Why Is Nonfiction Defined By What It Is Not?: 10 Questions To Help You Re-Think and Re-Imagine Informational Text

Marc Aronson, Ph.D.

16th Annual UCF College of Education & Human Performance Literacy Symposium
April 11, 2014
University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida
Late-Breaking News

• American Students Test Well in Problem Solving, but Trail Foreign Counterparts

• By MOTOKO RICH APRIL 1, 2014

Fifteen-year-olds in the United States scored above the average of those in the developed world on exams assessing problem-solving skills, but they trailed several countries in Asia and Europe as well as Canada, according to international standardized tests results released on Tuesday.
Why Re-Think and Re-Imagine Informational Text?

• CCSS: Elementary School – 50%
• Middle School – 55%
• Senior HS -- 70%
• Across all classes – Critical Reading that undergirds entire education
• From 2009 NAEP study of what students need
Commonalities Among the Practices in Science, Mathematics and English Language Arts

Based on work by Tina Chuek elli.stanford.edu
ELA/Literacy: 3 shifts

1. Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction

2. Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from text, both literary and informational

3. Regular practice with complex text and its academic language
What Does This Have to Do With Literacy?
EVERYTHING
If...

• Literacy is not limited to decoding.
• Literacy is critical reading.
Now, Let’s Examine Our Ten Questions
• Why Is Nonfiction Defined by What It Is Not?
Word Association

• Nonfiction    Fiction
• Data          Story
• Calculate     Imagine
• Comprehend    Identify
• What Makes a Work Nonfiction?
truth
No!
Nonfiction = Active

Inquiring
Discovering
Questioning
Debating
Comparing
Contrasting
Building Knowledge
Nonfiction Mistakes

• The book speaks and the reader listens.
• The book knows and the reader doesn’t.
• The book is right because it says it is.
• One book is all you need.
• Books/sites/articles are trustworthy because found through a library.
From Pre-K On

• Show how nonfiction is:
  – Evidence
  – Argument
  – Point of View
  – Compare and Contrast Sources
  – Encourage young people to think, question, argue, debate, explore
  – (Venn Diagram)
Two Nonfiction Pleasures

• 1) Gain Possession of Knowledge: **mastery**
  – Reader owns what s/he knows

• 2) Engage in Building Knowledge: **expertise**
  – Reader has confidence to compare, contrast, evaluate, construct meaning
For Example:
Start in Storytime

THREE LITTLE PIGS
THE TRUE STORY OF THE 3 LITTLE PIGS!

BY A. WOLF

AS TOLD TO JON SCIESZKAZ
ILLUSTRATED BY LANE SMITH
Classroom Display

Pluto
• I am not an expert on science, social studies, math, how do I know which book is right?
That Is Not Your Problem

• You don’t need to know which source is correct, indeed that is the wrong question.
• You do need to know how to teach students to read critically, to compare sources, and to research other perspectives.
• Exactly the same skills as they use with fiction, plays, poetry, etc.
Not About Right Answer

• About right ways to research, think, and construct contentions
Question 4

• Are you saying that all knowledge is relative, that all views are equal?
No!
Evidence

• How does the book know what it knows?

  – Citation
  – Annotated citation
  – Author’s research journey
  – Bibliography
• Where Can I Find Nonfiction Books that feature:
  – Evidence
  – Argument
  – Point of View?
Examples

AIN'T NOTHING BUT A MAN
MY QUEST TO FIND THE REAL JOHN HENRY

SCOTT REYNOLDS NELSON with MARC ARONSON
Evidence

- Song
- Primary Sources
- Research Journey
- Compare to other research
- Share with peers
- Refine
- When stuck ask new questions
Contention

Sugar Changed the World
A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom, and Science
by Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos
Atlantic Slavery

• What % of Enslaved Africans Sent In The Middle Passage Came to North America?

• Which Country Made the Most Money From Sugar Slavery?

• Which Country Was the First to Finally Abolish Slavery?
POV: First Person Science
POV:
Citizen Science
POV: Call to Action

EYES WIDE OPEN
Going Behind the Environmental Headlines

Paul Fleischman
POV: Author’s Passion

Almost Astronauts
13 Women Who Dared to Dream

Tanya Lee Stone
Foreword by Margaret A. Weitekamp, Curator, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum
POV Concern

• If nonfiction has more of an explicit POV, am I in danger of imposing ideologies on my students?
Remember the Answer to Question 3?

• Check out: [http://sheg.stanford.edu/rlh](http://sheg.stanford.edu/rlh)
• Reading Like a Historian project at Stanford – not to turn you into a Social Studies teacher, but to ground you in the reading, thinking, and practice of historical writing.
• Nonfiction is not an answer, it is a method of seeking answers
• What about language?
  – Is there any nonfiction that I can use to talk about word choice, onomatopoeia, alliteration, imagery, detail, sense-image, metaphor, simile...
Yes: Poetry

• *Come feel the cool and shadowed breeze,*
• *come smell your way among the trees,*
• *come touch rough bark and leathered leaves:*
• *Welcome to the night.*
Yes: Prose

- Jim Murphy
  
Saturday, August 3, 1793. The sun came up, as it had every day since the end of May, bright, hot, and unrelenting. The swamps and marshes south of Philadelphia had already lost a great deal of water to the intense heat, while the Delaware and Schuykill Rivers had receded to reveal long stretches of their muddy, root-choked banks. Dead fish and gooey vegetable matter were exposed and rotted, while swarms of insects droned in the heavy, humid air.
Word Choice, Scene, Theme
• So we have inquiry, critical reading, and language, what about story? Can nonfiction offer compelling plot without blurring into fiction?
Yes: Rise of Narrative NF

• Steve Sheinkin
  http://www.stevesheinkin.com/
More
More

• Deborah Heligman
• http://deborahheiligman.com
Narrative Nonfiction: The Third Pleasure

- Pace
- Cliff-hanger chapters
- Dramatic action
- Strong individuals/characters
- Now have Third Nonfiction Pleasure: immersive story
Question 8

- Ok, I see the Nonfiction may have a lot to offer, but how can I introduce these books to my class?
Read Aloud

• Nonfiction ideal for read aloud – chapter, section, selected for language, pace, drama – capture students’ attention, excite their curiosity.

• No need to read/assign the whole book – select material to explore.
More
More

PHILLIP HOOSE
Newbery Honor and National Book Award–winning author of Claudette Colvin

MOONBIRD
A YEAR ON THE WIND WITH THE GREAT SURVIVOR B95.
More
• Are You Saying That Nonfiction Should Be All We Read?
NO!
Pairing

• Historical Fiction -- Biography
• Saga/Fantasy – Real Adventure
• Mystery/Thriller – Real Detection, Spies
• Myths -- Quest to Explain
• Authors by Style/Voice
• Fiction Author --- Context
More Nonfiction Frees Fiction

• Reading for depth everywhere – not for content in one class and for literary analysis in another. Looking at voice, POV, language, structure at every opportunity in every class.
• Work with content-area teachers to build cross-curricular connections.
• This is where the CC %s are your friend
Layout

• Use of images
• Interaction of art and text
• Nonfiction as immersive experience ala picture book
• Model for student research and presentation
Question 10

- Where can I find the kind of nonfiction books and strong authors you’ve presented?
Ask a Librarian

• He/She knows, or can know, how to find them.
• Every author I listed has gotten great reviews and won prizes. Get a list of recent prize winners linked to subjects/areas you want to cover.
• Share lists and experiences – what worked/did not work for your classes?
Author Study

• Have students do author studies on nonfiction authors – create growing resource list of authors by style, approach, subject, age...
Author Visits

• SKYPE: I.N.K. Think Tank
  http://www.mackin.com/CLASSROOM/INKTHINKTANK.aspx

• Taped interviews:
Adding It All Up
The Right to Know

• Back to test.
• We are opening NF:
  – away from textbook
  – into inquiry
  – tools of/for inquiry
  – the school is showing it believes that every student has a right to know
  – NF gives models, examples, opportunities to exercise skills, to get angry, get engaged, be moved, care, explore
• NF tells readers: the world belongs to you!
• Critical Reading = Literacy
One Term to Retire

• NF does shift away from can the reader “relate” to a character, story, plot, circumstance.

• Instead the reader is expanded – changed in how he/she understands him/her self by engaging with new ideas, experiences, situations, characters, modes of thinking.

• An invitation to move beyond ourselves as we know ourselves.
Last Question

Any questions?
Thank You!

• Marc Aronson, Ph.D.
  – bookmark@aol.com