Reading Like a (Nonfiction) Writing Teacher: Using Mentor Texts to Teach the Craft of Nonfiction Writing

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Habits are at first cobwebs, then cables. ~Spanish Proverb

Habits Worth Keeping

When nearing the end of a school year, one habit that most teachers can't seem to break is to look back on the last eight months and lament what didn't get done. This tradition was evident last June among teachers at our partner elementary school where my pre-service teachers engage in clinical fieldwork experiences. "Where did the year go? I have so much left to do!" was a common refrain, and I came to realize that maybe the habit is a good one, like eating well and flossing, because these lamentations, when not simply exercises in hopelessness, serve to generate immediate and future solutions that ensure more attention to those areas of teaching and learning that got short shrift.

Knowing that teachers can't avoid these regretful look-backs, I decided to make the most of their distress during the last Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting of the year in our partner school. In early June, I invited teachers to join in a group mourn, giving us all permission to publicly despair about the units of study, books, and projects we didn't accomplish. After five minutes of this downward spiral, we stopped, breathed deeply, and re-grouped. The teachers then made a list of those units/books/projects they wished they'd had time for, ranked the undone work from most-to-least regrettable and then compared lists with each other.

What we discovered from the comparison was surprising to many teachers, but not to me. Eleven out of the twelve lists had "writing" at the top and five of those lists specifically indicated "nonfiction writing". The follow up discussion revealed that while most teachers felt good about the amount of nonfiction *reading* their students had done during the school year, capitalizing on that reading to support nonfiction *writing* did not happen enough.

In our extended discussion, it became clear that teachers wanted to find time for more nonfiction writing because students enjoyed the genre. They also recognized that, while writing in-and-of-itself was not a stand-alone subject evaluated as part of the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments, understanding the structure of well-written nonfiction would support students' nonfiction reading skills, an area that is thoroughly evaluated on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment.[1]

From Theory . . .

By tradition, once our PLC study group zeroes in on a topic of interest, we begin our inquiry with some reading. In this case, I recommended "Why Cauley Writes Well" by Katie Wood Ray (2004), a long-time favorite article of mine. It starts with a marvelous poem written by first grader Cauley, titled "I Am the Snake". Using that poem as a touchstone throughout the rest of the article, Wood Ray describes the nine factors that she considers essential to creating an environment that supports writers of all ages, and that she observed in abundance when she worked with Cauley's teacher, Lisa Cleaveland, as a researcher in her classroom.

One factor discussed in the article was especially interesting to the teachers in my study group—reading with a sense of immediacy (104). Wood Ray describes this element of an

effective writing environment as the way writers read when they need to know *how* to do something with their work. For example, Wood Ray recalls a moment during a read-aloud when a child noticed the way text wrapped around an illustration of a mountain to enhance the idea of elevation with an upward coil of words; this first grader pointed out that she could use this technique in her own book about hamsters to show the circular motion of wheels in a hamster cage. Wood Ray also cites many decisions Cauley made while writing "I am the Snake" that were influenced by features of particular texts he had studied.

The idea of reading with a sense of immediacy was interesting to our study group *not* because it was a new concept—they used mentor texts regularly to frame mini-lessons around fiction writing—but because its application to nonfiction texts offered a fresh twist. And while teachers were philosophically aligned with the idea of teaching kids to write nonfiction under the influence of exemplars in the genre, they quickly came to the conclusion, rather sheepishly, that their command of nonfiction reading and writing was not at the level of their knowledge and comfort with using fiction.

To Practice

We didn't have much time left in the school year, certainly not enough time to read the number of nonfiction books required to design mini-lessons around high-quality nonfiction writing, but the teachers didn't want to wait until the fall to get their feet wet. I decided to share with them an exercise that pre-service teachers practice in my Content Area Literacy course, an activity called "Reading Like a Writing Teacher." My students, who study and read nonfiction books for weeks throughout the semester, also read Fletcher and Portalupi's *Nonfiction Craft Lessons* (2001) at the same time. The objective is to match the reading of high-quality nonfiction books with instructional ideas designed to support the habit of *reading with a sense of immediacy* in order to plan nonfiction writing mini-lessons.

For those unfamiliar with the approach of the *Craft Lessons* books, they are tailor-made for promoting mentor texts as support for young writers. In *Nonfiction Craft Lessons*, Fletcher and Portalupi provide more than sixty craft lessons for different grade ranges, as well as groups of lessons they call "Exploratories" to jumpstart nonfiction writing. Most lessons in the book are tied to a nonfiction text that exemplifies the highlighted craft.

For example, one lesson designed for students in grades 3 & 4, is called *Jazzing Up Your Title* and it recommends a resource called *It's Disgusting and We Ate It! True Food Facts from Around the World and Throughout History* by James Solheim to show students how "snappy titles entice readers" (53). (Fletcher and Portalupi also point out that playing around with different titles is a simple, but high impact way to encourage revision.) In another lesson, geared toward grades 5 through 8, Fletcher and Portalupi explain how nonfiction writers often use time as an organizer. In this lesson, the book *Pond Year*, by Kathryn Lasky, is the recommended resource for showing students how to write "about topics that change or evolve over time" (qtd. in Fletcher and Portalupi 100).

Because learning to read like a writer is a new concept for my pre-service teachers, I developed a template to help them hold their thinking as they read nonfiction books and noticed opportunities in each for teaching an element of effective nonfiction writing. The template relies on *Nonfiction Craft Lessons* to guide students toward noticing aspects of craft in nonfiction that, as fledgling writing teachers, they may not easily recognize in the genre.

Reading Like a Writing Teacher (blank template)

As I read _____I was struck by

_____

_____

I realized I could use this book as a mentor to teach (insert craft lesson)

_____

Why this lesson? (This section serves as a justification, that is, why does this particular lesson fit this particular book? Keep it to one paragraph and provide evidence from the book.)

_____

_____

At the top of the template, my students write the title of the nonfiction book they read and a notable craft feature of the book that they identified while reading it. They go on to match this feature to a lesson from *Nonfiction Craft Lessons* focused on how to teach that craft. The template then asks for a justification that explains why there is a tight fit between the featured craft in the nonfiction book and the selected lesson from *Nonfiction Craft Lesson*. The expectation with this part of the exercise is that my students will point to examples from the nonfiction book to show how the writer, for instance, included quotations or defined new vocabulary in context. *(An example that I give to students appears in Appendix A. A student-created example is provided in Appendix B.)*

When I explained how "Reading Like a Writing Teacher" works to the veteran teacher study group, they decided to try it out as a way to scaffold the application of *reading with immediacy* to nonfiction books. And while they were interested to learn that the familiar book *Craft Lessons* had a companion in *Nonfiction Craft Lessons*, they had the benefit of experience to predict that they would draw on many resources to match instructional ideas with the craft features they noticed in the books they read rather than relying only on Fletcher and Portalupi's book. Some of the nonfiction writing resources they looked forward to consulting were *Is That a Fact?,* by Tony Stead; *Knowing How*, by Mary McMackin and Barbara Siegel; and *Nonfiction Mentor Texts*, by Lynne Dorfman and Rose Cappelli.

Looking Ahead

Heading into the summer, teachers were busy choosing nonfiction books, mostly titles from the Orbis Pictus Award and Honor Book list--http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus--published each year by the National Council of Teachers of English. When we pick up the trail again in the next school year, I'll continue to record their learning and to observe the influence of our nonfiction genre study on their teaching practices. One teacher is already planning on

adapting the template by changing the title to *Reading Like a Nonfiction Writer* and introducing it to her fourth-grade students in the fall to kick off her year with a nonfiction focus.

The way this teacher is thinking matches another of the nine aspects of effective writing instruction that Wood-Ray includes in her article, that is, *a clear teaching vision*. Wood-Ray explains:

> Cauley writes in a room where his teacher has done a lot of thinking about him as a writer, and this is another reason he is writing well. Instead of beginning by thinking about specific things she wants him to know about writing at the end of the year—the qualities of good writing, mechanics, genre differences, etc.—Lisa thinks about Cauley and his classmates and how she wants them to be as writers at the end of the year. She knows that the point of her teaching is to lead them towards becoming the kinds of writers she envisions. (105)

The distinction between teaching students *things* about writing and teaching them to *be writers* is significant. When teachers include in their instruction a focus on writerly habits of mind, habits described by Wood-Ray that include *reading with a sense of immediacy*, *talk as a support for writing,* or *developing a stamina for writing*, they ensure that they are teaching the writer, not simply covering a skills scope-and-sequence. Learning to read like a writing teacher is not only the *first step* toward supporting students as writers, it is a desirable *habit* that effective writing teachers acquire in order to make a strong reading-writing-teaching connection for fiction and nonfiction genre studies. With practice, reading like a writing teacher becomes second nature, a productive habit that reflects a positive spin on St. Augustine's observation, "Habit, if not resisted, soon becomes necessity."

Note

1. 1. c.f. http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/Accountability_Programs/Assessment_and Testing/Assessments/MCA/Samplers/index.html, grade 5, pages 14-18, for an example of a nonfiction reading and response section from the most recent MCA item-sampler released by the Minnesota Department of Education in 2010).

Works Cited

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Appendix A

Completed Template Example for *The Top of the World*, by Steve Jenkins

Reading Like a Writing Teacher: Documenting the Reading-Craft Connection

As I read *The Top of the World*, I was struck by the way the author defined words in context. I realized I could use this book as a mentor to teach *Defining New Vocabulary in Context* (p. 96).

Why this lesson? The author of this book, Steve Jenkins, uses several different "devices" for supporting readers' understanding of new vocabulary. One of the techniques he uses is to define words in context. For example, on one page he writes, "Nepal, a small country that borders India, is home of the Sherpa people." In another spot, he helps readers understand what a *survey* is when he explains, "Peak 15 was renamed in honor of Sir George Everest, the first leader of the British survey, a mapping expedition to the Himalayas." Later in the book, Jenkins starts with a common phrase, then follows it with a more precise vocabulary word, "Deep cracks, or crevasses, are constantly opening and closing."

Fletcher and Portalupi point out that writers who support vocabulary acquisition by defining words in context, for example, are helping readers "feel comfortable using these new words in **their** writing". I would use *The Top of the World* to show students how writers pay attention to building their readers' background knowledge in the way they handle key vocabulary in their writing.

Appendix B

Student-completed example for *Wiggling Worms at Work*, by Wendy Pfeffer

Reading Like a Writing Teacher: Documenting the Reading-Craft Connection

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As I read *Wiggling Worms at Work*, I was struck by the "Find out More about Worms" section at the end of the book. This section gives ideas for how to observe worms in order to learn more about them first hand.

I realized I could use this book as a mentor to teach "Anticipating Readers' Questions".

Why this lesson? (This section serves as a justification, that is, why does this particular lesson fit this particular book? Keep it to one paragraph.)

Wiggling Worms at Work is a book that engages students by triggering their natural curiosity about the world around them. It would be a good text to use for teaching how writers *anticipate readers' questions* because the ideas given at the end of the book focus on observing worms, something most kids will be interested in doing after reading this book.

The craft lesson is focused on teaching students to include enough information to explain a topic thoroughly, but a teacher could also use this lesson show how writers can't include every

bit of information they know, so they sometimes add "how to find out more" for readers who want to dig deeper into the topic.

Sidebar: Nonfiction Mentor Texts & Craft Lessons

Mentor Nonfiction Text & Author	Excerpt	Craft Lesson & Resource
The Book of North American Owls by Helen Roney Sattler	"Shortly after sunset, a barn owl awakens and leaves its perch. Silently it patrols the pasture, skimming over the ground just a few feet above the vegetation, looking and listening for small animals. Spotting a meadow mouse, it hovers momentarily, then, with its talons spread, it plunges and lands on the animal, pinning it to the ground"	*Use precise, vivid verbs, rhythmic sentences, and alliteration* (from *Making Facts Come Alive: Choosing Quality Nonfiction Literature K-8* Bamford & Kristo)
What Do You Do with a Tail Like That? by Steve Jenkins	"Animals use their noses, ears, tails, eyes, mouths, and feet in very different ways. See if you can guess which animal each part belongs to and how it is used."	*Types and forms of scientific explanations: Those that describe how something works or was formed* (from *Is That a Fact?* by T. Stead)
What in the Wild? Mysteries of Nature Concealed . . . and Revealed by David Schwartz and Yael Schy	"These lumpy mounds upon the ground you may not recognize. They're left behind once we have dined—that's how we fertilize. We're long and lithe, we wriggle and writhe. Of dead things we dispose. We daily toil to plow the soil, and help stuff decompose."	*Selecting fascinating facts* (from *Nonfiction Craft Lessons*, R. Fletcher and J. Portalupi)
A Cod's Tale by Mark Kurlansky	"There are still a few cod left in the North Atlantic Ocean. But governments and fishermen have to learn how to limit what they catch or soon there will be no big fish left in the ocean at all. And then what will happen to the humpback whale, and the seals that eat cod bellies, and the birds that eat fish?"	*Compelling Endings: Dreaming of the future* or *Giving advice* (from *Knowing How*, M. McMackin & B. Siegel)