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Using Mentor Texts to Teach Nonfiction Writing to Third Graders

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Reflections on my “Ah-ha” Moments in Learning to Teach Nonfiction

Getting to know my students and preparing how to best meet their learning needs are always welcomed challenges, and, as the hustle and bustle of beginning a new year begins to subside, I enjoy reflecting on what has worked and what changes or improvements are necessary. It’s not long before the holidays come and I begin to feel some apprehension about what the winter months will hold for me (and my students). Ironically, it’s not the cold Michigan temperatures or the mounds of snow that blanket our state that worry me. Winter is the time that my district has designated when I need to teach nonfiction writing to my students.

I agree with Vicki Spandel, who says, “Nothing, absolutely *nothing* you will ever do as a teacher will be more powerful than modeling writing in front of your students. It is vital to the successful teaching of writing.” In theory this will always be true, but it was not for me until recently when my practical applications were able to “catch up” with this perspective on the value of modeling.

Teaching nonfiction writing was a challenge for me because I had difficulties demonstrating passion for it to my students. The genre was something that made me feel closed in, almost stifled, yet table of contents, headings, subheadings, and glossaries were just a few of the required components of nonfiction writing that Michigan Department of Education’s Grade Level Expectations (GLCEs) expects students to understand. I believe that this genre(s) of writing is important and students *do* need to be given opportunities to write from this perspective, but it was still a difficult “sell” for me.

Many people might agree that standing before our classrooms mirrors performing on a stage: it is

when we are able to emulate who we are and what we expect, and, in turn, we hope our students “enjoy the show” (as well as learn those GLCE’S!).

My students have been given the opportunity to write in this genre(s) each year, but I wondered why it was not something they looked forward to either. Teacher modeling? Teacher passion? Apparently, I was not hitting the “targets,” because my students disliked the nonfiction-writing unit, nearly as much as my disdain for teaching it had grown.

The *Write Start* towards Growth

Novi Community Schools’ Writing Consultant, Mary Cooper, began an elective initiative to support our growth as teachers of writing. The *Write Start* movement was something that I knew I needed to connect myself to: it was something that enabled me to take those first steps toward deepening my growth as a teacher of writing. During the cold and dreary month of January—through collaboration with Mary Cooper—I was enlightened to find a balance between what my students needed to learn (to write expository texts) and how to best teach them. Two believers in the importance of teacher modeling, and who enjoy “putting on a show,” we were able to collaboratively provide an eye-opening and uplifting unit to a class of eager learners. We began with two key components: mentor texts and students as authorities on selected topics.

Mentor Texts

The success of teaching nonfiction writing would now stand as tall as the pile of mentor texts I used to teach it. Using mentor texts meant giving students opportunities to examine the author’s craft and to take risks in trying to import techniques into their own writing, and to deliver information to their audience.

By using mentor texts, students would be exposed to a variety of styles of writing and this paved the way for them to create various forms (or genres) of nonfiction writing pieces. It was not long before my students relished the idea of getting a chance to share information in a “new” and “fun” way! Suddenly, learning this genre was igniting passion in all of us, including the opportunities of choice.

Authorities on Selected Topics.

Ralph Fletcher talks about having students create “AUTHORITY Lists” which showcase topics that each student feels confident in writing about. Some of these topics might include facts learned from a science lesson at school (e.g., the water cycle), or perhaps a lesson learned in life (e.g., being a big sister). The authors celebrate these topics as they bring information to their audiences in creative ways. Therefore, I provided students with the opportunity to compile an AUTHORITY List and then searched for texts that would mentor the students as writers—and as readers.

Three Examples of Mentor Text Applications and the Heart of Learning

Authority/Novice: Letter Writing. *Dear Mr. Blueberry*, written and illustrated by Simon James, tells the story of a little girl named Emily who believes there is a whale living in the pond beside her house. A letter exchange blossoms between Emily and her teacher, Mr. Blueberry. Throughout their communication, various facts emerge as Emily’s questions and concerns about the fate of her new neighbor are eased by the knowledge and expertise her science teacher offers.

This textual form invited Erika in my classroom to share her knowledge about basketball through an inquisitive letter exchange between herself and NBA Star, Carmelo Anthony. Letter writing also offered success to Morgan who was the AUTHORITY on Bengal tigers and chose to write letters to her big brother Ben, who was skeptical about her new found pet, and he offered all the reasons why she could not have found a tiger in her North American backyard.

See/Saw or Question/Answer: Question and Answer Writing

What is the Sun? by Reeves Lindberg gives young writers a chance to demonstrate a *see-saw* technique as questions are asked and answered, a pattern that further scaffolds learning for students. In my classroom, Vivek, our resident expert on presidential history, shared his knowledge about Franklin D. Roosevelt, which led to questions and answers about elections, electoral votes and the Constitution. A question-answer or *see-saw* model was appropriate in helping students to share information in meaningful ways, and to guide them to engage in writing that reflects the approach to learning.

A to Z

Our classroom bookshelves are peppered with an array of A to Z books, from a range of authors such as Jerry Pallotta. With predictable and consistent structure, the books offer students a guide to display information about their topics. This form can also be showcased in class-created books. For example, my twenty-six students divided responsibilities and each student composed a page for our class book celebrating our knowledge of Native Americans.

A Writer’s Toolbox Filled

The presentation of my informational writing unit enhances students’ opportunities to write in different forms, to different audiences, for different purposes. Students investigate mentor texts, emulate teacher modeling and add to their growing repertoires of what good writers do. By the end of the year, each of my third grade students was able to choose one of the forms learned during this unit and present it in our “Read Around Celebration.” It was uplifting to witness the power that the “AUTHORities” in my classroom had about their topics, how they stretched themselves as writers, and how they developed ownership of their work that they exhibited and shared.

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About the Author

Melissa Israel (misrael@novi.k12.mi.us) lives in Canton with her husband Pete and three children, Grant, Kennedy and Delaney. Working as a third grade teacher in the Novi Community School District has allowed her to make wonderful connections with colleagues, parents and, of course, her students.