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BEYOND THE “NEW NORM”

The benefits of reading more than informational texts

By **Timothy V. Rasinski, William H. Rupley, and David Paige**

*W*ith the advent of the Common Core State Standards and similar global initiatives, the emphasis on the types of reading recommended for students has shifted to a focus on informational texts. It is true that informational texts and stories are types of reading most of us, adults and children alike, will encounter. However, these are not the only texts that can or should be used to support reading.

If volume of reading is a factor in increasing achievement, one way to increase volume is to expand the types of text used. Here, we explore and advocate for reading that goes beyond stories and information to ensure that, with the current focus, we don't lose out on the potential benefits of a simple practice—broadening text types.

Poetry

Poetry has been neglected in recent reading curricula. That's unfortunate, as it has much to offer students.

Poems are usually brief reads that students can master quickly. Most poems for elementary students rhyme, which offers opportunities for practicing word families in context. A poem is meant to be performed orally, which requires students to rehearse it—a form of repeated reading that builds fluency.

Moreover, when students rehearse, they are working on expressive oral interpretation (prosody) of the poem, another key component of fluency. The distinct structure of many poems makes it easy for students to write their own versions. Bruce Lansky's parodies of "Yankee Doodle" (gigglepoetry.com) are hilarious and offer examples of what students themselves can write.

But poems offer so much more, such as reflections on culture. When students read and recite "In Flanders' Field" by John McCrae around Memorial Day in the United States and Canada, for example, they are giving tribute to the men and women who have served and given their lives for their countries.

Song lyrics

Songs provide similar advantages with two exceptions. Melody embedded in songs adds context and memorability to the lyrics. How many of us remember lyrics from our teenage days?

A foundational goal of reading instruction is increasing words that are memorized and recognized on sight without the use of decoding strategies. When students repeatedly hear and sing songs with lyrics displayed, they will eventually memorize those words and add them to their sight vocabularies.

Songs have the ability to unite us. When we sing patriotic songs, civil rights songs, or songs of our schools or classrooms, we are allowing students to affirm their membership in other communities.

Oratory

Back in the day, students were expected to read, memorize, and recite

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famous speeches. In the United States, a common speech students memorized was Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Perhaps because of the expectation of rote memorization, this type of classroom activity was criticized and it largely disappeared from schools.

Memorization of a text requires repeated readings of the text, thus enhancing reading fluency. Moreover, as with poetry and song, famous speeches offer the study of history and culture.

Imagine the deep discussion that may ensue from reading and reciting Lincoln's speech: "...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Further consider Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech, "I Have a Dream," which weaves together many rhetorical styles.

Americanrhetoric.com is a wonderful resource for accessing speeches from history. If the speech was delivered in more recent years, an audio recording is often available for students' listening and analyses. For example, "I Have a Dream," and John F. Kennedy's inaugural address are the two top-ranked speeches of the 20th century.

Readers Theatre scripts

Many students enjoy participating in a class play. However, the tasks involved in putting on a classroom play can be overwhelming. Costumes, props, scenery movement, script memorization, and more can lead a teacher to distraction and frustration.

Readers Theatre minimizes the logistical load of putting on a play and requires no costumes, props, scenery, movement, or memorization of lines.

Instead, actors perform a relatively brief script simply by standing stationary in front of the audience and reading the script in hand. Because there is neither movement nor other accoutrements to convey the story, readers have only their voices to communicate meaning. This means that performers need to rehearse their scripts to read aloud with appropriate expression, volume, intonation, and rate to help the audience make meaning of the script.

Although there are free and commercial sources for finding scripts that can be performed as Readers Theatre, some of the best scripts are written by students themselves. Imagine students transforming a picture book, a portion of a chapter book, or a selection from an informational text into a script that will eventually be performed. In the process of thinking about how to make characters, dialogue, and narration come alive in script form, they will have to engage in a close reading of the original text. Reading fluency, comprehension, and writing become integrated into an authentic and engaging process.

Moving "beyond"

There are many text types that can and should be used in most classrooms. These range from monologues, dialogues, and journal entries to letters, jokes, advertisements, and more.

The point is that when we expand the options available for teachers and students in the types of texts used for reading, we add variety, depth, and interest, while at the same time providing opportunities to increase the amount of actual reading done by students. ■