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# Supporting Teachers' Use of Nonfiction Text in the Primary Grades Classroom: One Practical Strategy

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# Supporting Teachers' Use of Nonfiction Text in the Primary Grades Classroom: One Practical Strategy

By

Renee Moran

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to argue for the benefits of using nonfiction text in the primary grades classroom. Readers are provided with a brief theoretical framework which outlines how nonfiction may increase achievement, motivation, and interest for young students. Additionally, practical strategies are included for classroom teachers which work to frontload and support students in the act of processing nonfiction text as well as increase teachers' comfort level with the implementation of a nonfiction unit of study.

As a first grade teacher, I believed wholeheartedly that my role in preparing students to become lifelong readers was an instrumental one. Based on this premise, I employed a plethora of techniques that I thought to be essential in developing not only proficient readers, but readers who truly enjoyed the process. I provided ample time for independent reading during which I conferenced individually with students. I read aloud quality children's literature on a daily basis and encouraged thoughtfulness and discourse surrounding books. I explicitly modeled essential comprehension strategies and encouraged

my students to practice them during shared and guided reading. For the most part, my students thrived, and they departed my first grade classroom as readers, and, more importantly, readers who actually liked books.

Nonetheless, every year there was a small group of students who appeared to be missing the mark. Several of them were reading with some proficiency by May, while others struggled to

complete even the simplest text. Regardless of proficiency, there was one commonality amongst this group- the act of reading seemed to be a great chore. Some studies

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such as one conducted by Worthy and McKool (1996) demonstrated that even large numbers of skilled readers spend little time reading, simply because they do not find it enjoyable. Another study (Juel, 1988) found that for struggling readers the situation is even more precarious. Forty percent of these students reported that they would rather clean their rooms than read. One child actually stated, "I'd rather clean the mold around the bathtub than read."

I found statistics such as these frightening, and I began a reflective process involving professional reading and dialogue with peers in an attempt to get to the root of the problem. As I engaged in this reflection, I began to realize that while my instructional practices were sound, the range of literature I was providing my students with was narrow in scope. The majority of the books I incorporated were narrative, fiction pieces, the most appropriate for primary students. As I expanded my knowledge base, I began to question this premise and consider alteration of my method.

#### *A Brief Background on the Use of Non-fiction Texts*

In recent years, various individuals in the educational community have begun to lament what they view as the overuse of narrative text in the primary grades. In fact,

this imbalance may reach as high as 90% in terms of narrative use with only a corresponding 10% use of nonfiction texts (Trabasso, 1994). A study of first grade classrooms affirmed this notion, reporting that on average students interacted with nonfiction texts approximately 3.6 minutes per day.

Congruously, Yopp & Yopp (2000) found in their investigation of 100 primary classrooms that teachers chose to read aloud non-fiction texts only 14% of the time. Pappas (1991) posited that this heavy reliance on narrative may impose a "barrier to full access to literacy" (p. 461) for students.

Traditionally, educators have tended to view the primary grades as a time of learning to read while upper elementary classes have been expected to focus on reading to learn. In fact, just a few decades ago it was believed that students should not be exposed to informational texts until middle school because of the unlikelihood that they could appropriately comprehend the format (Egan, 1988). Researchers have demonstrated a notable decline in reading achievement believed to be a result of an onslaught of informational materials (Chall, 1983). Views on the place of nonfiction in the primary grades are changing.

In 1998 the International Reading Association issued a statement that called for primary level students to “be exposed to vocabulary from a wide variety of genres, including informational text as well as narratives” (p. 203). Guillaume (1998) concurred, arguing that we need to move away from the notion that only proficient readers are prepared to tackle informational text.

From this standpoint, not only are primary level students capable of interacting with nonfiction text, it may also be a means of raising interest and motivation levels. In a study of first grade classrooms, it was found that while students initially experienced some discomfort with informational texts, this reaction shifted quickly to one of excitement and embracement (Duthie, 1994). In fact, many young children appear to prefer them to traditional narrative texts (Caswell & Duke, 1998). Pappas (1993) notes that the kindergarteners in his study most often chose nonfiction books over narrative and Harvey (2002) argues that the natural curiosity inherent in young students

*“Nonfiction breeds passionate curiosity; passion leads to engagement” (p. 15).  
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naturally lends itself to the use of informational books. “Nonfiction breeds passionate curiosity; passion leads to engagement” (p. 15). Dorion (1994) agrees stating that “children are naturally curious with a great thirst to know about the world around them. They are not bored by facts, data, or information; they are only bored by how such information is presented or what they are expected to do with it” (p. 17). In

addition, nonfiction exposure has been shown to increase vocabulary use, improve the writing process, and work to end the fourth grade slump.

Thus, if the research has so clearly demonstrated the benefits of informational text, why is it still missing in many primary grades classrooms? The reasons

could be two-fold. One possibility is that teachers avoid using these materials due to their own apprehensiveness about the process and discomfort with the genre (Donovan & Smolkin, 2001). Secondly, many teachers may still hold on to the notion that the nonfiction is not developmentally appropriate for or interesting to young readers (Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). I would argue

that many teachers are aware of the importance of nonfiction text, yet lack appropriate strategies with which to implement its use.

Richgels (2002) called for the implementation of the following strategies in order to further students' capacity with nonfiction text: 1) using a variety of informational texts forms in conjunction with narrative text 2) increasing the functional nature of young children's experiences with nonfiction 3) encouraging primary students to write informational texts (p.587-588). Additionally, some educators have advocated for increased familiarity with the text structures imbedded in informational books. These structures are pointedly different from the layout of the narrative story which normally revolves around a problem and solution, and because of lack of exposure to these structures comprehension may be impeded (Bakken, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 1997). According to Dymock (2005), "Students should be taught explicitly how to recognize and use expository text structures to improve comprehension and recall,"

*According to Dymock (2005), "Students should be taught explicitly how to recognize and use expository text structures to improve comprehension and recall" (p.178).*

(p.178). Likewise, Bakken and Whedon (2002) posit that "students need explicit training in strategies that teach them to identify different types of text structure and apply appropriate structure-specific strategies" (p. 230).

### **Change in My Classroom**

Based on my newfound knowledge, I set out to make a change in my own first grade classroom in terms of my use of nonfiction text. I set into motion the

following criteria in an attempt to boost my students' comfort level with the genre by doing the following: 1) increasing the number of read alouds of nonfiction text, 2) working to add to the number of nonfiction choices in my classroom library, including magazines, fact sheets, and newspapers, 3) modeling nonfiction writing, and 4) encouraging students to

write informational pieces which then often became additions to classroom libraries.

With these criteria as a backbone for change, I then, per the suggestion of researchers such as Bakken and Whedon (2002), sought to increase my students' knowledge of nonfiction text structures in an engaging and age appropriate manner. In the following

section, I will outline the practical classroom strategy I used to familiarize my students with these informational features.

*"My Book about Features of Non-Fiction Text": A Student Project*

The goal: to unlock the mystery of nonfiction text structures. For many students, picking up an informational book for the first time can be overwhelming. Many children have only been exposed to fiction which classically contains a set of characters in a particular setting, presents a conflict of some sort, and lastly leads to a resolution. In contrast, nonfiction books may contain several text features which while ultimately helpful to the reader, may be difficult to decipher if the student has no exposure to them. Harvey (2002) explains that these features can provide a wealth of information to students but because of the non-traditional nature and often non-sequential nature of nonfiction texts, students may need explicit instruction to utilize these elements. In order to help my students crack the code of nonfiction features, I decided to frontload their reading experience with practice recognizing and becoming comfortable with a few of the features that I had found to be most prominent in their reading experiences.

*Introductory Lessons: Distinguishing Between Fiction and Nonfiction Text*

Bakken and Whedon (2002) note that "narrative prose follows a story line with a beginning, middle, and end" (p.230) while "expository prose presents facts, theories and dates, and the information is largely unfamiliar to the reader" (p.230). I felt that it was beneficial to begin this unit to provide my students with broad examples of the differences between these two genres. I began by simply giving students a selection of each so that they might peruse the books for any apparent differences or similarities. We then created a chart which illustrated what students noticed about each genre. I found that my students were often quite insightful in terms of what they saw. After allowing time for student brainstorming, I then modeled some of the likenesses and contrasts I saw through the use of familiar read-alouds. I believe that this introductory activity set my students up well to delve into the specifics of text features. Depending on the group of students and their experiences, the number of days spent on this broad introduction varied. The premise was simply to help students understand the different genres and to increase awareness of their specific aspects.

After completing the introductory lessons, we embarked on a unit long study of nonfiction features. Each day students are involved in discussing, identifying, and creating a new feature of informational text. I choose the following features to include in the unit: photographs, captions, illustrations, labels, titles, charts, maps, and diagrams.

Below is the outline the tenor of the lessons and the activities my students engaged in to become more proficient with these particular features. As a precursor, each student received his or her own book entitled “My Book about Features of Non-Fiction Text”. Each book was simply made and only required access to a computer and copy machine. I provided students with a few minutes at the onset of the unit to decorate the front of their book in any manner they wished to increase excitement about the project. Each page provides a definition of the feature for students. The definition is purposefully simplistic in order to provide students with a brief and accessible meaning each term.

#### **What is it?**

Pictures emphasize a particular point of the text as well as increase interest. Here, it is important to have students distinguish between the illustrations or drawings often found in fictions books and photographs in

nonfiction text. For my students this often involved a discussion about how each was created (an artist using pencil or paint versus a camera). Purposeful definition of a photograph for students: to show something.

#### *Nonfiction Text Feature 1: Caption*



#### **What is it?**

Captions provide additional explanation or insight. For many students, understanding the picture or photograph may assist in grasping the implications of the text.

Captions may provide a further layer of support in this understanding.

Purposeful definition of a caption for students: to tell about a photograph.

#### *Nonfiction Text Feature 2: Illustration*

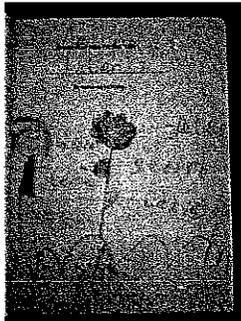


**What is it?**

A picture included which is meant to support the corresponding text. Captions provide a good opportunity to revisit the introductory lessons and make comparisons about the differences between illustrations in fiction versus those in nonfiction books. While both are meant to enhance the text, nonfiction illustrations may provide specific information in terms of facts while fiction illustrations are often merely a compliment to the story. It may be useful to allow students opportunities to make these comparisons.

Purposeful definition of an illustration for students: to show a picture.

*Nonfiction Text Feature 3: Labels*



**What is it?**

Labels assist readers in identification of the particular parts of a picture or diagram. Students who are unfamiliar may not naturally attend to a simple visual such as a label, but when they do their understanding and engagement can easily increase.

Purposeful definition of a label for students: to name something.

*Nonfiction Text Feature 4: Title*

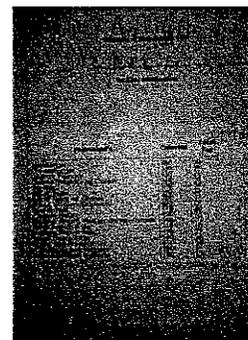


**What is it?**

Titles give a name to what the book is about; often this states the main idea of the text. Again, this may be an appropriate place to make comparisons between the titles of nonfiction versus fiction. Often nonfiction books provide titles that are informational in nature such as “All About Snakes” or simply reference the topic such as “Volcanoes”.

Purposeful definition of a title for students: to name the book.

*Nonfiction Text Feature 5: Chart*



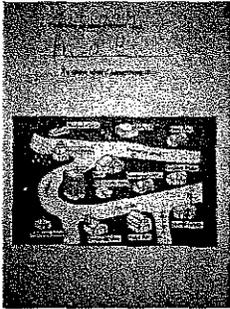
**What is it?**

Charts present information often in the form of a table or graph. Students who have not had experience in deciphering charts will certainly need practice in doing so.

Connections may be easily made between the content area of math to assist in their understanding.

Purposeful definition of a chart for students: to give information.

*Nonfiction Text Feature 6: Map*

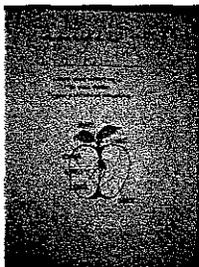


**What is it?**

Maps give students a reference for a particular location or point of interest. Maps are a common feature in many informational books, but may be difficult for students to interpret without practice and support.

Purposeful definition of a map for students: to show where something is.

*Nonfiction Text Feature 7: Diagram*



**What is it?**

Diagrams simplify how something works or particularities about its visual elements.

Diagrams often provide an extra layer of understanding by adding a visual representation to a simple text explanation.

Purposeful definition of a diagram for students: to show what something is; to show inside; to give a picture of something.

*Lesson Plan Format:*

*Orienting the Learner* - The teacher begins by introducing the feature of the day. For example: “We have been learning about the features of nonfiction text. These features can help us to understand nonfiction books better. Today we will be learning about \_\_\_\_\_ (feature of the day).” At

this point, you can add the new feature to the class chart and give students a brief explanation about its use.

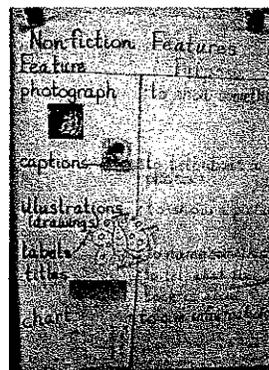
*Modeling* - Because many of the features will be unfamiliar to students, grounding examples in real text is essential. During this time, teachers can model the location of a particular feature and explain their thinking in the identification of the feature. For example, if the focus of the day is labeling the teacher might have ready a book with a flower and its parts labeled. The teacher would then share what clues were apparent that made her aware that it was a label and

remind students of its use in aiding us as readers.

*Independent Practice or Partner Activity:*

Students will then have the opportunity to locate an example of the feature of the day. Old magazines such as National Geographic for Kids provide a wealth of informational features. Students could locate them, then cut and paste them into their Nonfiction Student Books. If magazines are not an option, students could peruse books from their classroom libraries and draw examples directly in their Nonfiction Student Books. The idea is simply that students engage in the process of identifying the feature in the real world context of books.

*Sharing-* Lastly, the class reassembles for time to share a few of their examples. Teachers might employ the following questions as a discussion guide: How did you know this example was today's feature? How would the example you found help you as a reader? This is also an appropriate time to revisit the large class chart in order to reference the previous features discussed.



When the nonfiction student books are completed, they should not be discarded, rather they can serve as an effective reference for reading informational texts, kept for each child's independent reading box. If a student came across a feature that they struggled with, the book could serve as a reminder and an example of the feature. This may be a particularly palpable strategy for struggling readers. As Beers (2003) points out: "Reluctant readers enjoy informational books with a large number of photographs, illustrations, drawings, charts, and diagrams. When reluctant readers read informational books, they use the visual aspects of the book not only to help them create meaning but to help them visualize the text, thus sustaining an active level of engagement with the text" (p.288). Truly, without attending to these elements students may rely solely on a superficial glance at the pictures. Awareness of these features can increase the significance of the text and increase connections and comprehension.

### *Revisiting My Classroom*

My efforts to move away from a narrow notion of appropriate texts for primary grades students, has increased my effectiveness as a literacy teacher. I still love fiction based reading and argue that its place in the primary classroom remains essential. Nevertheless, there is also room for nonfiction in my first grade classroom. It has served to increase interest levels and reading engagement for the group of students that I had difficulty reaching, and I believe that generally I am increasing the level of preparedness for all students in terms of approaching texts which focus on reading to learn as well as for life as a productive citizen in our Information Age.

#### **About the Author**

**Renee Moran is an Assistant Professor of Reading Education at East Tennessee State University and a former first grade teacher.**

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