Curiosity, Complexity and Conversations

Curiosity, Complexity and Conversations

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Discovering, Questioning, Talking and Imagining: Writing Nonfiction

by Charlie Otting

Arrowhead

I’ve always hoped

that one day

I would find

an arrowhead

digging through

an ancient compost heap

in my yard

at the bottom of the hillside

where the narrow creek bed

sometimes overflows

at the foot of the grand

sycamore

I would scrape away

the layers of brown clay

with my thumbnail

I'd carefully run

my fingertip

along the edge

testing its sharpness

I'd wonder who

crafted this fine

object where it was

made what rock

it was shaped from

I'd think about

the last time it was

used why it ended up

here

I’d ask that farmer

who lives down Zion Rd.

what he thinks

and he’d show me

his collection

and we’d talk

through the afternoon

over coffee

“That’s a nice one

you got there”,

he’d say.

−By Charlie Otting

1.1 The Role of Curiosity in Teaching

That's all it takes – you find something. Then your curiosity and imagination take over. And you're off. When I think of nonfiction, this is the process I have in mind: curiosity about some thing, place, or idea that incites a passion to learn more; that gives you an itch you need to scratch. Questions arise, the imagination is sparked. More questions may follow. You heap up facts, sort and sift through what you've discovered. You're dying to share all of this with someone, to hear what your spouse or friend or colleague might think, what angle they will take, what insight they might offer. This process of discovery and questioning, talking and reflecting could lead you to write something -perhaps something in your writer's notebook, maybe a poem or a text for a picture book because you want to share it with a larger audience. That's the kind of nonfiction I want to read. That's the kind I want to write, the kind I want children to experience as readers and writers. One that found its beginning with someone finding something intriguing.

What do I find interesting? What am I curious about? I feel especially at home in nature. I enjoy poking around my yard, dodging the poison ivy, while discovering moths, butterflies, spiders, frogs, dragonflies – especially ones I've never before seen. The same with weeds and wildflowers. Why did I never notice these before? Yes, I even stare at clouds and marvel at how, in all their variety, they move majestically across the sky, different from one hour to the next. On cloudless nights, I venture outside to look up at stars, constellations, planets, and try to remember their names. Weather phenomena, different kinds of trees, birds, mammals. I'm the same way with people – neighbors and friends I've known for years, or total strangers I encounter at an airport or along a hiking trail. I always enjoy those conversations that reveal something new through hearing about another person's experiences. This way of being in the world, of giving attention to the life going on around me, brings deep pleasure and joy, but it does require that I take things slowly and allow time for reflection. Of course, in a hectic world, this is an ideal to strive for, but one that repays the effort. Whatever is around me, I notice and appreciate.

I often wonder if such curiosity can be taught – the kind that brings you up short for just a moment, stops you in your tracks, so that you need to look for some answers. Some people seem to lack this inquisitive sense. Perhaps it was there in their younger years, but has been dulled by adult responsibilities and routines. Yet I believe that being inquisitive and curious, being a person who feels compelled to ask questions, is a stance you can take in the world. It is the kind of person you can learn to become. It seems that taking this stance is essential for being a writer, as well as for being a teacher. As an educator, I try to bring inquisitiveness and curiosity to every part of my job, even before the teaching day begins. I wonder about those small mounds of heaped-up earth poking through the snow-covered playground that I pass on my walk to school (the work of moles? voles?). I'm intrigued

by the plastic duck figures that first-grader Amira has attached to her backpack. “Do they have names?” I ask her. I notice a photo on the desk of my colleague, a scene of snow-capped mountains. Was that from a recent vacation? Call me nosy. I can’t help it. I’m just curious. Being engaged with all aspects of life is a privilege of being alive, as well as an obligation, whether one is a spouse, parent, friend, teacher, citizen.

> ***Nonfiction. Why don’t we just call it Life? – Tomie dePaola***

The family members, community members and teachers in the lives of young children have a critical role to play in ensuring this way of being in the world for the young. I model inquisitiveness. I provide books that offer answers to many of their questions. These books serve as examples to show children that people, who are curious and passionate about something, sometimes want to share with others what they’ve learned and experienced through writing.

My curiosity and need to keep learning about the world found a new outlet when I became interested in nonfiction picturebooks in the 1980s. My children were young, and on our weekly trips to the public library we would return with stacks of books on topics of interest to two young children – big machinery and trucks, dinosaurs, volcanoes, baseball and basketball, outer space, snakes, wildcats. We enjoyed poring over these books together, reading and talking and learning things we never knew before. I especially enjoyed alphabet books constructed around a particular topic – butterflies, early American history, Japan, mammals. These nonfiction titles were so different from the ones I remembered from my childhood. There didn’t seem to be a topic that didn’t have its own picturebook. In reading to my children I was getting my first real introduction to the riches of children’s literature. In particular I came to realize that reading nonfiction picturebooks was a fun way to learn new things. My children responded to this reading by doing their own drawings of dinosaurs and spaceships. They also made lists of their favorite mammals, baseball players, rocks. Reading nonfiction picturebooks together was a natural way to foster not only the sense of wonder and curiosity of my children, but also my own. I was excited not only by the great variety of topics that was being covered, by also by the amazing variations in design and the differing formats of presentation. I had not yet become a classroom teacher, but I had already developed a passion for nonfiction picturebooks.

1.2 Teachers Writing Nonfiction

When I began teaching in the early 1990s, I brought a lively inquisitive stance strengthened by a familiarity with a growing body of nonfiction writing for children. Teaching writing was new to me, bundled up as it was with the many complex issues of helping young writers move from the physical control of the pencil to achieving a sense of confident independence. The easiest route to this goal was to tap into children's burgeoning curiosity about the world. Even the most reluctant writers had things they were passionate about, questions they had pondered, things they had noticed. How could we together use writing as a way of deepening our understanding and sharing what we were learning about the world outside – whether it involved the praying mantis that someone brought into class from their backyard, or had to do with a unit on the peoples and cultures of the Arctic that we together had chosen to study? Collecting ideas for writing was the easy part – we had little notebooks which we filled with ideas for future writing. The more challenging aspect was how to allow these young writers to express their learning in formats that allowed their voices to be heard, without forcing their writing into a form determined by the need for uniformity. Through using interactive writing, I was able to provide some sample mentor texts that could be used as inspirational models, especially for those writers who needed a more guided approach. And of course, I shared many nonfiction picturebooks that showed some of the myriad possibilities for presenting information in an interesting and engaging way. In the classrooms in which I taught for the first ten years of my career, children "published" many pieces of nonfiction – from personal narratives to pieces about hobbies and favorite activities to works about animals, space, big machines. We were making books to share our learning with others. When I look back at my first years of teaching, full of false starts and do-overs, I hope that I was conveying that writing is a natural consequence of being a curious and engaged person. I was on my way to learning that if you as a teacher present yourself as a person who is curious, who uses writing to collect observations, to tell about what you've noticed, what you're wondering about, what you're surprised at, then you're showing the children in your care that writing is an activity as normal as walking or breathing. In fact, writing is a characteristic of someone who knows that learning goes on all the time, for a lifetime.

For me, writing is a natural consequence of being a curious and engaged person. If you're the kind of person who's curious about the world, you probably do some kind of writing. You are capturing what you've noticed, what you're curious about, what you're perplexed about. Perhaps you have a writer's notebook, into which you place your observations, questions, memories. Maybe you write electronically, and keep your writing stored online, in the form of a blog. The experience of writing often, daily if possible, gives the writer a lot of rewards. Many writers report that daily writing helps them concentrate and gives them a focus. Others say it helps them relax, that it acts almost like a kind of meditation, and that the process of writing can even slow down a racing heart. Many writers talk about writing as a process of discovery. They discover things they hadn't thought of

before. Others have reported feeling happier and having increased gratitude about the circumstances of their lives. Research around the habits and attitudes of people who write daily backs this up.

Having the identity of a writer, of saying that "I am someone who writes", can have a powerful influence on the children with whom teachers work.

For a teacher who writes there are multiple rewards. Teaching is a stressful job. If writing can produce a sense of relaxation, concentration, or discovery, and feelings of happiness and gratitude, then, I would argue, these rewards alone are worth aiming for. But I would also say that having the identity of a writer, of saying that "I am someone who writes", can have a powerful influence on the children with whom teachers work. If you present yourself as a person who is curious, who uses writing to collect observations, to put into words what you've noticed, what you're wondering about, what you're surprised at, then you're showing the children in your care that writing is an activity as normal as walking or breathing. It demonstrates that writing is a characteristic of someone who is curious about the world, of someone who knows that learning goes on all the time, for a lifetime.

Of course, let's be realistic. There are many reasons some teachers would choose not to write. Teachers are very busy people. It takes a lot of time and effort just to keep the daily routines up and running. Many need the time to relax when school is out for the day; and then there are the many responsibilities of family and home. Someone needs to make a grocery run, take a child to dance class or soccer practice. Also, writing can feel like a solitary activity. Some may not like the solitude that's required, or may not be able to find a quiet place in a busy house. Others would prefer to spend their leisure time reading rather than writing. Whatever the reasons, many teachers seem to have negative reactions to the thought of writing on their own. It's hard, lonely work, and the rewards are not evident or immediate; the frustrations are plenty. However, we know, as teachers, we are a powerful presence in the lives of the children we work with. What remains the most important factor in pointing the way to success for our students is the stance that a teacher takes, the identity that a teacher projects. If that identity is of someone who writes, who knows that writing is a way to support noticing, observing, discovery, then children will see writing as something that curious people do.

1.3 Working With Nonfiction Writing As A Literary Coach

Before I started my current position as a reading intervention teacher, I was a literacy coach for several years. I worked with K-2 teachers at two different buildings. While most of these teachers would have described themselves as readers and could name books that had recently read, none of them would have said that they were comfortable with teaching writing, and they disagreed strenuously about how writing should be taught. And it wasn't surprising that they had very little interest in doing any writing themselves. Part of my identity as a coach was being passionate about all aspects of literacy. I certainly had the reading part covered, but I felt that I was just beginning to put myself forward as "one who writes". I had done lots of collecting of bits of writing that I admired. I had lots of disorganized fragments of my own impressions, memories, and reflections that I had written. But now that I had the responsibility of being a literacy leader in my school, I decided that I had to take the lead in not only how we talked about the teaching of writing, but how to act like a person who writes. I felt that the most effective way of being teachers of writing was to practice being writers ourselves. This belief in the importance of teachers being writers as well as readers was a constant thread that appeared throughout my professional reading over the years. To work effectively with young writers you had to live the experience of feeling what it was like to choose a topic that you cared about, to think about organization, audience, voice. How could I help my colleagues become writers with their students?

I thought back to my own experience with my writer's notebook. My wife gave my first one to me. It had been given to her when she was younger. She had packed it away but had never used it. Now it was mine. The sturdy covers enclosed thick creamy blank pages. I immediately liked that the pages were unlined. This offered a real invitation to wander around the page, to include simple sketches or doodlings, alongside the texts I was placing there. My first "writing" was copying out short passages from books I was reading. I also copied out individual words, unusual words I had never encountered before. It was a while before I started to write down my own thoughts and memories, to describe things I noticed that caught my attention.

After years of filling my notebook in this manner, I found that I had a created a good collection of short writing pieces, unshaped and unrevised. But I was also struck by that fact that most of my entries were what would fall into the category of nonfiction. There were recorded memories (potential personal narratives, memoirs, "slice of life" writing), there were observations of nature (the beginning of nature writing), there were quotes from my reading (possible essays in social studies, history), and, of course, lots of fragments and individual words (the beginnings of poetry.) I also realized that I remembered my writer's notebook experience as one of enjoyment and accomplishment. No one was looking over my shoulder to see what I was writing, no one was putting pressure on me to write a certain amount of words by a certain date. Maintaining a writer's notebook had been fun and

pain-free. I knew that this would be the place to start with teachers who were very fragile with the idea of being writer.

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So I asked teachers to bring a writer's notebook to our first monthly professional development meeting of the new school year. I was pleased that every teacher did in fact bring a notebook to our first session, although I could sense the wariness they were feeling. Was I going to make them write something, they were probably thinking. I began by showing my colleagues my writer's notebook that I had been filling for quite a few years – the favorite quotes I had collected, lists I had made, short observations and descriptions of experiences I had had. I showed them my lists of interesting words, and my unskillful but earnest attempts at sketching – an insect, a leaf, a tree. I told them that this is all it took to take on the identity of writer – being curious and having a place to collect your impressions in written form. I could immediately sense their relief that this was something they could do. That's how we began.

As we continued to meet monthly throughout the year, I always started our session by sharing something I had collected in my notebook. I would often share a quote, but I made sure I also included some short pieces I had written myself. Then I would invite others to share. Sharing came slowly at first, but after a few meetings, most of the teachers in our group were willing to share something they had written. I could feel a growing sense of comfort as we did this kind of writing and sharing together. While the level of feedback was quite undeveloped, not much more than "Thank you for reading that", there was a strong sense that the teachers enjoyed the routine we had put in place.

Later in the year I asked the teachers to choose something from their notebooks and extend it into a longer piece. In the preceding months I had begun to share with them samples of one-page essays that can be found on the last page of some magazines – *Sports Illustrated*, *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *Newsweek*, and other home, garden, and nature magazines. These essays usually took the form of memoir, what some have taken to calling "slice of life" writing. The fact that they were one page in length gave us a manageable limit. These short pieces also gave us the opportunity to refine our understanding of genre, including types of multigenre writing. With these essays as guides, we made our attempts at growing our shorter pieces into longer, more shapely pieces.

These kinds of essays turned out to be the perfect vessels for my fellow teachers, for they could now see a way into writing about their own families, vacations, childhood memories. I was amazed at the quality of what they wrote, and we were all moved and delighted when one brave soul agreed to be the first to read her piece aloud. We enjoyed listening to the story about a parent who had kept a guest sign-in book for all the gatherings and dinner parties at her house during her whole married life of fifty plus years. We were delighted by one teacher's memory of sitting beneath her mother's baby grand piano as a child playing with her dolls, as her mom gave piano lessons. We laughed at the story of one mother giving her son driving lessons. What had at first seemed scary and impossible now seemed almost natural. I came to believe that it was the ease and comfort of the writer's

notebook that allowed this to happen, that allowed teachers to grow their seed ideas into accomplished one- page essays. Even though we had begun the school year hesitantly tip-toeing around the notion of teaching writing and practicing as writers, by the end of the year we had learned that writing grows from small imperfect attempts. We had started to learn something about choosing a topic. We learned the importance of having mentor texts. We learned the importance of having a supportive audience for one's writing. Most importantly we saw that keeping a writer's notebook was an easy, carefree way to start on the journey to becoming a writer, and that we could bring these habits and experiences into our classrooms

We began our second year of professional development together by continuing to use our writers' notebooks as a way to launch more formal pieces of writing. We now had an initial vision of how we would connect our own experiences of writing with a writer's notebook to our work with children. The first question we grappled with was at what grade level we should introduce notebooks in the classroom. There was disagreement about whether young children just acquiring the rudiments and control of print were ready and able to maintain some form of writer's notebook. I reminded my colleagues of how I had used my notebook to collect various kinds of writing. Perhaps we could start that way – by showing our own notebooks to our classes.

As we worked together through the year and experimented with different versions of the notebook (keeping a whole class notebook on chart paper, created through interactive and shared writing, in Kindergarten; incorporating a writer's notebook within the already established writing folder in first grade; using a steno pad notebook in second grade), we came to the conclusion that what we were really doing was teaching a habit of mind. We were modeling the sense of curiosity that drives us to capture in writing our noticings and observations and experiences. We were demonstrating how writers collect their ideas and choose topics that are personally meaningful to them. We were seeing that if we are going to ask and expect children to write, then we needed to show them how writers go about doing it, start to finish.

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In our first two years of professional development together we went from collecting items in our notebooks to our fledgling attempts to move on to finished pieces. In our third year of working together, we continued to expand our writing by working together in two writing projects that connected to nature / science and social studies writing. For our first writing project, I asked teachers to bring in an object from nature, along with some writing they would do in connection with it. For example, I brought in the remains of a paper wasp nest that had hung near the sliding doors over our patio. I showed the notes I had taken from reading about this particular kind of wasp, and then read the poem I had written about it, in which I tried to combine my mix of fascination and fear

with facts I had learned. Other teachers did the same with the husk of a cicada, the remains of a giant sunflower head, a beautiful light-green Luna moth found injured along the street, a bat skeleton found in an attic. Some read what they had written in their writing notebooks, others showed lists of interesting facts they had discovered, one wrote of a memory the finding of her object had invoked. We found this a useful writing exercise that we could easily bring into the classroom, where children love to share things they have found outside. It demonstrated to us that there are many forms writing can take as we attempt to do nonfiction writing – it can result in lists, expository, and even narrative writing.

Our second project involved doing an interview with someone – parent, friend or other relative who had done something interesting, or had an unusual job or hobby. I asked them to think of how they would present their interview in some form of writing. Once again I found myself moved to write a poem. It was about a friend whose father had been in the diplomatic corps and had spent her years growing up in Pakistan, Australia, and Italy. Another teacher interviewed an uncle about his experiences in the Korean War, and presented it in interview format; yet another teacher chose a narrative form to talk about her parents' involvement in a project to harvest silk from silkworms that was then used for cross-hairs in weaponry during WWII! We were amazed that the colleagues alongside whom we worked had such fascinating stories to tell. We were also seeing how writing helped us give focus to our stories so that we could share them with others. We certainly could bring this important message into our work with children: there are many fascinating people nearby, many intriguing objects just outside our windows.

As we worked together in this third year we came to realize that much of the writing being done in our classrooms had fallen into a kind of lethargy of journal writing. Children continued to put writing in their daily journals but this writing would often get jumbled up with older entries, so that you couldn't always tell where one ended and the other began. There wasn't yet a strong sense that writers are people who have a goal – to complete a piece of writing. We decided that the best way to demonstrate was for teachers to show their students how they had managed to capture an idea, had chosen how to develop it into a piece of writing, and had shared it with an audience. Of course, to begin to change this way of writing, from using daily journals to using other formats – individual sheets of paper, for example – meant changing some cherished writing routines that teachers had been using for years. While we didn't always agree on what was the best solution to this dilemma, we did see that it was an important issue, the kind of issue writers grapple with.

Since we wanted the writers in our classrooms to think of writers as people who have a goal, as people who make 'books', we needed to make sure that the kinds of books we read during read-aloud helped children envision the possibilities of conveying information and experiences in ways that would engage and entertain, with words and pictures. When we began to make the study of mentor texts a focus for our third year of professional development, we found that we didn't all agree on the purpose of read alouds. Since teachers for some time had felt the need to cover more math, science, and social studies content, read alouds were often done for the purpose of conveying this content. Teachers felt that most of the time they didn't have leisure to talk about how the writer chose to convey that information. There was an unspoken tension between reading for information versus reading to learn the writer's craft. It was a tension that we never really resolved, but we did manage to bring this issue to the forefront of our discussions. I continued to sense that we as teachers were continuing to see that teaching was an ever-changing process of problem-solving, and I hoped that this would become the natural mode of interacting with children in our classrooms.

Read Aloud Time

1.4 Next Steps

Our district was unable to sustain the cost of instructional coaches, so our work together as a learning team came to an end that year. As I think back now on those three years, here's what I think we accomplished during those monthly teacher professional development classes. I helped teachers get over some of strong negative emotions associated with writing. Mostly this came about because of the ease they felt with using a writing notebook. Having teachers willing to share their writing was the next big step. They learned that sharing writing with a supportive audience brought with it a sense of accomplishment and a feeling that their writing was appreciated. Teachers experienced first-hand the process of choosing a topic and turning that topic into a finished piece of writing. Together we learned the power of mentor texts as models for presenting information in ways that inform as well as entertain. We started to demonstrate and model using a writer's notebook in our classrooms as a way to capture seed ideas for our writing projects. We began the study of nonfiction writer's craft around the books we chose for read-aloud. Most importantly, teachers stood before their students as "people who write", who write to discover, to remember, to create pieces of writing that move readers.

Where would I want to go next in my work with teachers? I've always wanted to learn to become a better artist, to at least acquire a passable skill at figurative drawing and perspective. I've long felt that visual elements play a significant role in the composition of the kinds of books children write. So this is one area that awaits fruitful exploration for many teachers: the role of drawing and illustrating in the composition process. We know that many young children come to writing through storytelling and drawing. Somehow in the narrowing but necessary process of beginning to acquire alphabetic literacy, these supportive elements, story and drawing, get pushed into subordinate roles, in spite of the evidence that they are equally important in the development of composition. Fortunately teachers and other practitioners have tried to address this important need. For example, Martha Horn and Mary Ellen Giacobbe in their book *Talking, Drawing, Writing – Lessons for Our Youngest Writers* (2007) have shown how to return drawing to the composition process for the early grades. Beth Olshansky, in her book *The Power of Pictures: Creating Pathways to Literacy through Art, Grades K-6* and in her image-making workshops, has found a way to make visual elements equal to the verbal in a workshop setting, so that we now can talk about an Art / Writing Workshop. I am looking forward to creating my new identity as a writer / artist.

1.5 Coming Full Circle

As I picture my colleagues in their classrooms now, this is what I envision: a teacher has brought something to school to share with her class of first graders. It's an arrowhead she found when a dead tree was uprooted in a storm. Conversation erupts as students examine the object.

"What's that?"

"Wow."

"Let me see."

"Where'd you find that?"

"Is it sharp?"

"Who made that? An Indian?"

"Can I touch it?"

"Well, you know what?" the teacher asks as there is a lull in the talk. "I couldn't find a good book about arrowheads. I think I might just have to write one."

Image from Hemera Technologies/ PhotoObjects.net/Thinkstock

1.6 Drawing And The Science Teacher: Getting Started With Nonfiction

When I began teaching Kindergarten, I was perplexed about what exactly should go into the science center and why I needed one in the first place. I suppose I was hoping that the items on display would encourage students to look closely and begin to ask questions. I wanted to set the stage, create an environment of wonder and curiosity that would pay off at the end of the year when we would be fully immersed wondering, asking questions and doing research as we read and wrote nonfiction.

I didn't have any microscopes or ready-made kits from the teacher store. However, I did have some hand lenses and, of course, my backyard. I began collecting sweet gum seed pods, pine cones and leaves. I dug through the many rocks, shells, pieces of driftwood and jars of sand from my trips to northern Michigan as a child and put them in containers on a bookshelf in my classroom. I brought in pots of lemon balm and mint from my garden. The turtle shell from the dead turtle that I packed out of the woods on a backpacking trip as well as a parent-donated, molted tarantula skin were also put on display. As I introduced the center early in the school year, I tried to demonstrate to my students how what they did here was an important part of their work as researchers. It took a lot of explaining but I think I planted the beginnings of how to do research through the activities of the Science Center!

Besides encouraging a sense of inquiry and wonder in my young students through the Science Center, I also began the year by teaching my students how to draw during our Writing Workshop time. Through drawing young students, who do not yet have the ability to write well-developed texts, can record what they are thinking and observing and explain themselves more deeply, enhancing their messages with visual details. Further, they receive feedback as friends comment on the meaning their drawings convey. By honoring drawing as a composing process, I was helping children learn about the craft of writing.

Because we began the year with personal narratives, I began modeling how to draw people and animals using ovals. Then I used colored pencils to add clothing, skin colors and/or fur. I emphasized the importance of drawing realistically to teach my students how making their illustrations as real as possible helps the reader to understand the message they are trying to convey on the page.

Here is how Libby used the oval shape as she was illustrating her bee research ("What bees do to protect its home"); she included three "close up" fact boxes of a bee stinging a person, a stinger and the bee outside the hive. In the center of the page, is a person being stung with the appropriate speech bubble: "Ach!"

In the weeks that followed, as other writing needs took over our Writing Workshop mini-lessons, drawing lessons moved to science time. Observing and recording our observations was one aspect of thinking like a scientist. I modeled how to look carefully at various artifacts from the science center and how to draw the items as realistically as I could always emphasizing that even if it didn't look exactly like the object, I was doing my best. After many days of modeling how to draw realistically, I made sure that the science center had a ready supply of writing tools and scraps of paper for recording observations.

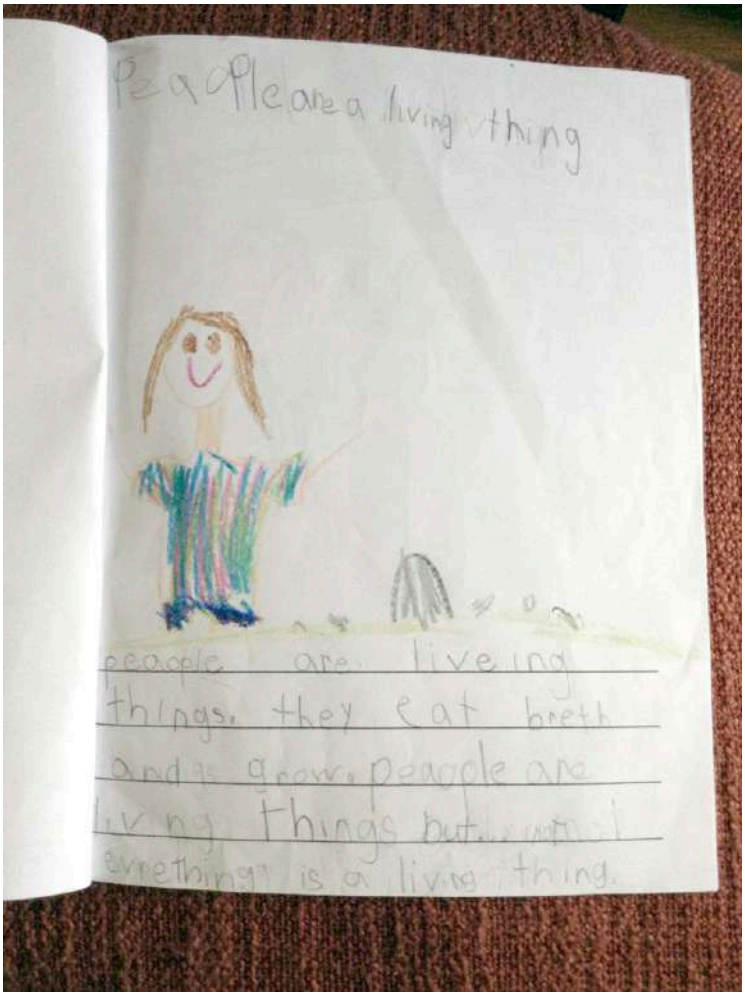
Even toward the end of the year as part of a nonfiction unit on how the parts of plants help them survive, I continued to model how looking closely can help us discover new information. When drawing sweet gum seed pods, I modeled how I first noticed the sharp, spiny covering of the seed pod. I wondered aloud why this seed pod needed to be so sharp while sharing that this is why I have to wear my shoes when I go out into my yard! After discussing that this is one way the plant is protecting its precious cargo – the seed, I decide that when I drew it, I would have to draw the spines so that my audience realized how important they are to the survival of the seed.

On another day, after germinating lima bean seeds, my curious scientists wondered about what was inside the seed. After carefully peeling the seed coat away, they were thrilled to see the tiny seed leaf inside surrounded by its "food" that would help it begin to grow. The thrill of discovery, drove them to record their observations as accurately as they could.

I couldn't wait to see how this idea of looking closely and drawing realistically would transfer into their nonfiction work about bees. However, before we could write our nonfiction books about bees, we had a lot of work to do – reading and researching – to create our common knowledge of bees.

Chapter 2: "It's like we're learning and having fun!" Writing NonFiction In The Kindergarten Classroom

"It's like we're learning and having fun!" Writing Nonfiction in the Kindergarten Classroom



by Elizabeth Jo Ingraham

While kindergartners often live in an imaginative world, much of what they write is nonfiction—facts about themselves and the world around them.

“I like yellow.”

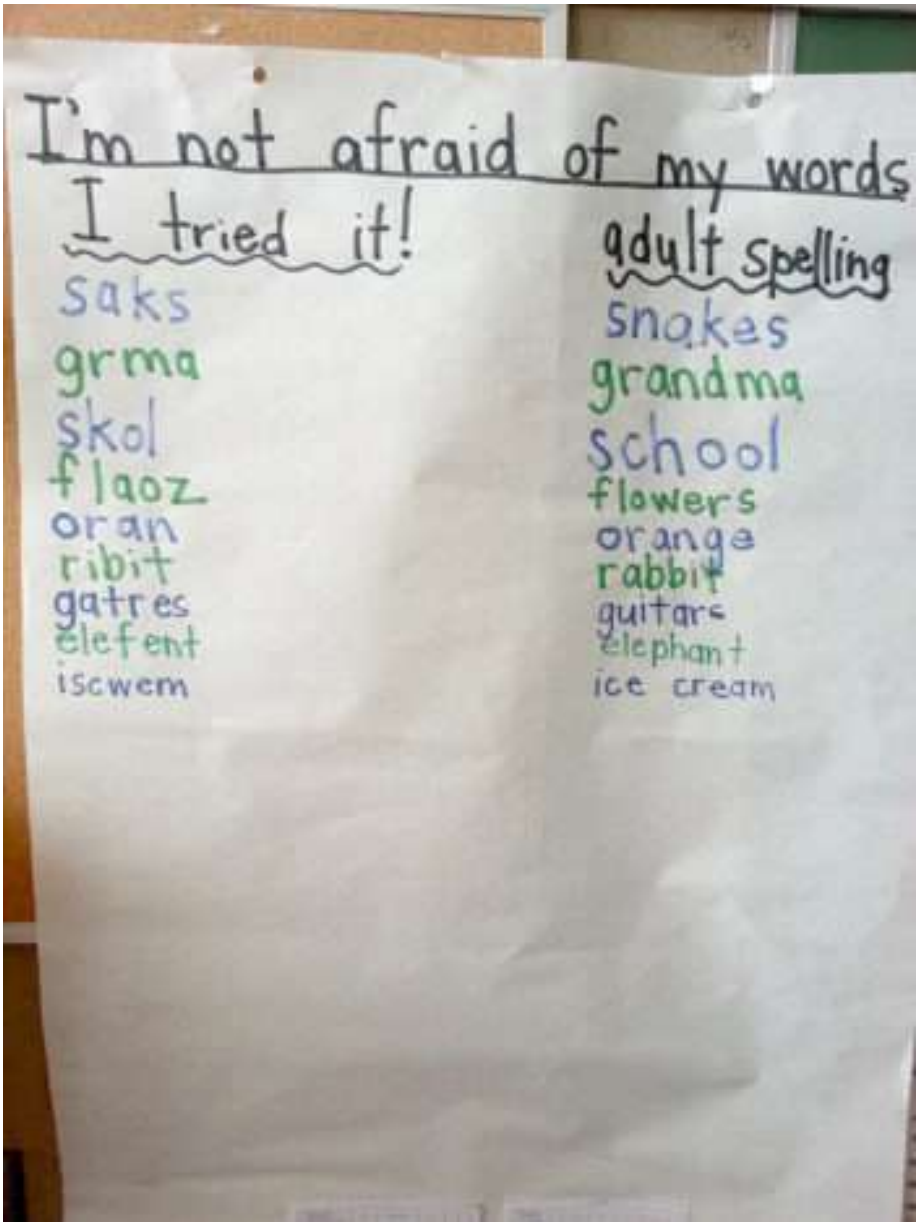
“I went to the pool.”

Young children yearn to share their thoughts and experiences with the world. They want people to know they have a dog and they love their family. Writing provides an opportunity for these facts to be heard.

It is also the case that the simple text structure inherent in young children’s nonfiction writing allows them to enter into the world of authorship easily. They do not have to create characters and describe events in great detail. Instead they can list facts using high frequency words, environmental print and simple sentence structures.

In the following chapter I describe how I guide Kindergarten students from “I like dinosaurs” to “His neck is so long that it is the size of you,” from simple declarative sentences to more descriptive writing that purposefully entertains and informs readers. Carefully planned lessons, individual conferences, and time to write books on topics that interest them provide opportunities for students to move from writing a list of facts to making connections with content and using specific vocabulary. Likewise by studying high-quality nonfiction texts as readers, students begin thinking about how best to describe information as they consider what readers want to know and interesting ways to express information so that readers can understand it.

2.1 Doing The Work Of Authors: Setting Students Up To Be Writers Of Nonfiction



From the very first day of Kindergarten my overarching goal is to have my students write. The main inhibitor to writing is their perception that they do not know how to spell the words they want to write. I have to address this if I expect my students to write texts that are worth reading. So, we begin the year with what they know, using a simple structure: "I like…." My only requirement is that they correctly write "I like," try the words they don't know ("Don't be afraid of it! Just write the sounds you hear."), and match their pictures to the words. I give them a blank book with two lines on each page, and send them off. "Now go do the work of authors!"

When we give young children the space and time to write, however, we have to be aware of the gap between their oral stories and writing possibilities. For this reason, independent writing time has to be differentiated. One student who illustrates this is Sophie. Sophie is a very strong-willed, eager student with unbelievable self-confidence. In her eyes, there wasn't anything she couldn't do. It was not uncommon to hear Sophie, as she walked to her seat to write, say something like, "I can do this! This is easy for me!" When it came time to put pencil to paper, however, all her confidence melted away. She didn't have the fine-motor control to make her page look the way she envisioned it. Her time was spent writing, erasing, writing, erasing with fury, scribbling, and finally throwing her pencil down in disgust. She didn't know the letters that matched the sounds she heard, and what came from her pencil was not the perfection she saw in her favorite authors. She regarded her pages as evidence of failure.

I did not regard them in that way, however, and continued to give Sophie the space and time to write. I allowed her to make mistakes and write like a Kindergartner; and I supported her specific needs in individual conferences. We analyzed how her pages looked when there was too much erasing, and agreed to only erase major mistakes. She tried out various types of pencils, and finally settled on a purple wishbone shaped one. We celebrated completed books and didn't worry about imperfections. I knew that if I expected Sophie to improve her craft as a writer, I would need to allay her sense of frustration.

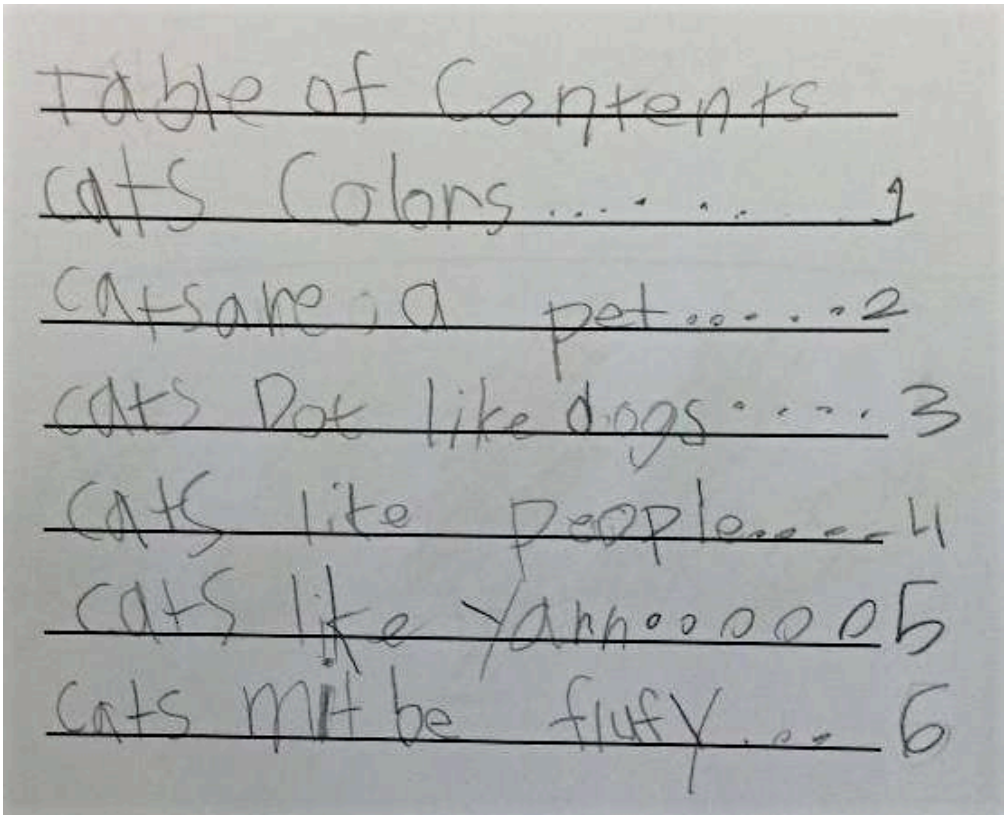
A page from Sophie's journal illustrating the result from her process of writing. erasing, rewriting and more erasing.

By the fourth quarter, Sophie's inner confidence matched her output. She spent day after day practicing rote spelling and handwriting by writing books about things she cared deeply about. She knew unique things about wolves that others didn't, and she saw this as an opportunity to advocate for her favorite animal. She could match Steve Jenkins' pattern in *What do you do with a Tail like This?* and added her own features of nonfiction, just like the authors we had read. Daily practice allowed her to overcome her challenges, and she was now able to entertain and teach her audience using more complex and sophisticated written language.

Over time writing became part of our class culture as we celebrated completed books, questioned for more information, and discussed mistakes. All my students (Sophie included) were excited to share what they had written and to hear what their classmates had created. Writing books was no longer an activity they saw as outside their ability.

Examples of Student Work

2.2 Doing the Work of Authors: Transitioning to Formal Instruction on Nonfiction Writing



For the first two-thirds of the year in Kindergarten, our focus in writing lessons was on building confidence and an identity as a writer, basic mechanical lessons (letters, sounds, letter formation, top to bottom, left to right, front to back, using resources, increasing known words, ending punctuation, use of lowercase letters, spacing), adding details in words and pictures, and understanding the difference between writing that lists information or opinions and writing that narrates events in our lives. Around April, students were ready to move into a more formal study of nonfiction and how authors create books that teach and entertain readers. We began by studying the Kindergarten level nonfiction books we had been reading all year. I talked to students explicitly about the characteristics of nonfiction providing instruction on how readers navigate and understand nonfiction by using the table of contents, headings, bolded words, and other nonfiction textual features.

Once students had an understanding of nonfiction as a genre and how it differed from fiction, I extended their thinking by studying with them high interest nonfiction books that were outside of their independent reading levels. My goal was to move their writing to more complex, descriptive text that both entertained the reader and helped deepen their own understanding of topics. In the following sections, I will explain how I used two nonfiction books as mentor texts to provide students with models to write clearer and more descriptive text about a topic. I also describe how students took up the authors' various text features to write their own nonfiction.

The Octopus's Garden: The Secret World Under the Sea

I chose the book *The Octopus's Garden: The Secret World Under the Sea* by Mark Douglas Norman to start teaching students about the craft of nonfiction. The simply stated, yet fascinating facts make the text comprehensible to young children. The layout is easy to understand, and the information is novel. Each section focuses on a different cephalopod, and tells about its unique features. Attached to the front cover is a DVD with a video of each animal, serving to make the mysterious, underwater world come alive for readers. Learning things most adults have never even considered gave students a sense of sophistication and feeling of importance. High-level vocabulary stretched their comprehension skills. From the hypnotizing color changes of the cuttlefish to the shape changing mimic octopus, we couldn't stop reading! Our art, gym, and music teachers were left anxiously waiting at their doors as we rushed down the hall late to their classes, and then immediately began bombarding them with, "Did you know……!"

While we read, I talked about how Mark (I always refer to the author by his or her first name with my students) is a scuba diver and has seen these octopuses up close; because of his personal experiences this is a great topic for him. I connected my own love of diving and excitement over seeing my first live octopus. My writing lessons, grounded in this book, were focused on topic selection (i.e., choose something you are an expert about), and using a table of contents and headings to plan and organize your book so that readers can better understand your content. The book's high-level vocabulary and text layout allowed me talk about some decisions authors make to help draw readers in and learn more. (And because it is a topic I am fascinated by, the children were able to see my undeniable excitement over reading nonfiction.)

This proved to be just the book Ruth needed in order to push her writing forward. She is a smart girl and eager to share her thinking with others through writing. However, the act of writing was difficult for her. It took great effort for her to hear individual sounds in words, match those sounds to letters, and then attend to directionality and formation.

When she announced her topic, nature, to the class, I knew I would need to start conferring with her. Narrowing the topic would help her focus her ideas and lighten the writing task facing her. After chatting, she came to realize her "nature expertise" started with plants, so I helped her frame the book around that more specific topic.

"You could write your book just like Mark wrote his. Each section can be about a different kind of plant you know about, the way each of Mark's sections is about a different kind of octopus. What plants do you know a lot about?"

And off she went!

Plants what have a lot of nectar: There are different kinds of plants like the sunflower.

My simple nudging to consider the work of one of our mentor text authors was enough to help Ruth get started while also encouraging her to use the text features she had learned about. After listing the different kinds of plants she knew about, Ruth began organizing her book into sections about each plant. On her introductory page she lets the reader know there are different kinds of plants like nectar plants, scary plants and corn. She then goes into detail about nectar plants using a heading ("Plants that have a lot of nectar") and adding information with her illustration which shows how sunflower seeds fall to the ground and where nectar is found. Ruth seems to be beginning to understand the purpose of an introduction, by first explaining to her readers that there are different kinds of plants before elaborating on what differentiates one plant from another. Without explicit instruction on how authors select and expand upon topics, and the quick, individualized conference focussing on the concrete example provided by a mentor text, Ruth would have been stuck trying to figure out where to go with a topic that was too big for her.

Alternatively, writing came easily for Samantha. She begged for writing time each day. Whenever students were able to choose what to work on (including during our frequent indoor recesses), you could find Samantha's eyes glued to her page, crayons and pencils sliding seamlessly across her paper. Moving away from a narrative structure, however, proved to be difficult for her, as she said to me, defeated,

"I don't know what to write about."

She often talked about gymnastics, so I suggested this as her topic.

"You like to do gymnastics the way Mark and I like to scuba dive. I don't know anything about gymnastics, so I am sure you can teach me a lot! Can you try that?"

I checked back in with her after writing her first page. She was off to a good start, but needed more support as she continued to write.

I know about gymnastics. You don't dive head first in the pit or the balance beam.

"This looks like a good topic for you because you know a lot about gymnastics. On this page, you are telling your readers the rules about gymnastics. That is important information! What other rules do you think your reader needs to know?"

After some discussion, she began writing her next page, so I asked her to check in with me when she was finished and I left her to work independently.

If you are a big kid, then there is one big kid on the trampoline. If you are a little kid, then there is a lot.

A few days later, her next page read "If you are a big kid, then there is 1 big kid. If you are a little kid, then there is a lot."

Now that she had a clear understanding of topic and focus, it was time to move the conversation toward refining her writing so that readers could clearly understand what she was trying to communicate.

First, I restated the work she had done. "You have a good start on your book about gymnastics. You tell your readers the rules about gymnastics, and that is really important. I don't know much about your topic, so you are teaching me important things!"

I began my conference with her by honoring her writing and its message while also naming the work she had done as an author.

Then, I moved to my teaching point.

"You say that 'if you are a big kid, then there is 1 big kid.' I don't know what you mean here. Can you tell me more about it?"

I listened as she clarified, and then we discussed how she could change her writing to make it clearer for her readers. During this discussion I connected her work to our nonfiction texts, as well as books she had written earlier in the year. Adding details to clarify her writing was an ongoing goal, as many of her earlier narrative memoirs had also lacked the details needed to make them interesting. Working on this goal in an informational text helped her to better understand how to write so that readers can understand and visualize information.

Lyla was yet again a different writer. While she had strong "big picture" literacy skills (comprehension, fluency, understanding of an audience), translating those onto paper required scaffolding. During an assessment on letter sound identification on the first day of school, she laughed at me and said, "I don't know any of those sounds!" Choosing a topic, cats, was easy, but she didn't know where to start. I suggested the table of contents, and that would help her know what information to put in each section.

"While Mark has a section for each different kind of octopus, you will have a section for the kind of things you know about cats."

In case you are concerned that reading the table of contents will spoil the book for you, Lyla has a solution: "I don't like to write the whole sentence (in the table of contents) because I like it to be kind of a surprise."

Lyla used her table of contents to organize information for herself and her readers. Further, she didn't simply repeat the words she has written on each page of her book, but rather made subtle changes to enhance her meaning,

synopsizing information (cats' colors) or suggesting what the reader might learn (cats might be fluffy). Her table of contents in particular was an indication of her realization that someone was going to read this book, and most probably begin by reading the table of contents so that they would know where to turn to find the information they were interested in. And while the information on the specified pages is written using simple sentence structures supported by pictures, here we see the beginnings of nonfiction writing that will grow to become more thoughtful and complex in future years.

Lyla's Nonfiction (Mostly) Book About Cats

As elementary teachers, we often shy away from nonfiction reading and writing. There are so many great fiction books to use as discussion starters about situations that students encounter in their real lives. Also we are responsible for teaching children how to read and write, a very daunting process when starting with only the most basic print concepts and one that becomes more complicated as we think about the conceptual load of understanding nonfiction content. So, it becomes quite easy to push nonfiction to the side. In doing so, however, we disregard the learning opportunities that come in comparing genres, neglect the needs of students who are more drawn to nonfiction texts, and miss out on the rich content that helps students become more inquisitive and curious about the surrounding world.

Egg: Nature's Perfect Package

Once we had fully digested *The Octopus' Garden* and everyone had a good start on writing nonfiction books, I introduced a more complex book, *Egg: Nature's Perfect Package* by Steve Jenkins and Robin Page. At first glance, it appears to be a very simple book written in small chunks of text that students can easily comprehend. However, if you have ever read Steve's and Robin's work (or even just a page of *Egg*), you will know the layout is quite deceiving. Their rich description and high-level vocabulary stretch the readers' thinking and understanding. In order for elementary students to comprehend this content teachers need to provide a high level of support.

I chose to use *Egg* as our next mentor text because I felt the information was captivating for students. This text also provided text to help me teach reading comprehension and decoding strategies this group needed. Finally it was a good model of some nonfiction features like headings and bolded words. All of these characteristics of the book would, I hoped, spark conversations on craft decisions authors make to help inform and entertain readers.

We spent almost a month reading *Egg*: reading, discussing, reading again, consulting the illustrations, sharing background knowledge, and reading yet again.

Steve Jenkins and Robin Page write, "A mother splash tetra leaps from the water and attaches her eggs to an overhanging leaf. The father remains nearby and frequently splashes the eggs to keep them moist. As soon as they hatch, the baby fish drop into the water."

To model how readers comprehend complex text, I consulted the illustration showing us that a "splash tetra" is a fish, and I used synonyms to define "frequently." I broke the word "overhanging" into its two parts: over, and hanging, and then showed a real-life example of what it means. We acted out how the mother jumps out of the

water, and how the father uses his body to wet the eggs. Students shared summer pool memories of jumping out of the water and splashing friends who were "hanging over" the deck.

We began to make personal connections to the text in the book. After reading and discussing, "Animals that lay just a few eggs have a lot invested in each one, so they usually take good care of them. Other creatures employ a different strategy. They produce vast quantities of eggs, then pay little attention to them," William, a triplet, was able to connect it to his own life as an animal born with multiple siblings versus his little sister who was born as a single baby. "My mom had to be really careful with Gabby (non-triplet sibling)!" Students were beginning construct understanding of the text through our discussions and their own life experiences.

I also saw students make moves in their writing that came directly from our discussions. In *Egg*, Steve Jenkins and Robin Page use up-close pictures of various eggs so the reader can see the different patterns and begin to imagine the textures. Phoebe applied this strategy in her own book on wasps to help readers understand what wasps look like, comparing a wasp's stripes to a bee's stripes.

Phoebe is an avid writer with a folder overflowing with writing, but her books often lack the details needed to help her readers understand the topic more fully. Anchoring her thinking to an exemplary text, *Egg*, helped Phoebe better consider her readers' needs and ways she could more effectively describe and illustrate her information. She understood that very few of her readers would have seen a bee or wasp up close, and drawing a more to-scale picture of the two insects would not suffice. My reminder, "You can do that in your book just like (author's/illustrator's name) did!" while reading exemplary texts supported Phoebe as she took up this technique independently.

The stripes look a lot like bees

David was another one of my avid writers. He loved sharing factual information and viewed writing time as his chance to record all he has learned about the world. He had spent his entire life studying reptiles and other animals,

and typically introduced himself as a reptile breeder. He was truly an expert. Learning how to write factual books came easily to him, but finding ways to make information come alive to reptile novices (like myself) proved to be more challenging.

David often wrote about dinosaurs, from fictional pieces about them being teased at school to factual books containing information he had learned over the years. One of the facts he wanted to relay in his nonfiction book was the length of a plesiosaurus' neck. Based on our readings and discussions, he understood that reader might wonder just how long the neck was, and simply saying "it's really long" would not adequately describe the length to readers.

In *Egg* Steve Jenkins and Robin Page explain that the size of an animal's egg does not always correlate to the size of the animal. To help readers understand the size of a few of these animals, they line them up next to a silhouette of a human, and readers can quickly see how large or small the animals really are. In other books we had read, authors related size to a known object: "It is about the size of a golf ball." David was able to merge these text and illustration strategies to better describe just how big a plesiosaurus' neck is. Plesiosaurus' neck is not just long, but as long as you!

I talked to David about the evolution of his thinking when writing this page. While creating organized and detailed nonfiction books was the goal of the end product, David helped me better understand how studying nonfiction both as readers and writers was much more significant than the books they would write. David was gaining critical thinking skills as he generated an idea, thought through how to best put the information into words so others would understand, actually wrote the text, and then supported his text with a visual representation of the concept he was communicating. The skills he is practicing as a writer now – consideration of an audience, text organization, using comparisons, support with illustrations – will support him in the coming years as he reads increasingly complex and novel nonfiction, and struggles through transforming research into clear, well-written pieces. Additionally, this page took him several days to complete, so he was able to practice the perseverance and hard work required to make quality work.

His neck is so long that it is the size as you.

For David writing about science content was natural. It is the world he lived in comfortably, so refining his craft was my focus with him. Maira was very different. She viewed writing simply as work to complete and took pride in her over-stuffed writing folder. She began Kindergarten with very little literacy understanding, so this was a big accomplishment for her. Knowing few letters and sounds, her pages consisted mostly of strings of letters with a supporting illustration. On one page she wrote, "trbraum." I asked her to read this to me and, with a confident smile on her face, she spelled out the letters, reading, "T R B R A U M!" As the year progressed, she began copying books she read independently, and then

wrote songs and poems she had memorized. I was happy with her emerging ability to use foundational skills to write readable texts, but I wanted to push her to write her own ideas. Studying nonfiction was the springboard she needed: She loved whales and wanted to teach other people what she knew about whales.

Just as David had, Maira made the move in her writing to show how big whales are by drawing a human next to the whale.

Whales' tails are big. Whales are huge.

As we examine her text and illustrations we can see that Maira didn't quite hit the mark as a scientific, nonfiction writer. It is not accurate that whales are just slightly taller than a 5 year old girl as she shows in her illustrations. Further "I love whales" really isn't appropriate information to include in a factual book. However, Maira shows us what is important and relevant to a Kindergartner. With this work, she shows us how she is taking up nonfiction writing practices to communicate and explain ideas; she is also beginning to write in ways that better inform and entertain readers.

My objective is not for students to write well researched, accurate nonfiction books; rather I want my students to start recognizing that someone is reading and interpreting the information they write. Further I want them to have permission to try out the tools authors use to convey a message in a safe environment. I don't want them to be afraid of the genre of nonfiction. My eyes are set on a more long-term goal: to support my students in becoming adults who can write persuasive articles with factual information, emails that clearly communicate ideas, and Facebook posts that consider a diverse audience. If we expect them to do this in the years to come, we must begin by modeling and supporting their early attempts, allowing them to try out the work on their own.

Nonfiction reading and writing is often an afterthought especially in the early elementary grades. Complex vocabulary and the background knowledge required for comprehension make nonfiction texts laborious to get through with young children. It can be difficult to find texts that contain enough information to be fascinating yet have enough support for our youngest readers to fully understand. Putting aside our favorite fictional stories to devote the time needed to fully digest a single nonfiction text continues to be a struggle for me. However, this type of work helps students more fully understand other genres by recognizing the features that are required of each. Struggling through information helps prepare them to do the work on their own in later grades. Analyzing how authors move from single facts to fully descriptive pieces helps children see how language can be used and refined to more completely illustrate a point.

Nonfiction writing was defined loosely for my Kindergarten students. Many children missed the mark on scientific fact, as the independent reading and research required to write a complete nonfiction piece was much

too difficult for them. However, I provided all of them with opportunities to try out the genre and write about what they knew. Their focus was on conveying information so that others could understand, and so becoming familiar with nonfiction and how to write what they knew to be true.

2.3 Putting It All Together

The freedom and opportunity to write about their world and the topics they are already "experts" on, explicit instruction about the genre of nonfiction and a chance to share writing with an audience were all necessary for my

students to take on the risks associated with writing nonfiction. Getting excited about ideas and crafting writing that invited readers in motivated them to build their literacy skills. As students shared books, laughed together, and heard peers spontaneously shout out, “Wow! I loved your book!”, they come to the realize the power their words carried. As one of my students put it, “It’s like we’re learning AND having fun!

While fiction lines my bookshelves and it is so hard to put aside our classic loves like *A Letter to Amy* and *My Lucky Day*, young children crave the kind of information that introduces them to and opens up whole new worlds and possibilities. Intentional instruction of nonfiction helps move their work from the ordinary information of their daily lives to the type of writing that will stretch their understanding of the world around them, enhance language skills, support beginning literacy skills and motivate them to read, write, and learn even more.

Much of the writing our children will grow to do will be nonfiction: emails, blog posts, work proposals, appeals to community leaders for policy change. Simply exposing them to the genre is not enough. They need to read different types of nonfiction, live in great books, dissect them, pull apart details, and study how writers craft language to achieve a certain outcome. They need to have time to try it out themselves, to experience the disappointment when readers don’t quite understand, to struggle through revision, and to experience the delight of an audience after having shared their understanding of the world. They need to experience the intimidation of starting with a blank page and the joy of creating something others read and are entertained by. As teachers of young children, it is our responsibility to expose children to nonfiction and allow them to try out being nonfiction writers with our guidance and support.

Chapter 3: Finding The Balance: Pairing NonFiction and Realistic Fiction

Finding The Balance: Pairing NonFiction and Realistic Fiction

by Kathy Havens

3.1 Take A Peek - A Second Grade Writing Workshop

Their cheeks are flushed and a wave of excitement flows into the room. Recess is over and as my second graders enter, they are breathless and chatty. Footballs are tossed back into cubbies and hoodies are hung precariously on shiny silver hooks. It is time for Writing Workshop and they are itching to go back to the work they left spread out on the tables moments ago.

Sipping my morning cup of tea, I glance at the dry erase board. Seven purple names are scrawled in a list; partners Hazel and Zoe are at the top. They are in need of a conference. I tap my synergy bell and a pitch perfect C-note fills the room. Voices quiet and faces eagerly turn in my direction. “Second Graders, we will work for 40 minutes (I give them the visual on the classroom clock). At 10:45, when the long hand is on the 9, we will meet for sharing. Use your time well.”

These second graders are doing the work of researchers and authors and are busy answering the weather questions they designed. Working in collaboration with a partner, the children are reading, sketching, writing, and whispering (the voice level rule for Writing Workshop) about various weather topics. In this nonfiction Writing Workshop, these young writers are learning to communicate information through writing and visual

images (graphs, tables, diagrams, sketches, and word clouds). Students are sitting at tables, on the carpet, and side by side in bean bag chairs – clipboards clutched in their hands. They are surrounded by nonfiction books and print material spilling from bright red pocket folders: diagrams, anchor charts, notes, graphs, weather data, news magazines, and short written responses. All of these materials were generated in the weeks leading up to this day. All of us in room 101, myself included, have immersed ourselves in scientific concepts related to weather. Our learning grows from the experiments, demonstrations, observations, tools, videos, guest speakers and books – fiction and nonfiction – that we have studied. The students are working on the culminating project, a nonfiction weather book. Their audience? The other students in the school, their friends and family. Their real world model? BookFlix – an online resource that matches engaging picture books with high-interest grade-appropriate nonfiction texts.

It is time for conferring and scaffolding, the careful conversations that nudge these learners to a deeper understanding and a connection between the new content, their personal experiences, and past learning. As I move to the conference table, I motion for Hazel and Zoe to follow me. Hazel is up first, as she always is, eager to share her work. From a neatly arranged pile of paper pulled from her folder, she locates her carefully penciled notes. Her research question is written clearly at the top of her page, “How does rain happen?” When I glance at Hazel’s notes, I see bulleted facts—recorded carefully from the nonfiction book she used to find the information she needed, looking much like the modeled note taking I taught over the past several weeks. But missing is a clear connection between rain and the earth’s water cycle— a major concept we explored in books, tested, talked and wrote about.

Hazel’s notes

- tiny droplets of water
- hang in clouds
- bump into each other
- join together
- larger, heavier
- fall as rain

After she shares her notes, I nudge her to think about the scientific process she has outlined in her bulleted phrases. I push her to think about the terminology we learned related to the process. I pull a diagram from her folder – a diagram she created after learning about the water cycle through books, videos, and class experiments (see Illustration 3,1 Diagram of a Watercycle). She smiles and quips, “Oh! The water cycle!” I send her back to add those notes to her graphic organizer. Often times I find that I am called upon to help children make these kinds of connections, connections between the content and the scientific vocabulary and what they have come to understand through hands-on experiences and other sources of information.

Now it is Zoe’s turn. Twelve months younger than Hazel, Zoe is the youngest child in my second grade classroom. In many ways she reminds me of the first graders I taught previously. Always smiling, Zoe needs to work with a more capable other. She is thrilled to be Hazel’s partner. Hazel acts as her model and sometimes coach, boosting

her confidence that she can do the work of a second grader. From her jumbled pile of papers, Zoe searches for her research notes and pulls out what looks like a first draft. As she begins to read to me, I realize she has copied the text word-for-word from a nonfiction book. I think to myself, “How did she miss the multiple mini-lessons on note-taking and paraphrasing?” In spite of this, there is reason to celebrate. She has answered her research question, “What comes before a thunderstorm?” with the copied lines of text. This is a sign of growth for Zoe. She located the information she needed. She proudly shows me how she used the table of contents and the index to find what she was looking for. I have learned to celebrate the small steps and not expect perfection. I recognize that now I need to offer her more support on how to paraphrase. Together, we reread the information she located and then close the book. I will ask her to retell me, in her own words, what she read. I might ask her to sketch her understanding or I act as her scribe taking notes (or fact fragments as we have learned to call them) on her graphic organizer. I take a deep breath and turn to her with a smile.

The scenario I describe above is one that occurred well down the road on my journey as a teacher of young elementary students, a teacher who brings both fiction and nonfiction texts together to share with them. In the course of this journey, I met and overcame many obstacles in my path – changing pedagogy, new state and national standards, new school and grade level assignments and my own need to grow as a learner, teacher, and scholar. As I share my journey in the remaining pages of this chapter, I hope that you embrace the meaningful learning experiences possible when teachers intentionally discover the value of pairing fiction and nonfiction texts.

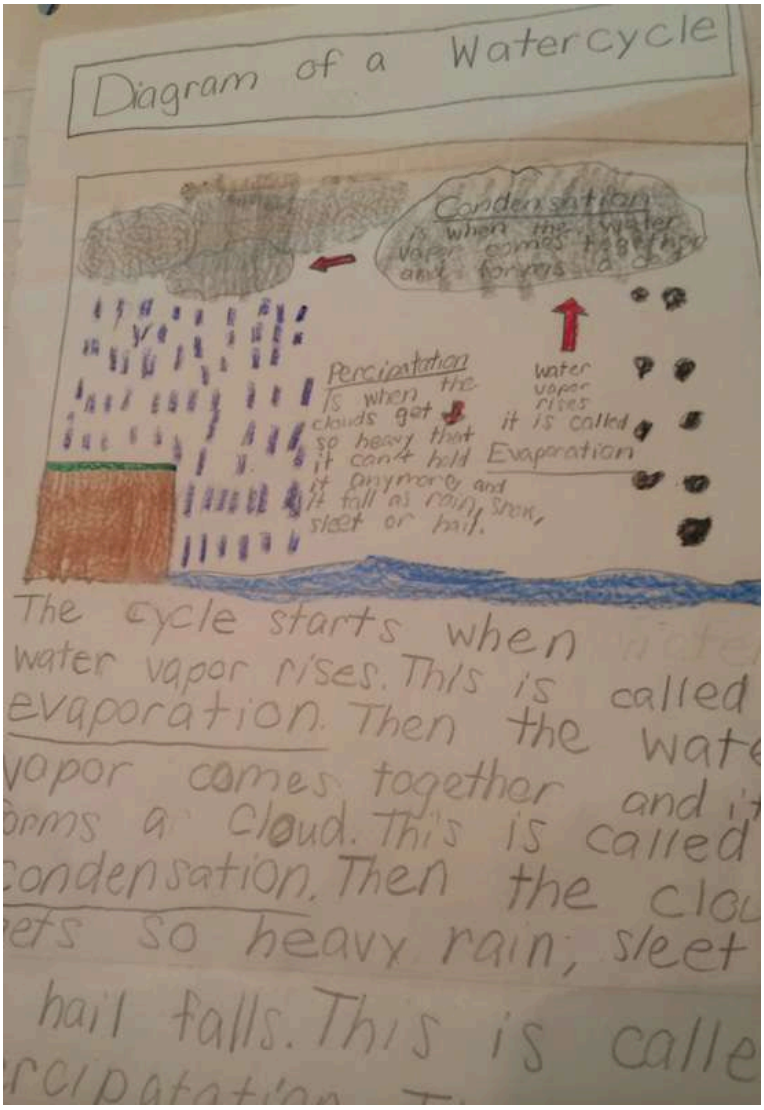


Illustration 3.1 Diagram of a Watercycle by Hazel

3.2 My Journey Begins

I have always felt that teaching young children to write content rich informative pieces is hard work—hard work for the students and hard work for the teacher.

As a veteran teacher who has solved daily classroom challenges for almost three decades, I often grapple with the many nuances of teaching nonfiction writing. Children are naturally curious and wonder about the world they live in. They ask questions: Why are the hamster's teeth so long? What makes a rainbow? Can a tornado pick up the school? It is my task as a writing teacher to tap into this sense of wonder and support children's efforts to communicate what they discover through nonfiction writing experiences.

Children are naturally curious and wonder about the world they live in. They ask questions: Why are the hamster's teeth so long? What makes a rainbow? Can a tornado pick up the school? It is my task as a writing teacher to tap into this sense of wonder and support children's efforts to communicate what they discover through nonfiction writing experiences.

Over the course of my career, I have seen many shifts and pendulum swings in education that have affected the way I think about this task, however. I entered the teaching profession at the height of the Whole Language pedagogy. As time passed, my knowledge and expertise grew as I learned more about Vygotsky's theory of learning and how to apply the theory to my practice. I supported my emerging readers and writers in order to shift their learning. I raised my expectations for what they could do independently and what they could accomplish with support. In subsequent years, state and national standards were introduced, revised, and tested. But in spite of all of these changes, my work with the students in my room has always been based on observation and reflection – what they can do and what they need to learn next.

In the early years of my career, I taught curriculum and planned lessons drawn from high-quality children's literature. I began with a web and planned thematic units that were activity based. We made the little red hen's bread, painted large colorful pictures of the mouse, the dog, and the cat, and compared versions of the story examining illustrations, refrains, settings and characters. These units always began with a pile of books, both fiction and nonfiction, on a specific topic or theme. Typical themes included folk and fairy tales, insects, journeys, bedtime, and magic. I culled the shelves at the public library pulling up to 50 books or more to use for my planning. I selected the best books to read aloud, and introduced other titles for children to browse. I reveled in the beauty of these books, the language and the visual images. I learned about authors, illustrators, the power of the language, and the author's message. I immersed children in these books as we worked our way through the thematic study. I integrated various curricula within each theme – math, science, social studies;

and, of course, I provided many opportunities for reading, writing, talking, thinking, and sharing. We graphed responses to child-generated questions (How many teeth have you lost?), sketched and recorded science observations (What has changed in the incubator?), and read and reread our favorite titles. Children wrote stories in blank wallpaper books, created paintings and diagrams, and compared similar books on large colorful sheets of mural paper, all based on favorite read alouds. The learning was joyful and messy, no high stakes attached.

3.3 The Journey Continues: Standards And Project Based Learning

With the introduction of state and national standards, my planning changed. I studied these new directives detailing what children should know and be able to do and agonized about how to combine these discrete items of knowledge into meaningful, connected learning. I began that process by sitting at my dining room table and cutting the documents apart in order to group the standards in a way that would make sense for my students. Using scotch tape and large pieces of constructions paper, I continued to plan themes but now thought of them more as units of study—and not just a group of engaging activities. I slowly gave up the cooking experiences, the large messy art projects, and the student-designed puppet shows. I was too busy to grieve the loss of these experiences for my students; I was determined to plan and implement even better, more meaningful units of study. I often worked with colleagues, pushing ourselves to think more critically about the learning that would take place in our classrooms and how we would document it.

Years later, I was introduced to Project Based Learning (PBL), drawn from the constructivist theory that students are more highly engaged and gain a deeper understanding when working with and using ideas, and collaborating with others. Students are asked to solve real-world problems that they have ownership of and that call for them to do the real work of scientists, mathematicians and writers. With this new planning process in mind, I once again sat at my dining room table but this time with a blank calendar, my laptop and the revised standards. Instead of scissors and scotch tape, I used the electronic tools on my desktop. Still a messy process, I planned a sequence of lessons which included hands-on experiments, field trips, speakers, real materials, mini-lessons, final projects, rubrics, and assessments. I posed questions that gave my students a meaningful reason to dig deep, work collaboratively, and design their own questions. Again, I collaborated with colleagues, both those in my building and those made through professional learning experiences. I consulted the books of my published mentors including Tony Stead, Katie Wood Ray, and Samantha Bennett. And I collected books, lots and lots of books.

As I tackled this new way to plan, I framed each project with a meaningful problem to solve that offered the appropriate level of challenge for my second graders. It was the kind of problem that I hoped would provide for the sustained inquiry of asking questions, finding resources, and applying information. I included student choice and an end product that could be shared with others. Once again, fiction and nonfiction books remained at the heart of this process. I upped the ante, though. I included more nonfiction texts in my planning and more opportunities for children to engage with nonfiction content as readers and writers. In addition, my Project Based Learning units were now designed around nonfiction topics. Instead of a bedtime unit, we studied the earth, moon, and sun.

Instead of a folk and fairy tale unit, we studied how others lived, worked, and learned in places different than our own. Gone were the units full of experience-based activities, and book extensions. But in their place, I added more meaningful, connected, and information-based studies that supported children's learning of language arts, science, and social studies standards.

3.4 Books -A Compass On My Journey

Throughout all the changes, though, I remained a teacher who loves children's literature. I don't own expensive jewelry or handbags. My joy comes from browsing the shelves at bookstores, reading blogs about the newest and best books out there, and adding titles to my electronic shopping cart. I am giddy when I notice the familiar smiling box on my doorstep holding the next jewel for my collection. Throughout my career, I chose to buy books – lovely, engaging books. I was proud of the collection I had to offer my students; twenty four large red plastic baskets lined the shelves under the classroom windows. Each basket held fifteen or more picture books grouped by genre (biographies, realistic fiction, fantasy, traditional literature, poetry, information) or by topic (sports, animals, school, jokes and riddles, songs). Chapter books filled the remaining shelves placed about the room. Books were displayed on windowsills, chalk ledges, and propped against the walls. In spite of the ever-changing mandates, standards, and a long list of alphabet-soup acronyms, I continued to place children's literature at the center of my planning for the learners in my classroom.

While selecting children's books for my planning, I watched as my colleagues dove into the nonfiction genre with great vigor. They planned rich and engaging units that focused on nonfiction reading and writing. The literature blogs, professional development sessions, and journal articles were full of nonfiction titles and authors. I created a new wish list of mentor texts. I loved these shiny gems and my electronic shopping cart overflowed once again. I embraced the nonfiction genre enthusiastically, but did not want to give up the wonderful stories that were an integral part of my teaching, my passion, and that helped foster a sense of community and curiosity in my classroom. And then one day, as I was organizing my classroom library, I stopped in my tracks as I straightened a basket of beginning chapter books. There in front of me sat my inspiration. Will and Mary Pope Osborne gave me the answer I was searching for. I could share paired texts – fiction and nonfiction – in much the same way these authors paired the Magic Tree House stories and the Magic Tree House Fact Trackers. The time travel adventure series featuring brother and sister, Jack and Annie, were favorites in my classroom and students often turned to the fact tracker to discover more information and answer the questions they generated before, during and after reading the story.

My next task, then, was finding the balance as I paired fiction with nonfiction. I was not intimidated or overwhelmed by this task of pairing books since I was already accustomed to using both fiction and nonfiction books in my planning. Now, however, it was time to think more carefully about this endeavor. I created text sets based on my belief that these pairings were important. Using paired books for read alouds, mentor texts, and content learning would support the new national standards for English Language Arts as well as state standards for Science and Social Studies. The pairings would excite my students, help them develop background knowledge, and increase their vocabularies. I would draw my students in through the fictional story and deepen their

understandings with a nonfiction text on the same topic. Doing so would also offer my students a window into experiences they had not lived. They would be introduced to new perspectives and scientific learning anchored in the realistic fiction I planned to share.

As I began pairing books, I looked for other real-world examples to share with students. My school media specialist, as she often did, came to my rescue. She introduced my class to the subscription website BookFlix. Scholastic BookFlix pairs classic video storybooks with related nonfiction eBooks. The site is organized by content area topics such as Earth and Sky. One such example of a pairing is *Miss Rumphius* and *From Seed to Dandelion*. This website quickly became the centerpiece of my classroom listening center. Children eagerly awaited their weekly turn to "Listen to Books" as part of our morning reading workshop. I regularly overheard students in the computer corner whispering about some new topic or piece of information they encountered while on the BookFlix site. Often their excitement grew and spilled over into the otherwise quiet classroom. Undoubtedly, the book pairings were delightful, engaging, and interesting to my second graders. The BookFlix site quickly became another model of paired books.

A Classroom Nonfiction Book Collection

3.5 The Next Stage Of The Journey: Pulling Together Mentor Texts, Mini-lessons And Projects

As I started the 2014-2015 school year, I learned of another shift. This year my school district adopted the newly revised state science standards. Gone were the science standards I had used the previous year to plan my Project Based Learning units. Teaching about the earth's atmosphere was now a major science theme in the standards for second grade. This included concepts related to air, water, and observable weather changes, topics appropriate for seven and eight year olds. The topic of weather was a good choice. Children in Ohio experience firsthand the changing weather patterns, season to season and within seasons. The school yard became our laboratory. We interacted with weather phenomena and on inclement days observed it from the windows of our classroom. Weather affected our lives – how we played, how we dressed, and how we spent our days (Would tonight's snowstorm bring tomorrow's snow day?). I was excited about exploring this topic and I knew my students would be, too.

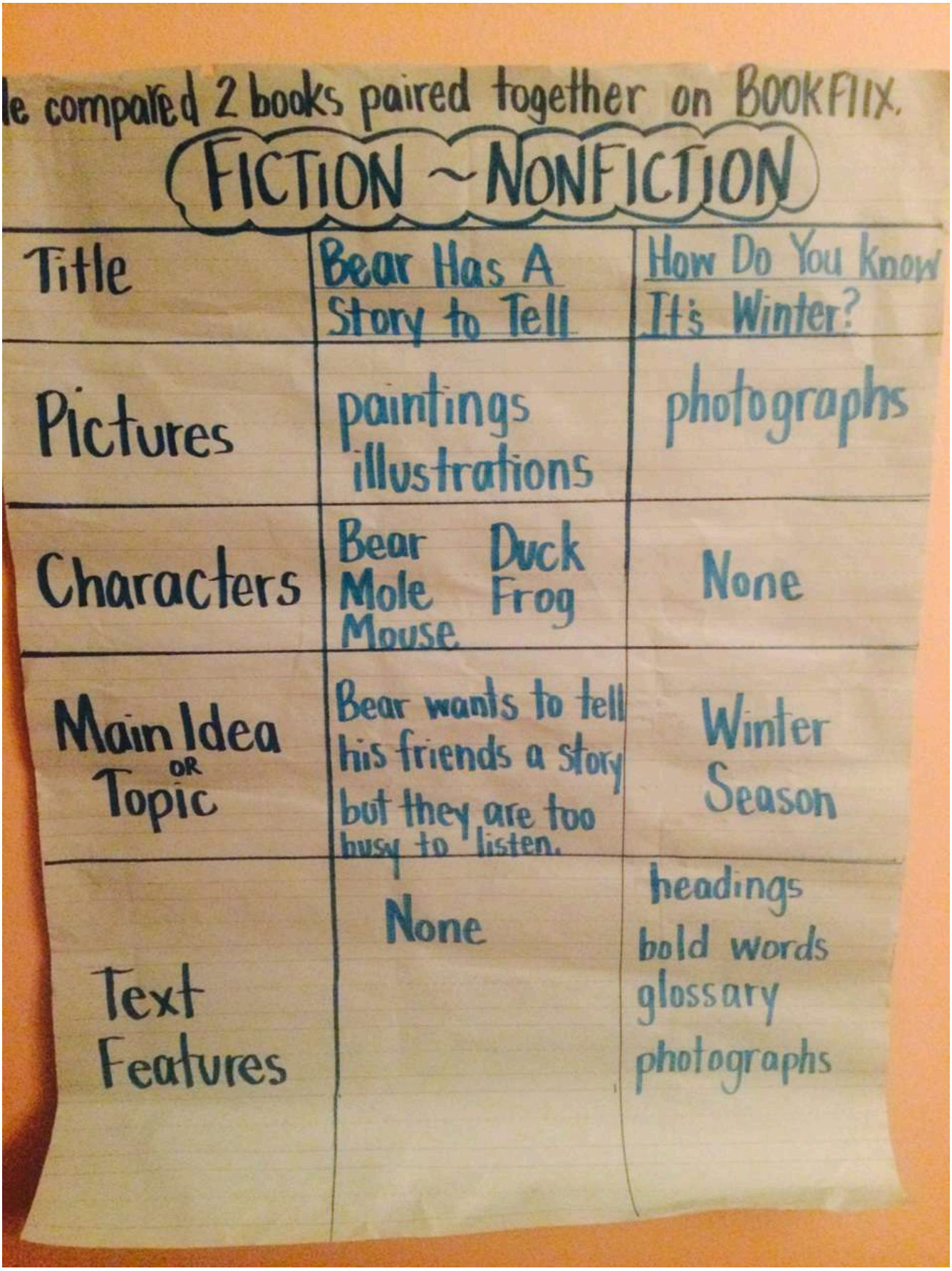
So, once again I collected books. The nonfiction books served as mentor texts and models. I used these books each and every day as part of mini-lessons as I taught my young readers and writers the content related to weather and how to access that information from a nonfiction text and then share it with others through writing. And because of my desire to acquaint my students with both genres, I included realistic fiction texts – stories about windy days, clouds in the sky and foggy mornings. Sharing these stories grounded their growing understanding of moving air and the earth's water cycle in experiences they understood – chasing items carried away by the wind, getting wet in a sudden rainstorm, or through the experiences of others – children rushing to safety from rising flood waters.

At the start of the unit on weather, I positioned my students in two ways. First, as weather researchers, they designed weather questions, collected data, and conducted experiments. Second, as authors, they examined the text features in the nonfiction books for the way information was shared (diagrams, illustrations, fact boxes, captions, headings and bold-faced words). I regularly asked questions that drew their attention to various text features—"What has the author done to help the reader better understand how wind moves?" Or "Where should I look to find information about clouds? What will help me?" We talked about photographs and illustrations and what we could learn from them. We used the table of contents and the index to navigate the text to locate the information we sought. When we encountered a word in bold-faced print, we turned to the glossary to check the definition.

During read alouds I rarely read a nonfiction book cover to cover. Instead, I used the nonfiction texts as supports

to build content and background knowledge for the realistic fiction I shared regularly. When I read aloud the book, Twister, a story of a brother and sister who comfort themselves in the cellar as a tornado passes overhead, I paired it with the book, National Geographic Kids Everything Weather: Facts, Photos, and Fun that Will Blow You Away. After inspecting the table of contents in the National Geographic book, I turned to page 24 and read aloud the information on tornadoes.The information in the nonfiction book in conjunction with the story, *Twister*, helped students better understand concepts such as tornado conditions, wind speed, and tornado safety. And even more importantly, students talked in empathetic ways about how scary it would be to wait alone in a basement during a dangerous storm. This became the process I used as I paired the fiction and nonfiction books throughout the study.

3.6 Road Bumps


le compared 2 books paired together on BOOKFLIX.
FICTION ~ NONFICTION
Title
Bear Has A Story to Tell
How Do You Know It's Winter?
Pictures
paintings illustrations
photographs
Characters
Bear Duck Mole Frog Mouse
None
Main Idea OR Topic
Bear wants to tell his friends a story but they are too busy to listen.
Winter Season
Text Features
None
headings bold words glossary photographs

As I kicked off the study with my class, we weren't without a few storms of our own as we worked to sort out the differences between fiction and nonfiction texts. Confusion rained down on us right from the beginning. Because of the way I planned to pair fiction and nonfiction books, my students understanding the distinction between the two was important. However, I quickly observed students' confusion and misunderstandings. In response, I designed lessons that called upon the students to dig deep to discover the differences and similarities between the two genres.

It all started after a trip to the library to compare the characteristics of two paired books from the Book Flix website. Using a T chart I asked children to share the characteristics of each book (Bear Has a Story to Tell by Philip Stead and How Do You Know It's Winter by Alan Fowler). When asked about characteristics of the nonfiction text, my students easily rattled off the text features they noticed: photographs, headings, bolded words, and glossary. They did the same for the fiction book: illustrations, characters, main idea. In a follow-up lesson, students compared two more paired books on the Book Flix site with much the same results.

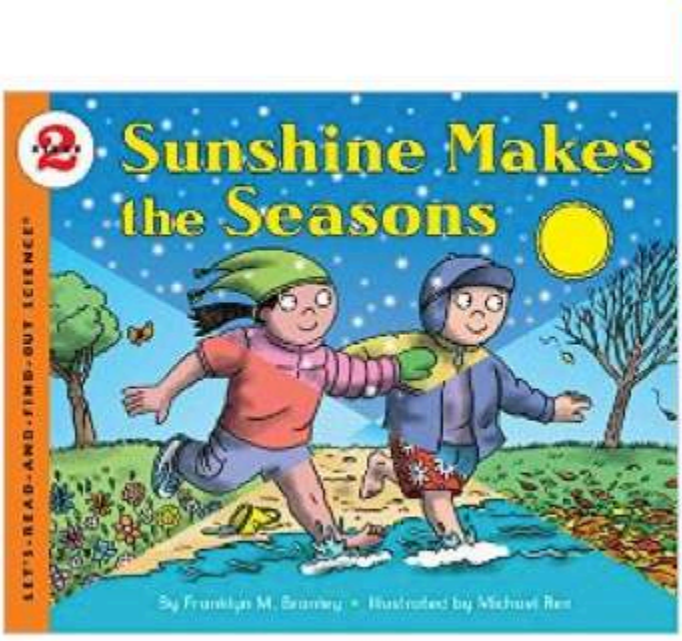
During later sharing sessions, however, I realized that there was still some confusion. When I posed the question, "How do we know a book is nonfiction?" many students insisted nonfiction books included photography, headings, and fact boxes. Even in a classroom full of many illustrated nonfiction texts, my students stuck to the notion that only books with photography and certain text features fit in the genre of nonfiction. I wondered, "Did I over-teach nonfiction text features? Did they leave first-grade with the idea that photography and text features were the determining factors in whether a book was labeled nonfiction? " Certainly, with new national standards, teachers were explicitly teaching text features in the nonfiction books they shared with students. I decided it was time to rethink my own teaching.

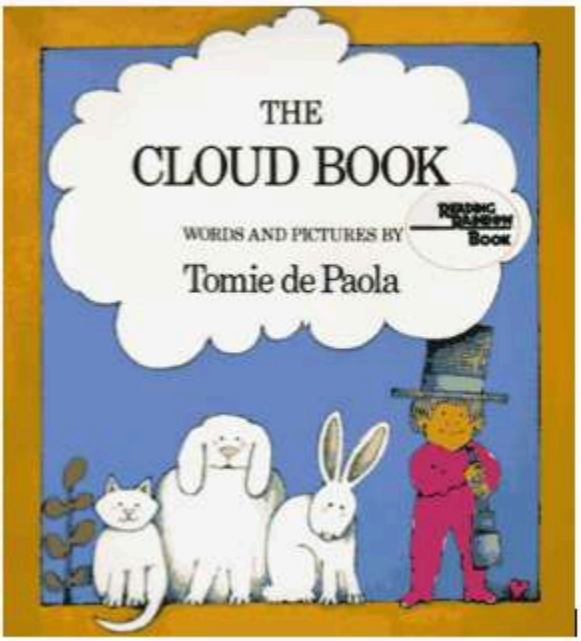
In order to help my students gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of the difference between fiction and nonfiction texts, I planned a book dump. I placed a small collection of books (5-7 titles) at each table and asked children to sort them, creating two piles—one for fiction and another for nonfiction. I intentionally included nonfiction texts filled with illustrations but few text features, nonfiction books with photography, and realistic fiction books. As individuals and groups shared their discoveries, I still observed some confusions, most of which stemmed from the comparison of illustrated nonfiction picture books and nonfiction books with examples of the text features the students had identified earlier. Many children placed the illustrated nonfiction texts in the realistic fiction pile. They did not view titles like Tomie dePaola's The Cloud Book and Lynda DeWitt's What Will the Weather Be as nonfiction books.

More support was needed. To be honest, I was tempted to just tell them. Days were ticking by and my original unit timeline was slipping away. In spite of this, I knew it was necessary to their growing understanding of the genre and nonfiction books in particular, that they discover the answer themselves through some additional focused experiences. I decided there was value in letting my students grapple with this distinction. I pointed them in the right direction by questioning their assumptions, offering models that did not fit their initial definitions, and supporting their efforts to sort out the inconsistencies.

The final lesson involved students comparing two nonfiction texts with the support of a graphic organizer (see Chart 3.1). Before sending students to work, I modeled how to work through the chart, searching for the information listed on the organizer. Student partners compared the books and recorded their discoveries.

The following are two examples of students' charts for the books, *Sunshine Makes the Seasons* and *The Cloud Book*:





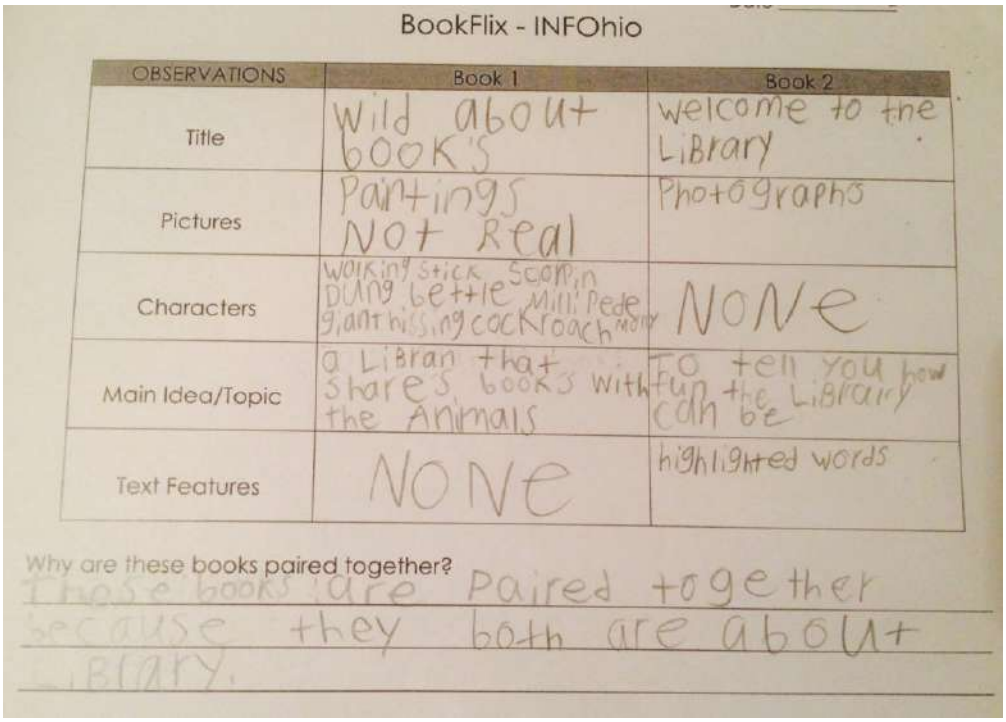
Both of these books included illustrations and few nonfiction text features.

Title	Author	Pictures	Text Features	Content
Sunshine Makes the Seasons	Franklin Branley	paintings	speech bubbles diagrams	how seasons change

Title	Author	Pictures	Text Features	Content
The Cloud Book	Tomie DePaolo	drawings	captions	different kinds of clouds

When we gathered back on the rug to share our findings, students sat with partners, graphic organizers and books piled on their laps. I directed their attention to the Smart Board as I asked for volunteers to share what they discovered. With the electronic graphic organizer displayed on the screen, I typed in the words students read from their charts. With the completion of each, I drew students' attention to the column marked content. Time after time, I posed the question, "Did the book include true facts and information? Is this a nonfiction book?" The answers were always a resounding, "Yes!" As we compared the other columns, the proverbial light bulbs clicked on above their tousled heads. As they sat looking up at the screen and down at their graphic organizers, Sam piped

up, “All nonfiction books have true facts and information but not always all the other stuff.” Heads were nodding across the meeting area. We reached an important Aha! moment. It was time to move ahead with our final project.



BookFlix - INFOhio

OBSERVATIONS	Book 1	Book 2
Title	Wild about book's	welcome to the Library
Pictures	Paintings Not Real	Photographs
Characters	working stick scorpin DUNG beetle Millipede giant hissing cockroach	NONE
Main Idea/Topic	a Libran that shares books with the Animals	To tell you how fun the Library can be
Text Features	NONE	highlighted words

Why are these books paired together?

Those books are paired together because they both are about Library.

Chart 3.1 Example of the graphic organizer adapted for students’ partner work.

3.7 The Journey Continues - Well Down The Road

NONFICTION BOOK PROJECT

Book Partners – Research Topics – Guiding Questions

Calvin Zak Book Title: Twister By Darlene Baily Beard **TOPIC:** tornadoes How do twisters form? What is tornado safety? What is a twister?	Mason Odel Book Title: Tap Tap Boom Boom By Elizabeth Bluemle **TOPIC:** rain How does rain happen? What is thunder? What is a rainbow?	Emmet Leo Book Title: The Terrible Storm By Carol Otis Hurst **TOPIC:** snow What makes snow? Why does snow fall? What are snowstorms?
Jason Zeke Book Title: The Snowy Day By Ezra Jack Keats **TOPIC:** snow What is snow? What is ice? What makes a snowstorm?	Alice Sophia Book Title: The Rain Came Down By David Shannon **TOPIC:** rain What is rain? Where does rain come from? Why is rain important?	Grace Niki Book Title: Snowflake Bentley By Jacquelin Briggs Martin **TOPIC:** snowflakes What is a snowflake? Where do snowflakes come from? What shapes can snowflakes take and are they all the same?
Joey Mikey Book Title: Groundhog Weather School By Joan Holub **TOPIC:** meteorologists What is a meteorologist? What tools does a meteorologist use?	Alfred Wilfred Book Title: It looked Like Spilt Milk By Charles Shaw **TOPIC:** clouds What are clouds? What are 4 kinds of clouds? What is condensation?	Jillian Louise Book Title: Boom Boom By Sarvinder Naberhaus **TOPIC:** seasons What makes the seasons? What are the seasons? How do seasons change?
Bryson Louis Ezekial Book Title: Blizzard By John Rocco **TOPIC:** blizzards What is a blizzard? What is wind? What are blizzards like?	Hazel Zoe Book Title: Thundercake By Patricia Polacco **TOPIC:** thunderstorms How does rain happen? What is lightning/thunder? What comes before a thunderstorm?	JT AJ Book Title: Brave Irene By William Steig **TOPIC:** wind What is wind? How is wind measured? What is windchill?

Each partnership will create a nonfiction text/book to pair with the realistic fiction title listed above.

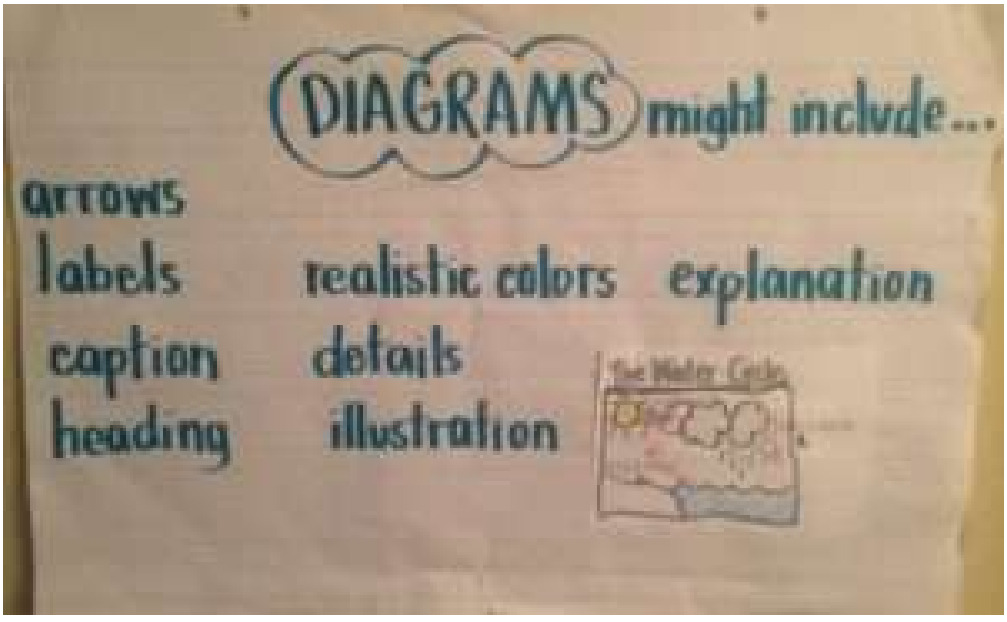
After writing partners selected an appealing realistic fiction text from our shelf of weather books, they decided on the research questions, drawn from the story that would drive their inquiry. Partners Hazel and Zoe chose

Patricia Polacco's *Thundercake* and recorded the following research questions: How does rain happen? What is lightning/thunder? What comes before a thunderstorm? Their next step was research on these questions followed by the writing and designing of a nonfiction book to pair with Thundercake. Other writing/research partners did the same. As the editor for the project, I gave the following directions for the nonfiction books:

"Your book should include both writing and drawing. It should look like the nonfiction books we read that have print and pictures. You can use your science journals, diagrams, word lists, news magazines, graphic organizers, and any of the weather work we completed in class, the work you collected in your red folder, to help you answer your research questions. This should be a book with your words and research – not something you copied word by word from a published book."

At this point in the study, I trusted my second graders to do the work I had prepared them for. However, my work as teacher, coach, and editor was far from over. We came upon many potholes in the weeks that followed. I located readable nonfiction texts for children and did book talks to help match books with researchers/readers. This happened frequently and as the study continued students began to do this for one another. It was an amazing and unexpected reality – one second grade researcher assisting another. When Calvin needed information and ideas about tornado safety, Emmet stepped up and suggested a book he'd read during Sustained Silent Reading time on tornado chasers. He described the cover and the title and quickly located the book and placed it in Calvin's hands. Positioning my students as capable writers, researchers, and authors allowed them to become colleagues and experts for one another.

Through conferences and additional mini-lessons, we tackled plagiarism, inaccuracies, and writing with our audience in mind. The writing pairs designed two-page spreads to share the information they learned in answer to their research questions. They conferred about layout design, headings, illustrations, photography, and ot
her text features. I guided their efforts, suggested changes or additions, and encouraged them to return to the mentor texts that filled the room.



I reminded them of the mini-lessons about diagrams, labels, and captions. I referred them to the anchor charts that hung in the room, the most prominent being our work diagramming the water cycle. After learning about the

water cycle and creating our own “water
cycle in a bag”, I taught two mini-lessons on why nonfiction authors use diagrams in their writing. We looked at diagrams in mentor texts, I shared images from the Internet, and we revisited our editions of Scholastic News. We listed the elements we noticed: arrows,

Water cycle in a bag

labels, captions, headings, realistic colors, details, illustrations, and explanations. I spent time on sketching and diagramming because they are two ways that young writers often communicate information; further, they serve as tools to help children organize their thinking. I expected many of my students would use diagrams in their nonfiction books because they are both reader- and writer-friendly; indeed, the mini-lessons on sketching and diagramming proved to be an integral part of the nonfiction writing process for my second grade authors.

In fact, diagrams did appear in many of the books the students wrote. Zeke, in his book about snow, created a diagram that included 3 numbered panels illustrating how ice crystals in clouds increase in number and size until they become so heavy they fall to earth. His caption read, “These are ice crystals forming in order.” In his book titled *All About Tornadoes*, Zak drew and labeled a twisting funnel of dirt and wind and included a caption next to it. Both examples demonstrate how these young writers used images and scientific language to communicate what they discovered in the course of their research.

Diagrams in Finished Nonfiction Writing

3.8 Surprises Along The Way

My young writers accomplished a great deal during the course of the project. The energy level was high and students were invested in the work they were doing, always with the end goal of a nonfiction book created with an audience in mind. I saw many headings, captions, and diagrams as the students in my class created their nonfiction books. And in many cases, my second graders wrote explanations for the science underlying all sorts of weather phenomena.

Then I noticed something unexpected. In our nonfiction Writing Workshop, the writers began to include other text features to help communicate information to their readers. In his book about *All About Blizzards*, Bryson used the a map to answer the question, "Where do blizzards happen?" His short explanation read, "Blizzards mostly happen in North America (added during one of our conferences), northern Europe, and China." He added a small text box at the bottom of the page which read, "Blizzards mostly happen on high tall mountains." Calvin also used a map to illustrate the location of tornado alley in his book, *All About Tornadoes*. While both boys were missing some important information on these pages (Why do blizzards happen in that particular part of the world? and What is tornado alley?), their work was evidence of their growth as nonfiction writers.

Using Maps in Nonfiction Writing

3.9 Reaching Our Destination: Time To Share And Celebrate

A unit of study, like this one, sometimes takes on a life of its own. Momentum builds and every day brings new

resources, new ideas, and more chances to “get it right.” That is why timelines are so important – even if we find it hard to adhere to them. I planned a sharing event to help us bring our project to a close. The students created story maps to showcase the realistic fiction book that prompted their research, and the finished student-authored nonfiction books were laminated and bound. Our fiction and nonfiction pairings were ready to share. Our media specialist helped us take our project to the next step. Using a digital program she converted the students’ nonfiction books into eBooks. In addition, th
e students created a podcast of the story maps of the fiction book that were then paired with the eBook. Our vision became a reality. Not only could we share the paper editions with our classmates, friends, and family members, our work was now available for a much broader audience on the school website.

It is 7:45am on a spring morning in the second grade hallway. Young writers arrive with families in tow. Zoe is holding tight to her little sister’s hand as her dad follows behind carrying backpacks and lunch boxes. It is the BookFlix launch party. After months of work, my second grade auth
ors are eager to unveil the nonfiction books they’ve created. Zoe pulls her yellow hosting sheet from her neatly organized pile of books and folders. She stands up the book, *Thundercake*, so it holds a prominent place on the round table. Carefully, in front of that book she places the treasure she is ready to share, her nonfiction book, *Flash, Boom! A Book About Thunderstorms*. Moments from now, she will take her dad and sister and lead them to the computer lab just down the hall to share the eBook versions of this pairing. Zoe is a writer, a researcher, and a published author. She is beaming, proud of what she accomplished.

Zoe and her classmates were successful in their efforts to write nonfiction texts because of the access they had to mentor texts, mini-lessons, and the time and space to write for a purpose. I immersed these young writers in the content and vocabulary, provided hands-on experiences, and offered opportunities to gather facts, sketch, record observations and collect data. But as importantly, I shared high quality children’s boo

ks, both fiction and nonfiction, to infom and extend my students’ understanding and knowledge. As I shared these book gems with my students, they, in turn, produced treasures of their own.

Tremont BookFlix

Welcome your guests.
Take your guests to the computer lab.

Log in and give them a demonstration of **Infohio** – **Book Flix**. Explain how the books are paired – fiction and nonfiction

Return to classroom.

Share weather **projects**/learning – yellow folder

WEATHER PROJECTS TO SHARE

Share the **fiction book** you chose to use as a jumping off point for your nonfiction research and writing.
Share your topic and research questions.

TITLE

STORY MAP

RESEARCH TOPIC AND QUESTIONS

TOPIC

QUESTIONS

Share your research/drafts.
Share your nonfiction book.
Return to lab and launch your Tremont Book- Flix project.
Ask your guest to sign your guest comments sheet.
Thank your guests for coming.

Book Flix Party Hosting Sheet

Chapter 4: Why Bees? Writing Nonfiction Together In Kindergarten

Why Bees? Writing Nonfiction Together In Kindergarten

by Michelle Coneglio

Have you ever looked at a bee? I mean really looked closely at a bee? A few years ago, my Kindergarten students and I were at a local arboretum on a field trip. As I was walking among the flower gardens that had been planted around the historical home on the property, a large bee who was busy collecting nectar and pollen from the lavender and peonies nearby caught my eye. I moved in for a closer look, and I could see the pollen baskets on the hind legs of the bee so loaded with pollen she could barely fly! I was excited to see in person what we had been reading and researching about. I gathered as many students around me as possible to witness this incredible sight. As we watched the bee together, my mind buzzed with questions! Was there a literal basket? I didn't see one. How did the pollen that was collected in the hair on the legs make it back to the basket? What WAS this basket?

As a teacher, I theoretically understood the importance of allowing children to ask their own questions and to choose topics they were passionate about; but it wasn't until I became curious about bees myself that I truly felt the power of taking a stance that valued inquiry and curiosity. The following is the story of the impact this realization had on how my students and I read and wrote about bees during one school year. The story has evolved over five years of changing standards and district requirements and includes strategies that I tried, changed or abandoned over the course of time. I begin with the "Drawing and the Science Center" section which explains how I tried to set up a classroom environment of curiosity and wondering and how I taught drawing at the beginning of the school year. The next two sections, "Asking Questions" and "Asking, Answering, Asking….Research" take the reader through the inquiry process we used as we read nonfiction picture books, asked questions and researched about bees. In the "Power of Visual Images" section, I explain some of the thinking and decision making my students and I were engaged in as we explored and experimented with the literary genre and the disciplinary content in nonfiction picture books about bees. In the "Complex Content" section, our research is "finished" and the writing begins. I describe how my young writers decide to begin writing their bee books and what I learned from this process.

Teacher's Note

4.1 Drawing and the Science Teacher:Getting Started with Nonfiction

When I began teaching Kindergarten, I was perplexed about what exactly should go into the science center and why I needed one in the first place. I suppose I was hoping that the items on display would encourage students to look closely and begin to ask questions. I wanted to set the stage, create an environment of wonder and curiosity that would pay off at the end of the year when we would be fully immersed wondering, asking questions and doing research as we read and wrote nonfiction.

I didn't have any microscopes or ready-made kits from the teacher store. However, I did have some hand lenses and, of course, my backyard. I began collecting sweet gum seed pods, pine cones and leaves. I dug through the many rocks, shells, pieces of driftwood and jars of sand from my trips to northern Michigan as a child and put them in containers on a bookshelf in my classroom. I brought in pots of lemon balm and mint from my garden.

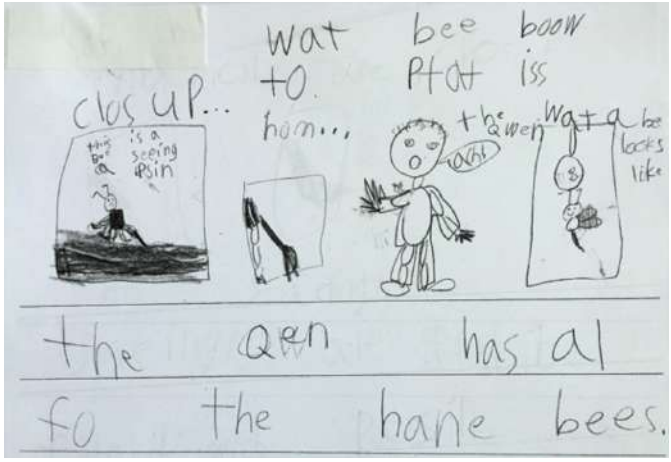
The turtle shell from the dead turtle that I packed out of the woods on a backpacking trip as well as a parent-donated, molted tarantula skin were also put on display. As I introduced the center early in the school year, I tried to demonstrate to my students how what they did here was an important part of their work as researchers. It took a lot of explaining but I think I planted the beginnings of how to do research through the activities of the Science Center!

Besides encouraging a sense of inquiry and wonder in my young students through the Science Center, I also began the year by teaching my students how to draw during our Writing Workshop time. Through drawing young students, who do not yet have the ability to write well-developed texts, can record what they are thinking and observing and explain themselves more deeply, enhancing their messages with visual details. Further, they receive feedback as friends comment on the meaning their drawings convey. By honoring drawing as a composing process, I was helping children learn about the craft of writing.

Because we began the year with personal narratives, I began modeling how to draw people and animals using ovals. Then I used colored pencils to add clothing, skin colors and/or fur. I emphasized the importance of drawing realistically to teach my students how making their illustrations as real as possible helps the reader to understand the message they are trying to convey on the page.

Here is how Libby used the oval shape as she was illustrating her bee research ("What bees do to protect its home"); she included three "close up" fact boxes of a bee stinging a person, a stinger and the bee outside the hive. In the center of the page, is a person being stung with the appropriate speech bubble: "Ach!"

In the weeks that followed, as other writing needs took over our Writing Workshop mini-lessons, drawing lessons moved to science time. Observing and recording our observations was one aspect of thinking like a scientist. I modeled how to look carefully at various artifacts from the science center and how to draw the items as realistically as I could always emphasizing that even if it didn't look exactly like the object, I was doing my best. After many days of modeling how to draw realistically, I made sure that the science center had a ready supply of writing tools and scraps of paper for recording observations.



Libby's use of the oval shape in her drawings to accompany her bee research

Even toward the end of the year as part of a nonfiction unit on how the parts of plants help them survive, I continued to model how looking closely can help us discover new information. When drawing sweet gum seed pods, I modeled how I first noticed the sharp, spiny covering of the seed pod. I wondered aloud why this seed pod
needed to be so sharp while sharing that this is why I have to wear my shoes when I go out into my yard! After discussing that this is one way the plant is protecting its precious cargo – the seed, I decide that when I drew it, I would have to draw the spines so that my audience realized how important they are to the survival of the seed.

What We Observed

On another day, after germinating lima bean seeds, my curious scientists wondered about what was inside the seed. After carefully peeling the seed coat away, they were thrilled to see the tiny seed leaf inside surrounded by its “food” that would help it begin to grow. The thrill of discovery, drove them to record their observations as accurately as they could.

I couldn’t wait to see how this idea of looking closely and drawing realistically would transfer into their nonfiction work about bees. However, before we could write our nonfiction books about bees, we had a lot of work to do – reading and researching – to create our common knowledge of bees.

4.2 Asking Questions: Getting Started With Research

It's 8:50am and the bell has rung to signify that students can begin to enter the classroom. I'm furiously typing to finish an email response to a parent when my first student, William, enters the classroom. As he walks in, I glance over and say, "Good morning, William!" And he says, "How hot is lava?" Not "Good Morning" or "Hello". He enters the room asking a question he is curious about. Is he thinking, "This is that place where we ask questions and try to find the answers"? If he is, I have done my job! (Event recorded in my classroom, April 2015)

It is the middle of April and time to begin our bee unit. As I reflect upon ways that I have started this unit in previous years with the use of a KWL chart (where we ask students to tell us or show us in their drawings and writing what they (K)now, what they (W)ant to know and then what they have (L)earned), I remember my past experiences. First of all, whenever we ask kindergarten students what they want to know about a topic or if they have any questions, inevitably they will tell story after story. Their egocentric psyches want to show us what they know! And when we ask how they know that, it's usually because "My dad told me!" The other problem I have encountered with the traditional KWL chart is that much of what kindergarteners think they know about a topic

usually includes some misconceptions or misinformation. Thus, we need to research to confirm if what we think we know is indeed true or not.

As I reflected about how to begin **this** year, I decided that I wanted the emphasis to be more on the inquiry from the beginning. It occurred to me that developmentally, Kindergarteners really do think that what they KNOW has to be true; so, maybe starting by asking them what they know about a topic was not the best for creating an atmosphere in which as learners and researchers we would be engaged in finding out more about a topic. I wanted to think of a way to generate questions from the start to help fuel interest in the topic and lead us to our research.

To that end, on the first day, as we were gathered on the rug, I asked students to think about what comes to their minds first when they hear the word "bee". As they shared, I scribed their ideas on a piece of chart paper. One child shared a story about her friend who was running through the grass and got stung by a bee. Right away, I wondered out loud about why that bee stung the child? The students, of course, had all kinds of answers. As they were speaking, I wrote "Why do bees sting?" on a post-it and placed it under the "wondering" subheading.

The next day, we revisited that list and decided what we thought we knew including why we were sure (our evidence) and generated questions at the same time. By the end, our chart was loaded with more questions than statements, giving us a purpose for our research stemming from student inquiry.

As a science inquirer, I knew that what I probably should do was to take my 27 Kindergarten students outside and let them observe bees naturally. That approach had certainly worked for me. However, the reality is that I hesitate to allow five year old children to become bitten (or stung in this case) by the inquiry bug. Over time, I have discovered that it usually takes immersing ourselves in our research to overcome fears that may lead to swatting and consequently being stung by the very bees we are researching. For me, it took a trip to an apiary where the beekeeper allowed a couple of male drones who don't have stingers to crawl all over my hands and arms to get me comfortable! So, maybe Kindergarteners shouldn't be researching bees! Perhaps you're right. However, bees are fascinating and complex creatures that arouse curiosity in young children while, at the same time, they can be frightening to them. And there is yet another reason to study bees! There is an important life lesson to be learned about fearing something just because we are uneducated about that something…or someone.

The Klew Chart

4.3 Asking, Answering, Asking…The Research Process

It is day 3 and our KLEW chart is loaded with our questions about bees. Room 104 is literally buzzing with excitement to get started! Over the next few weeks, during the read aloud portions of our day, I began to read nonfiction picture books in order to find answers to our many questions. Also, because at the end of our inquiry unit on bees I expected each child to produce a nonfiction book in order to educate our audience about the importance of bees, I also used these books to help us consider how authors organized and presented the content – what kind of nonfiction features did they use, what kind of writing craft decisions did they make and how were the books illustrated. This was a lot to investigate in our short (15-20 minute) sessions together on the rug. Some days we were able to discuss both craft AND content but on most days, the curiosity, the need to find the answers was what consumed our time with these books.

And to be quite honest, most of the nonfiction books that I had borrowed from the library did not vary much

in their organizational structure. For the most part, these books had the standard table of contents, information presented under subheadings with fact boxes and captions included, and a glossary at the end. What was interesting, at least to my Kindergarteners, was that despite the similar organization, the titles differed. Of the books that provided information about bees in general, three books had a title like Bees or Honeybees. However, one was titled, *Incredible Bees* while another was called *It's a Good Thing there are Bees*. These books generated a discussion about how authors use titles as their "hook" to entice us to read their books. Interestingly, when students came to title their own books as we prepared for publication, thirteen chose the title Bees while fourteen chose a title with a hook to invite the reader into their work.

Our research continued throughout April and into early May. As we found answers to our questions, I recorded the information on a post-it note or just wrote the information under the "what we have learned" section on the chart. Inevitably, the more we read, the more questions we had. I tried to write them down as quickly as I could, on scraps of paper when necessary. One day, the questions were coming too quickly for me to record them all and our time on the rug was coming to an end; so I sent my curious scientists to their tables to write down their own questions which we later added to the chart.

Questions That Students Asked

This is exactly the kind of excitement that I wanted to instill in my young researchers. When Matthew learned that wax comes out of a bee's body (a fact we in Room 104 call, "mind blowing"), he wanted to know exactly how that wax was made inside the body! And then there was Abigail who wanted to know how the eggs got in the queen's body in the first place. Robert was curious about how exactly the antennae work! This is why we do inquiry. We want kids to ask those questions; even those difficult ones that keep us thinking, reading, writing and creating meaning.

And yet, sometimes these questions don't really have a place in our whole classroom discussions because, although one student is extremely fascinated by the question, other students could care less! Similarly, most nonfiction written for elementary children will not have information to address such complex questions. Even the beekeeper, who we visited on a research trip to a local organic farm, didn't have the time to address all of our complex questions in one visit.

And so we are left with another conundrum when negotiating community research about complex content. How do we keep the research moving along, answering as many questions as possible (even as more are being generated) while keeping as many children engaged as possible? Inquiry takes time. But, in my opinion, it is time well spent. It's that slowing down, taking the time to really look, think and wonder that can lead to amazing writing by Kindergarten students. And when you feel that you don't have the time to answer all the questions, then do what I did after our visit to the beekeeper: I looked up the information online, printed it out and sent it home for families to use to support their curious scientists!

The sheer number of questions that came up during our research was not the only issue that arose for me as a teacher. Sometimes students had difficulty with the seriousness of the content or they were not emotionally ready for some of the concepts. On the day that my students made the connection that a dwindling bee population would not be good for food production, Chase piped up with his slogan, "No bees, no us!"

Immediately, Gina replied, “No us? My mommy would miss me too much!” and broke down into tears!

Every day after that, she would get upset if any of our discussions approached the topic of OUR survival! As a community, we reassured Gina that scientists were indeed working to help bees. I also took these moments as an opportunity to point out that this was why our work, reading, researching, writing, was so important! We had an important job to do – to educate our audience about bees. Poor Gina, however, continued to be so worried about the bee situation that she ultimately wrote her nonfiction book about butterflies, not bees. Emotionally, despite our support and encouragement, she was unable to handle the intensity of the content.

Another emotional moment occurred while reading about the short lifespan of bees, especially the workers. The text I read that day said: “After a worker bee has made about 400 long flights, the muscles in her wings and legs are worn out. She usually falls to the ground and dies of exhaustion” (Honey in a Hive, Anne Rockwell, p. 17).

My intention was to read on quickly, but in the slight pause between this paragraph and the next, Nairan said, “That’s just the silly bees who didn’t listen.”

I was puzzled by his response but before I could think of what to say, Maddie said, “All bees have to die sometime because they are living things.”

Then Robert suggested, “They don’t die if they rest one time. I think they would just die when the wings wear out.”

“Yeah”, Helen chimed in. “It’s like when you’re running and you get worn out.”

I intervened in the discussion at that point: yes, that was a good personal connection to being “worn out”, but I didn’t think any of them needed to worry about expiring while running during recess time!

Finally, Nairan had the last word, “It would be too sad if they die.”

Again, for some children, the reality of life and death that inevitably comes up in all areas of life science is just too real for their tender hearts. My students responded in the way that a community of five and six year olds do best, by comforting and supporting Nairan as they shared stories of their own deceased pets and grandparents.

Fortunately, life goes on and it did, day after day, as we continued to be fed by the need to know more. After many sessions of reading aloud, summarizing our information and recording our answers on multiple sheets of chart paper, we finally got to the point where more of our post-it notes were in the “what we have learned” section than in the “what we are still wondering” section. I realized that it was time to move on. We will always still be wondering. And that’s OK. But I had to let go of my need to answer all of our questions. If we were going to be real scientists, (and we were!), we would never be truly finished. There were always going to be more questions.

4.4 The Power of Visual Images: Drawing Nonfiction

> I have just finished reading the text that goes along with a painting of the blooms of Black-eyed-Susans that have a violet colored rectangle painted over them with an even darker color highlighting the middle of the bloom. The text explains to us that flowers have ultraviolet markings on them that people can't see but that bees can and that these markings lead bees to the pollen and to the nectar inside the flower. Chase raises his hand and says, "Those pages should be in Incredible Bees. We just learned that and that's just awesome!" (Event recorded from my classroom, April 2015)

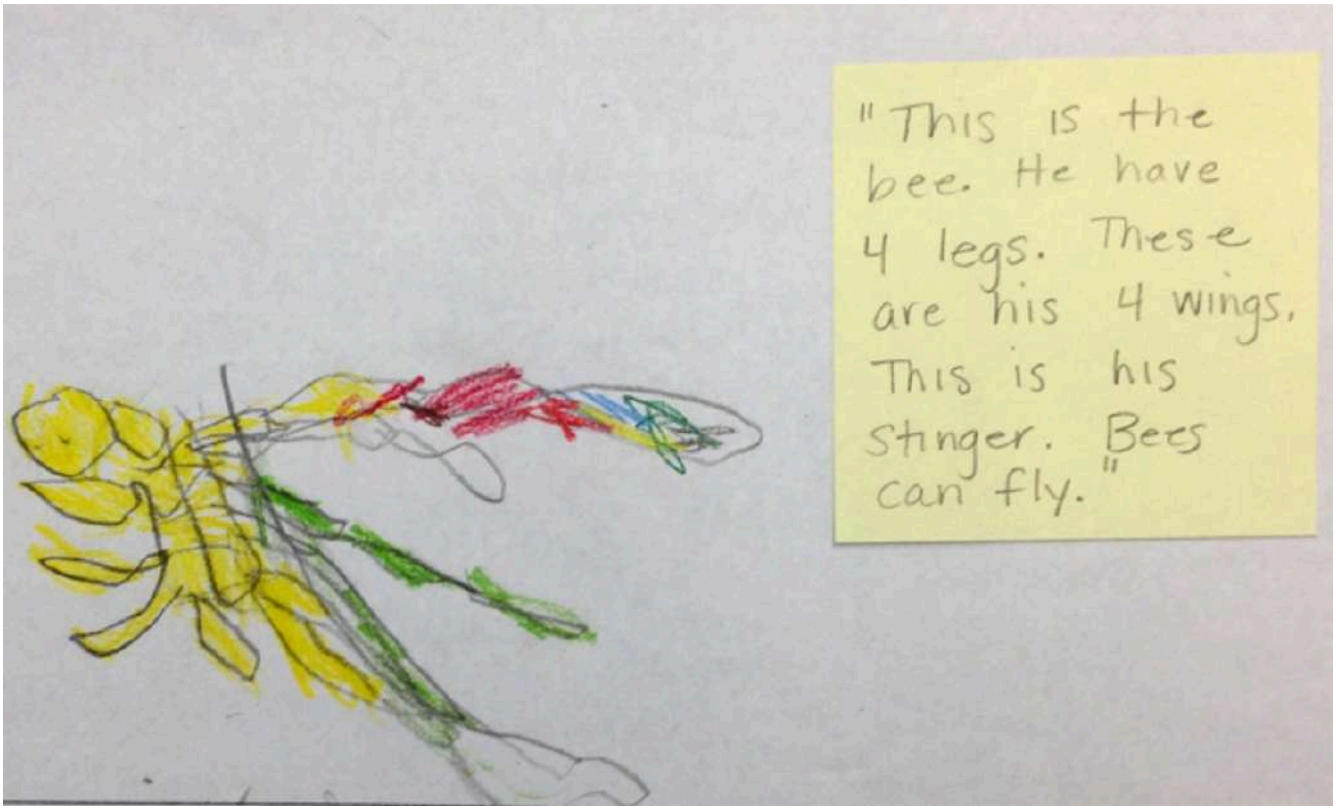
I had to agree with Chase. What a fascinating concept! It's like bees have super powers! And the technique S.D. Schindler used to paint that violet hued box over the flowers really made an impact on all of us. I marveled aloud over the decisions that authors and illustrators make when they are creating books. We discussed why the illustrator thought it was important to paint that box over the middle of the bloom and decided that this was this illustrator's interpretation of what the bee sees. I related this technique to a decision that our own Maddie had used as an illustrator in her Writing Workshop story the day before. Her illustration had shown two legs towering over some flowers in a garden. She had explained that she was trying to show how much taller the human was

than the flowers in the garden. Wow, adult illustrators make decisions just like us as they pick details to emphasize an important concept!

This is a garden filled with flowers

Schindler's technique helped clarify a concept in much the same way as the illustrations in the work of Kindergarteners do by complementing the written text with detailed drawings to enhance meaning. However, good nonfiction picture books use a variety of visual images (photographs, diagrams, fact boxes and drawings to name a few) to pull young readers into their pages. Students can look at these visuals and gather information without reading pages filled with lines of text that they are unable to decode or understand. For many Kindergarten students, modeling during read aloud time how to take the information from the visual image and pair it with the meaning from the text is an important way to support them as nonfiction readers.

Likewise the visual images that draw us into our nonfiction texts during read aloud time also draw us into our writing work. Just as for some students the visual image was the main source of meaning when reading, for others, the drawing might do all the communicating. Edgar transferred from another school and had not had the rich literacy experiences in his preschool years as the majority of the other students in my class had. His drawing of a bee was one of the most recognizable pieces of work that he produced all year although the written text below his picture was his name written three times. When I asked him to dictate his message, he said: "This is the bee. He have 4 legs. These are his 4 wings. This is his stinger. Bees can fly." On another day, he dictated to me: "This is the bee again. I put his legs on. That is stripes. That's a flower. Bees sting kids." On May 8th, he revised "Bees sting kids" to "Bees help kids." In his later writing about pollination, he attempted to draw a flower in the fact box and used multiple colors. A less detailed picture of a bee is next to it. He dictated to me: "Bees get nectar. Bees help get people food." While Edgar's expressive language was limited, drawing that first bee gave him the confidence and the format to share the content knowledge that he learned (and even revised!) True, some it was inaccurate but even adult scientists are constantly revising their work as new information comes to light.



This is the bee. He have four legs. These are his four wings. This is his stinger. Bees can fly.

I even found myself needing to revise based on new information one Writing Workshop as I was working on my drawing of a bee. I explained to my students that I wanted to help my readers visualize the pollen basket. In some of our resources, pollen baskets were described as the large balls of pollen attached to the legs of the bees (as depicted in photographs) that were held in place by long hairs. In another book, we found an illustration that depicted an actual cut, or groove in the leg providing a physical space in which to collect pollen. At this point, we discussed how adult scientists are still learning and questioning, thus explaining why we would sometimes come across conflicting information in our sources. Another caution when inquiring into complex content, but not a reason to stop.

I continued with my drawing and my thinking aloud about how to make decisions as an illustrator. I drew the bee's leg with the groove in it explaining that this made the most sense to me. As I was drawing, Robert raised his hand. When I called on him, he proceeded to tell me that our beekeeper friend and expert had told Robert's group during our research trip that the hairs on the legs of bees are like tree branches! What?! None of our resources depicted the hair on a bee in such a way! However, I was not going to discount our expert so I added tiny lines to my hairs so that they looked like tree branches. I thanked Robert for helping me make sure that my illustration in my nonfiction book was as realistic as possible. That's what writers do! We give each other feedback! At recess time, I ran back to our room to search online. Could this be true? Had Robert understood the bee-keeper correctly? Sure enough, I found a magnified photograph of perfect tree branch hairs on the leg of a bee. My need to be accurate drove me to dig even deeper in my research. This was what complex content was forcing us to do every day. Teaching nonfiction writing this way can be complicated and time consuming. But I believed that this approach helped my Kindergarten students become interested readers and writers of nonfiction.

4.5 Complex Content: Writing Nonfiction

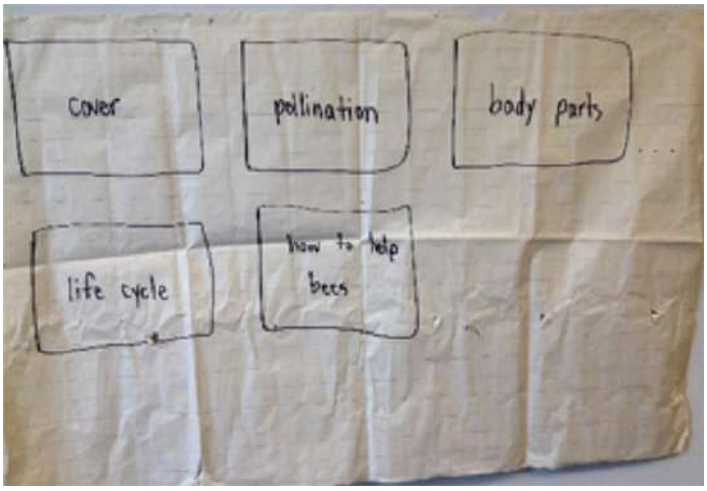
Teacher's Note

It is the second week in May and we have wondered, read, asked more questions, read some more, discussed how writers make decisions, participated in some hands-on activities to solidify content, consulted a beekeeper, experimented on our own with nonfiction writing techniques… and now it was time for my young writers to tackle the challenge of explaining pollination in their own bee reports. But, despite all our preparation, I was worried. Have you ever tried to explain the pollination process to someone and describe why it's important for food production? I don't think I ever really thought about it myself until the summer of my parents' zucchini mystery. The solution to that mystery left me with an understanding of the importance of bees and the pollination

process. But how would a five year old be able to understand and explain it? Was the concept so complex that Kindergarteners shouldn't be expected to explain it?

Further, I was worried that beginning our nonfiction writing with the pollination page might not be the best decision. It's a complicated concept. Would beginning with writing about such complex conceptual information thwart my students' stamina for the rest of their work? But I reminded myself that my students had made the unanimous decision to start their nonfiction books by explaining the importance of bees as pollinators. Based on their own original misconceptions about bees generated that first day of the project, they understood that they would have to change the minds of their audience if they were going to save the bees. It was going to be their job to explain why bees are important from the very beginning of their writing. Then they could write about the life cycle and those cool body parts (because those visual images had drawn them in) and end by informing the audience about how to help save the bees.

Teacher's Note



I continued to feel uncertain. Was it because I didn't think the students fully understood the process? I reminded myself that I purposely addressed this in Community Writing. I knew it was complex. I wanted us to think through the pollination process and as a community, compose an explanation of pollination. My reasoning was that after several repeated readings, my students would have internalized the language and would be able to access it when they were composing independently in their bee books.

Teacher's Note

Gathering my courage I decided to begin. I purposely moved Writing Workshop to be the first activity of the morning that day. I wanted our brains to be fresh and ready to work! After referring them to the graphic organizer

and pointing out that we would all begin our work on the pollination page, almost everyone chose paper with the fact box labeled, “An Inside Look”. Before we left the rug to begin writing, we discussed that it would make sense to illustrate the inside of a flower in the fact box to show the parts necessary to the pollination process. After pencil caddies and crayon boxes were brought to the tables and my young authors settled into their “studio seats”, I pressed play on the CD player signifying the beginning of our time to write and stood back while they worked.

That night as I reflected on their pieces, I was struck by the beautiful illustrations. Bees were flying from flower to flower. Some students had even used dotted lines to show movement as we had learned from mentor texts throughout the year. Others enlarged the proboscis (tongue) to show it reaching into the flower while pollen baskets loaded with pollen hung off the legs reminiscent of the photographs in our nonfiction books. Still others had chosen to emphasize the stigma and stamen inside the flower both in the fact box and in the illustration itself. Based on this work, I felt my Kindergarteners understood that visual images are integral to communicating knowledge to others especially in nonfiction texts. Moreover, their visual images conveyed accurate and important information about the pollination process.

Next, I took a look at how my scientists explained the pollination process in their writing. The following are some examples:

“A bee collects pollen for us to survive.” Abigail

“Bees are amazing. They give us food.” Emma

“Bees fly from flower to flower.” Etta

“I love bees because they make food for us and everyone in the world.” Daniella

“The stamen needs to get to the stigma. It will die. It will turn into an apple.” Matthew

“If there were no pollination, no food, no us.” Sara

“Bees pollinate flowers to help us survive.” Chase

I confess that I was disappointed. Not that many days before, during Community Writing time, Chase had explained pollination so succinctly and so appropriately for a five year old that we all voted to record his explanation verbatim: “Bees move pollen from one flower to another flower. It has to be the same kind of flower. Then the flower gives us seeds and food.” And yet here he wrote: “Bees pollinate flowers to help us survive.” As a writer, was he satisfied that his illustration of a bee hovering over flowers with arrows to indicate flying and the diagram of the inside of a flower in the fact box gave us the information he wanted us to know? I knew he could explain it more clearly. He said it more clearly while sitting on the rug. Why couldn’t he do it in his writing? And, of course, he was not the only one that I expected more from.

It seemed as though my worst fear had come true. The concept of pollination was too difficult. My students really didn’t understand it deeply enough or hadn’t internalized it in such a way as to be able to communicate it in their written text. Maybe I should leave it alone, let their visuals do the talking. But I couldn’t let it go. So, I did what many Kindergarten teachers do when they want young children to absorb difficult content—we dramatized it!

Teacher's Note

I had one group of students stand up on one side of the rug representing flowers while another group stood up on the other side representing flowers. The group in the middle were the bees. I gave the first group of flowers some pompoms to hold in their hands. Next, the bees flew over to those flowers, collected some of the pollen, and flew over to the other group of flowers. Then, they reversed the sequence to illustrate that all of the flowers were being cross pollinated. When this was done, the flowers wilted and died, folding their arms around themselves to represent the fruit (full of seeds) that grew as a result of being pollinated.

Later that day, I took a break from math groups and brought groups of students to my table to revisit their pollination pages. I explained that as reader, I wanted to know more about pollination than what they had written on the page. As I worked with each group, I noticed that indeed, they could explain more about the pollination process orally, but in order for them to get more of that explanation on the page, I really had to support the writing process by holding their message for them as they reread and engaged in all of the complex actions I describe as the miracle of Kindergarten writing.

Teacher's Note

What I learned that day is that I needed to be especially cognizant of the complexity of the encoding process when asking students to write complex content. If I expected my Kindergarten students to write complex ideas and concepts, I needed to be ready to support their oral language as they worked through the lengthy and time consuming task of getting their messages down on paper. With just a little extra support and time, most students could and chose to expand on what they had already written in an effort to make their meaning more clear. In essence, this was more about the process of receiving feedback and trying with support to do what adult authors who participate in a writer's group do on a regular basis. I had previously introduced the idea of revisiting our work, and we have been giving feedback on a daily basis as authors shared their work at the end of each Writing Workshop session; but this was the first time I specifically asked my authors to try to explain a complex concept in more detail in their writing.

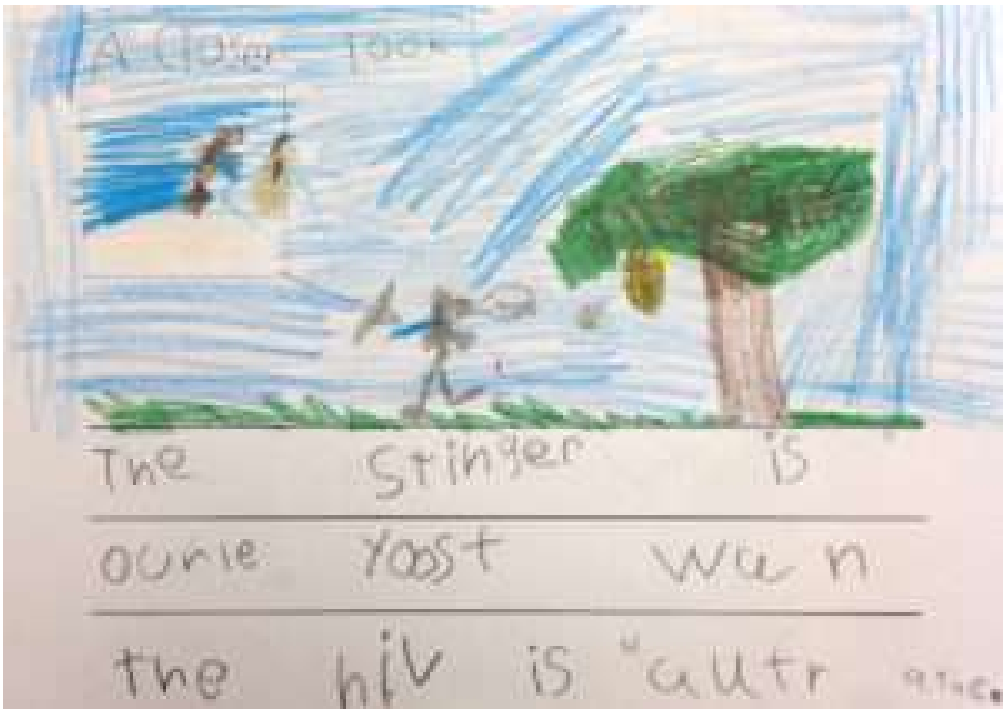
The writing below shows the additions, if any, after the dramatization and small group support.

Writing About Pollination – Before and After

Are these perfect explanations of the process of pollination? No. Did I expect them to be? No. I do think their additions made the pollination process clearer especially keeping in mind that as Kindergarteners, they will be adding an oral explanation as they "read" their illustrations. Most importantly, they learned that they can, with

support, work to revise and clarify their writing. And I learned that Kindergarten students can improve their writing with just a little push.

Finally, what did I do about misinformation? What happens when Kindergarteners report facts that are not completely true? For example, this is the page that appeared in Theo's final book:



The stinger is only used when the hive is under attack.

This isn't entirely true since stingers are actually ovipositors and are only found in female insects! So, actually, the stinger is also used by the queen to deposit eggs. (Every year, this realization upsets my Kindergarten boys who are sure that the drones (male bees) are the defenders of the hive!) For Theo's purpose, he is trying to convey that bees don't want to sting but they will, especially when the hive is in danger. Again, these young writers are doing amazing, complex work with extremely complex content. At this level, the confusions my students have are developmentally appropriate and, to my way of thinking, completely acceptable. The fact that they are thinking, questioning, researching and composing about content that is exciting and interesting is, in my opinion, much more important than some inaccuracy. I would even go so far as to say that confusion is good. Aren't adult scientists constantly revising their hypotheses as new information is discovered? As an inquirer of my own classroom practice, I certainly am!

Teacher's Note

4.6 The Sweet Reward

It's the "conference" portion of our Writing Workshop time, and I'm looking over the shoulder of William. As I jot down notes about the many fact boxes he has chosen to include in his work and the descriptive language he has used like, "Barbs are attached to the stinger.", he looks up and says, "I am going to be writing nonfiction for a long time." "Why?" I ask. His response: "The more animals we study, the more nonfiction I write!" (Event recorded from my classroom, May 2015).

I have always been an inquirer of teaching, specifically, my own teaching practice. Every day, every moment, I am reflecting and making decisions about how to approach my work with my students in a way that is most beneficial to them as learners. Although the original decision to study bees was content driven, my personal journey as an inquirer of science as well, has made me believe that Kindergarten children can and should be engage with complex, rich content in the classroom.

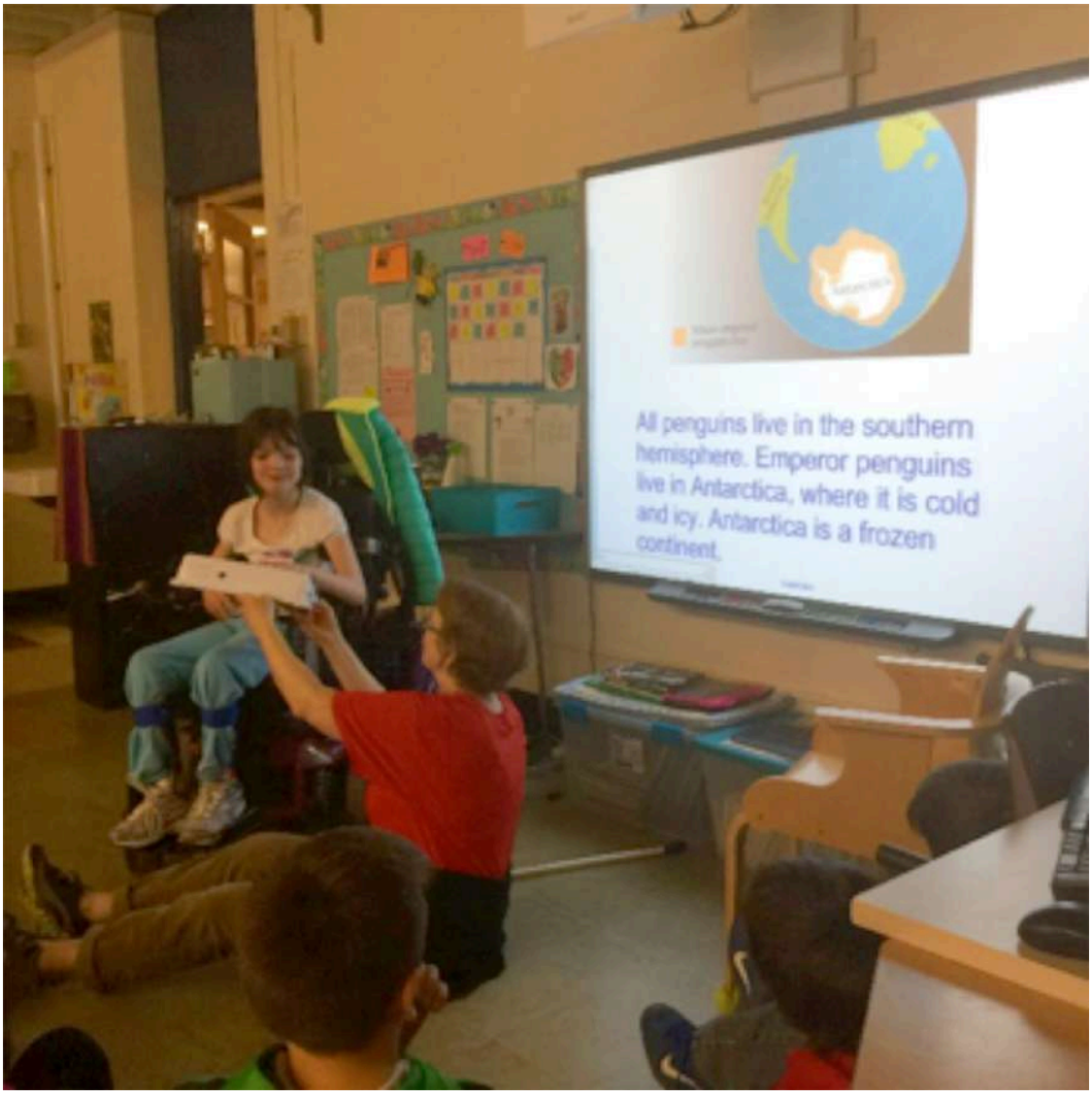
I am fortunate that Kindergarten is a full day program in my district because I have found that in order to provide a high quality nonfiction writing program guided by student inquiry, it takes every part of our day. From engaging in thoughtful discussions during read aloud times around mentor texts, to learning about the conventions

of writing and encoding text during Community Writing; from internalizing scientific content during Shared Reading sessions, to research trips, dramatizing, watching video clips and engaging in hands-on activities during science; from modeling drawing and writing during Writing Workshop time to celebrating and giving feedback as a community of writers, we were learning to become writers of nonfiction.

As readers, my students learned how to derive meaning and content from nonfiction text, and they understood how to ask questions and summarize information. As writers, they learned how to organize a nonfiction bee report, use fact boxes to enhance concepts, report information through words and pictures and to use realistic drawings and diagrams to report information to their audience. Through inquiry, they learned that bees are necessary for human survival and not to be feared. They learned how to write to an audience and how writing can be such informative, powerful work! I have found that learning to write nonfiction is time consuming and messy. I am constantly making decisions about what the most developmentally appropriate way to handle the complexities of teaching the content are. However, the journey, the process, is sweet and never-ending. Just this spring, as I observed the bees among my vinca and crocuses, I couldn't resist looking for their pollen baskets. And guess what?! The pollen baskets were blue! Next year, I'll be looking at bees even more closely and I already have my first question.

Chapter 5: Collaborative-Interactive Nonfiction Writing: Positioning Students with Significant/ Multiple Disabilities As Nonfiction Writers

Collaborative-Interactive Nonfiction Writing: Positioning Students With Significant/Multiple Disabilities As Nonfiction Writers



by Amy Nolan

"All living things depend on one another": My classroom ecosystem

A few years ago in the early fall, I took my fifth grade students on a field trip to a nature park. With the help of a park naturalist, we explored forest, pond, and grassland ecosystems. We hiked through a beautiful field of yellow wildflowers. We observed several examples of interdependence in nature: lichens growing on tree trunks, frogs sitting on lily pads seeking safety from predators, bees drinking nectar from wildflowers, and monarch larvae munching on milkweed. My students were fascinated in particular with the number of bees they saw. The next day, as my students and I sat around our writing center table, we began sharing our observations, questions and ideas. I captured their thoughts on chart paper as we began to make sense of what we had seen and experienced at the park. Through our interactive, collaborative writing process, I supported my students as they deepened their understanding and thinking about what they had seen.

Over the next several days my students and I worked collaboratively to write a nonfiction narrative account of our trip to the nature park. We typed the narrative using our classroom's technology set-up—a wireless keyboard placed on our writing center table, our interactive whiteboard (which is a large, flat screen computer monitor mounted to the wall), and "notebook" software. Our narrative included text as well as other nonfiction text features, including the photos we had taken at the park. We "published" our story and placed it in our classroom library where it could be shared and enjoyed by others. The following excerpt comes from our collaborative writing process:

> ***We saw a bee drinking nectar from a yellow wildflower and we wondered if the flower was yellow from the sun. It reminded us of something the bee says to the sleeping man in one of our favorite books, The Great Kapok Tree. The bee says, "I fly from tree to tree and flower to flower collecting pollen. In this way I pollinate the trees and flowers…you see, all living things depend on one another." We saw milkweed growing in a field of wildflowers; we learned that monarch caterpillars are very picky eaters – they only eat the leaves of milkweed plants.***

We had actually read The Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Amazon Rainforest by Lynne Cherry as one of our interactive read alouds in the days leading up to the field trip. I use nonfiction picturebooks like this one to introduce content material and to build background knowledge for my students. After reading this book, much of our discussion focused on the bee's message in that story – all living things depend on one another. Through our collaborative nonfiction writing, then, my students were continuing to make sense of this important idea, locating evidence to support it, and communicating their ideas and understanding to others using text and photographs with my assistance and technical support.

I teach students who have significant and multiple disabilities. The beautiful students in my classroom are dreamers, wonderers, and emerging writers. They have a variety of disabilities, including brain injuries, cerebral palsy, and significant health impairments that affect all domains of learning, including cognitive, language/communication, and motor skills. Most of them are not able to write in the conventional sense – they must use a variety of assistive devices and technologies to support their communication, mobility, and fine motor skills. My students receive various therapies while at school; some use wheelchairs, standers, or walkers, while others use personal communication devices to produce speech. They participate in adapted physical education and Special Olympics. At my school (a public school in a large, urban school district), there are classrooms for students with

disabilities at every grade level. The general education classrooms are comprised of mostly neighborhood kids, while the students in the special education classrooms are drawn to the program from all over the city, representing a variety of economic, cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. There is a strong culture of collaboration and inclusion at my school among students, teachers, and staff.

In my role as a teacher of students with significant and multiple disabilities I face many complexities related to educational mandates. While federal law stipulates that students with disabilities must be educated in the "least restrictive environment" to the maximum extent appropriate (e.g. with their nondisabled peers from general education classrooms), the law does not magically ensure that students with significant disabilities are accepted and included in the mainstream culture of the school. Advocacy is an important aspect of my work as a special educator; I strive to develop collaborative relationships with my colleagues and make instructional decisions that increase my students' opportunities to be actively engaged with their nondisabled peers in the context of our school's learning culture. I especially enjoy co-teaching science with our general education fifth grade teacher. Through our collaborative teaching practices, my students experience regular, ongoing opportunities for inquiry-based learning and nonfiction writing alongside their peers from general education.

As the classroom teacher of students with significant and multiple disabilities, I am the facilitator-in-chief, encouraging and supporting my students' curiosity and sense of wonder. And I locate nonfiction writing at the heart of my classroom teaching practice because it invites my students to be wonderers, dreamers and thinkers as they explore the natural world around them. It facilitates classroom discourse around important topics, events, ideas, problems, and possible solutions. It drives my students' curiosity as they develop research and inquiry skills, such as observing, collecting data, finding answers to questions, and building academic vocabulary. As a teacher of students with significant and multiple disabilities, it positions my students as active participants in our school's learning culture, holding true to the intent behind the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004.

Given all this, I have come to think of my classroom as a special kind of ecosystem. Together we form a community made up of individuals who depend on one another for many things: the exchange of ideas, making sense of the world through language and communication, learning how to express our ideas and observations through writing and other visual means, and the friendship and support that allows us to take risks and grow as thinkers and writers. We learn collaboratively by being curious, asking questions, expressing ourselves, listening to each other, and looking for evidence and answers; conversation and talk is central to our learning process. Nonfiction writing combined with other forms of visual literacy (e.g. photographs, captions, illustrations, graphic organizers, and digital media) make our thinking visible to ourselves and others; it documents our learning as we create artifacts that mark our journey of discovery. Further students experience agency as their voices are heard by wider audiences.

Nonfiction writing is a flexible, blended process that involves the use of instructional and assistive technologies, digital photography, and collaborative, peer-mediated learning. It is this unique process which I have cultivated over the years that I describe as collaborative-interactive nonfiction writing.

Over time I have adapted my writing instruction to better meet the needs of my students who have "intensive"

impairments (e.g. some cannot talk, physically write, etc.). With nonfiction writing at the heart of my teaching practice I scaffold students through the use of multisensory approaches to teaching; further I blend best practices in nonfiction writing instruction with special education practices. While my process may be different from the ways in which we commonly approach nonfiction writing, my students can and do engage in it. In our classroom, then, nonfiction writing is a flexible, blended process that involves the use of instructional and assistive technologies, digital photography, and collaborative, peer-mediated learning. It is this unique process which I have cultivated over the years that I describe as collaborative-interactive nonfiction writing.

5.1 Exploring The Natural World Through Our Classroom Window: Positioning My Students As Nonfiction Writers

My school is situated in a lovely neighborhood on a tree-lined street. My classroom has one entire wall of expansive windows that face a school yard bordered by a ravine. As we look out our windows, we are blessed with a shifting panorama of sunlight, clouds of every kind, extreme weather, the water cycle, rainbows, seasonal changes in deciduous trees, and life cycles of insects, plants and animals – we have even had the occasional deer striding through our school yard! We have found Luna moths and monarch pupae, spiders rolling up flies like tasty little burritos in their intricate webs, and snow rollers – large, rolled, cylindrical formations of blown snow that look like gigantic Swiss rolls. There is a never-ending source of ideas for our nonfiction writing right outside our window! Further, by building on our observations and curiosity, our first-hand observations and real world experiences, nonfiction writing becomes more accessible.

I vividly recall a wintry morning two years ago when we looked out our classroom window and saw snow rollers scattered about our snowy playground landscape. With blown snow obscuring many familiar features, the deserted playground had an eerie, almost lunar feel to it. My students were entirely captivated – this was an intense sensory experience! It was as if organic, alien objects had invaded our playground. School had been closed the day before due to sub-zero temperatures and high winds – perfect conditions for the snow rollers to form. This natural phenomenon, also known as “Mother Nature’s snowballs,” provided us with an opportunity for inquiry and nonfiction writing aligned to science standards, drawn from our local experience.

Our fun-loving principal brought one of the large snow rollers into our classroom from the playground (it was too cold and windy to take the students outside). Each of my students had an opportunity to examine the snow roller up close by observing, touching, and holding it. We had to hurry so it wouldn’t melt, though! As we examined the snow roller, I took the opportunity to review states of matter and the water cycle – science concepts that my fifth graders have some knowledge of. I took photographs of the snow roller (using my iPhone) as we continued making observations. Building on my students’ natural curiosity about the snow rollers, I helped them formulate some “I wonder” statements (through the use of modeling and cues) and recorded these on chart paper. Some of these “I wonder” statements were:

- I wonder how the snow rollers got here?
- How did they form?

- Did people do it?
- How long will they last?

Several of us had heard about the snow rollers on the news, so we went on the Web to read a few news stories and watch some video clips. Our use of online media further ignited my students' curiosity and helped them construct understanding of this unusual natural phenomenon. After making our observations, gathering information on the Web, and engaging in discussion about the snow rollers, we were ready to begin our collaborative writing process.

I positioned my students in a semi-circle around the interactive white board (running this way and that, moving wheelchairs and standers), and in a complicated and somewhat messy fashion, my students "dictated" their narratives describing what we had observed and experienced. They communicated their thinking using speech, signs, communication devices, assistive technology for students with language and sensory-motor impairments, paralinguistic cues (e.g. rising intonation, increases in voice volume) and gestures, such as making a swirling sign in the air using the forefinger going around in a circle. One of my students, Natasha, sat at the wireless keyboard, typing text using models I provided. An instructional assistant and I moved about from student to student, providing physical assistance and other instructional supports. As Natasha typed our nonfiction text, the words appeared in large text on the interactive whiteboard, providing additional sensory cues for my students with visual impairments. I uploaded the digital photo of our snow roller above the text.

In this way using our collaborative writing process, the computer, and other assistive technologies, our observations, thinking, and questions became visible and could be shared and understood by others. At the end of the day, I printed our snow roller narrative (which included text and photos) and sent copies home with my students so they could share it with their parents, family and friends. Throughout that week, we continued to research and learn about the snow rollers and other effects of the severe winter weather we were experiencing. In over 20 years of teaching, I had never experienced anything like those snow rollers, and it was exciting to see my students thinking and writing about them!

Here is an excerpt from the narrative nonfiction writing we did that day:

> ***When we looked out the window this morning there were giant snow rollers everywhere! Some of us heard about them on the news. Mrs. B, our principal, brought one into our classroom. It looked like a giant Swiss roll made of snow! We could see the layers of snow swirling around and around in a circle. Zoe couldn't believe how big it was! We wondered how long the snow rollers would stay on the playground, and how changes in the weather would affect them. When will they melt?***

A student observes the snow roller

Our collaborative writing process helped my students make sense of the snow rollers while supporting their understanding of important science concepts such as weather and the water cycle. That day their natural curiosity and first-hand observations fueled this writing. However, I also use children's literature to support my students' as writers. I have an extensive collection of children's literature in my classroom covering many topics of interest to fifth grade students. (I also make regular trips to the public library to augment my personal collection.) I have some favorite nonfiction books that I use to anchor and support my instruction – books such as Recess at 20 Below written by Alaskan teacher Cindy Aillaud. This book, written as a nonfiction narrative from the students' point of view, uses text and photographs to tell a simple story about school children playing outside during recess in an Arctic village. On that wintry day, I used this book as a mentor text; it provided my students with a model that they could try to emulate. Throughout the week, we referred to this book many times, rereading it and comparing it with our own narrative. Aillaud's story supported my students as they became more comfortable with the format of using photos and text to tell their story.

Using books like Aillaud's *Recess at 20 Below* and Cherry's *The Great Kapok Tree* are an essential component of nonfiction writing in my teaching practice. Because my students with significant disabilities experience a variety of learning challenges, reading aloud from these books provides them with the rich language and academic vocabulary they need to develop and communicate understanding. Such books also provide and supplement conceptual content. Finally, as mentor texts, they serve as examples of ways in which authors organize and structure their nonfiction writing.

5.2 Bringing The Natural World Into Our Classroom

While we are able to observe a great deal through our classroom window, there are times when I bring the natural world right into my classroom! Raising monarch butterflies is an activity which provides an authentic, real-world learning experience that engages my students in the science curriculum and inspires and supports nonfiction writing. As we begin this project, I order monarch larvae from Monarch Watch, set up our monarch emergence cages, and provide fresh milkweed for the monarch larvae to eat. Over the next several weeks my students observe the monarchs as they progress through the stages of their life cycle (larva, pupa, adult). Then, if all goes well, at the end of the project my students act as "citizen scientists" (through the Monarch Watch program) as we tag and release the adult monarch butterflies. This is part of a global conservation effort that includes researchers tracking the migration patterns of the monarchs.

Throughout our monarch study, we record our observations, measuring the growing larvae, estimating how much milkweed they are eating, and researching information about their life cycle, metamorphosis, and migration. When the larvae fail to develop, we try to discover why this is happening. If all goes well, in 3-4 weeks we will go outside on the playground to tag and release our adult monarch butterflies. Once again, I use children's literature to help my students develop background knowledge and academic vocabulary as they learn about the monarch life cycle and their amazing fall migration to Mexico. Their expertise grows as we read Butterflies on Carmen Street by Monica Brown, Monarch and Milkweed by Helen Frost and Leonid Gore, and Citizen Scientists: Be a Part of Scientific Discovery from Your Own Backyard by Loree Griffin Burns, as well as high quality Web-based resources, such as Annenberg Learner's Journey North.

As you might imagine, there are many opportunities for nonfiction writing associated with raising and releasing monarchs. This writing may be as simple as noting observations or as complicated as describing the step-by-step process of a science lesson on monarch butterflies. Much of this writing occurs in our butterfly journals. Each student has their own journal, which can be a spiral notebook or a digital version using our "notebook" software. Using this electronic technology makes the writing process more accessible for students with sensorimotor impairments although I still usually print the pages of these digital journals daily so that students can also have the more traditional paper journal. We observe our butterfly larvae, take photographs, and research information on the Web to learn about the monarch life cycle, migration, and conservation. Because many of my students are unable to physically write independently, they may type text from a model, work with a peer or adult assistant, or write in the context of a collaborative group. I provide visual models and step-by-step cues as needed. In essence, I provide my students with whatever type of support they need to be actively engaged in the writing process. Thus, through their individual writing and our use of digital photography, students visually documented the metamorphosis of the monarchs and created an artifact (their journals) that reflected their learning.

At the same time, I also create a classroom journal which is displayed as both a model for their own writing as well as a text of our shared experiences. Early in our monarch study, we took a photograph of our emergence cage, which we had researched and constructed together. I recorded my students' observations and ideas, and together we wrote about it using chart paper as well as our classroom technology.

Monarch Butterfly Emergence Cage

Today we made a cage for our monarch larvae. We used a tomato cage and netting material. We learned how to do this on the Monarch Watch website. We put the netting all around the tomato cage and tied it on top with some yarn. We have to put a lot of milkweed in there every day. That's the only thing monarch larvae will eat. They are very picky eaters!

As we observed the monarch larvae daily, we continued to record our observations. Much of what my students wrote reflected simple observations:

"The caterpillars are eating a lot of milkweed."

"They are growing a lot."

"They are getting longer."

"They are getting fatter."

"My caterpillar made its chrysalis today!"

Finally, on a beautiful, sunny day in late September, I took a group of students outside on the playground to release our adult monarch butterflies. Each student had an opportunity to say something to the monarchs before we released them.

When we returned to our classroom, we collaborative composed and typed this brief piece describing our ceremony:

Butterfly, you are very beautiful! We wish you safe travels to Mexico. Please take some time to rest before you go. Mexico is a long way away. Migration is hard work! You have a very long journey ahead of you.

This process of bridging nonfiction writing with scientific inquiry is a lot of work as it takes place in the context of managing 6-8 students with significant/multiple disabilities. It takes up my personal time in the evenings and weekends as I drive around in search of milkweed along highways and construction sites. Needless to say, there have been many times when I have questioned whether it is worth all of the trouble, but in the end I always reach the same conclusion – it is definitely worth the trouble! Of course, things do not always go smoothly: the larvae may fail to develop; there is never enough time in the school day for meaningful observation and reflection; and we are constantly interrupted by therapies and various medical procedures. Yet despite all these frustrations, this experience provides rich opportunities for learning and nonfiction writing. In fact, it is often this study which grounds us.

Through our collaborative, hands-on approach to nonfiction writing tied to a science unit on butterfly metamorphosis, my students with significant/multiple disabilities constructed their knowledge about monarchs and communicated their understandings to others via butterfly journals, photographs, and text. They wrote in academic language and used grade-appropriate, content vocabulary; further they included non-textual nonfiction features in their pieces to communicate what they knew about this topic.

5.3 A Multimedia Research Project

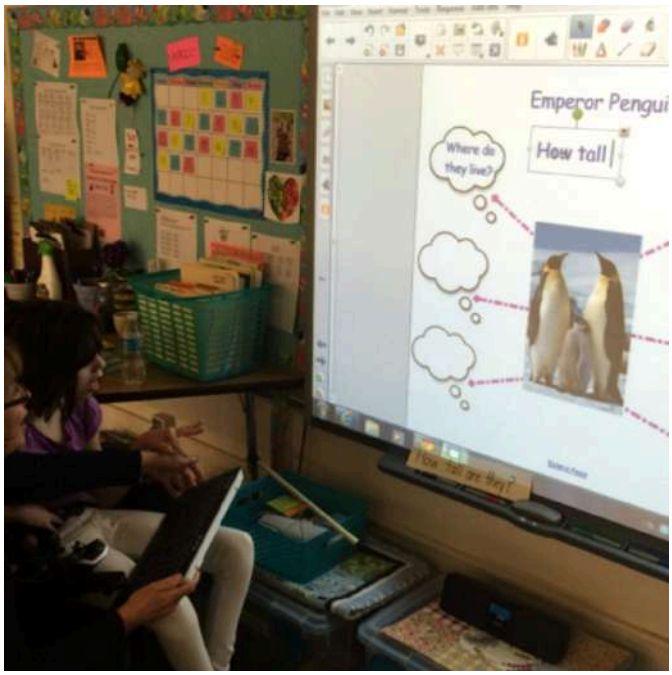
Last year, my students and I embarked on a lengthy nonfiction writing project in the late winter. I wanted my students to be engaged in a more extensive, formal writing process – writing a research report as required by state standards for fifth graders. The research project was designed to build on my students' natural curiosity while incorporating digital learning tools and resources that would help me individualize the process to support my students' learning needs and personal learning styles. All of these things, I hoped, could be accomplished with the multimedia research project I envisioned. My hope was that my students' final projects would integrate text with some combination of visual images, audio, video, and interesting links to the World Wide Web that supported their research. For me, the beauty of this process was threefold: I would be able to adapt a more traditional writing project to meet the learning needs of my students with significant and multiple disabilities; the digital format would provide many opportunities for collaboration; and my students would have the experience of using technology to present their research to an audience of fifth grade peers and teachers—an increasingly important real-world skill.

I asked my students to think of an animal they wanted to learn about based on what we had read and learned during the school year; they would be required to report on the animal's life cycle, ecosystem, relationship with plants and other animals, relationship with people, threats to survival, and anything newsworthy. It was important to me

that their curiosity would drive their research process. I was open to just about anything within reason. One of my students, Lily, wanted to learn about Emperor penguins. She had recently watched the movie *Happy Feet* and was fascinated with the life cycle of the Emperor penguin and the unusual caregiving role of the father penguin. She repeatedly looked at images and stories on the Web (e.g. National Wildlife Federation Kids, *Who's the Best Dad?*) showing father penguins keeping newly hatched eggs warm on top of their feet. (We later discovered that father Emperor penguins actually cover the egg with feathered skin called a "brood patch.") I wanted Lily's palpable curiosity and sense of wonder to drive her research and writing. Considering Karen Wohlwend's literacy framework based on the idea that children's "storied worlds" are filled with images based on a stream of messages in popular media (e.g. movies, video games, and toys), I wanted Lily's writing to build on her passion for these animals and the narrative that was informing her understanding, while creating a bridge to her continued learning and developing literacies.

Lily and I began the process by utilizing our digital learning tools to create a simple web. She brainstormed and outlined what she wanted to learn about while I provided technical support and assistance.

Lily used classroom technology – a wireless keyboard with the interactive whiteboard – to complete a graphic organizer as she planned her research. I provided physical support and a model on a sentence strip as she used the wireless keyboard to type the phrase, "How tall are they?"



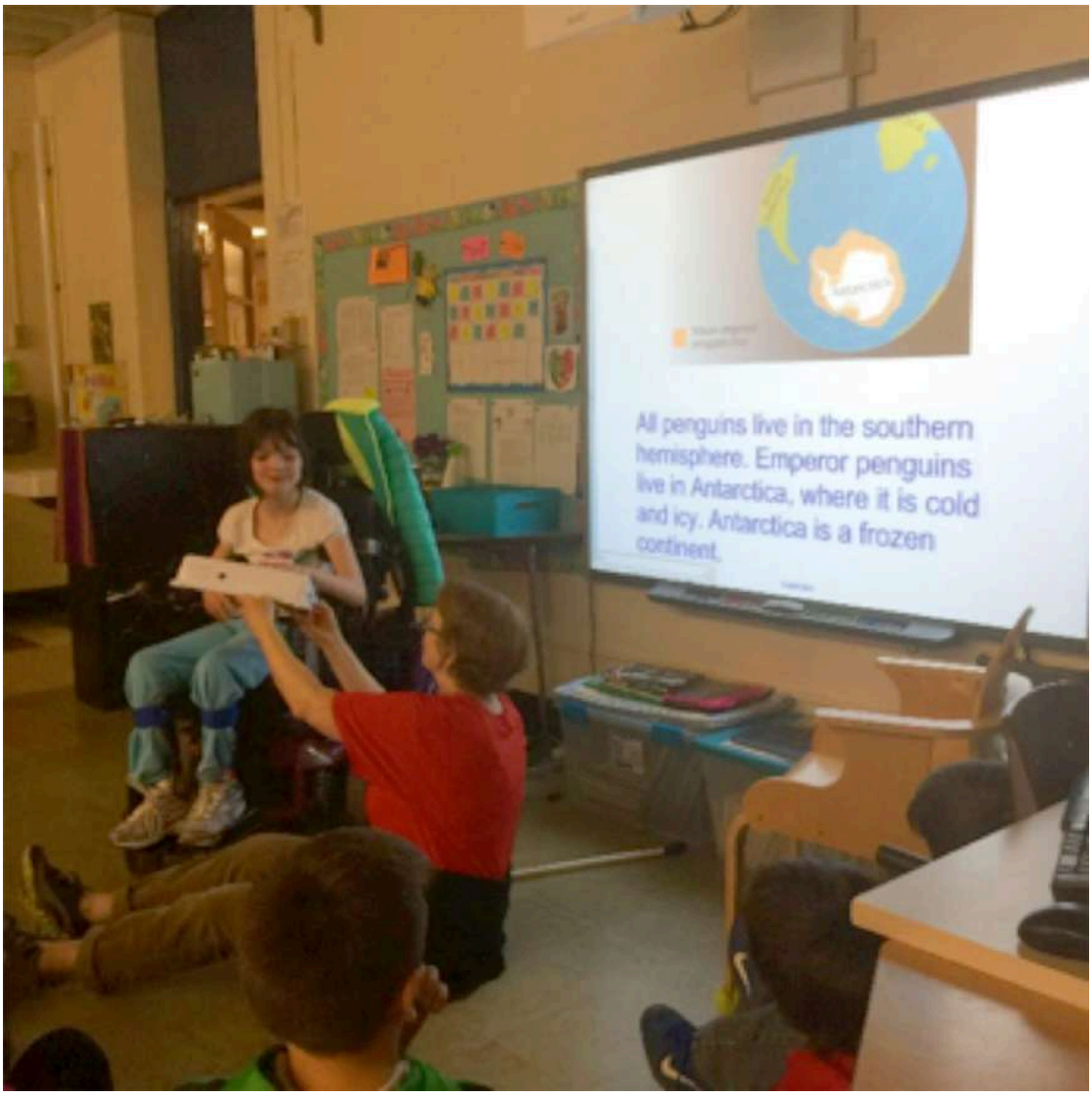
Lily working on her web using classroom technology

Similarly Lily used gestures, props, and other paralinguistic cues (e.g. rising and falling intonation) to tell me where the Emperor penguin lives – in the southern hemisphere, on the icy continent of Antarctica. Collaboratively, she and I transformed her expressed multimodal language into a conventional written format along with supporting text features.

Building on the playful nature of Lily's personality and her individual learning strengths, I used props, puppets, and dramatic play to support her use of language and sense-making through multisensory learning. One day, we made "blubber gloves" using Crisco shortening, plastic gloves, icy cold water and masking tape. Lily and her classmates experienced the insulating properties of blubber (animal fat) in this simulation as they dipped their hands simultaneously in icy cold water—one hand insulated with the blubber glove and the other hand without the insulation. Lily reached the conclusion that the water did not feel as cold on the hand with the blubber glove. We reviewed the notion that insulators (such as blubber) work by reducing the transfer of heat energy; in this case, the Emperor penguin retains its body heat when swimming in the icy Antarctic waters. The blubber glove activity enabled Lily to think about her topic more deeply – specifically how Emperor penguins stay warm when swimming in the icy Antarctic waters.

When she was finished with her research project, Lily used presentation software with the interactive white board and a “low tech” communication device to “read” her report to a live audience of her fifth grade peers (we printed a copy of the report, which served as a replacement for the more traditional written research report). She skillfully combined both images and texts to answer her questions. Then at the conclusion of her presentation, with expertise and finesse, she clicked the mouse on a hyperlink taking her audience to the icy underwater world of these graceful creatures. Lily and her audience listened to an evocative and beautiful instrumental song that complemented the graceful undersea swimming of Emperor penguins. Lily’s nonfiction writing with digital and multimedia tools were deepening and expanding her developing literacies.

5.4 Final Thoughts



The intent of this chapter was to demonstrate that my students with significant and multiple disabilities do, in fact, engage in meaningful nonfiction writing every day. However, my teaching practices are, in many ways, more varied and at times quite different than what one might see in a traditional general education classroom. Recall that many of my students cannot “write” in the traditional or physical sense; others have language impairments

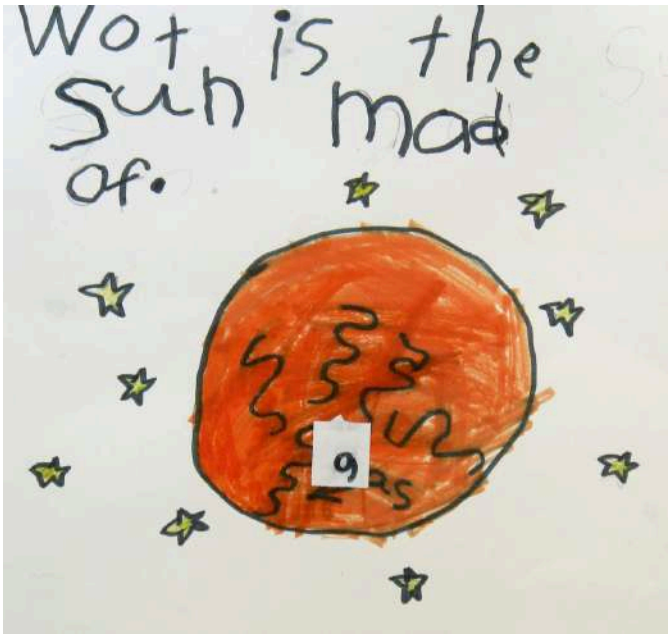
or cannot produce speech (and may use a variety of assistive devices). As a result, nonfiction writing in my classroom must be based on a synthesis of best practices in writing instruction fused with special education pedagogy. Based on the latter I take into consideration individual and unique learning needs by providing instructional supports to enable my students to discover and explore what interests them, exercise choice in their topics, and work as independently as possible. I may incorporate practices that one might see in an early childhood classroom (e.g. visual documentation of learning or dramatic play); I utilize multisensory learning approaches and classroom technology to support my students in their writing process. Finally, perhaps the most sustaining factor in my nonfiction writing practice is the art of collaboration between my students and me, and between the assistive technologies and my students' interests and passions. Thus, through the support of collaborative-interactive writing instruction, the dreamers, wonderers and writers in my class write nonfiction!

Chapter 6: Conversations With First Graders: Scientific Imagination and NonFiction Writing

Conversations With First Graders: Scientific Imagination and NonFiction Writing

by Melissa Wilson

6.1 Olivia And The Sun



“What is the sun made of?” Olivia asked me.

As I considered this complex question being asked by a six-year-old first grader, I was wondering how I could help her. Glancing through the books she had lying on the table in front of her, I recognized that Olivia was going to have a very difficult time answering her question using just these books. Written at a first or second grade reading level, the text in these books referred to the sun providing heat and light to the earth but did not offer any details about the composition of the star itself. Books that might fully answer her question were probably well beyond her reach as a reader; and, even if we had access to more complex materials, I wasn’t sure how successful I would be helping her comprehend what they were saying.

Deciding that I had to start somewhere, I picked up one of the books from her stack. Looking through it, I suggested that, since the sun provided heat and light, it must be burning hot.

Olivia took up this explanation with a further question, asking: “What is the hot on? It can’t be like a big furry thing of fire. That wouldn’t really stay.”

She continued speaking, shaping her hands like a ball: “So, is that [the book] saying it’s a big thing of floating fire or something?”

Once again I was at a loss. What was Olivia actually asking me? She seemed to have some concept of fire needing a source of energy in order to burn as well as an understanding that fuel sources get used up. Without clearly understanding what Olivia was asking, nevertheless I acknowledged that she had asked an important question, adding, “You’re right, it’s not just a bunch of sticks burning, is it? I guess we need to find out more.”

This was typical of the conversations that I often found myself having with the students in Mrs. Janey’s first grade classroom. Because students wondered about complex concepts and because the reading level of the nonfiction books available in the classroom varied widely, Mrs. Janey and I often found ourselves reading to students and talking with them about what they understood the text to mean and how this understanding might help them with their research. These interactions typically occurred in Writing Workshop both during individual writing conference time and during whole class mini-lessons, where Mrs. Janey’s interactive read aloud style encouraged students to wonder and imagine as they thought through possibilities for questions and answers.

As Olivia and I pondered her question that day, we both struggled with the source of the sun’s energy by referring to what we knew about fire as a source of heat. As that Writing Workshop ended, we had imagined some possible ways to answer Olivia’s question; but we both felt a sense of uncertainty and tentativeness about our understanding, and that left us with more questions.

Several days later, as I entered the classroom one afternoon, Olivia came up to me announcing: “The sun is made out of gas.”

“It’s made out of gas? You mean, like the kind of gas we put into our cars?” I asked.

“No,” she replied dismissively. “It’s like a big bomb that never stops blowing up.” Her words were accompanied by a roiling motion with her hands.

After a visit to the school library where she ended up in consultation with the librarian and materials from the Internet, Olivia had found further information to help her answer her question. This information helped her imagine a different possible answer—one that combined what she knew about how fire created heat along with a source that seemed more sustainable to her. Olivia was using her “scientific imagination” (Gallas, 2001) as she reasoned through and worked with making sense of the complex and sophisticated concept she was researching and writing about.

Gallas (2001), who does research in her own first grade classroom, uses the term “scientific imagination” to describe what she sees the young learners in her classroom doing as they engage in science. I see this term as suggestive of the way in which many children “play around” with the ideas and concepts of science and other content areas, looking at and interpreting these phenomena and events from their own perspective. Young children, who do not yet have the life experience or intellectual knowledge to deal with complex and nuanced scientific concepts, are imagining possibilities, hypothesizing approximations and proposing what might be true as they encounter scientific concepts.

Of course, many might argue that “scientific imagination” is really just a form of “scientific reasoning”. Yet I find myself uncomfortable with this term. It makes me think of scientists in white lab coats running experiments,

studying streams of numbers, arguing theory. It strikes me as a very sophisticated activity that a certain type of adult person does, and has little relationship to what I see young children doing. But in Medawar's work (1982) there is a definition of "scientific reasoning" that resonates with my experiences talking with first graders. He views scientific reasoning as a dialogue between two voices:

Scientific reasoning is therefore at all levels an interaction between two episodes of thought – a dialogue between two voices, the one imaginative and the other critical; a dialogue …between the possible and the actual, between proposal and disposal, between what might be true and what is in fact the case (p. 46).

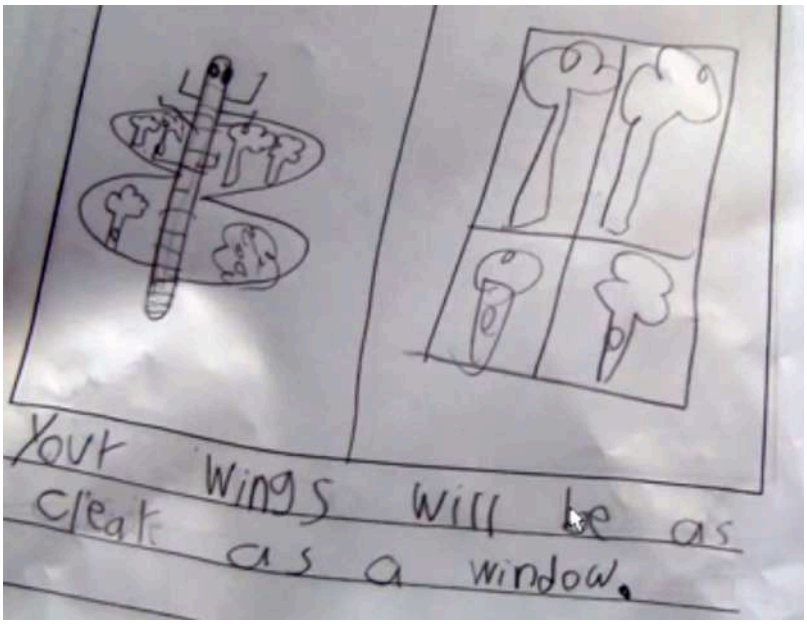
This definition meshes well with my notion of "scientific imagination" as well as my experience with the ways in which early childhood classrooms work. After 30 years teaching in elementary schools, I have come to regard the classroom as a culture where students and teachers act and react together, developing expectations for ways of acting, believing, valuing, feeling, thinking; and they do all of this through talk. Through instructional conversations with teachers and peer interactions children construct understanding and knowledge by engaging in the kinds of dialogues that Medawar describes.

The process that Olivia used to research and answer her question about the sun is typical of how students in Mrs. Janey's classroom engaged in "scientific imagination (reasoning)" as they wrote nonfiction. They asked questions, and they read (or were read) nonfiction books; reading was accompanied by talking and writing about what they found out. Throughout this process the young students began to improvise, adapt, and transform their ideas and understandings about how the world, as they understood it, worked. Their conversations and writing reveal the ways in which they hypothesize and create ideas using textual knowledge and lived experiences to imagine what might be possible and what might be real.

In Olivia's case her final answer only approximates the scientific explanation for what the sun is made of and how nuclear fusion powers it. However, throughout her process we can trace a dialogue between what she was able to imagine and her own critique of those imaginings. Reading that the sun was a source of heat made her imagine fire as the way in which the sun made heat; yet, she could not picture how that would work on the sun. Her initial imagined explanation did not fully meet her critical standards of where the fire was and how it was sustained. This critique of her own understanding led her to ask more questions and seek further information, eventually developing a hypothesis that answered her critical dialogue.

What is the sun made of? The sun is made out of gas.

6.2 Marcy And The Dragonfly



“What are you working on today, Marcy?” I asked, sitting down in the empty chair at the table where she sat writing.

“I’m putting in some facts about where the dragonfly’s going…and one fact is that dragonflies fly as fast as a person runs. Another fact is gonna be that a dragonfly’s wings are as clear as windows.”

As I bent over to look at the pages she was working on in her note-taking journal, I saw that she had already written: “I am a dragonfly. I can fly as fast as people can run. I can fly backward and forward and left and right” on one sheet of the day’s practice paper. On a second sheet she was in the process of completing her writing about dragonfly wings: “I am a dragonfly. My wings are as clear as a window.”

Throughout the research report writing which occurred in Mrs. Janey’s classroom during April and May of the school year, students experimented with the language and structure of mentor texts they could use to make their own research reports more interesting. In this instance, Marcy was using the mentor text Atlantic (Karas, 2002), a nonfiction book about the world’s oceans. In this book the Atlantic Ocean speaks in the first person about itself (“I am the Atlantic Ocean. I begin where the land runs out…”) and Marcy had clearly borrowed this structure with her use of the phrase “I am.” She had also taken up the metaphorical language of the book (e.g. “The Pacific

and Indian, Arctic and Antarctic are my relatives. We are one big family.") by using similes to make comparisons between the speed and wing appearance of dragonflies with other known, real-world objects.

As I continued to sit by Marcy, she began her illustrations. She began by drawing a dragonfly flying ahead of a person running. Although she was producing rough sketches, Marcy, like all the students in Mrs. Janey's classroom, understood that sketches as well as other visual text features common in nonfiction were provided by writers as a way to support and enhance the information written on the page for the audience.

"I'm drawing these lines to show that they are both moving pretty fast," she told me as she drew several dashes behind each figure.

She then turned the paper over and on the back drew a cross shape. At the end of each point which she marked with arrows, she drew dragonflies. "There," she said, settling back in her seat, "that shows all the different ways they can fly."

After admiring these drawings with her, I asked if she was going to draw an illustration for her other page of writing. She nodded her head and I told her I would come back and check in with her later. I actually didn't see her again that day; but the next day, she came up to show me her illustration of the dragonfly wings. Since she had been working with a different mentor text that day, her writing was no longer in the first person. Instead, she had written: "If you are a dragonfly, your wings will be as clear as a window."

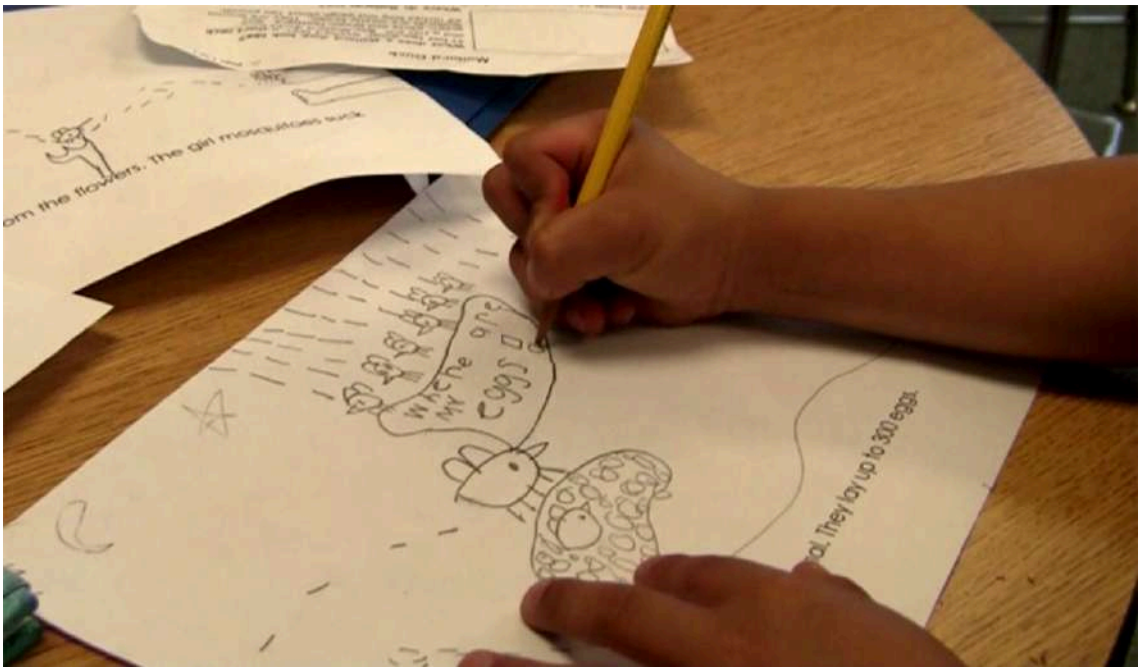
She had drawn a line down the middle of the box for her sketch. On the left side she had drawn a dragonfly body with its wings spread out. On the other side of the line she had drawn rectangles to represent window panes.

Drawing my attention to the trees that were visible within the frame of the dragonfly wing and window panes, she explained: "I made the trees to show you can see through the wings and the window."

I was suitably impressed, complimenting her on the clear comparison that she had drawn, and she wandered off to continue her writing work for the day.

Marcy, as with many young students, used familiar objects and easily recognizable concepts as she imagined ways to express her understanding of how dragonflies moved and looked. By writing about and showing the dragonfly flying faster than a person running and by explaining the transparency of dragonfly wings by comparing them to window glass, she conveyed what she understood might be possible based on what she understood about the world she lived in and the textual information she had read as she conducted research. These comparisons were represented through metaphorical language structures (as clear as, faster than) and sketches depicting common objects and activities (people running and window panes). For her as a writer of nonfiction, the goal was to represent her ideas so that an interested audience or reader would understand them. For Marcy, then, this drawing and writing created a dialogue where she wrote and drew about what was possible in terms her audience could understand.

6.3 Hector And The Mosquitoes



“I ate Hector because I was eating some leaves off a tree and he was sitting on them. I don’t really eat mosquitoes, but he was on the leaf when I chomped down on it and I ate him.” Mark was quite gleeful as he announced this one day.

Then Colin chimed in. “Yeah, me too. I accidentally ate Ned and Kane because I eat plants and they live on branches.” He then opened his mouth wide and made a crunching sound as the others giggled.

These boys were not practicing cannibalism or even indulging in some exotic form of bullying. They had imagined themselves into the persona of the animal they were researching for their end of year reports. Mark, the deer, and Colin, the beaver, had feasted on Hector, the mosquito and Ned and Kane, the walking sticks, as they foraged for food by the pond.

The students in Janey’s classroom were first graders and as playful as would be expected of that age group. Playing around with each other and with what they were learning about were characteristic ways of acting and being for them. This playfulness took many forms in Mrs. Janey’s classroom including joking, making up games and telling stories based on the information that they were learning. The “food chain game” was one such way

that students used disciplinary knowledge in imaginative and playful ways as they took on or assigned to someone the role of the insect or animal they were researching.

In the end this group of boys came to the collective decision that it was a "bad thing to be a mosquito" because pretty much everyone ate you, even the walking sticks. Yet, despite the bad rap that mosquitoes got in the food chain game, Hector continued to work with this topic of research. At the request of Mrs. Janey, I often sat with him as he worked, and one particular day in May I came over as he was drawing the final illustration for his research report. His last page read: "Mosquitoes…are not mammals. They lay up to 300 eggs." By the time I came to sit with him he had already drawn a female mosquito on a lily pad resting on a wavy line meant to represent the water of the pond. The mosquito was surrounded by ovals representing the eggs. At this point, Hector had created an illustration that supported and helped clarify the information that was written on the page as was expected of a nonfiction writer. However, Hector decided to go further.

"It's in the night," Hector announced as he began drawing a moon and a star at the top of the page.

As he finished drawing the star, I said, teasingly, "Oh, all right. Better watch out for bats then, if it's night."

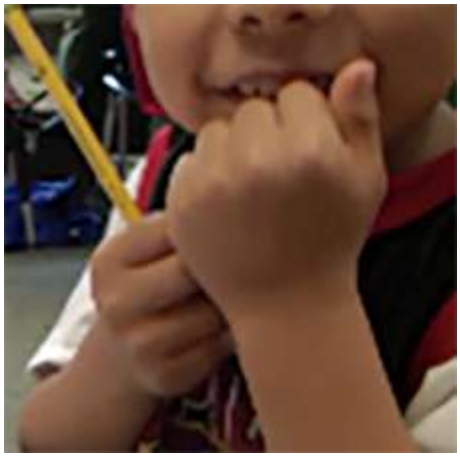
Hector stopped drawing and looked up at me, considering. "No, I want it to be in the day. I don't want the bats to eat my eggs." He erased the moon and the star he had just drawn and made a sun instead.

He then began drawing a series of lines coming down from the top of the page which ended in little mosquitoes. As he finished with these mosquitoes he once again returned to the top of the page drawing a V shape in the corner.

"Yeah, but this one is not a mosquito," Hector said.

I asked, "What's that one?"

He answered, "A bird," grinning up at me and then acting out being scared by shivering.



"A bird! Oh-oh," I acknowledged his quick joke, smiling back at him.

Next he turned his attention to the center of the page where he drew a very large mosquito above the lily pad.

"He's the big man," he explained. "And he's going to be talking."

“Oh,” I responded rather at a loss for words at this flagrant piece of fiction being introduced into the illustration. “What is he saying?”

Hector drew a talking bubble coming from the mosquito and answered, “Where are my eggs!”

As we finished writing the words for the talking bubble together, I asked him what was happening in the picture.

“These mosquitoes,” he said indicating the smaller mosquitoes at the top of the page, “they’re the friends of the dad mosquito. He’s calling all his friends to come away from the flowers; to come over and see all the eggs the mom has.”

At this point you might be wondering why Mrs. Janey asked me to sit with Hector. We had clearly strayed quite far from what Hector had been tasked with finishing that day. Despite being aware of the other work that he needed to accomplish, though, I sat and listened to him tell me playful stories about this illustration in his research report—stories about what might be possible and true based on Hector’s experiences of his world.

One narrative we constructed was grounded in content knowledge about mosquito predators. To be fair to Hector, I started him on the path of the narrative, by joking with him about what was possible, even probable, within the “story” he was drawing. I implied in my brief comment to him that if it was night time, then bats would be out; and we both knew that bats eat mosquitoes. Hector, after sorting out the implications of my comment, decided to change the time in his picture. He also extended the notion of bats as predators of mosquitoes to their eggs as well (a reasonable possibility, but not true). So, in order to keep the eggs of the mother mosquito safe, he changed the time.

Hector continued this story later in his drawing by adding a stylized bird to his picture (the V shape that is often shorthand for birds flying in the sky). He purposefully drew my attention to this figure with words and actions so that I could follow along with this further extension of our predator narrative or joke. We are both smiling as this narrative ended in acknowledgement that there really is no time in the day when a mosquito is safe from predators.

Then Hector moved onto another story about the dynamics of the mosquito family. In this narrative the proud father mosquito invites his male friends to join him in admiring all the eggs the “mother” mosquito has laid on the lily pad. Of course, there is not factual basis for any of this narrative. Mosquitoes don’t live in family units and, although the males swarm during mating season, they don’t otherwise come together in the way that Hector describes. I suppose the story Hector was telling has its basis in Hector’s observation of his own family dynamics – pride taken in individual accomplishments, the role of the father and the mother, hospitality towards friends, etc. Using his own lived experience of families and how their members act, Hector’s story told through his drawing and talk describes what might be possible or true about mosquito families. What was actually the case, however, was the written text telling about mosquito reproduction.

6.4 What We Can Learn From Conversations With First Graders

There is much to be learned as we consider these conversations from Mrs. Janey's classroom. We can hear how students were constructing identities as nonfiction writers and researchers; they saw themselves as people who asked and answered questions in certain ways through reading, talk and writing. They understood that they were expected as part of the writing practices of Writing Workshop to find and report information that was interesting, important and (generally) accurate. As they figured out how to explain the information they gained from their research, they were also expected to revise their understandings, making sense of and communicating the relevant information they had read vis-à-vis the topic they were researching. Finally, they were trusted to write in an interesting way which would both inform and appeal to their audience.

Mentor texts were an integral part of nonfiction writing in this classroom. Mrs. Janey gave a great deal of thought to the books she purchased for the classroom library considering readability, accessibility of information for her students, appropriateness and accuracy of content, and the text features. She used nonfiction books that were different in their organizational structures; many of her mentor texts also had literary qualities. She was purposeful in choosing and talking about these elements with her students. In turn, the students used the language and visual features of the mentor texts in their own writing to inform their audience about their topics in ways that were interesting and creative.

The instructional framework in Mrs. Janey's classroom allowed a great deal of freedom for a varied range of students, expanding rather than constraining their opportunities for learning. Students had time and many opportunities to read and write nonfiction. As they read books, and wrote their own research, they also had time to talk to each other about interesting questions and answers, as well as to share writing of their own and others. There was room for and acceptance of mistakes, and there was time to explore the topics they were researching. There were also daily opportunities to write a variety of nonfiction texts including notes, drafts, visual texts, posters and research reports. As they worked within this instructional framework, students began to write to learn what they thought.

Further, while Mrs. Janey guided students through a process of asking and answering questions and recording information in certain genres (posters, thinking bubbles, and research reports), students were also supported – they were never told that a topic or question was too hard to answer, for instance. Instead Mrs. Janey and I, as well as the school librarian, worked with students to find texts that would help them with their research. When the texts were difficult for a first-grader, we read and discussed the content with them. Yes, there was often a great deal of

guidance as we grappled with complex content, but this hard work was valued as part of the identity of being a researcher and nonfiction writer.

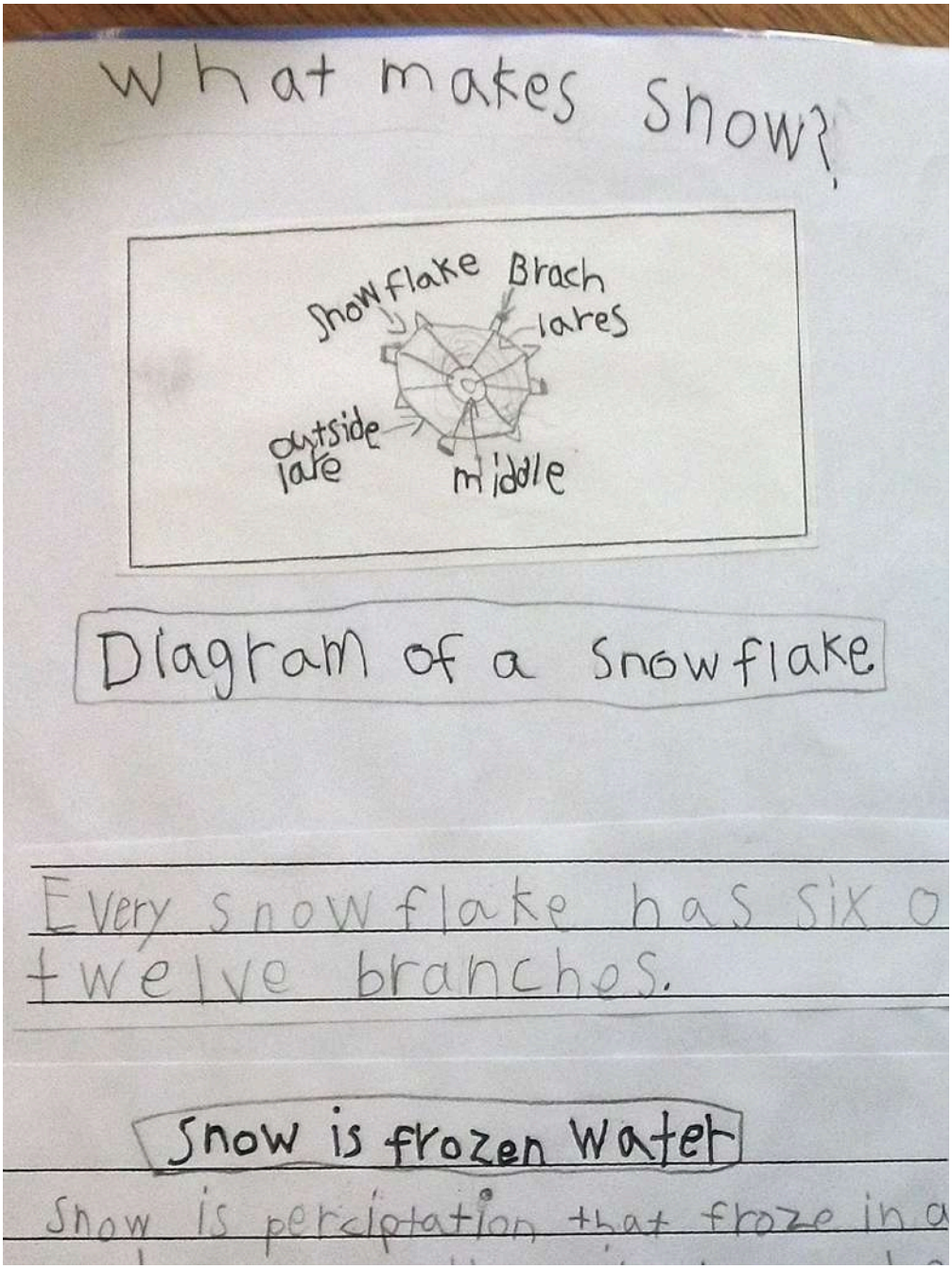
Young students hypothesize and create ideas using textual knowledge and lived experiences to imagine what might be possible and what might be real; what might be true and what is actually a fact; and what might be imagined and how we might be critical of those imaginings.

The dialogue between two voices that Medawar refers to and we have seen in these conversations further reveals the ways in which young students are constructing and writing about their knowledge of complex scientific concepts. They hypothesize and create ideas using textual knowledge and lived experiences to imagine what might be possible and what might be real; what might be true and what is actually a fact; and what might be imagined and how we might be critical of those imaginings. We have seen through these conversations that students' scientific thinking is not the same an adult's. The elements of playfulness and struggle to understand are common throughout these conversations; likewise students often relied on their own lived experiences and real world objects to construct an understanding of content that was, at best, an approximation of complex scientific concepts. What we have to recognize, as teachers, however, is what it means to teach and learn nonfiction writing in the area of science. In the end, this work is not about becoming scientists *per se*. Rather, this process is about learning writing practices and inquiry practices and how to coordinate them as we become writers who have "scientific imagination."

Although scientific imagination and reasoning may take many forms, as teachers we need to be accepting of these dialogues between the imaginative and the critical. The stories of these first-grade students suggest that young children are able to read and write nonfiction when the adults working with them are mindful of the challenges of the genre, willing to accept students' "scientific imagination", and ready to support students as they think about the complex concepts they encounter.

Chapter 7: Nonfiction Is Not Just A Fancy Name For Fiction Reading And Writing Nonfiction In A Second-Grade Classroom

Nonfiction Is Not Just A Name For Fiction Reading And Writing Nonfiction In A Second-Grade Classroom



by Sara Kersten

It is reading time, and students sit in pairs, huddled around groups of books. Some sit at their tables, others lay on their stomachs on the floor with feet in the air, and some squish together in the red chair in the corner. Two girls get up and walk to one of the many bookshelves stationed around the room and whisper back and forth about which book they are going to read next. Another boy looks up at a large piece of chart paper taped to the blackboard and moves his lips as he reads the expectations of being an active reader. The teacher wanders around, frequently bending over the students, asking them about the books they are reading, at times leading them to the book cart and finding a book they may enjoy. There is a general buzz of productivity and excitement around the room. Niki comes up to me, smiles, and shyly says, “I’m having so much fun.”

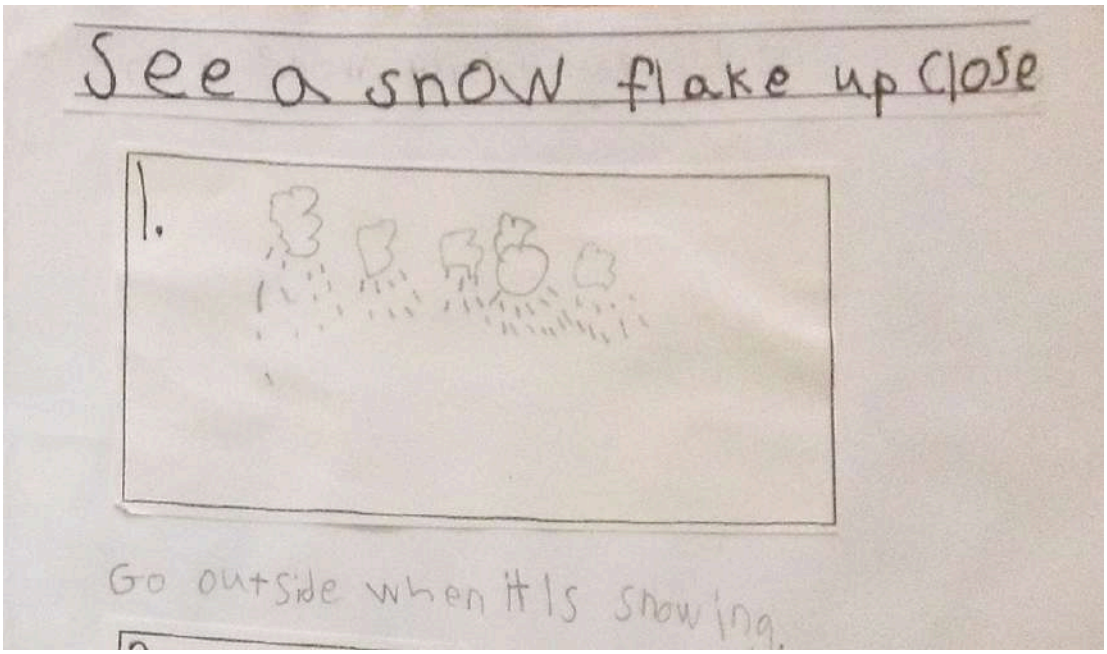
What teaching decisions informed the work of Mrs. Kona and Sara?

- We read nonfiction books aloud every day.
- We paired fiction and nonfiction books together to help them inform each other.
- We explicitly taught students about the characteristics of the genre.
- We engaged students in conversation about the books we were all reading.
- Using the science content we involved students in a collaborative writing project.

The students in this second-grade classroom are being pulled into books about tornadoes, rainstorms, blizzards, and sunshine. The books Niki is having so much fun with are nonfiction books. While at one time the teacher, Mrs. Kona, had thought of nonfiction as boring and too difficult for primary children to read or have read to them, and as aesthetically bland and only useful for content area study, she now incorporates nonfiction books and content area study throughout her reading and writing instruction. Students in this classroom enjoy reading and hearing nonfiction as they explore and make personal connections with the books.

This chapter recounts the journey Mrs. Kona and I (as participant researcher in her classroom) took as we incorporated nonfiction picturebooks into her classroom. Based on our many years of teaching experience and our love of children's literature we worked together to create a six-week unit combining the second-grade science study of weather and atmosphere with the English Language Arts Common Core Standards on nonfiction. This unit of study incorporated fiction books with weather related concepts, nonfiction picturebooks related to the content, science experiments, and a daily weather log. The unit ended up taking much longer, however, as we discovered that integrating nonfiction books into classroom instruction involved much more than simply putting books into students' hands. As we observed students at work, we found ourselves re-planning lessons and choosing different books; evaluating what was working and what wasn't; and planning where to go next. In the rest of this chapter, I describe these in detail.

7.1 Reading Nonfiction Aloud



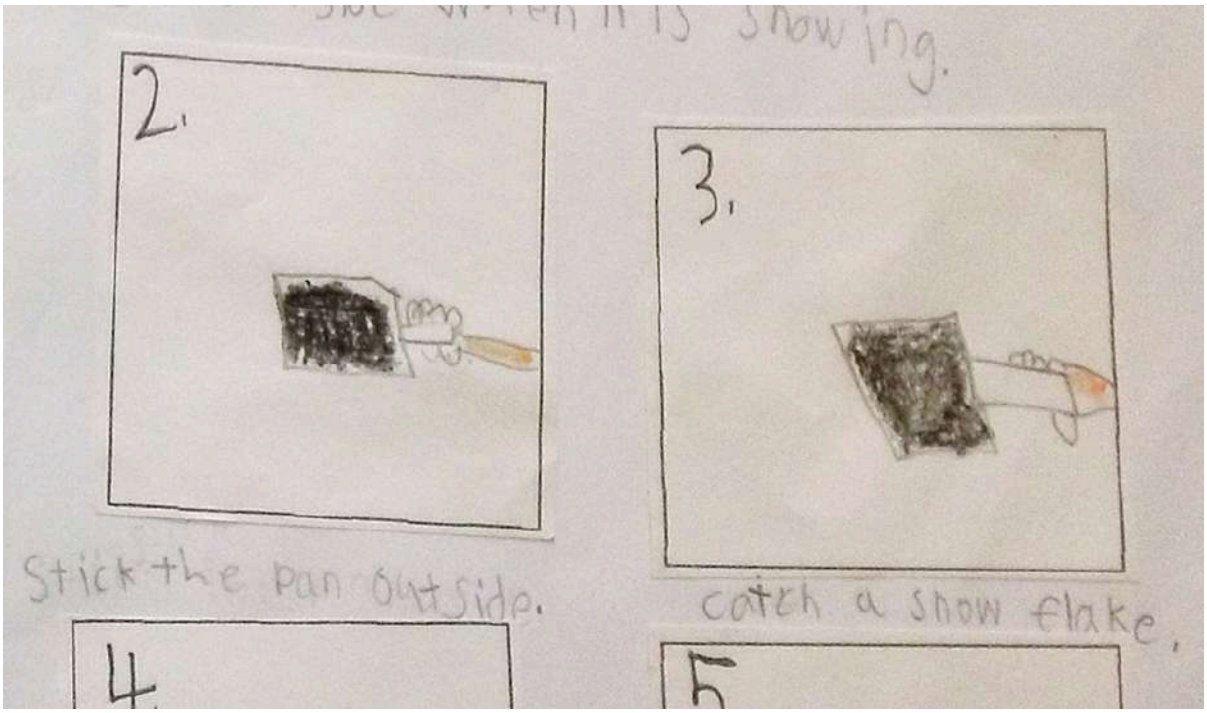
Mrs. Kona wanted to read nonfiction picturebooks out loud during whole class read aloud sessions in order to excite and engage students in the ways she did with fictional picturebooks. However, she acknowledged that starting at the beginning of a nonfiction book and trying to read to the back cover wasn't going to work. She would get bogged down in the scientific discourse, complex vocabulary, and all the captions, fact boxes, headings, and asides commonly found in the genre. If she had trouble wading through all of that, what about her students? As we thought about how to read nonfiction in a read aloud setting, we considered the ways students read nonfiction when reading by themselves. I remembered my own second-grade students huddled around Steve Jenkin's Actual Size, flipping through the pages, finding an illustration that excited and amazed them. The real-to-life squid eye was one vivid example of a page where they stopped, read what they wanted to learn about, then spent a lot of time holding the book up to their faces and comparing their own eye to the 12 inch diameter eye of the squid. Students did not read the entire book, but instead focused on a page they found that interested them.

Keeping this kind of interaction with books in mind, Mrs. Kona would open a carefully selected quality nonfiction picturebook and, turning to a page or illustration would comment or ask a question. With a book on snowstorms, for instance, she exclaimed, "Oh my goodness! Have you ever seen snow this high?" In another instance she looked only at the illustrations in a book about a rainy day, not even reading the text, and asked the students what

they thought was happening page by page. She also read portions of the nonfiction books, focusing on different excerpts, and even highlighting specific captions or other textual features. This shift in how she read nonfiction books aloud led Mrs. Kona to consider the organization of nonfiction books. She discovered that books where the content was easily accessible through charts, labels, captions, the table of contents, diagrams, index, and other visual features were most effective for her read aloud sessions because then students were able to easily locate information they found interesting and read (or at least acquire information from) the text and visual elements. As a result Mrs. Kona continued to look for and select books that met these criteria.

After several months of this type of read aloud we noticed something exciting: the way children typically listened to fiction during read alouds—attentive, eyes on the teacher, no squirming—was the same when Mrs. Kona sat in her red reading chair and opened up a beautiful nonfiction picturebook. We felt affirmed in our decision to read aloud nonfiction books as a way to engage and interest children in the content and genre.

7.2 Pairing Fiction and Nonfiction



As we were planning this unit on nonfiction, Mrs. Kona reflected on her own reading of nonfiction. She remembered how reading *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* caused her to stop and look at nonfiction sources to help her understand why Irish nuns back in the early 20th century forced young women to give up their children. Through this research she began to better understand the book and the characters. Because of her own experiences as a reader, Mrs. Kona felt strongly that "I cannot just hand my students nonfiction books they have no experience with… I have to help them create connections to bridge their interest and understanding." This became her inspiration for pairing fiction with nonfiction.

Early elementary students certainly have more exposure to fiction and their literary diets are often mostly fiction. So, Mrs. Kona sought opportunities to create a sense of comfort and familiarity with nonfiction. One important way she did this was through her read aloud sessions. But another way was to bring in fiction books as a bridge, a way of making connections for students. On the one hand, she used fiction with nonfiction to introduce students to content area study. On the other hand, she used nonfiction to provide deeper understanding about a fictional narrative as with her own experience with Philomena.

Often, Mrs. Kona gathered her students to the carpet after lunch and recess and showed them the cover of a nonfiction book reading a short passage from it. She would read this piece to pull her students in, pique their interest and possibly build their knowledge for a topic they were about to read further. For example, she pulled out Feel the Wind to give the students some context about the wind that was going to be referenced in the fiction book, The Wind Blew. She only read a small excerpt but this nonfiction passage was a lure to excite and entice the children while providing them information about the wind and how it worked.

Other times, she would start with a fiction book and use it as a springboard into a nonfiction content area study. While reading the fiction book Gooseberry Park she asked her students about the ice storm in the story. Then, as a whole class, they created questions about the storm, which they then answered by searching for and reading numerous nonfiction books on storms, blizzards, and ice storms. In this instance and in others, she challenged the idea that nonfiction can only be used to gather information, instead using it as a way to help deepen their understanding of the fiction book. Thus, Mrs. Kona's and the students' co-construction of what it meant to be a reader of nonfiction, a researcher, and a nonfiction writer began with a bridge between two genres; it started with facts, with real life, and a deepening understanding of the fictional story through nonfiction.

However, asking students to pair fiction and nonfiction was difficult if the children could not read the texts. We noticed that some of the students struggled with the difficulty of the nonfiction texts, and Mrs. Kona acknowledged that the readability of the genre was one of the reasons she had been reluctant to use nonfiction in the past. At this point Mrs. Kona introduced me to what she called "considerate texts."

What makes a nonfiction text considerate?

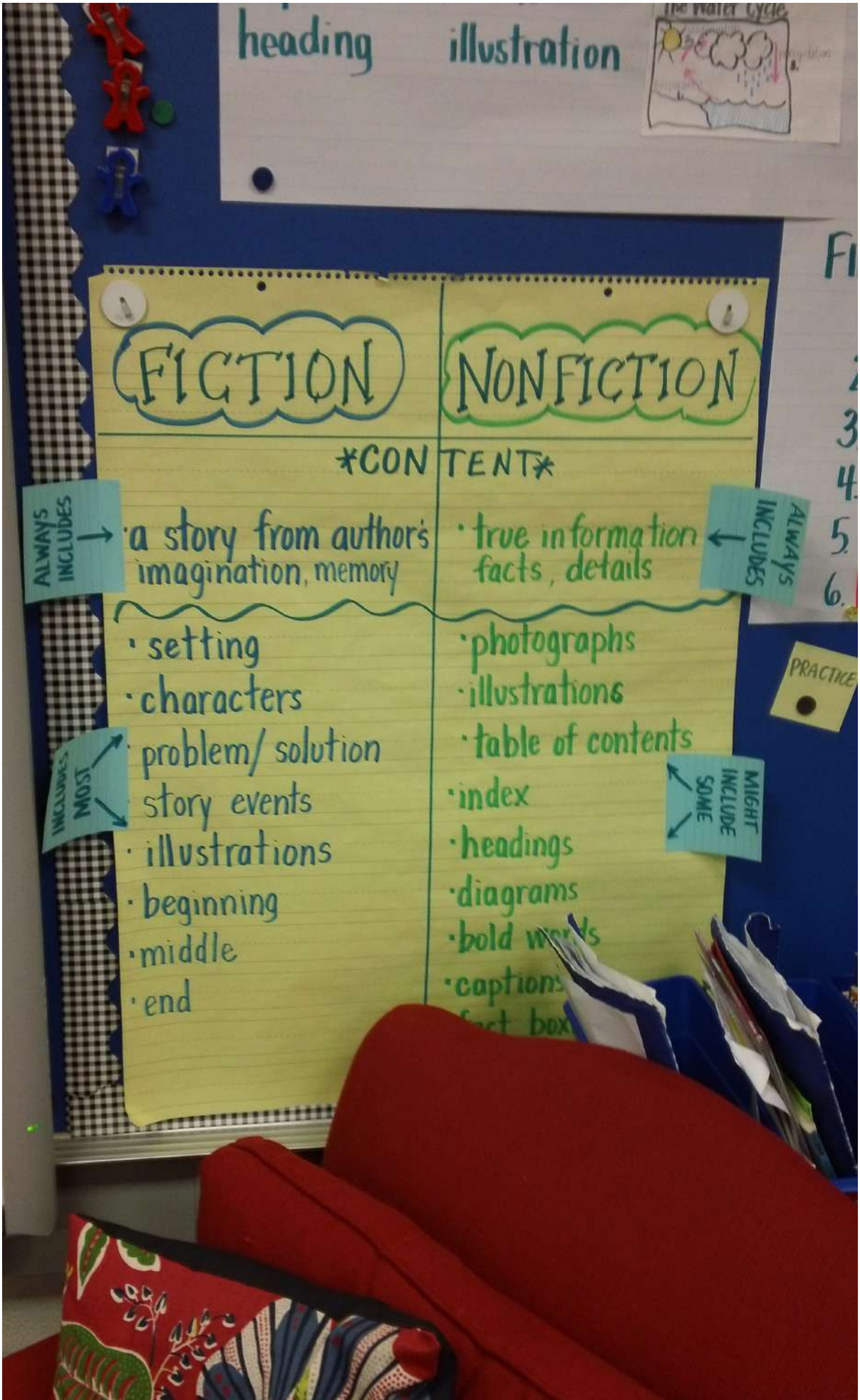
- Does the book provide visual scaffolding in the form of pictorial clues, headings, or captions?
- How much text is on the page. Is there too much?
- How difficult is the vocabulary? Are too may words to hard?
- If the main body of text is above the reading level of the reader, are the other textual elements helpful for the reader?

Mrs. Kona acknowledged that sometimes even "if the text was simple, the concepts [could be] very, very difficult." For example, we originally selected Seymour Simon's Tornadoes as a text to use in the weather unit, but quickly realized it was too text heavy and difficult for second grade students. Simon's Super Storms ended up being a more considerate choice in terms of lexical density, terminology, and content. Consequently, stronger readers were able to read the text fluently while struggling readers were able to use the text features, photographs, and bolded vocabulary to help support their reading and understanding of the text. By using "considerate texts" we supported students as they worked, for example, with intimidating and indecipherable vocabulary like atmosphere and anemometer.

By pairing nonfiction and fiction books Mrs. Kona shifted the focus from an information processing model of

using nonfiction books to one of exploring the genre to learn about and discover content that was interesting and sparked conversations.

7.3 Teaching Characteristics of the Genre


heading
illustration
The Water Cycle
FICTION
NONFICTION
CONTENT
ALWAYS INCLUDES
a story from author's imagination, memory
ALWAYS INCLUDES
true information facts, details
setting
characters
problem/ solution
story events
illustrations
beginning
middle
end
INCLUDES MOST
photographs
illustrations
table of contents
index
headings
diagrams
MIGHT INCLUDE SOME
PRACTICE

Since nonfiction books convey information in a variety of ways, Mrs. Kona felt it was important to teach students about the text features associated with the genre. So early on in the unit Mrs. Kona created a lesson where the students did a scavenger hunt with a nonfiction book. Using a form that Mrs. Kona created, students were to read the book and write down information they read from the text features (captions, maps, diagrams, etc.) in that nonfiction book. It did not work. Instead students wrote down the names of text features, ignoring the information, and frequently had questions about how to find the information. As we walked the students to lunch, we talked about the lesson and why we thought it failed. We noted that while students seemed to be able to name the features, they could not tell their purposes or use them to find information.

As we investigated further, we discovered that many of the students defined nonfiction as books with a table of contents and a glossary. We were befuddled. What about the content? What about all the other inventive and interesting text features? After realizing this, Mrs. Kona realized that she had to spend some time teaching students about the text features associated with genre. In her teaching she included diagrams, captions, labels, headings, charts, maps, table of contents, glossary, index, bold-faced words, fact boxes, and inserts. Yet, even after introducing and talking about these terms students still seemed to be confused. Sophia told me that bold faced words were just words written in capital letters. When I asked Hazel about a caption, she stated the she had no idea what it was for, and Calvin did not understand how to read a diagram.

Again, Mrs. Kona and I reflected on what to do next. First, we looked at our selection of nonfiction picturebooks, examining how both the design elements and illustrations worked together to attract, interest, and help the reader (or not as was sometimes the case). We began by looking at all of the nonfiction book baskets and the nonfiction books displayed around the classroom. We noticed that some books had too many text features; they all seemed to be competing with each other and we were overwhelmed with what to read and where to focus. Other books had a moderate amount of text features but the book itself was aesthetically bland. There was no color or variation in print or text and, in some books, only one type of text feature was present. As we discussed this issue, Mrs. Kona and I realized that we had similar expectations for nonfiction picturebooks as we did for nonfiction books for ourselves. As Mrs. Kona pointed out, “I’m not going to select a book that has dated photographs or looks like an encyclopedia entry; why would I expect my students to do the same?” Thus, much like Goldilocks on her hunt for the just right porridge, chair, and bed, we looked for books that were appropriate for Mrs. Kona’s young students. We searched for books that had a suitable number of text features portrayed in an attractive yet informative fashion. We looked for books that were exciting to look at but displayed the factual content in a readable manner. We weeded out Mrs. Kona’s book baskets and bookshelves until only the books that we felt met our standards remained.

One such book was The Story of Snow. When we first looked at this “just right” book, we were both struck by the way each page was colored in various shades of dusty blue. There was a mix of microscopic photographs of snow crystals and hand drawn illustrations of snowflakes. Each page spread was different, interestingly so. On one page there was a web diagram that zoomed in and showcased the variety shown in individual snow crystals. Another page had a hand drawn diagram of how snow is formed in the atmosphere. The amount of text varied on each page and alternated between paragraphs, captions, and fact boxes. The content was factually accurate based on the extensive reference list and bibliography. As the reader flipped from page to page, they encountered new and exciting facts about snow on each page. Mrs. Kona and I agreed this was a great book to use for the weather unit. It was, quite simply, fascinating!

Interestingly, it was with a similar book, Snowflake Bentley, where we uncovered students’ misconception about

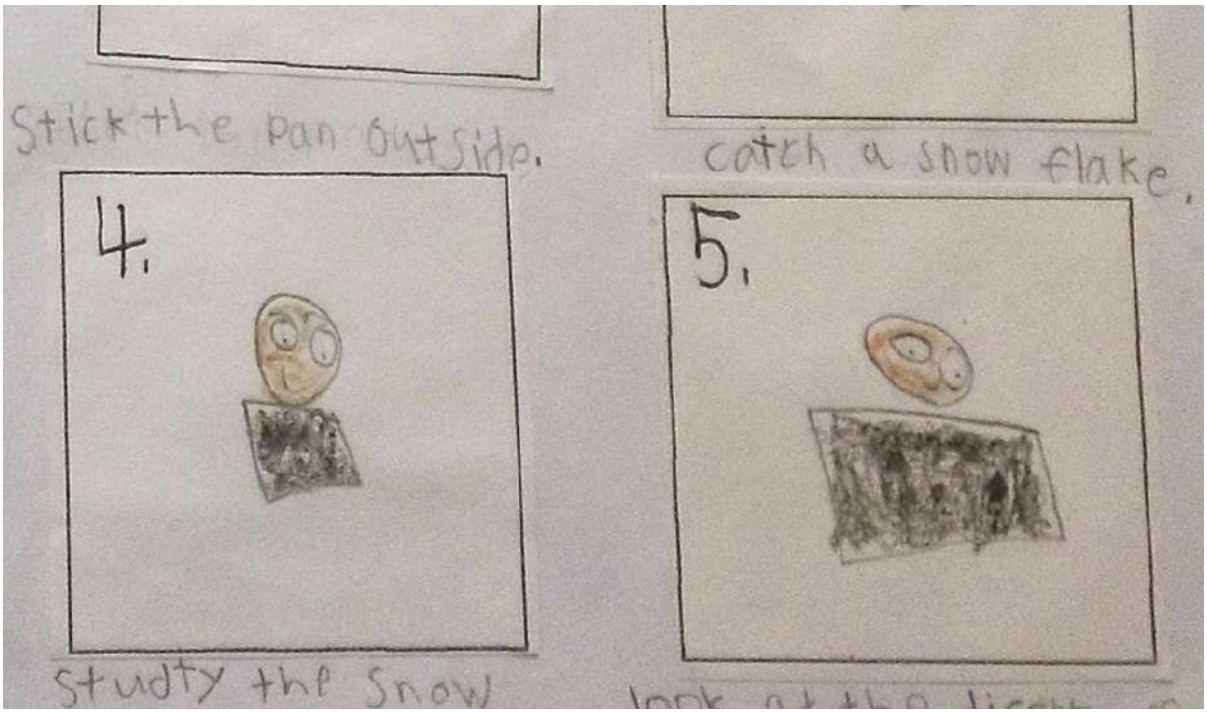
the use of photographs in nonfiction books. One of Mrs. Kona's students, Grace, originally thought *Snowflake Bentley* was fiction because of its illustrations. Mrs. Kona subsequently addressed this in several mini-lessons where she asked the students to analyze the content of the text instead of focusing on the illustrations. As a result of this teaching, Grace and her classmates came to understand that *Snowflake Bentley* was a true story, with accurate information, and where nothing was made up. Based on this experience we intentionally looked for other nonfiction books that used illustrations instead of photographs. By exposing students to nonfiction picturebooks in a wide variety of illustration styles, we hoped to broaden their understanding of the genre.

After working with design elements and illustrations, Mrs. Kona then explicitly taught children about specific visual and textual nonfiction features and how to use them for information gathering. One such lesson focused on diagrams in nonfiction books. Showing a diagram of a volcano, she pointed out the labels, the cut-aways, the use of color, and the arrows pointing to different sections of the volcano. Stressing that the diagram is "trying to communicate information," the students learned about the formation of the volcano and the flow of lava by looking at the diagram. After this lesson, students put their learning into practice, locating a diagram in a book, writing down what they saw, and explaining what they learned from the diagram. Hazel and Zoe noticed that their diagram of a hurricane was trying to tell them exactly how a hurricane forms. They understood the arrows were pointing out the churning water and the captions were explaining about the eye of the hurricane. These features helped them understand the information.

Of course, Mrs. Kona taught many other lessons focused on nonfiction text features including: the table of contents and how it helped you to find your way around a nonfiction book; other times she would point out the bold words and headings directing the reader's attention to certain information. There were times when Mrs. Kona, after a mini-lesson, would look over at me and say, "I don't know if they are understanding this," worrying about whether students were really grasping these characteristics of the genre. We soon saw that exposure to and conversations about these text features and what information they provided was not lost on her students.

Emmet and Leo became enthralled with the text features that described science experiments or unusual facts or asked readers to play a game. They enjoyed these interesting tidbits of information so much that they created their own science experiment on snow in the nonfiction book they made. Their five-step experiment, complete with illustrations, advised readers on how best to capture and study individual snowflakes. They also loved reading interesting facts about blizzards and were intentional about writing their own "Did you Know?" facts about the Blizzard of 1888 in their books. They were insistent on looking for and providing actual photographs of the blizzard, with Leo stating, "Readers will know it [the blizzard] better if they see the actual photographs." As a result, Leo's book included a picture of a person standing next to a towering snow drift with the following caption, "The most terrifying blizzard was in 1888. 58 inches of snow fell. Ohio state struggled." Because of their understanding of the textual features of nonfiction, Leo and Emmet learned about snow, blizzards, and atmosphere and translated that knowledge into their own nonfiction text features using ideas they had gleaned from all the nonfiction books they had read in class.

7.4 Engaging Children in Conversation



Throughout the unit Mrs. Kona and the students engaged in many conversations. Typically these conversations centered on nonfiction as a literary genre and/or understanding the content being communicated in the books. Initially Mrs. Kona spent a lot of time helping students understand that nonfiction contains factual information about the world in which nothing is made up. This caused some confusion, however, as students encountered books that contained real information but was delivered via flying school buses and talking animals. A well-known example is the *Magic School* bus series, which provides factual information on a wide variety of science topics through the use of fantasy. Flying school buses with the capabilities of shrinking and riding through a person's bloodstream to teach about the circulatory system may excite, but can also confuse, younger readers trying to discern the differences between nonfiction and fiction.

Thus, at the beginning many of the conversations around nonfiction books were based on understanding what was fiction and what was nonfiction. For instance, after reading two books on Martin Luther King, Jr. Mrs. Kona initiated a whole class conversation about the books. Students quickly identified the first book, Martin Luther King, Jr., as nonfiction because of its combined use of illustrations and photographs, text features they recognize

as indicative of nonfiction. The second book they read was Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The mixed media illustrations and lyrical content confused the students; many immediately categorized the book as fiction. Mrs. Kona decided to use this as a teaching moment. Going through the book page by page, Mrs. Kona stopped on a few pages, and, emphasizing the content, asked the students if the events in this book matched the events in the other book, their own prior knowledge, and what they read in a previous piece about Martin Luther King, Jr. in Scholastic News. As they went through the book, they came to recognize that both books talked about the peaceful marches MLK led, related other events of the civil rights movement, and provided consistent wording of his speeches. Like detectives, students investigated the nature of the genre, coming to understand that the content is the most important criteria in determining whether a book is nonfiction or not.

However, students still confused fiction books with nonfiction books. For instance, Calvin told me he loved historical fiction books. He loved learning about history and told me about George Washington's role in the Revolutionary War. He asked me if I knew about the Battle at Yorktown, and if I knew Washington fought in the French and Indian War. Calvin was engrossed in the information he was learning. When he showed me the books he had been reading on George Washington I noticed they were nonfiction books, yet he was labeling these books as "historical fiction." When I asked him about their classification he said, "I don't know why they call it fiction. They're historical but not fiction." With further discussion, Calvin told me that he classified them as historical fiction, minus the fiction, because the events were in the past. For Calvin, then, nonfiction seemed to be limited to books telling about current events and topics; anything that happened in the past was relegated to "historical fiction." He was not alone in his struggle for clarity about what nonfiction was.

Likewise, Leo, after reading The Great White Man-Eating Shark told Mrs. Kona that the story was nonfiction "because it tells you, like, what to do if you are, like, nose-to-nose with a shark or if you see a dorsal fin when you're in the water." He was enthralled with the safety tips provided—"leave in a quiet and dignified way"—and even recognized the description of the shark, has having sharp teeth and a pointy head, as being realistic. Mrs. Kona later told me she knew she could not just tell him the book was nonfiction because, in a way, he was correct, there was true information provided in the story. Instead, she began by asking him about the subgenre of realistic fiction. He acknowledged that in realistic fiction books some of the situations could actually happen, but probably would not. They continued by talking about the content of the story. While Leo thought it was pretty awesome that someone could pretend to be a shark and scare people, he finally acquiesced, saying that it probably could not happen. Combined with his understanding that the characters were made up and knowing that the whole book was not true he finally came to the understanding that in a nonfiction version of this book "everything would have had to actually happen."

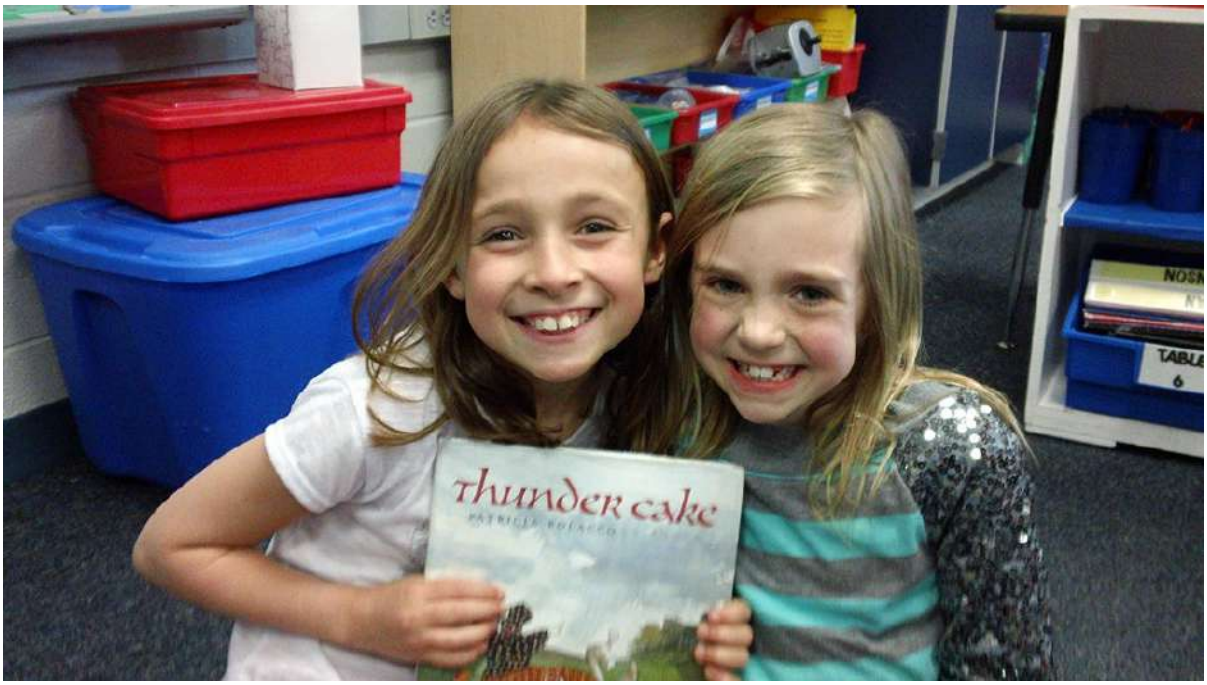
While Mrs. Kona dealt with students' confusion surrounding fiction and nonfiction, she also helped students understand the informational content they were reading through conversations that were embedded throughout the day. These discussions helped students make connections between what they were reading and their own lived experiences. For example, when reading nonfiction books, Mrs. Kona never asked her students what I would consider the most common question teachers ask their students after reading a nonfiction text: What is the book about? Instead, she asked her students to make personal connections between the books and themselves. When reading Gusts and Gales: A Book about Wind, she wanted to know if the students had noticed or felt any wind when they were outside. Since it was February and the students had just missed a whole week of school due to snow and frigid temperatures, they had many personal experiences from which to draw. In particular several

students noted that on days that it was colder, the wind blew faster; Mrs. Kona was able to find a section in the book that supported and extended their hypothesis.

Discussions helped students make connections between what they were reading and their own lived experiences.

The students also connected the information in this book with an earlier science experiment they had experienced when a science program came to their classroom. Referring back to the experiment about hot and cold air, they discussed how temperature affected the movement of wind. They used their hands to show the shifts in the wind depending on the incoming fronts of hot or cold air. Students used this prior knowledge to deepen their understanding of the information in the book. As the book moved on to address hurricanes, one student made a connection between that book and another book, Twisters, which discusses famous tornadoes and hurricanes. This kind of connection often occurred as students became more familiar with a topic after reading or hearing several books on the subject. All in all, it is interesting to note that these discussions were not just a simple regurgitation of information; rather Mrs. Kona and the students interacted with the information in the books, posing and answering questions as they read and talked together. As Penny Colman says, “Nonfiction is real life”; and Mrs. Kona’s students certainly were able to connect their own lived experiences with the information they were learning.

7.5 Content



After about six weeks spent in reading quality nonfiction books and discussing both the content and the characteristics of the genre, it was time for students to write their own nonfiction books on weather-related topics such as rain, snow, thunderstorms, and tornadoes. Mrs. Kona began the writing project by introducing the students to some carefully selected fiction picturebooks that told a story based on a weather-related topic. She placed the students in pairs and had them select a fiction book that interested them. They read the book, asked themselves questions while reading, and then wrote questions they had based on the weather event described in the book. For example, when Mikey and Joey read Groundhog Weather School they wondered what human meteorologists did (in comparison to their rodent counterparts in the story) and what tools they used in determining the weather. Reading Boom! Boom! caused Louise and Jillian to wonder about the seasons depicted in the story; one of the questions they asked was, “Why do the seasons change?”

As students finished developing their lists of questions, Mrs. Kona told them: “Your book should include both writing and drawing. Your book should be like the nonfiction books we read that have print and pictures.” She encouraged students to think about elements of the nonfiction books they had been reading including the ways in which they were organized, the text features they used, and their considerateness. She challenged students to

ask themselves, “How am I going to create a nonfiction text that teaches someone about these things?”, and to think about what excited them about the topic and include that in their books. Mrs. Kona remarked that she tried to position her students as both researchers of and authors of nonfiction.

The teacher challenged her students to think about what excited them about their topic and include that in their books.

Armed with those questions and knowing that nonfiction books supply real, factual information about the world, students, acting as researchers, began reading and investigating numerous nonfiction books for the information they needed. Hazel and Zoe had read Patricia Polacco’s *Thundercake*, and had questions about what happened in the atmosphere to create thunderstorms, how rain happens, what comes before a thunderstorm, and more about lightning. Since the fictional text did not provide information to answer these questions, they turned to nonfiction texts, seeking out, reading and evaluating the information for the answers to their questions. Just as Mrs. Kona had modeled asking questions during her large group read alouds of nonfiction books, and using the fiction and nonfiction books to inform each other, Hazel and Zoe also created their own questions as a gateway to helping them intentionally read the nonfiction texts for information.

After completing their research, students, in the role of authors, used writing, illustrations, drawings, and other text features to communicate the information they had discovered. Using their understanding of the characteristics of nonfiction, students thought critically about how they were going to convey and display their information. Hazel and Zoe took up Mrs. Kona’s lessons about nonfiction text features and how they conveyed information to readers. I observed them one day studying a diagram of the atmosphere during a thunderstorm. Hazel pointed to the diagram and said, “Look! This diagram is telling us how thunderstorms are formed. We can use this information in our own book.” While she was commenting, Zoe quickly took notes and found a way to rewrite that information into their own book. Writing the information in their own words, “as authors do,” Zoe said, the girls elected to place the information in a Fact Box. When I asked them about the Fact Box they both said it would be an easy and quick way for the reader to see and get the information they were trying to tell. Using their constructed knowledge of nonfiction and nonfiction texts, the girls adopted both the author and researcher stance to read, think critically, create connections, and use nonfiction information in their own writing.

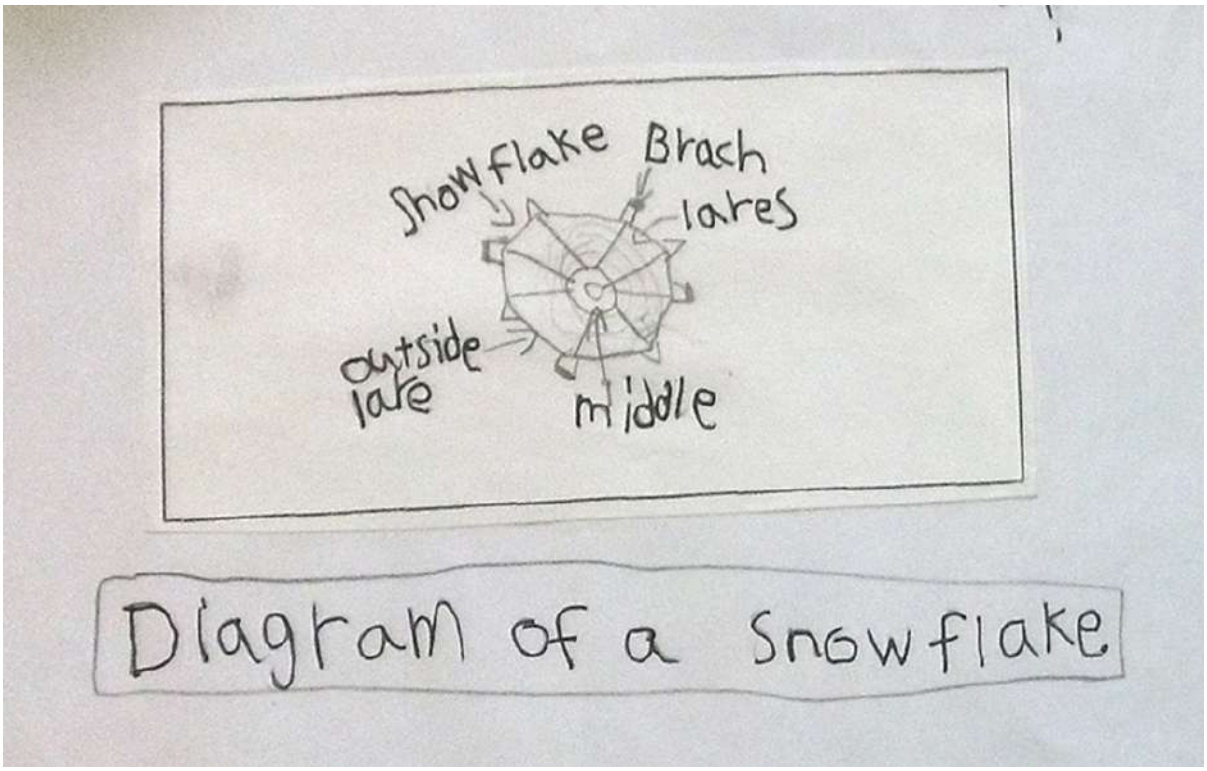
During the next several days, students worked on their books using a multi-step writing process format that included drafting, sloppy copies, second drafts, and multiple stages of edits. Zoe and Hazel worked hard, furiously even, during this time to create a book just like the ones they had spent months reading and studying. By the end of the time Hazel and Zoe and the other students in the class had produced nonfiction books with covers, title pages, table of contents, indexes, glossaries, captions, illustrations, fact boxes, headings, bold words, quizzes, experiments, and even “About the Author” pages.

Hazel in speaking about her completed book, told me that she had worked hard to make sure her information was easy to understand so everyone – including Kindergartners and 5th grade boys – could enjoy it. She had put in bold-face print vocabulary like meteorologist, electricity, and temperature so readers would know the key terms. She included a diagram of the water cycle complete with arrows and labels on the page describing why rain happens. Colorful illustrations accompanied paragraphs explaining what happens to the atmosphere just before

a storm. The book included a Table of Contents to “help readers get to what they want to read”, a glossary, and an index. The use of these text features helped present the information in an organized and considerate manner. Throughout this project students were not given step-by-step instruction; rather they were provided with opportunities to act like authors of nonfiction based on their own understandings of what nonfiction is and what it is used for. Further, students were able to do this because they were knowledgeable and knew their topic, just like authors of published nonfiction books.

Pages from a Completed Nonfiction Book

7.6 Nonfiction: A World Entered Willingly



When we started this nonfiction journey, Mrs. Kona and I did not anticipate the many twists and turns the unit on nonfiction would take. We originally anticipated the entire unit would last six weeks but it ended up lasting over 16 weeks as Mrs. Kona frequently responded to confusions and misconceptions. Our daily conversations about the lessons, student understanding (or lack thereof), and the books became integral to the ways in which we came to understand how nonfiction can be used in the classroom. At the end of the unit as we observed students displaying their understanding of what made a nonfiction book nonfiction, creating personal connections with the texts, using nonfiction and fiction together to inform each, and creating amazing nonfiction books we constantly found ourselves saying to each other, “Did you see this?” “They understand this!” “Remember when she thought nonfiction was just a fancy way of saying ‘fiction’?” It was exciting and affirming to realize that that the books students enjoyed came from the nonfiction shelf, because we were able to “create a vivid and believable world that the reader will enter willingly and leave only with reluctance” (Freedman, 1992, p. 3).

As we were ending the unit I asked Hazel what she enjoyed about making her own nonfiction books. Her eyes

became big and her arms waved effusively as, speaking in a rush, she told me all that she had learned and done. She used words and phrases not commonly associated with a nonfiction study: fun, I want to do it again,

awesome! She told me that she was in the process of making her second nonfiction book at home; she wanted everyone to be able to read, enjoy, and learn from her books. Her imagination was ignited! Before she turned away from me, she looked right at me and said, “My books, they could be in the library right next to the other nonfiction books.” I could not agree more. Isn’t this what we hope to hear from all our students; and, to think, …it all began by handing her a quality nonfiction book.

Chapter 8: Redefining Nonfiction Writing

Redefining Nonfiction Writing

by Sherry Bentley

The In-between Space

One foot in elementary and one in middle school. Fourth graders are the "tweeners" no matter what the school configuration might be – stuck in that in-between space. As learners they are beginning to construct different understandings of what it means to be a reader as they shift from learning to read to reading to learn in the content areas. Their identities as writers are also changing as they learn to write in particular genres and continue to address more sophisticated and complex issues of writing craft.

When I started teaching fourth grade, I, too, felt like a "tweener" situated in an in-between space. After five years as a first grade teacher and a break in my career to be a stay-at-home mom, I was offered a position as a fourth grade English language arts and social studies teacher. I embraced the challenge of preparing my fourth graders to

plant both feet firmly into fifth grade the following year; there was a lot to teach and I soon realized that finding enough minutes in my day for writing, which I believed to be so essential to students' growth in English Language Arts (ELA), was going to be difficult.

After pouring over the curriculum guides I concentrated my writing instruction on teaching the format of the writing genres that were part of our district ELA curriculum. Research reports related to a social studies topic were completed through an instructional sequence of mostly step-by-step, whole class lessons. There was not much in the way of creative writing or thinking and definitely not much in the way of choice. And while the students did get some practice with how to write a report, the finished products basically were all the same. It was all I could manage as I juggled to fit in the various facets of good ELA instruction with the time I had allotted to me each day. And then, of course, there was still social studies to be taught.

After several years of teaching in this way, I came to realize that, while I was a successful writing teacher if one measures success solely by test scores, something was missing. Where was the enjoyment? Where was the relevance? What else could and should my students be learning from writing? How could I use their writing to deepen their thinking about nonfiction text? How could I teach more efficiently to fit everything in? Professional development through reading books and attending workshops gave me some answers, and I began to expand my thinking about what constitutes nonfiction writing.

The journey beyond test scores and curriculum guides began when I discovered the power of the personal narrative in the form of literary nonfiction. One day I decided to introduce a pre-writing activity that I had learned during a professional development workshop. First, I drew a floor plan of the house I grew up in on the whiteboard. Then as I went from room to room, I reminisced about the memories I had of the activities that went on in each room. I did a "think aloud" and recorded ideas for stories I could write about my family to the side of the floor plan. As I wrote on the board, my back was to my students, of course, so I didn't have much opportunity to gauge their reactions. Another teacher who was in the room to lend writing assistance to one of my students shared with me that the kids were totally "mesmerized" as I shared bits and pieces of my life and family through my memories. "Really? They were?" I replied in amazement. I listened to the buzz in the room as students then created their own floor plans, narrated their stories to a partner, and developed their own "prompts" of things they could write about their family.

"I have a hard time teaching writing because I am not really comfortable writing myself," this colleague admitted candidly.

Based on this experience I realized that starting with what students already knew – themselves and their own lived experiences – seemed to build confidence in even the most reluctant writers. After all, they had been writing using this personal memoir genre since kindergarten. I just had to "grow their writing up" a bit. By providing them with opportunities to hear and tell their stories to each other before putting them to paper, I was able engage my fourth graders in the writing process. Further, as they listened to each other, they became aware of where they might have left out important details or where their narrative sequence was confusing. As a result, their narratives became more complex and their confidence in writing increased.

And something even more exciting happened. We began to build relationships with each other and became a community. We learned new things about each other that fostered respect and built a feeling of trust in our classroom. Students listened to each other. And, yes, the students became more comfortable with taking risks so that they began to share their stories aloud. When given permission to write about themselves and their everyday experiences, I discovered that even the most reluctant writers would take a chance – and sometimes we were all surprised by the results.

Around this same time, I had a conversation with another teacher that pushed me toward my next steps in preparing my students to be writers of nonfiction.

“I have a hard time teaching writing because I am not really comfortable writing myself,” this colleague admitted candidly.

I acknowledged her concern but to myself I wondered why that might be. Did she lack the preparation for teaching the particular genres? Was she worried that her students might see her vulnerabilities if she shared what she wrote as she modeled the writing process? Her words caused me to stop and think. While I considered myself a writer, was I comfortable enough to share with my students the process I go through to get to a finished piece? I knew the answer had to be “yes”. I had to model the process. The whole process. The joys. The frustrations. And everything in between.

And so I began to model how I write. I thought out loud. I erased and revised and rewrote as I worked through the messy process of writing. I wanted my students to see and understand that even though I am a teacher and one who enjoys writing, I still have to work at it. I modeled my process for answering an essay question in social studies. I modeled how I would write a letter to request information from the Ohio Department of Tourism about historical places I might want to visit. I modeled how to choose the important facts from an informational source and then how to write a report using those facts. I showed them that it is a challenging process but one that becomes easier with practice and the right tools in your toolbox.

I also found myself thinking about how to provide students with choice in their nonfiction writing. I began to collaborate more with my partner to provide science topics as well as social studies ones as choices for writing. Writing lessons became more interactive as we solved the problems of writing together. We read. We researched. We organized the information. We talked it out. We wrote together. And we learned. We learned how to write nonfiction. We learned how to read nonfiction. Further, as students engaged with the science and social studies content through the writing process, I often found myself clarifying misunderstandings about conceptual information, too. My job got a little bit easier.

8.1 Blurring The Boundaries Between Fiction And Nonfiction: Literary Nonfiction

As students became more motivated and more confident writers, something else happened. The lines between fiction and nonfiction writing began to blur as students made use of aspects from both genres to create interesting, literary writing. While reading Love That Dog by Sharon Creech, we encountered the poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams. When I presented my students with the first line from the poem as a prompt (So much depends upon . . .), I got varying responses. Many students, like Lee, were inspired to write about a personal experience or favorite activity:

*S*o much depends upon a fishing pole on a warm summer day

to help you have fun.

Put bait on your hook

and cast it out.

Then splash! It's a trout!

You start reeling it in and say,

"That's a big one!"

Then it's time you go home for the day with some fine dining.

But others chose to write about something they had observed or had read about in a nonfiction text. Here is what Eva wrote:

So much depends upon a spider

in his web beside the old barn

Watching the flies

buzzing all around

until GULP!

The fly is the spider's dinner.

As I continued to work with fourth graders, I sought new ways to infuse literary forms often associated with fiction writing into the learning of our content area subjects. Reading, writing, language, and science. Reading, writing, language, and social studies. They all began to blend together in a harmonious mix. During a unit of study on weather, writing stations provided students with opportunities to choose how they would show their conceptual understanding through a variety of reading and writing activities. A narrative story written in the first person as if they were a raindrop or a snowflake allowed them to elucidate what they understood about the water cycle. Using The Important Book by Margaret Wise Brown as a mentor text, students illustrated and wrote about the role clouds played in the water cycle. Fiction writing? Nonfiction? The two got jumbled together in their lively, literary pieces.

Poetry, typically a fictional genre, was also a useful form to help students grasp a new scientific concept, I found. While I introduced them to limericks and cinquains and haiku and diamantes, I also introduced other types of poetry to provide student with ways to communicate their understandings of content area material. Mary, for instance, chose a nested meditation to show her understanding of the water cycle:

Water.

Water

pouring.

Water

pouring

down from the clouds.

Water

pouring

down from the clouds

into the stream.

Water

pouring

down from the clouds

into the stream,

rushing down the waterfall.

Water

pouring

down from the clouds

into the stream,

rushing down the waterfall

into the river to start the cycle over again.

Current events articles also presented students with opportunities to write free form poetry as we sifted through the articles to find main ideas and important details that could be used creatively. During one such lesson we gleaned important details from an article about monkeys in Delhi, India. (Because of overpopulation, the monkeys had become a nuisance for the residents.) After reading and determining the important information, I modeled how we could take that information and use it to write a poem. Later we read another article focusing on New York City leaders' ban of big sugary drinks due to their detrimental health effects. I then gave students an opportunity to "give it a go" for themselves. Elizabeth wrote this:

Big sugary drinks.

Big sugary drinks.

Big sugary drinks.

People drink too many sugary drinks.

That causes people to become obese.

People are getting heart disease and diabetes.

Stop drinking big sugary drinks.

Too much sugar.

Drink less sugary drinks.

New York's getting rid of them.

Do we get rid of them?

No, that takes away individual freedom.

Don't slurp as many sugary drinks.

Don't make the problem bigger.

As I read Elizabeth's poem, I was startled by what her writing revealed… Cause/effect. Persuasive writing. Main idea. Humor. It was all there in that short poem. She had sifted through the important information and had gotten to the crux of the article. With this piece of writing I was able to assess what she understood from her reading as well as marvel at the skillful way in which she was able to communicate this understanding to an audience.

Collaborative learning groups added a further dimension to the ways in which I taught nonfiction writing. As students worked with peers in small groups they had opportunities to learn from each other, experience different perspectives and discover diverse ways of doing things. A lesson on the Native American Indian tribes that settled Ohio was transformed into a Readers' Theater by one group of students. A lesson on the schools in pioneer times was turned into a play. A lesson on the various modes of transportation in early Ohio became a song which they all sang to a familiar tune. I observed as the kids discussed, disagreed, and finally came to consensus on what content should be included in their scripts and songs. They asked questions to clarify their understanding and made decisions on how best to present their material. They wrote. They erased. They revised and rewrote – together. And then they presented their hard work with smiles on their faces. Some presentations were great and some not so great. But as they grappled with the material through the writing process, they gained a deeper understanding of the content and each other. They practiced speaking in front of an audience and listening to each other. They practiced reading fluency. They read and wrote in new genres and practiced their grammar and shored up their nonfiction text reading skills. And everyone participated and was successful in one way or another.

It seemed clear from my own observations of the students in the classroom that using these forms of writing typical to fiction when writing nonfiction text were benefitting my students in many ways as well as making teaching nonfiction writing, such as formal reports, easier. Students were encouraged to think more complexly, and their understanding of the conceptual material was firmer. Their familiarity with nonfiction text structures improved as they used these features in their writing. Students made choices about how to convey their conceptual understandings of the content they were studying in ways that best suited their learning styles. Relationships were being created through collaborative experiences: students received support from each other when they needed it as they worked together as partners or in groups. Since all students were busy and engaged, I had the opportunity to provide assistance to individuals or groups who needed intervention. Best of all, everyone's work did not look the same. Further, I had the data I needed to confirm that this intermingling of writing and reading and content was a valid practice; consistently my state scores in reading came back every year with a very high class average in the subcategory of nonfiction text.

8.2 Becoming A Hybrid Teacher

During my years teaching fourth grade I have become, what you might call, a hybrid teacher. Hybrid, as defined, by vocabulary.com, is a mixture of two different things, resulting in something that has a little bit of both. My experiences as a teacher of English Language Arts have mixed with my work as a content area teacher resulting in teaching that combines content area study with many different forms of writing – poetry, songs, radio/television ads, scripts. As my students transform content material into literary forms of nonfiction, we use what we know from ELA classes as we explore the proper formats for various genres, understand and use English grammar to communicate our messages, and incorporate newly acquired content vocabulary into our writing.

As a content area teacher, I continue to facilitate comprehension of the conceptual material we are studying. Sometimes creativity is evident in the writing but comprehension and accuracy aren't. As I check for understanding, I can see where there is a problem as a student grapples with explaining complicated concepts in their nonfiction writing. When I see a misunderstanding of the content that needs to be cleared up before they move on, or the need to provide suggestions for formatting, organizing, or revising their work before they create their final copy, a one-on-one conference generally provides the assistance needed. I can then leave students to explore their own ideas and possibilities.

Further, students understand that they have choices in the ways they demonstrate their understanding of the material they are studying. As a hybrid teacher, I no longer regard research reports as the single option open to nonfiction writers. In fact, students have added new forms of nonfiction writing to my repertoire. If I offer choices like a brochure, a Reader's Theater, or a song, for their assignment, they may have another idea. "Could I write and perform a game show instead," one student asked. Student motivation, enjoyment, and engagement is evident and the quality of their work is high when they make the choice on how to learn and to be assessed. Seeing how differently my students approach similar assignments and the creative thinking displayed by their work continues to amaze me.

Editor's Note on Hybrid Picturebooks:

Sherry's use of the word hybrid in this chapter is very interesting since it is a term that is sometimes applied to nonfiction picturebooks, as in hybrid nonfiction. Like Sherry's definition the books labeled in this way combine two different things – in this case, different genres are combined to create a nonfiction piece. For instance, a poem may be used as the frame for the information presented as in Byrd Baylor's *Before You Came this Way*. Or fantastical elements like magic school buses provide the vehicle for the reader to explore information about topics as varied as outer space and the human body (*The Magic School Bus* series by Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen). Narrative is also common in hybrid nonfiction texts. In some instances a particular story is narrated throughout the book with more scientific information presented separately or in a coda at the end (*Rattlesnake Dance: True Tales, Mysteries, and Rattlesnake Ceremonies* by Jennifer Owings Dewey); or information is conveyed using the first person as in Brian Karas' *Atlantic* where the narrator is the Atlantic Ocean.

There are two important aspects, I think, to the use of hybrid nonfiction picturebooks in classrooms. These books are often part of the classroom or school library collection, and for young readers and writers may initially cause some confusion. Although these nonfiction books provide "real" information about a topic or content area, sometimes there were make-believe or "not real" elements in the books. Teachers need to be aware of the possibility for confusion with these books and may want to discuss how they have characteristics of both fiction and nonfiction.

Further, hybrid nonfiction picturebooks are often used as mentor texts for nonfiction writers because of the literary features present in them. For this reason hybrid nonfiction picturebooks can also be referred to as literary nonfiction, a form of nonfiction that uses narrative and other literary language and structures to present information. Thus, literary nonfiction in picturebook format provides young writers with examples of the author's craft when writing nonfiction. Again, however, it is important that teachers be mindful of how the language of these texts might support or constrain how students take up the models in their own writing.

8.3 On Being a Hybrid Writer—A Student's Perspective

I recently asked Elizabeth, a former fourth grade student now in sixth grade, why she thought the work we had done in fourth grade with nonfiction writing was important. Without hesitation, she rattled off a few things.

When you write nonfiction, you can't just make things up. You have to think about it and make it realistic. It has to be true. It makes you review the information you are learning because you are repeating it in your mind.

When I pressed further and asked if she felt the nonfiction literary writing she had done during the two years I was her teacher were beneficial to her, she continued:

When I write in a different style, it helps me think about the information I am learning in two different ways. I have to think about what the article says and then how I am going to write about it. My writing has to make sense. I have to make sure it has the right information, so I have to think about it.

When I worked on the radio ad [a social studies project] with my group, I learned from others. I learned the answers to some questions about our empire. Sometimes I was like, 'Oh, that's what that meant, and then I

understood it better.' Or maybe I hadn't thought about the question someone asked, and then I learned the answer to it. As more people added their perspectives to the answer, I understood it even better.

My conversation with Elizabeth confirmed my belief that infusing creative expression into nonfiction writing experiences is truly advantageous for my students but in more ways than I had even imagined. They are able to wrestle with ideas and concepts and grapple with the best way to express what it is they want to say. They have the opportunity to collaborate and learn from their peers. They are immersed in the learning process on a deeper level. Using writing genres generally associated with fiction to convey information requires something more from them as students. It requires them to think in a whole new way.

My students have become hybrid writers – connecting their learning in ways that suit them and their learning preferences. They tangle with nonfiction information as they read it and analyze it, and then they assimilate what they have learned into various forms of writing. Through the struggle that comes with these writing experiences, they ponder, they learn, and they become better writers and better thinkers. What is the best way to express the information in this article? A poem? A Readers' Theater? A monologue? What is the most important information I need to share? What do I want my audience to learn? These are just a few of the many essential questions students must consider they write nonfiction.

There are other surprises and less obvious benefits that have come from these writing practices too. New friendships have developed as a result of collaborative experiences. Quiet students have stepped out of their comfort zone to sing a song that they have written in front of the class! A close classroom community has developed as students have shared their talents, personalities, and interests through their writing. I have gotten to know my students better which has helped me to better meet their needs. And my students have become more reflective about their own learning process as they have opportunities to see what they know and what it is they still need to find out in order to grasp a new concept.

I realize that I have not officially redefined the meaning of nonfiction writing; what I refer to in this chapter is often referred to as literary nonfiction. However, I have redefined what nonfiction writing means to me and my students. For us it is the chance to think "out of the box" as we learn about and communicate new content and ideas. It is the chance to show our understanding in ways that suit our individual learning styles. It is a chance to fuse all of the subjects together as we deepen our comprehension and thinking about content material. So, yes, I enjoy blurring the lines between fiction and nonfiction as I stretch my students' thinking. I am happy to be a hybrid teacher guiding students to become hybrid writers.

Chapter 9: A Large and Lovely Accomplishment: Three Types ofNon-Ficton Writing for Fourth Graders

A Large And Lovely Accomplishment: Three Types Of Nonfiction Writing For Fourth Grade Writers

by Kate Corson

The collected knowledge of nonfiction

When I was 15 years old, I went to the public library for the first time in my life and asked for a specific title, a nonfiction title—Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. I forget how I learned about the book; perhaps from the daily newspaper, my brother's Village Voice, or my parents' Time magazine. The librarian looked at me with suspicion. What was a teenage girl doing requesting a nonfiction book when school wasn't in session, particularly this one? In a small farm community in Ohio, suggesting that field chemicals were dangerous, as this book did, was almost subversive. Despite the librarian's attitude, I checked out *Silent Spring* that day, and I still remember the ensuing conversations with my parents at the kitchen table as I was reading it. Did they know about the DDT Dad was putting on the ground around us? How could he be so cavalier in saying that he was sure it was in our well water? Didn't he know what it might be doing to us and to the environment?

Reading *Silent Spring* was a watershed event for me. This intriguing book gave me important information about my life. What else didn't I know about what people were doing to damage my world? Moreover, I was peripherally aware of other implications it held for me. The author of this book was a female researcher and author, uncovering and writing about controversial information in the environmental science arena. Here was a true story, both narrative and researched, which drew readers in. Here was a book with facts that would change my world and what I thought about myself.

Given my interest in the environment and because I was a girl who liked to push boundaries, I chose to major in agricultural engineering as an undergraduate. In the technical writing class required by my major I learned that less is more. If words aren't necessary, delete them. If they aren't precise, replace them. **Therefore, so, in conclusion, however, in addition, interestingly:** all were cut from writing unless they truly added value. The goal was to be clear, complete, and concise. Later as an engineer for a regulatory agency, I primarily wrote reports summarizing inspection and analysis results. It was important to my audience that I be clear, complete, and concise in my writing.

Eventually I came to realize my work was not aligning with my passions or dreams. I came to understand that through teaching I could be myself (the tree hugger and science geek who speaks out for her beliefs). I completed my education degree thirteen years after the engineering degree, and since then I have taught fourth or fifth grade in a suburban, middle class community.

Because of my particular, previous experiences with reading and writing, nonfiction permeates my teaching. The research and narratives of an impassioned author and the technical writing of an engineer impacted my life; and so in the classroom I continue to pursue ways to best teach content while also helping students value what they are learning. I encourage my students to be scientists, dreamers, writers, readers, environmentalists, and activists. To encourage them to create and pursue dreams, I bring them true stories, nonfiction stories.

We have found many books that draw us in just as Silent Spring drew me in when I was young. For the boy who loves to draw I read *The Boy Who Drew Birds: A Story of John James Audubon*. There are stories of children who became presidents (*To Dare Mighty Things: The Life of Theodore Roosevelt*) and underwater explorers (*Manfish: A Story of Jacques Cousteau*). Some books recreate the field notebooks of scientists (*Searching For Grizzlies*) and others share the process of scientific discovery (*Scaly Spotted Feathered Frilled: How Do We Know What*

Dinosaurs Really Looked Like?) These books are creative and descriptive, with funny anecdotes and lots to be inferred about life and learning. They tell true stories that help my students learn about their world and how they might fit into it.

My students and I also learn through inquiry. Rather than provide facts I provide support as they investigate questions and problems they are interested in and choose to learn more about. They design experiments, share strategies, and study topics individually and in groups. I ask them to write across the curriculum and throughout the inquiry process. They write to share information, tell stories, reflect on learning, and respond to questions.

Underlying all this work we do together is my belief that nonfiction writing carries forward the continuum of collected knowledge and to be one of its writers is a large and lovely accomplishment. Very, very few of my students will be lifelong writers of fiction, but they will all experience and learn, throughout their work and their lives, as they read and write nonfiction. They are all part of an intricately connected world and as such they need to be able to tell their stories well because they as humans have value and their stories have value. However their messages should be clear to the people who hear them. Throughout our time together, then, I work to help students understand how it is that nonfiction writing carries forward the continuum of humanity's collected knowledge. And I work with them to construct the understanding that to be one of its writers is, indeed, a large and lovely accomplishment.

9.1 Investigative Writing

Entering fourth grade, students have plenty of experience with nonfiction writing. They are familiar with features of nonfiction: table of contents, index, and picture captions. They have written true stories and researched for writing, since kindergarten. Now they need to start learning the nuances of nonfiction writing. To do this I begin the school year by introducing students to investigative writing.

Teacher's Note

I like to begin with something that is active and engaging, in recognition of how very difficult it is to get

back into school habits of behavior. This past year we looked at a website with a monthly science question, http://www.solveityourway.com/, and decided to investigate "Which ball rolls the farthest?" I gathered playground balls, tennis balls, golf balls, basketballs, and soccer balls, and outlined the scientific method for the class.

Teacher's Note

Gathering prior knowledge was not difficult, but the work became interesting when the class started writing hypotheses. Most students appropriately hypothesized which ball would roll the farthest, but the reasons were so creative! For example, students suggested that some tennis balls wouldn't go very far because dogs may have slobbered on them, just like the black and white dog next door that takes any that are left in the yard. Or, another hypothesis: Kindergarteners might come along and grab the playground balls, shortening their rolls, just like "my brother when my friend is playing football with me in the back yard and it makes me so mad." The scientist versus the teacher in me was overwhelmed. How do I respond? What feedback will be most helpful? Yes, the writing should be detailed, but no, the color of the neighbors' dog was not a helpful detail. Neither was the dog story or the football story, for that matter. However, after further thinking and extensive prompting about how to write a hypothesis (teaching which may or may not have been helpful for them as writers), all the students finally finished their hypotheses.

The scientist versus the teacher in me was overwhelmed. How do I respond? What feedback will be most helpful? Yes, the writing should be detailed, but no, the color of the neighbors' dog was not a helpful detail.

Next, we moved on to the procedure and had great fun. In small groups students designed "ball rollers", to control the variables inherent in beginning the roll. They set out with supplies, including notebooks and cameras, to find an unobstructed stretch of floor. Groups gradually began reporting that data collection was complete, and everyone was finished in a couple of days. At this point I asked groups to meet to finish writing about the procedure they had just completed.

Everyone was excited to talk about their work, and the whole class met to share and assess progress. Thank goodness for cameras and group work! At that first group meeting I'm not sure anyone had a complete set of data. Numbers were disorganized and without labels. Important facts were not recorded. (Does anyone know why that one roll was so short…I think we measured distance in tape measure lengths… Why do you think the ball went 35 when I have 22… 22 what?) I discovered that "writing about their procedure" followed few if any writing conventions. There were incomplete, unclear sentences without regard for capitals, punctuation, or lines on the page. Even the students didn't understand what they had meant when they read their notes.

After a lot of discussion and creative problem solving, everyone eventually had complete data and complete enough procedural notes to continue. At this point I asked them to tell the results, reflect on their hypotheses, and

speak about difficulties with their procedures. No, I still didn't think the dog story was appropriate! Why did your group have one outlier golf ball roll that went 3 feet? You should talk about it. Your reader is going to analyze your work as they read, so be thorough! Conclusions were written, then rewritten. Each group finally created a video. On it they shared their results and included video footage of their procedure. The activity stood out with the students as a favorite of the year. For me, it highlighted some key issues in teaching this type of nonfiction writing.

In some genres of writing, students should make connections to what they know. But in this instance, I found myself, as a nonfiction writer, rejecting many of the connections they made. It seemed that the line between relevant and non-relevant facts and connections was unclear to them. I wondered how I could explain why some connections only work in some instances, or even if I should try to explain. Should I have accepted their responses as developmentally appropriate? When asked to apply prior knowledge, we all, adult or child, evaluate relevancy and irrelevancy based on that knowledge. For example, if I had written my own hypothesis, I would have said that a golf ball would roll farthest, because it is hard and smooth. Someone who works on the design of golf balls would probably create a hypothesis using connections to their much more technical knowledge of design, maybe even thinking that my "hard and smooth" reference was irrelevant at worst or "childlike" at best. In retrospect I can see that students needed to be allowed to use what they knew and be commended for the connections they were making. Likewise I could have pointed out that the tennis balls used for the activity had not been mauled by dogs so that connection wasn't valid, encouraging them instead to use whatever they did know about all tennis balls.

Another issue I observed was that students didn't consider the purpose of their writing. The end purpose of any investigation is to learn by connecting the results with all prior knowledge. So it was important that they know the results of their investigation; and the way they would get to those results would be by using their complete data records and well-written notes. But many students did not have complete data. Many did not connect and reflect on the results. When they wrote up their reports they did not consider how the reader was going to understand their learning? Why did their writing not mirror their work in writer's workshop?

What I came to recognize throughout this activity was that fourth graders are novices as technical writers. I needed to give them a clear understanding of the expectations of this type of writing. I had to help them understand that the purpose of their investigation should mirror the work of other scientists. Using the picturebooks in our classroom as mentor texts, I should have broken down the process into discrete lessons showing students how to record data first. Further, learning to pull together the investigation results and analyze them in relation to prior knowledge to reach a conclusion is a complicated skill that merits a well-developed introduction and series of opportunities for practice. In my early teaching of investigative writing, I had been pushing their learning too far and too fast and not recognizing students' points of entry to the process.

9.2 Nonfiction Narrative

In contrast to investigative writing, I knew more about my students' points of entry to narrative writing when they arrived in my classroom. I knew that they had been telling their own stories and writing about them for years. These students had worked on descriptions of characters, settings, story problems, and other elements of narrative writing in earlier grades. While I knew there might be a range in their writing development, I again expected the nonfiction writing skills to mirror their understanding of writing narrative fiction.

I began nonfiction narrative work early in the school year with a prompt calling for students to write about themselves. "Tell me the story of a time you felt proud of yourself." What an engaging prompt, I thought.

"Remember the important parts of a story," I went on to urge them.

"At camp I made a belt. I did it in craft time. It has red and black beads. My mom thought it was really good." Daryl wrote more, but it continued mostly
as a list of facts.

Similarly many of his classmate's writing was missing the descriptions and details which engage a reader and create a story. I have found this to be a consistent pattern each year with beginning nonfiction narrative writing.

Without time to root for causes, I dealt with the effects. Daryl and the others revised their stories, most of them earnestly trying to please me by adding details and descriptions. When the stories were finished, shared, and packed away they were improved, but I knew I had missed a key opportunity for learning. Students had not developed their nonfiction narratives in the same way they developed their fictional narratives. I would have to find the cause to address it. Was Daryl being lazy or was he putting aside what he knew about writing? Did he not share the whole story because he didn't value it? What didn't he value: the story, because its writing was contrived in response to my prompt, or himself as someone I (the reader) valued and wanted to understand through the story?

When students come to me, they see fictional narratives as valuable, pieces that deserve to be developed through attention to detail. They do not seem to believe their audience will value their nonfiction narratives in the same way as they value their fictional narratives. Through conversation, the use of mentor texts and opportunities to write, we begin to construct a different mindset.

I didn't have an immediate answer, but later, as I compared Daryl's piece with another student's nonfiction narrative, I began to understand what might have happened. When Alisha wrote her story about her cat, she already knew me and had several friends in the class. Alisha knew she had a story she and her audience valued, because anytime a student shared an anecdote about a pet, others joined in. So she decided to tell her story as a blog on the blog site we have for our class. Students are always eager to share their writing here, as well as to read and comment on the work of others. After submitting her piece and receiving my approval, she posted the following on the site:

…It was Thanksgiving 2011. My two cousins, my sister, and I were all going to spend 2 or 3 nights at my grandma and grandpa's house. The next day at my house my mom put my cat Geronimo on a leash and took him outside on our deck. With the sun pounding on Geronimo he was still relaxed. Geronimo had a ball of cancer on the left side of his chest called a tumor. Geronimo's tumor busted open and pink water came out of his tumor. My mom wrapped him in one of my blankets and took him to the vet to take the daylights out of him with a shot to put him to sleep forever. My mom was balling her blue eyes out and saying that I love him and that it was time to go.

I was not there when it happened. I was having fun with my cousins and my sister and I did not know any of this happened and when I found out I was balling out my blue eyes just like my mom. I believe my mom said to me "Geronimo is gone and well gone forever". On my way home I was so happy to see Geronimo but I did not and I won't for the rest of my life in person. Geronimo will see his old friend Cosmo, my old cat, waiting for him on the rainbow bridge in cat heaven.

Alisha's nonfiction narrative provides readers with information about the death of her cat, Geronimo. She wrote

a clear, informational account of what happened in which we are given glimpses of Geronimo, her mother, and herself. Nothing is made up in her recounting of events as we are made aware of the parallel, blue-eyed grief of Alisha and her mom.

Daryl and Alisha's writings were very different even though I had given them similar instruction and guidance. When Alisha chose to write about her topic, she knew she had an

interested audience and choices about how tocommunicate her message to them. Daryl just had me, and he didn't know me that well. He wrote in response to a prompt, with limited choice of topic and no choice in delivery. Examined together and reflective of the patterns in my students' attitudes toward nonfiction narrative, these examples highlight issues I need to recognize as a teacher of nonfiction writing. For whatever reason, when students come to me, they see fictional narratives as valuable, pieces that deserve to be developed through attention to detail. They do not seem to believe their audience will value their nonfiction narratives in the same way as they value their fictional narratives. Through conversation, the use of mentor texts and opportunities to write, we begin to construct a different mindset. Students come to recognize and value the choices they have in topics and in the forms of writing they use. They begin to develop a shared understanding of the expectations of the audience. Over time, nonfiction narratives become as rich as fictional ones.

9.3 Research Writing

I encountered many similar concerns as students wrote research. Research work is difficult for students, and I work with students to develop the many skills they need to be successful researchers. As part of this teaching, we evaluate resources: are they trustworthy, reading appropriate, and helpful to the topic? Students are fascinated to learn about entire websites devoted to false information (http://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/ and http://allaboutexplorers.com), and many are hearing for the first time that a website might be biased toward a product or a viewpoint. Students practice taking notes in their own words and talk to buddies about what they are learning to ensure they are learning. I read picturebooks to model engaging, informative text. We examine work to see what details help make it interesting (e.g., pictures with good captions, charts, surprising facts) and practice using those details in our own writing.

Their first research project, coinciding with these lessons, has specific related requirements. Picking a topic of choice related to our current studies, they are required to complete a report, presentation, and an evaluation of one of their resources. The report must include a minimum number of nonfiction features, and at the end they are required to reflect on the information and create something new: maybe questions, maybe conclusions.

For this first research project which occurred during a classroom study of weather, one of my students, Charlie, chose to learn about tornadoes. One section of his research included a list of tips on "What to do if there is a tornado coming." He had borrowed this idea from a lengthy article written for a knowledgeable audience. The article contained information that supported and clarified the included tips; further, the author of this article could reasonably assume the intended reader had the background knowledge needed to ensure that the information was helpful.

It was an interesting idea, but Charlie was writing for an audience, his classmates, who had minimal background knowledge. He had not considered his audience in this way, however, and so didn't include sufficient detail in his writing. I had written something to this effect in the margin of his draft noting that some of his tips needed further explanation. During conference time Charlie came to my chair intent on changing my mind, and I struggled to express to his satisfaction that, although he understood his meaning, his audience might not. As we talked, a line of students needing my attention began to form beside Charlie.

Charlie was writing for an audience, his classmates, who had minimal background knowledge. He had not considered his audience in this way, however, and so didn't include sufficient detail in his writing.

Aware of the other students who needed to conference with me, I worked even harder to convince Charlie that he needed to create a bridge between tips, the surrounding information, and the intended audience's prior knowledge.

"Listen to this tip, Charlie," I said. "You say that when you hear tornado sirens you should go to a safe place. Your reader won't know where to go unless you describe a safe place."

"Everyone knows that at school we go to the music room and at home we go to the basement," Charlie retorted, "I told them that in my writing."

Another voice chimed in. "My mom and I were at the grocery and heard sirens once. I was scared because I thought we should go somewhere." Julie, who was waiting in the line to talk to me next, had become interested in our conversation.

"Well, you can't go outside, so I guess you just should have gotten away from the windows. A tornado will break the windows."

Julie and Charlie started an animated conversation about other places they had been when sirens sounded and the possible safe locations for each: in a car, in a house with no basement, and walking home. Charlie was applying what he had learned through research to the situations they discussed.

"Julie, you sound really interested in what Charlie knows. Has he helped you understand his tip?" I gently asked.

Julie enthusiastically shook her head, yes.

"If he included what he just told you about safe places, who do you think would be glad to read his report?"

“Oh, man, I bet my friends would read it because sometimes we talk about safe places, when we have tornado drills. My mom should read it, too, I think.”

Charlie puffed up a bit as Julie responded. Julie had just told Charlie that his story was important and given him an audience. She had also shown him, by asking him questions and posing scenarios he had not considered, that being clear and complete mattered. Charlie left to revise his list of tips.

Charlie was what we could call a “good” writer. He used correct and varied sentence structure, monitored his spelling, and was learning to organize with paragraphs. He had found several resources for his research topic, and although one was at a difficult reading level, he was able to use some of its information. He did paraphrase the sources in his writing and showed that he understood the content. Overall, Charlie was applying a lot of the direct instruction on writing and researching that he had learned about in school. As we had struggled together, I thought I needed to show him, teach him, the nuanced connections between the writing and the audience. However, comparing the audience of his mentor text to his own audience didn’t help him. Rather what worked for him was the personal connection with his audience as he came to understand their needs, and to feel his knowledge was valuable. Then he knew what he needed to do as a nonfiction writer to communicate his message clearly and completely.

9.4 Reflections

Reflecting on these examples in student nonfiction writing, whether research based, narrative, or investigative, l am made aware of the importance of value and choice. It appears that we have taught our students that fiction is worthy of writing work but have not imparted the same message about nonfiction. So I work hard with my students to construct an understanding that nonfiction writing is valuable and worth working at. It is complex work requiring detailed note taking, accuracy, literary expertise, and completeness and clarity. Likewise I recognize the importance of choice. Choice allows students to explore what they are interested in or passionate about, providing them with the power to choose what they write about. By providing students with these opportunities we help them come to understand what motivates nonfiction writers and readers as they research and discover information that is fascinating and enlightening.

Sydney's nonfiction writing helped me recognize the final consideration necessary when providing support for their writing—time. She submitted a researched piece about horses as soon I gave students permission to write on the blog. I already knew how much she loved horseback riding and every piece of girly paraphernalia emblazoned with a horse. I was pleased to see she had chosen to research and write in her free time, and felt that self-satisfied expectation only a teacher can know, looking forward to a report incorporating the learning Sydney had already demonstrated in her required work. I winced reading the first sentence, though, and reading on confirmed that she had copied, verbatim, a pretty lengthy passage from an uncited resource. She did not pull in any of her prior knowledge to build from this new information. None of her learning on how to research or on the purpose of research, had carried over to this work.

She wanted her writing published on the blog, but before that happened, we talked. I reminded her that this was plagiarism and asked her to consider her audience. Some other students in the class loved horses also, I pointed out. I was sure she had learned some useful information from her research that could be combined with her understanding of classmates' interests, to create an important piece. What had she learned that those classmates would like to know? She wrote again:

…Horses have the biggest eyes of any mammal. Because horses eyes are on the side of its head, they can't see directly in front of them, behind them and under them. If you are to ever ride a horse, never go in those places. They are dangerous and horses can hurt you really bad. If you are nice to them, you will get kindness returned back to you….

With her second attempt Sydney had pulled together information gathered from multiple resources and used it to give valuable advice to her audience. This was reflection, the final and most difficult part of research. It didn't happen without intervention, however. As a matter of fact, initially Sydney had not applied most of what she had learned about research. Here was one more takeaway for me in supporting my students' writing: it will take time. These are new skills. It is easy to assume that fourth graders have some experience with nonfiction writing, but I need to attend to the fact that some aspects are completely new to them. They need explicit instruction that shows them the value of each piece to the whole. Then they need practice, to see again and again how their work can be valued by their audience.

By writing what they experience and know, pulling it together into something meaningful to someone else and then giving it away, students come to understand the power of nonfiction writing and that it is, indeed, a large and lovely accomplishment.