

LIVING INQUIRY

Learning From and About Informational Texts in a Second-Grade Classroom

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Learning about informational texts is most productive when embedded within inquiry-focused classrooms engaged in learning from informational texts. Explore ways to create living inquiry through daily informational encounters.

The second graders in room 407 buzz as they excitedly thumb through a Readers Theatre script that they will perform together at the end of the week. More buzz erupts when they discover that one character in the script is a well-known inventor, Benjamin Franklin, whose work and life have been a central focus in their science unit on magnetism and electricity. When the shared reading begins, the readers taste the words for the first time together, their voices a single chorus.

The group hums on until page 2. Mr. Franklin explains his famous lightning strike when all reading comes to a screeching halt. “Wait a minute,” Brianna interrupts (all student names are pseudonyms). “That’s totally not true!” “Oh yeah,” Thalia chimes in. “Remember that book we read? The one with the interview?” They scramble to their feet and to their book boxes, where they begin pulling books related to the topic, a few from guided reading, one from the science kit, another from the school library. Ray and Albert join in the search and pull books from the classroom library that also relate. Some are about electricity, some are about Franklin, some are about air and weather. Sierra heads to the science center and finds an Internet printout about Franklin and other inventors.

When they settle back into the community circle, the class is surrounded by a variety of informational texts. Brianna checks the table of contents and quickly flips to her page. She reads to the group, “It says here that the lightning never touched the kite. The electricity was just in the air!” Copies of the book are passed around, and as they dig through the variety of materials, they discover a major problem. Their books do not all give the same information. A discussion erupts about misconceptions and inconsistencies. The readers question their sources and examine reasons why authors might “dumb down” the information.

As the attention moves back to the script, the problem is posed, “What do we do about it?” Jose, listening to a scattering of suggestions from “just leave it” to “cross it out,” suggests instead that they add to the Readers Theatre script to give the audience the real information. The shared reading session transforms into shared writing as they work together to

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rewrite the script using information from their piles of books.

The preceding scenario from Michelle's classroom followed a year of reading, exploring, and learning from informational texts. In it, the students readily drew on their classroom literary resources to "talk back" to the texts they were reading. They moved to their browsing boxes to find particular books; they drew on their knowledge built up through their biography unit; they took ownership of these informational resources, using them for their own unique purposes.

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but readers who felt empowered to go in search of it to make their point, to challenge authors, and to rewrite stories with more accurate information. In classrooms founded on inquiry and rich with informational texts of all kinds, scenarios like this one are possible. How do teachers grow such confident, resourceful critical readers and thinkers? We hope to provide some answers to this question by portraying Michelle's second-grade classroom—a teacher and students who were invested deeply in informational texts.

In this article, two of us write. Michelle, whose practice we detail here, taught second grade at Chavez Elementary (a pseudonym)—a school characterized by cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity. Beth spent a year in Michelle's classroom observing how informational texts were integrated into Michelle's second-grade curriculum. Across this year, Beth observed an average of two or three days a week in Michelle's classroom, documenting her instruction through field notes, photos, videotaping, and artifact collection. Beth wrote about Michelle's work in her classroom (Maloch, 2008), but this previous work represented primarily Beth's perspective as a researcher.

Following her year in Michelle's classroom and in an attempt to better understand Michelle's intentions and thinking behind her classroom practice, Beth and Michelle planned a series of long conversations/interviews to discuss Michelle's practice—both during Beth's year in her classroom and since—and

particularly her work with informational texts. In this article, by writing together, we hope to portray Michelle's perspective on her own practice and her students' experiences. The portraits of Michelle's practice embedded throughout this article come from both Michelle's reports and reflections of her instruction over several years, as well as Beth's documentation of her observations of Michelle over one academic year.

Why Informational Text Matters

Michelle's classroom included all types of nonfiction text. *Nonfiction*—text that attempts to convey true or accurate information about the world—is a broad term that encompasses a range of texts, including biography, how-to texts, procedural texts, and informational texts. We focus our attention in this article on informational texts, defining them as Duke (2003) did—texts written with "the primary purpose of conveying information about the natural and social world ... and [having] particular text features to accomplish this purpose" (p. 14).

For young children, who are forever curious about the world around them, informational texts often capture their attention. Caswell and Duke (1998) suggested that this motivational aspect can actually spur overall literacy development as children are drawn into reading through their interest in informational texts.

In their everyday lives, children see all types of informational texts; for

Pause and Ponder

- Do all of my students have access to high-interest, independent-level informational texts throughout the day (i.e., in their independent book boxes and our classroom library)?
- In the past two weeks, how many opportunities did my students have to interact with informational texts throughout the day?
- In the past two weeks, how many opportunities did my students have to write for informational purposes across all content areas?
- How can teacher and student-initiated inquiry connect our readers and writers workshop to content-focused studies such as science and social studies?
- How can I use interest surveys and reading conferences to better know my students and provide materials and learning experiences that are engaging and exciting to individual learners?

example, grocery lists, newspapers, information books, and instruction manuals. Smith (2000) noted that 90% of the texts that adults encounter outside of school are informational in nature. Inside the school walls, children encounter more and more informational texts as they progress through the grades.

In fact, researchers have documented a shortage of informational texts in early primary classrooms (Duke, 2000), although there are indications that this is changing, slowly (Jeong, Gaffney, & Choi, 2010; Moss, 2008). Chall and Jacobs (1983) have speculated that the “fourth grade slump” might be partly related to the shift students typically make at that age into texts that are more expository in nature.

This kind of abrupt shift can be challenging for students because structures and features of texts vary across genres and lead to different expectations and challenges for readers (Duke & Roberts, 2010). Early exposure to and instruction in informational texts may smooth out this slump. Work by Pappas (1991) and Kamberelis (1998), among others, showed us that young children can and do learn the features and structures of informational text through exposure to such texts.

In the last 10 to 15 years, research regarding informational texts has continued to grow. Some research has focused on designing and assessing the effectiveness of instructional interventions (e.g., Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Williams et al., 2005); other research has examined cases of teachers who are integrating informational texts into their classrooms (e.g., Bradley & Donovan, 2010; Gregg & Sekeres, 2006; Maloch, 2008). This intervention and case study research is growing our understandings of how

teachers teach and students learn from and about informational texts.

The existing research in this area, however, typically highlights the researchers’ perspectives on teachers’ practices. Research that considers a researcher’s long-term participant observation in a classroom, alongside extended conversations with and reflections by that same teacher, can forward our understandings of how and why teachers do what they do in terms of instruction, particularly, in this case, with informational texts. Our work contributes to this growing body of research by showcasing instruction through the eyes of both a researcher who was able to physically document this instruction and a teacher who was able to articulate the thinking behind her instructional moves and overall approach. This combination of perspectives affords a rich portrait of a classroom worthy of examination.

Furthermore, this article highlights the ways informational texts may be embedded inside inquiry. In our work, we conceptualize inquiry in the way that Wells (1999; 2001) did. In his book *Dialogic Inquiry*, Wells (1999) argued that inquiry is not a method of teaching or set of procedures to follow, but “rather, it indicates a stance toward experiences and ideas—a willingness to wonder, to ask questions, and to seek to understand by collaborating with others in the attempt to make answers to them” (p. 121). It is this stance that we consider most compelling in Michelle’s work with her second

graders—one that is evident across the school day.

Wells (2001) further defined this stance as an “inquiring disposition that influences the way in which *all* activities are approached” (p. 194). A disposition toward inquiry invades all classroom activity; children can pursue their inquiries through collaboration with others, through hands-on experiences, and through engagement with text among other possibilities.

Recognizing the importance of all these ways of inquiring into the world, here we attend most closely to the ways children’s inquiries are furthered through their work with informational texts. Children consult informational texts to answer questions and satisfy their inquiries, but also to continue in their own wondering and inquiring. Wells (2001) argued that this process can become a cycle as students’ research leads to answers, but also to more questions. When inquiry becomes a “central feature of classroom life,” Wells suggested, students’ inquiries drive their reading and sense-making of informational texts. It is clear to us how the integration of informational texts in classrooms feeds into and grows out of a community founded on inquiry. So, for us, talking about informational text is all wrapped up in talking about inquiry.

Teaching and Learning Informational Text

We return now to the question we posed at the conclusion of the opening

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vignette—How did Michelle grow such confident, resourceful critical readers and thinkers? The answer to this question lies in the ways informational texts were seamlessly integrated into the classroom curriculum, and in particular, the ways in which her classroom functioned as a community of inquirers. It was within a context of inquiry that the integration of informational texts made sense and grew readers and critical thinkers (Maloch, 2008).

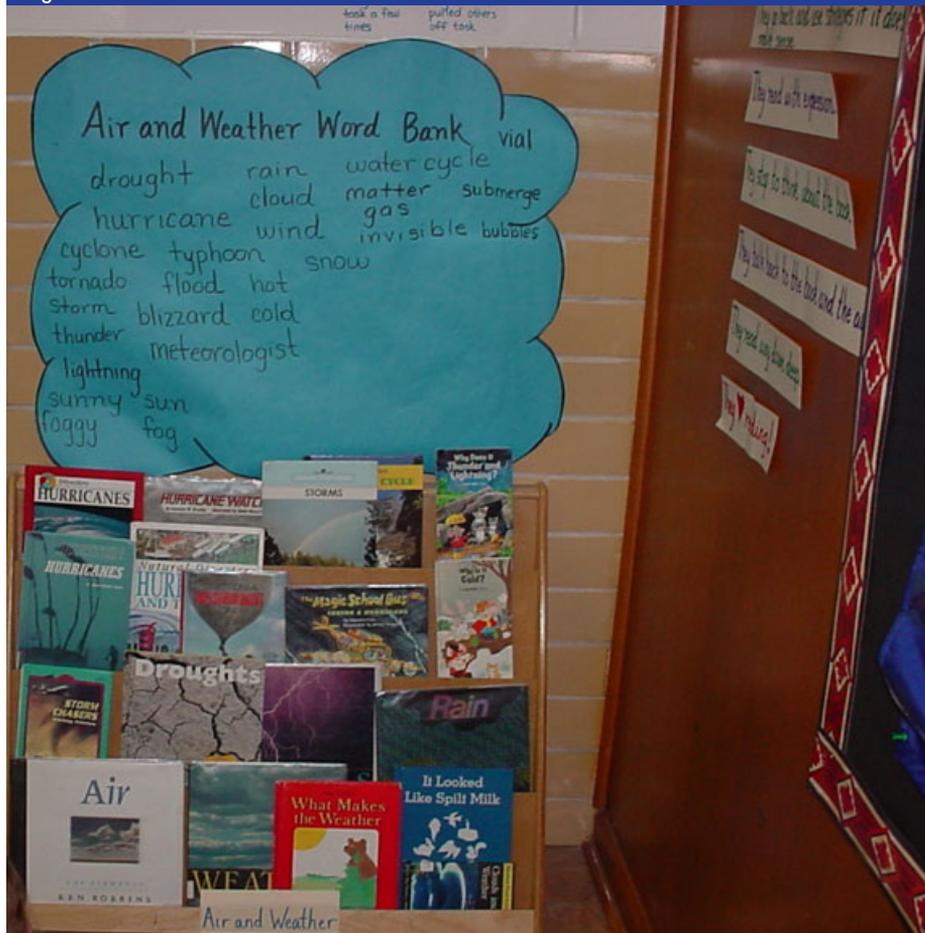
Building a Community of Inquiry: Learning From Informational Texts

In Michelle's classroom, inquiry permeated the school day. Second graders have an insatiable appetite to know. They wonder. They question. They explore. In Michelle's classroom, students' queries and curiosity helped shape the curriculum—particularly science and social studies. Their inquiry of these topics, however, was never confined to this time in the schedule. Quite purposefully, these inquiries also shaped and defined the language arts block, putting the meat on the skeletal bones of their literacy framework.

When Michelle and her students inquired about weather, for example, they conducted experiments outside related to wind and weather, recording (and later sharing) their observations in their science journals. Each day, they read the weather report together from the newspaper. The students read books about weather in their guided reading groups, listened to them during read-aloud, and chose to read them during their independent reading time.

They collected words on their "Air and Weather Word Bank," displaying them above a class collection of books (see Figure 1). Across these activities, students made connections, asked questions, and continued to inquire. In

Figure 1 Air and Weather Word Bank



this way, Michelle integrated science or social studies content with her language arts instruction, and students' inquiries and interactions with informational texts crossed the school day.

Informational texts—including a range of text types—helped provide potential answers for students' questions and resources for their explorations. In Michelle's classroom library, more than one fourth of the texts in the room were nonfiction—a particularly high percentage of the books relative to what is typically reported in primary classrooms (Duke, 2000; Jeong et al., 2010). To help expose the children to the texts available, and to make informational

text a ready resource, Michelle read aloud *something* informational each day. Often in response to students' questions or interests, as a companion text to a fiction piece, or of relevance to current events or local happenings, this reading was typically a short article from the daily newspaper or from one of their kid-friendly news magazines (e.g., *Time for Kids*).

Information books also made their way regularly into whole-group read-aloud, shared reading (in which all the children had their own copies of the text or access to text such as a big book), and in guided reading small group sessions. Information books were tucked into independent book

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boxes with a whispered, “I saw this and thought about you. I know how much you love learning about reptiles.” Children chose informational library books to fill weekly “Spotlight on...” crates in the classroom library and shared amazing and wondrous facts from the *Guinness Book of World Records* each morning. According to Michelle, informational texts may not always have been the star, but they played these supporting roles every day.

Capitalizing on Inquiry Moments

Michelle’s community of inquirers was partly a result of the ways in which Michelle structured her classroom day, thoughtfully planned curriculum and activities, and provided regular exposure to and open invitations for exploring informational texts. She purposefully modeled, encouraged, and scaffolded inquiry throughout the entire school year (see Maloch, 2008).

However, Michelle’s support for inquiry and students’ inclinations toward inquiry were most evident in what we came to call “inquiry moments” that emerged spontaneously during the day. We argue that teachers need to capitalize on the many moments of spontaneous inquiry that pop up all over our days. Michelle shares about some of these moments in her classroom:

I would not have thought twice about the ball moss invading our trees that lined the path to our playground, but Anna did, and instead of recess that day, she spent the afternoon in the library researching and learning about the plant. Her eagerness and inquiry spilled over to her classmates, prompting many detours to the library because they “just HAD to find out!” These moments beg for a deviation from lesson plans...

Beth observed many instances of spontaneous inquiry moments, including the one that Michelle describes next. In this episode, notice the ways the students’ navigation of informational texts emerges from their uses of these texts to answer their own questions.

During a fierce thunderstorm, my students shrieked and shivered in fear with each boom while I tried to press on with a small-group guided reading lesson. As they became more uneasy and less productive, misconception and speculation about the cause and proximity of the thunder raced through the room. I was confronted with a choice: send everyone back to his or her literacy center, with instructions to “get busy,” or seize the inquiry moment.

Quickly, I resigned the guided reading group and gathered my meteorologists to dig into the mystery and science of thunder. As we settled into our discussion, Amber offered, “If you count after the lightning, you know how far away it is.” We wondered together about this theory, and then we grabbed our weather book box from the library and flipped through, looking for a text that might answer our questions.

After settling on one, we reminded ourselves of how readers enter a nonfiction text, dipping into it to find just what

information they need. We searched the table of contents and flipped to our page, reading aloud about thunder and lightning. We cross-checked the index to see if we missed any information that might further our understanding. My students spent the rest of our reader’s workshop digging into the remaining weather books, buddy reading and sharing interesting facts they uncovered. That day, our class meteorologist job was born, checking the newspaper and sharing the forecast daily in our morning meeting.

By heeding these kinds of inquiry moments, teachers validate the importance of inquiry. It is in this validation that we empower students and transfer the initiation of inquiry to those who we want to do the thinking: our students.

Exploring and Documenting: Learning About Informational Texts

In the process of reading and learning from informational texts, Michelle’s students learned the purposes, structures, and features of these kinds of texts.

Michelle noted:

We learned about these texts as we read them, noting that we read these texts differently from fiction ones. For example, often we didn’t read an entire book but dipped into one part of the book to mine information relevant to our questions. Other times, we read through books, taking notes to keep up with the steady stream of information emerging from the pages.

To better understand why texts varied and how and why authors might make use of particular features, Michelle and

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her students created a chart featuring different genres, their purposes, and the features that might accompany each genre. They also maintained an evolving chart of text features—including what each feature looked like, how it helped the reader, and examples from real texts.

When first introducing the concept of text features, Michelle used informational big books with a variety of text features for shared reading and a targeted minilesson on one or two specific text features each day. (Later in the year, she replaced the big books with individual copies of magazine articles, such as *Time for Kids*.) Michelle created a language chart to keep track of the text features (which she defined as anything on the page besides the small black print), including real examples cut from the newspaper or other sources and a description of how it helped the reader better understand

the text. This “living” chart continued to grow throughout the year as they encountered them organically in shared, guided, and independent reading. It served as a valuable ongoing resource to remind readers to attend to and glean information from all print sources on the page. Figures 2 and 3 show two types of charts that highlight text features.

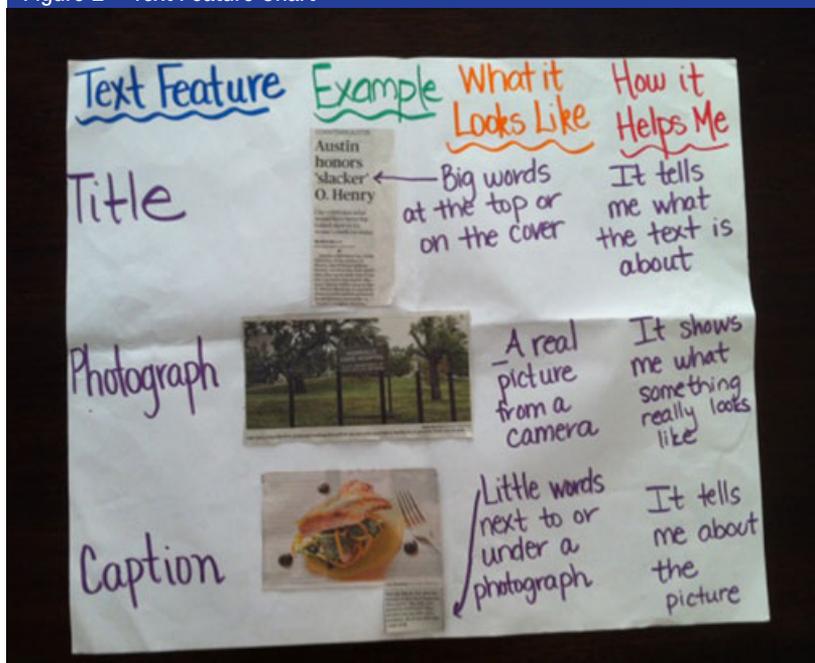
Beyond these daily experiences with informational text, Michelle and her students engaged in several extended units. At times, they explored related texts through author studies. Gail Gibbons, for example, has published a range of information books that Michelle’s students loved (e.g., *Weather Words and What They Mean*, 1992; *Tornadoes!*, 2010). Gibbons’s titles filled book boxes and the author study basket as they became familiar with her style of writing as well as the content.

Other times, their units were centered on specific science or social studies content in which informational texts became their primary resources. These units, characterized by wide and varied reading and research, almost always culminated in writing within particular informational genres (e.g., information reports, newspaper article) about topics such as electricity, the environment, or the weather. One of these units—the habitat unit—we explore here in more detail to better illustrate how instruction moved between brief daily encounters and more extended and concentrated investigations of informational texts. The habitat unit took place in the spring and lasted four or five weeks.

Inquiry Unit: Habitats

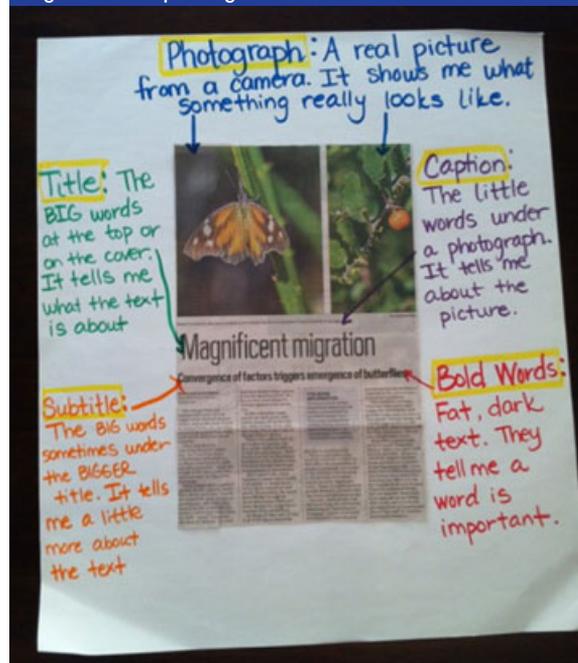
Stemming partly from a schoolwide emphasis on the human impact on the environment, this unit dealt with

Figure 2 Text Feature Chart



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Figure 3 Inspecting an Article



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various habitats (e.g., desert, grasslands, coral reefs) and the food chains that exist within them. Michelle's students, most likely influenced by her bent in this direction, tended to have an abiding interest in environmental issues.

For example, Beth had documented student comments and questions across the year, such as "How do we clean the air?" "I think I helped the Earth when I planted a tree," and "Who pays for the electricity at our school?" Studying habitats, the food chains that exist within them, and the human impact on habitats and food chains was a likely place for them to direct their collective attention. The unit began with two articles from the local newspaper—the *Austin American Statesman*.

The first, "Advocates Say Warbler Land May Be at Risk" (Price, 2008), explored the destruction, modification, and degradation of a local endangered bird species habitat as a result of development. The second, "A Place for the Wild Things to Roam Safely" (Mixon, 2008), described conservation efforts at the county's newest nature preserve, allowing developers to build while providing suitable habitats for local endangered species. Michelle recalled:

Inviting students to explore the topic by sharing a local story, right in our own backyard, provided a natural "hook" for students to build on. We know so much of what students comprehend about a subject begins with their own background knowledge, so tapping their schema and prior knowledge is an important first step in generating enthusiasm and sparking interest for further inquiry. My students were alarmed and full of questions, not only about what habitats were and why habitats change, but how these changes affect the many species living in the habitat. We were also able to clarify and establish some important content vocabulary for discussing the unit in context, such as species, habitat, and environment. We noted these

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vocabulary words on a shared chart, and they immediately made their way into our discussions, the shared language of habitat inquirers.

With this discussion, they were off and running. During the first week of the study, they closely inspected a touchstone text—*All Kinds of Habitats* (Hewitt, 1999)—for content about habitats. Touchstone texts, according to Nodelman (1988), are quality works of literature that serve to represent the genre. Michelle made use of this text to draw students' attention to its features and structures. Also during these discussions, however, Michelle and her students constructed and considered generalizations about habitats and explored relevant vocabulary (e.g., *predator, prey*).

In this way, their touchstone text accomplished different purposes than we typically see in genre studies (Maloch et al., 2008). With its information focus, in addition to providing exemplars of the features and structures of a particular genre, the touchstone text, along with other shared texts, helped build background and content knowledge. Specifically for this unit, they shared texts together to learn about the range of habitats one might see in the world, how these habitats are home to particular life forms, how these relate to one another in terms of food chains, and in what ways humans might have an impact on these processes.

This background building was necessary to provide a lay of the land, so

to speak, as they considered selecting a particular habitat for further study. What habitats were there, and how exactly were they to study them? What were the important aspects that they might consider? Sharing texts and conversations helped build a shared context or anchor for their subsequent partnered inquiry.

Although content building was an important aspect of their initial foray into these texts, along the way, they learned about text features. On their text feature chart, mentioned earlier, they added features that were particularly salient in the books they were reading for their inquiry. Maps, for example, were crucially important in reading and writing about habitats. When Michelle and her students arrived at a map in a touchstone text, they slowed their discussion to attend to what the map might offer them and how they might read it. Talking about the map in relation to this particular text led them to a more general discussion of how maps are read and understood within informational texts and how they might become important in their writing.

Similar discussions took place around flowcharts—a feature often used to represent food chains typical of particular habitats. The text feature chart, already displaying a number of features they had previously come across in their books, became a living chart—a constantly evolving reference and display of their shared knowing. For the children, the column "how it helps me" became most important



as they navigated through their own informational texts, gathering information for their personal research projects.

To support students' inquiries, Michelle flooded the room with informational books... but this was not your ordinary book flood. Elley (2000) described book floods as a teaching method in which the teacher "floods" the room with a collection of high-interest, readily accessible literature and provides opportunities for the students to interact with them daily. For the habitat unit, the book flood occurred in phases. Before the unit began, Michelle pulled books from the library about various habitats. As she did with every unit, Michelle was careful to find texts that were high interest and also ones that would be accessible to her students. She felt strongly that students should be able to access these texts independently to be able to fully engage with their inquiry.

In her search for these multileveled texts, Michelle sometimes dug through her own sets of leveled books or visited

kindergarten or first-grade classrooms for texts at an easier level. She also found *Time for Kids* articles that were both accessible and relevant to their unit. At the same time, Michelle's experience told her that sometimes students are able to access higher level texts when their interests drive their reading, particularly when these books have strong visual/graphic supports. To that end, the books included in her collection were high-interest books at a variety of levels.

These books/texts became the ones Michelle read from each day and were displayed in a face-out bookshelf in the back of the room. Students added to their book boxes from this collection. At that point, as is often the case with inquiry, Michelle noted, "We didn't know what we needed to know." Her students were still building up their understandings of habitats and how these might be investigated. As they read and talked together, charting new understandings and exploring common vocabulary, Michelle and her students built up a collective knowledge

of habitats. At that point, the children were ready to learn more by exploring a particular habitat.

Asking the children to write down the three habitats that most interested them, Michelle paired the students based on their interests. To support their inquiry, once again Michelle and her students set off for the library to find books and resources about their particular habitats of interest. Manuel and Alexis, for example, searched for books on coral reefs. Juan and Timothy found books about the rainforest, and so on. They returned with stacks of books—books about particular habitats, general resource books, Almanacs, and so forth. Once back in their classroom, the children scattered the books around them, searching for information relevant to their studies.

In this way, immersion in these informational texts varied considerably from when her children learned, for example, memoir. With memoir, they selected books that appealed to them and read them from the beginning to the end, savoring every last bit of the story. With the habitat unit, similar to their other studies (e.g., environment, weather), the children dipped in and out of books, directed by their inquiries, not by a need to understand the book in its entirety. The children considered these texts as resources for their learning. Their "tasting" of books was

"Their 'tasting' of books was directed not by story, but by inquiry."

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directed not by story, but by inquiry. Yet they engaged meaningfully with not just the content of the texts, but with the forms and structures.

As Michelle and her students continued their learning, a central point in their inquiries came to be the food chains that existed within each of the habitats. Even more specifically, they wondered together what would happen if something went wrong. Michelle began to pose questions such as “What would happen if part of the chain was removed?” “How would it affect the animals and plants before and after the missing link?” “What might cause part of the chain to disappear?” “What if there were too many species in one part of the chain?” “What problems or benefits might arise?” “Why is balance important in food chains?” “How can we protect and keep balance in food chains in habitats?”

Exploration of these food chains directed students’ attention to the text features of webs and chains in their books. It also sent them back to the library once again, searching for more books on particular animals, food chains, and the human impact on the environment.

At the same time, students constructed and pursued their own questions related to their habitats. As they consulted their resources and talked with one another about what they were learning, these young students noted their emerging questions in their learning logs. In this way, students consulted texts in pursuit of their own questions about habitats and the questions of their teacher.

The book flood, then, ebbed and flowed. They flooded the room with books, then flooded again, and then again, as their inquiries were developed and refined. However, they searched not just in books. Michelle encouraged

students to search beyond the books and papered texts of their classroom and library, venturing onto the Internet for additional sources of information. United Streaming—a large online library of educational videos, video clips, and images—turned out to be a rich resource for the children’s learning. Before their searching began, Michelle typically reviewed a number of videos and downloaded two or three of the most relevant to their learning. This kind of filtering helped the students be efficient with searching time and helped avoid free (and sometimes careless) Internet searching.

Along with United Streaming, Michelle bookmarked a number of online resources, such as NetTrekker (www.nettrekker.com) and FossWeb (www.fossweb.com), educational search tools available to them through their district, and National Geographic.com, in which students could search for their particular habitat or animal. Before they began their searching, Michelle brought in her computer and projector to demonstrate how they might search these various sites. As a group, they also ventured into the school’s computer lab, where they could search for information relevant to their habitats. Back in their classroom, Michelle bookmarked these important searching sites on their computers so that students could browse and learn during their self-selected reading and research time.

Making these resources—both text/paper resources and online resources—available and accessible to the children helped empower them in their research. Students sat around the room, surrounded by texts of all kinds, reading and collecting information relevant to their study. Importantly, in Michelle’s community of readers, the children knew what others were studying. She and the students often shared about

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their learnings at the end of each day around the question, “What interesting things did you turn up in your research today?” These sharing opportunities were important in the ways they facilitated students’ abilities to share resources and learning with one another, and in doing so, helped develop their community. Michelle remembered:

As students read across these texts, taking notes and talking with their partner, they often came across information that might be useful to another group. From across the room I would hear, “Marcus, here’s some information about iguanas. Do you need this?”

This generosity of learning and sharing was encouraged by Michelle, both in her provision of those postresearch share times and in the ways she modeled this as they read together in whole groups, saying things like, “Wouldn’t that be perfect for the group doing grasslands?”

The unit culminated in presentations in which each pair of students created a trifold board with information on their selected habitat. As they decided what to place on their board, students included a variety of text features such as maps, photographs, captions, and flowcharts of food chains. They also presented a scenario in which an event (human-made or natural) modified the food chain within their habitat and hypothesized on the effect this change would have on the other species in the habitat.

This extended example highlights the ways Michelle selected and shared informational texts, and how students took them up, as a part of one inquiry unit. It also illustrates the ways Michelle used touchstone texts as a way of both building content knowledge and exemplifying features of texts they would be reading and eventually writing. This deep study of a particular topic or a particular genre worked inside a classroom steeped in informational texts—a place where students enjoy informational text every single day—a classroom based on joint and individual inquiry.

Together, Michelle and her students wondered about the world and made use of informational texts to answer their questions about it. While engaged in their inquiry and learning, Michelle also drew their attention to the varying purposes, structures, and features of all texts, but informational texts, in

particular. Furthermore, texts' claims were not taken at face value—they were always measured against the students' knowing and other textual claims. Finally (and importantly), students read from the texts to serve their own questions and learning, not the other way around.

Moving Forward With Inquiry

In this article, we have worked to portray the kind of inquiry-based classroom that Wells (2001) talked about and to show the ways that integration of informational texts in classrooms feeds into and grows out of a community founded on inquiry. We argue here that learning *about* informational texts is most productive when embedded within inquiry-focused classrooms engaged in learning *from* informational texts. In her classroom, Michelle did the following:

- Included informational text daily in her classroom
- Integrated her language arts instruction with her science and social studies instruction, engaging in deep study of particular topics or genres
- Encouraged and modeled ways of making use of informational texts as resources in purposeful ways
- Nudged the students toward critical inquiry and consumption of texts

And, most important, Michelle's classroom community was driven by students' interests and sustained by their joint purposes for learning.

Harvey (2002) wrote about a spirit of wonder—the genuine interest and curiosity that urges teachers and students to pursue a line of inquiry together or independently. An

TAKE ACTION!

Try these steps for creating an informational text feature chart with students:

1. Choose an informational touchstone text, preferably a big book, to read with students. Consider choosing a text that relates to a current science or social studies unit of study. It is also important to choose a book with a variety of text features such as bold words, diagrams, maps, photographs, captions, and close-ups.
2. On the first day, simply read the book with students for pleasure, information gathering, and discussion as it relates to your unit of study.
3. On the second day, return to the book with the specific purpose of teaching text features. Show students the blank chart you have created with just the headings across the top labeled "Text Feature," "Example," "What it Looks Like," and "How it Helps Me."
4. Explain to students that often authors who write texts that give us information use certain text features to help the reader understand their topic better. Tell students that a text feature is anything on the page except for the small black words. Text features stand out and are important for readers to look at and understand.
5. Revisit two or three predetermined pages of the big book with students and ask them to notice anything that stands out to them on the page. As they identify a text feature, name it and discuss what it is and why the author included it. Most importantly, discuss how the text feature helps them as readers. Add the feature to the chart. You might later photocopy the page to paste on the chart as the example, or ask students to help you find the same feature in another expository text, such as the newspaper or an article to cut out and paste as the example. Add only two or three text features to the chart on the second day.
6. Throughout the rest of the week, continue to revisit the big book to identify more text features and add to the chart.
7. Encourage students to continue to add to the chart as they encounter other text.

LIVING INQUIRY

important aspect of informational text learning is the extent to which this learning grows out of authentic uses of informational texts (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007). We hope that our students are inquirers—who make use of texts in purposeful ways to accomplish their own ends and answer their own questions—rather than “doers” of school tasks. That is, as they leave classrooms and schools, we hope for children to feel inspired to follow their own lines of inquiry, to move into and through the world as wonderers and learners. If the tools we offer in the classroom are grounded only in classroom tasks of focused inquiry but not embedded in a community focused on inquiring, children may leave our classrooms having learned facts, but not living as learners.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans

- “Adventures in Nonfiction: A Guided Inquiry Journey” by Renee Goularte
- “Digging up Details on Worms: Using the Language of Science in an Inquiry Study” by Jean Landis
- “Investigating Animals: Using Nonfiction for Inquiry-based Research” by Devon Hamner
- “Reading Informational Texts Using the 3-2-1 Strategy” by Melissa Weimer

IRA Book

- *Informational Text in K–3 Classrooms* by Sharon Bengé Kletzien and Mariam Jean Dreher

IRA Journals

- “Making a Case and a Place for Effective Content Area Literacy Instruction in the Elementary Grades” by Barbara Moss, *The Reading Teacher*, September 2005
- “Models for Using Nonfiction in the Primary Grades” by Rosemary G. Palmer and Roger A. Stewart, *The Reading Teacher*, February 2005
- “Sharing Informational Text With Young Children” by Ruth H. Yopp and Hallie K. Yopp, *The Reading Teacher*, February 2000

Even More!

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