From Me to We: Using Narrative Nonfiction to Broaden Student Perspectives

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Jason Griffith’s new book in the Routledge Eye on Education series is a much-needed intervention. Under the Common Core State Standards, nonfiction texts have new prominence, but student experiential writing is often neglected in favor of argumentative, persuasive, or informative composition; and reading narrative, whether fiction or nonfiction, is sometimes discouraged. As Griffith’s title suggests, narrative nonfiction offers an opportunity for student writers to move from telling about their experiences to engaging, moving, and even representing information. In his reading unit, Griffith designs activities “to help students discover a book’s value for themselves” (20); but he also provides rationales for group study of a common text that are grounded in the value of social negotiation of meaning.

The book’s first half explores the reading of nonfiction narrative. Griffith’s “nonfiction spiral” shows how building a network of texts around a full-length work of narrative nonfiction—by incorporating magazine articles, reviews, interviews, and based-on-a-true-story film adaptations—can enhance students’ experience of the elements of craft, interpretive nuances, and ethical questions with which work in this genre wrestles. By suggesting comparative/contrastive approaches to analyzing texts across varied media, Griffith cultivates a version of close reading that is more interpretive and negotiated—and less a search for definitive answers. By acknowledging the networked quality of nonfiction reading today, Griffith’s book helps teachers think beyond close analysis of single texts to build upon the kinds of moves that students now intuitively make when constructing meaning amid networked representations of information. In

Among his most illuminating strategies are “empathy check-ins” and “collaborative chapter notes.” With the empathy check, a class assesses how a writer’s narrative strategies affect their responses to both the writer and other characters, thereby connecting discussions of writing craft to personal responses. Collaborative chapter notes invite groups to document their observations about a text by using writing to share emerging understandings in Google Docs in ways reminiscent of literature circle discussions. Overall, through the strategies he describes and through his inclusion of student work samples, Griffith illustrates the invaluable dialogue between personal response and group engagement in text-based analysis.

The Personal in Narrative Nonfiction Writing

When Griffith turns his attention to developing student writing, he...
illuminates the benefits of personal writing by reminding us of narrative nonfiction’s communicative nature. In outlining a preparatory lesson sequence, Griffith designs differentiated activities to address areas with which student writers often struggle and to build a classroom community that supports telling personal stories. For example, he prompts students to compile lists of ideas for personal writing, and he encourages those who use social media to “mine” their postings for material for more developed writing. He also shuttles students back and forth between short writing explorations focused on elements of craft (such as scene writing) and group examinations of other writers’ choices to weigh their effects on readers (by evaluating published student writers’ first lines). While Griffith’s strategies are ingenious, his discussions of the issues surrounding student creative nonfiction writing are perhaps even more valuable. He reflects on some of the challenges teachers face, from censorship and student use of profanity, to public sharing, publication, and the ethics of writing about real life. Griffith’s chapters on working with students as they write narrative nonfiction give readers both a toolkit and seed material to activate their pedagogical imaginations.

While presenting his teaching strategies and sequences, Griffith supplements his ideas with those of noteworthy teachers and writers—Penny Kittle, Stephen King, Lee Gutkind, and M. K. Asante, to name just a few—to underscore key points and extend our thinking. Griffith also shares his pages with his students, providing examples of their responses to assignments, his own reflective comments on their experiences as readers and writers, and an extended interview with one student writer about her experiences. By sharing the stage, Griffith enacts the power of “we” in the development of narrative nonfiction craft.

Griffith’s book is a timely rethinking of the power of narrative nonfiction to provide students with reading and writing opportunities that balance expression and analysis in ways that provoke dialogue and collaboration in the classroom. As someone who came of age as a teacher in the 1980s and who cut my pedagogical teeth on personal nonfiction narrative and the writing process movement, I walked away from Griffith’s book inspired to teach personal narrative once again, convinced that narrative nonfiction is what we, our students, and our society need in our current educational environment.

Critical Encounters in Secondary English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents

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When asked why they chose teaching English as a future profession, most of my preservice teachers claim loving to read as the main reason. It is true: we love books and assume our students will, too. However, this is not always the case, and we have an obligation to teach our students how to read, enjoy, and talk about the books. Moreover, we must teach them to understand how books reflect the world in which they live. It is helpful to complicate classroom readings and discussions with literary theory, moving outside traditional interpretation of themes, characters, and plot development. Deborah Appleman’s Critical Encounters in Secondary English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents is an important supplement to other textbooks teachers may use. The book’s audience is primarily English language arts teachers; however, social studies and history teachers, instructional coaches, literacy specialists, teacher educators, and curriculum developers will find that the book is written in accessible language that allows its use for professional development seminars and workshops.

Justifying the need for introducing theory to secondary school students, Appleman emphasizes that “contemporary literary theory can help adolescent readers make meaning of literary texts” (7) because it explores the intersection of the literary text and students’ social context. The 21st century is marked by ideological discord as our society goes through ecological, economic, social, and political changes. Adolescents struggle to
understand this harsh reality and to find their own place in a society torn by divisive politics. As English teachers and teacher educators, we have a responsibility to teach beyond literary terms and grammar structures to help our students face these current challenges.

Reading through Literary Lenses

Throughout the book, Appleman introduces the major theoretical lenses (e.g., gender, social class, reader response) clearly and concisely. She begins by presenting how to engage students in conversations about the text from multiple perspectives, giving examples of poetry and famous children’s rhymes and fairy tales. Subsequent chapters address reader response, Marxism (social class), gender, postcolonialism, new historicism, and deconstruction. One of the final two chapters argues for including literary theory in the secondary school curriculum so that it does not become privileged knowledge for only college-bound students. In fact, Appleman says the students “on the margins seem to be savvier about theory” (128). Disaffected students read the world and its inequities based on their realities. Summarizing the benefits of teaching with literary theory, Appleman emphasizes how critical encounters with literature may transform the study of literature and enrich students’ learning experiences.

The practical value of this book lies in the combination of “theory with actual classroom practice” (Appleman 13). Readers can “see” portraits of urban, suburban, and rural classrooms with examples of teaching literary theory as well as samples of students’ discussions. The author uses a variety of texts, from the classics to newly adopted titles, to illustrate different critical lenses. In addition, following the call of the Common Core for including more informational texts in the classroom, Appleman concludes each chapter with a list of nonfiction pieces that would work well with each lens.

A particularly valuable part of the book is the Appendix, which includes descriptions of 37 classroom activities. Activities include a literary perspectives toolkit, a sampling of critical lenses, and ready-to-go notecards with descriptions of each lens. Also included are theoretical approaches to literary texts such as “Little Miss Muffet” by Russell Baker, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Miller’s Death of a Salesman, Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, and many more. Appleman suggests using specific fiction and nonfiction texts, poetry, and motion pictures for teaching with theoretical lenses, but teachers may use any other texts that may fit better in their curriculum.

It is difficult to overestimate the value of Appleman’s textbook in secondary school teaching. In this increasingly multifaceted, information-charged world, combining literary theory with fiction and nonfiction texts will help teachers enrich students’ learning experiences, provide students with effective tools for literary analysis, and help students reach their teacher’s academic goals. Most importantly, Appleman’s approach can encourage students “to read everything critically and vigilantly” (xiv). As teachers, we want our young people to be able to experience critical encounters everywhere—in books, digital media, and daily interactions with peers, family, and community. Appleman’s third edition of Critical Encounters in Secondary English will help teachers guide their students through every step of that journey.

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