Readers theatre can involve students in performing a script based upon a nonfiction title. Requiring no props or memorization of lines, readers theatre simply requires students to use their voices to convey the meaning of the text. Readers theatre is highly motivating to students, develops fluency, and can provide an excellent way to introduce students to a range of excellent nonfiction texts. Figure 2 is a readers theatre script adapted from the blurb found on the inside cover of Mark Kurlansky's (2001) *The Cod's Tale*. This can be used to pique the students' interest in reading the book.

Reader 3: What was it that allowed the Vikings to cross the cold Atlantic Ocean to America?

Reader 5: And Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, and the Pilgrims after that?

Reader 2: What fish became a staple of the medieval diet in Europe, helped spur the American Revolution, and helped the early New Englanders start making money on their own?

Reader 4: It was cod, a fish that used to be so plentiful, explorers reported being able simply to simply dip a basket into the ocean to collect them.

Reader 1: A fish so common that for many hundreds of years man took it for granted.

Reader 3: But now, only a few cod remain in the oceans, a reminder of the once abundant fish that changed the world and of the devastating effect man has had on our earth.

Reader 5: *The Cod's Tale* is full of fascinating facts that seem too strange to be true!

Figure 2. Readers Theatre Script for *The Cod's Tale* (Kurlansky, 2001)

Readers theatre has the potential to motivate students to read the book after experiencing the script. Moreover, many teachers employ readers theatre across the curriculum to increase their students' content learning while improving their oral reading fluency (Flynn, 2004, 2007; Worthy, 2005).

Book Talks

One of the most effective ways of promoting reading is through "book talks" (Akerson & Young, 2004; Allington, 2006). In a book talk, a teacher briefly summarizes or reads aloud a particularly interesting portion of a book to spark student interest in the selection. For example, *Team Moon* (Thimmes, 2006) is ideal for a book talk for intermediate grade students because the book is a treasure trove of interesting facts and illustrations about the Apollo 11 moon landing. Equally important, it describes the people involved behind the scenes of the historic event. The teacher might share some of the book's illustrations as well as some of the concerns people had for the astronauts' safety during the lunar mission.

We recommend that teachers regularly present no more than five brief two-minute book talks at a time. Of the five books, two or three should be nonfiction (Akerson & Young, 2004). In this way, students will be exposed to many nonfiction books over the course of the year. Moreover, book talking books available from the classroom library introduces students to books that are easily accessible to them. Time spent book talking classroom library books increases the likelihood that children will not just look them over, but actually choose to read them.

Guess the Fib

A fun way for students to highlight nonfiction is "Guess the Fib" (Kagan, 1994). In this strategy, pairs of students read a nonfiction book and create three statements about the book—two true statements and one untrue. When sharing, the students hold up the book, tell the title and author, and then read their three statements. The classmates attempt to guess which statement is the fib. Student statements frequently focus on the extraordinary aspects of the book, which can help to develop student interest in the book. Three examples for Sy Montgomery's *Tarantula Scientist* (2004) follow: 1) The tarantula has yellow blood. 2) An Arachnophile is a person who unreasonably fears spiders. 3) Tarantulas use leg hairs to make a hissing sound. The fib is sentence number

two since an Arachnophile is actually a person who appreciates arachnids and an Arachnophobe is someone with an unreasonable fear of spiders.

Displays

According to Chambers (1996), “Book displays make books prominent. They stimulate interest. They are decorative. They deeply influence the mental set of people who see them. Displays are, therefore, essential to an effective reading environment” (p. 20). Frequently, displayed books seem to draw students to them (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003; Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, & Teale, 1993).

Books should always be displayed with the cover facing the reader. Displayed books should be accessible to students and available for checkout. Easels can easily become bookstands, as can benches, packing crates, or plastic rain gutters attached to the classroom walls. The focus for a book display could center on new nonfiction titles, fiction/nonfiction pairs, great nonfiction authors, Orbis Pictus or Seibert Award winners and honor books, books accompanied by student book reviews, book jackets, or other responses, or “Our Favorites” (Chambers, 1996). More topical displays could focus on areas of study like “Weather,” “Current Events,” television tie-ins, and much more.

Book Pass

Kim Guyette, a teacher at Marcus Whitman Elementary School in Richland, Washington, found the Book Pass (Allen, 2004) an ideal way for her fourth and fifth grades to sample books in the classroom library. Each child was given one of the books and then three minutes to sample the book, time to write brief comments on the Book Pass, and then the students pass the book to their right and process begins again until each child has sampled four or five different books.

Conclusion

Children’s reading engagement plays a key role in their academic success. Both comprehension and achievement improve when students increase their reading volume (Allington, 2006). Classroom libraries have the potential to increase student access to books and to stimulate their desire to read yet often these classroom libraries do not house nonfiction books (Worthy 1998; Duke 2000). The availability of intriguing and engaging nonfiction trade books makes

it easier than ever for teachers to incorporate these books in their classroom library collections and teaching routines. Classroom libraries overflowing with quality nonfiction titles enable students to spend more time reading rather than completing activities related to reading (Routman, 2003), which is critical to the goal of creating successful readers for the Twenty First Century.

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