H as a shift in standards changed the use of children’s literature in the classroom? In pondering this question, we recognize that there is ample research suggesting that informational texts in the classroom throughout elementary and upper grades is beneficial for student motivation and literacy development (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Guthrie & Alao, 1997). There is also support for the idea that more dependence on informational texts in instructional settings will help students acquire information and use informational text structures in their own writing (Pappas, 1993; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Tower, 2002). But how do teachers use this shift as an opportunity for integrating instruction and avoiding the appearance of neutrality that is often conveyed by nonfiction genres?

One approach is to take issue with the broad category term informational texts that is being so heavily wielded in educational circles today as a result of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; Maloch & Bomer, 2013), and instead focus on identifying genres within nonfiction and then teaching from a progression of text sets that scaffold younger students into the use of informational books (Neuman & Roskos, 2012). While these and other techniques are indeed important, it is equally vital that we help teachers tackle more nuanced issues, as the authors of the books in this column do.

Close reading, integration of texts, and using text-based questions to guide student reading are addressed in Close Reading of Informational Texts: Assessment-Driven Instruction in Grades 3–8 (Cummins, 2013) and Teaching with Text-Based Questions: Helping Students Analyze Nonfiction and Visual Texts (Smith, 2014). It is also important to those who teach from a social justice perspective that issues of power and privilege not get lost in the integration of informational texts into the curriculum, as explored in Social Studies, Literacy, and Social Justice in the Common Core Classroom: A Guide for Teachers (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2013). The authors of Language, Ethnography, and Education: Bridging New Literacy Studies and Bourdieu (Greendale et al., 2012) help teachers become versed in classroom ethnographic research that provides a type of close reading of students and language in educational contexts so they can determine for themselves if this text shift is truly an innovation or not. We are pleased to provide a peek at these professional books that help us to consider the power of informational texts from varying perspectives. Each one offers a unique insight into the current landscape of classroom literature.

Close Reading of Informational Texts: Assessment-Driven Instruction in Grades 3–8

Across the school day, in a multitude of exchanges,
how we engage students orally shapes how students see themselves and how they become strategically oriented independent learners. (p. 31)

Informational texts are becoming increasingly significant in today’s classrooms. In her book, Sunday Cummins illustrates ways to support students’ close reading of these texts through lessons, assessments, student work samples, and vignettes of teacher language. She proposes that teachers should engage readers during an instructional cycle that includes teaching to students’ needs and assessing their understanding. Cummins encourages teachers to be mindful of their language in order to promote autonomous readers. She advocates for teachers to personalize instruction in a “community of practice that endeavors to co-construct knowledge about reading, writing, listening, and speaking.” Such a community holds potential for students to “internalize what they need to do to read, understand, and communicate effectively” (p. 31).

Drawing on sociocultural learning theories, Cummins presents readers with ideas surrounding the instruction of close reading with the premise that knowledge is continually constructed through social interactions. For instance, teachers make visible their thinking through interactive read-alouds or through personal conferences to promote social interactions needed to construct meaning from texts. Cummins posits that close reading results when readers determine how important details fit together to logically convey the author’s central idea(s) or theme(s). She maintains that close reading is an essential skill “for our students to cultivate in a world where they are constantly bombarded with information they need to understand in order to be active participants in society” (p. 1).

Cummins frames the book around several fundamental points regarding instruction of informational texts: teaching for close reading is essential to create pathways for critical thinking; students experience more success with close reading when lessons are naturally integrated into content-area learning; an assessment-driven, systematic approach to teaching provides students scaffolding and rigor that supports them as learners; and progressively building students’ literacy skills sustains their growth as close readers.

The heart of this text consists of examples of lessons used with elementary and middle school students to support effective close reading of informational texts. Cummins delineates skills and strategies readers need to carry out this type of reading and provides a subsequent road map of instructional approaches to advance students’ proficiency as readers. She shows how to teach students to identify central ideas and supporting details, as well as how to synthesize knowledge during and after reading. Cummins provides examples of strategies to facilitate close reading in the classroom, including: 1) understanding the features of a text, 2) strategic previewing to set a purpose, 3) self-monitoring, 4) determining importance, and 5) synthesizing. Readers will appreciate the vignettes of conference scenarios and suggestions for coaching, in addition to examples of students’ responses to texts with descriptions of observations and suggestions for follow-up instruction. Cummins uses student work samples to determine strategies to support students’ reading proficiency.

This book serves as an entry point for teachers working collaboratively in professional learning communities or those who seek guidance in supporting students as readers. Cummins maintains resolute advocacy for instruction that includes “attentive listening, careful observation, and thoughtful conversations to nurture each student’s identity and self-efficacy related to academic achievement” (p. 31). In this way, the book calls for teachers to help all students develop a close affinity with reading so that they may view themselves with a greater sense of agency. (EB)
Kevin Smith provides a wealth of resources for teachers of all grade levels and content areas that will engage students through close reading and analytical analysis of literary nonfiction, informational texts, and visual texts. Though his content-area background is high school social studies, his application of text-based questions (TBQs) and experience conducting professional development for primary-grade teachers have enabled him to provide an instructional strategy that is versatile and adaptable for multiple content areas and grade levels. In addition—and as important—he is able to anchor his strategy within the skills addressed by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) in ways that build rigor without sacrificing student interest and engagement.

In the first chapter, Smith makes a case for TBQs and grounds his argument within the context of currently limited practice, global measures of student performance, CCSS, and feedback received from his former students. Where current practice is concerned, the use of questioning of documents is largely limited to Advanced Placement (AP) History classes through the implementation of document-based questions (DBQs). These questions can be highly effective preparation for the level of analytical thinking required of students on AP exams, but Smith argues for an expanded model via TBQs that reach more students in more classes, content areas, and grade levels. This is particularly needed since American students are seen to be lacking in proficiency in seven globally identified skills that separate the best-prepared and least-prepared students internationally. The CCSS are one way in which American schools are attempting to address these disparities, and Smith includes excerpts from the CCSS to build further momentum in his argument for the types of opportunities TBQs provide to meet these Standards. Last, Smith concludes his argument for the purpose and benefits of TBQs by providing quotes from former students of his who have benefited from their use.

Having established and supported his claim, Smith provides important distinctions between multiple types of texts that do not fall within the general definition of fiction. He provides succinct definitions and examples of the following categories of text: literary nonfiction, informational text, visual text, primary sources, and secondary sources. Furthermore, he annotates resources for acquiring samples of each kind of text. While many of them are related to social studies, he also includes resources for other content areas.

After laying important groundwork, Smith uses the larger, remaining portion of the book to address various ways to implement TBQs in the classroom. These remaining sections are a refreshing blend of teaching resources, scaffolding resources, and evaluation resources. Smith divides the remaining portions into Questions Students Should Be Asking, Working with Multiple Texts, Writing Good Responses to Text-Based Questions, and Evaluating Students' Responses to Text-Based Questions, all of which include resources that can be implemented in the classroom.

In Questions Students Should Be Asking, Smith reminds the reader of multiple grade-level Standards from CCSS that indicate how students are to respond to texts that are not labeled as literary. With the inclusion of strategies for soliciting higher-order questions and graphic organizers to help students think deeply about texts, this chapter highlights several ways to think about multiple types of text.

The subsequent chapter, Working with Multiple Texts, provides strategies for expanding students’ abilities to analyze and evaluate multiple texts. One of the strengths of this
chapter is the modifying of the SOAPStone strategy—analyzing texts for speaker, occasion, audience, purpose, subject, and tone—to include student engagement through text selection. Since DBQs used in AP classes can often alienate many students with their decreased relevance to students’ lives and times, Smith uses TBQs to scaffold students toward proficiency with those texts by first challenging students to look at more relevant texts with a critical eye.

Since the prior chapters focused on strategies that more often led to class discussions than student writing, Smith uses Writing Good Responses to Text-Based Questions to specifically hone students’ writing skills. Yet again, the SOAPStone strategy is modified and accompanied by other strategies to yield the kind of analytical writing students need to produce. Smith also includes solutions to common issues seen in student writing.

Finally, Evaluating Students’ Responses to Text-Based Questions provides a handful of rubrics as well as advice for grading students’ work along a continuum. Because it is followed by an Appendix of Exemplar Texts to be used when formulating questions, this brief ending to the text allows enough context to ground one’s practice of TBQs successfully, yet with enough latitude to adapt for one’s own classroom.

Smith has created a valuable, practical text for teachers of all grade levels and content areas. Students and teachers will benefit immensely from the application of this text. (AB)

Our work as educators, combined with efforts to teach for equity and change, is an essential step toward fighting injustice. We can remain resilient in our efforts to teach for social justice by finding hope in the possibility and potential for social change. We can find hope as we see our students learn to question the status quo and work to make change within their schools and communities. We can find hope as we learn to work together as teachers to creatively integrate social justice ideals into the curriculum and navigate constraints such as standardization and accountability. (p. 139)

Words like the ones above foster hope for educators to teach in ways that will empower students to make change within their schools and communities. Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath wrote the quote above within the closing of Social Studies, Literacy, and Social Justice in the Common Core Classroom: A Guide for Teachers to recapture the essence of her text—one of empowerment for teacher educators, teachers, and the students they teach. This is a text that guides educators as they navigate the world of teaching social studies for social justice while embedding such efforts within the context of literacy and Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). A rich resource designed for educators (grades 3–8), this book helps teachers use a variety of sources, particularly primary and informational texts, to engage students in new ways of thinking critically about history while also meeting demands of ELA and the CCSS. As a teacher educator journeying back into a secondary classroom, I found this text most helpful in planning curriculum to meet such demands. I am certain that wherever readers are on their journey, they will use this text as a creative roadmap for their curriculum planning based on a social justice foundation.

As I read this book, it was refreshing to find that the author never sways too far from the purpose of her text—to help educators teach for social justice. Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath opens the book addressing what it actually means to teach...
for social justice and paves the way into thinking more about how to integrate it into language arts and social studies. She clearly identifies the intended purpose of language arts taught with social studies to help students interrogate the world as a text, counter historical myths, think for themselves, and take action on their decisions through inquiry, dialogue, and activism (Wolk, 2003). She further highlights that through this conception, students are “agents of transformation in their classrooms, schools, and communities, raising questions of whose knowledge is in the curriculum, and examining foundations of history” (Au, 2009, p. 7).

As an education resource, a framework consisting of five tenets—inspiring wonder, painting the picture, application, connecting the past to the present, and facilitating change—is presented, and each chapter of the book is devoted to one of these tenets, offering concrete strategies to translate into practice. Each chapter also provides practical examples that real teachers are integrating into their lessons and shows how these examples are connected to the CCSS.

Chapter two of the text, Inspiring Wonder, eloquently unpacks ways to challenge students to be critical thinkers about materials presented to them and to ask questions that lead them to examine the world and scrutinize the information they process on a daily basis. Agarwal-Rangnath presents strategies within this chapter that lead to building on students’ prior knowledge, bridging to new learning, analyzing artifacts, and guiding simulation. In her discussion of guided simulation, for example, she explains the purpose of helping students understand and relate to people and events from another time and place. Examples of guided simulations, or imaginary replications in which students become historical figures and feel emotions from another’s perspective (p. 24), are delivered to help educators envision it in practice. Collaborative discussions follow guided simulations to engage students in asking questions such as: What did it feel like to participate in the simulation? Who had power? Who did not have power? Whose perspective did we get to see? Whose perspective did we not get to see? (p. 28).

Chapter three of the book, Painting the Picture, also relates the importance of learning history through personal stories of struggle and resistance as a great way to draw students in and introduce a concept, idea, or historical event. Here, the author offers ways to integrate literacy with social studies to develop students’ reading comprehension as well as critical thinking skills through questioning and synthesizing information. Ideas illuminated within this chapter consist of using children’s literature as read-alouds to engage students in discussions as well as small-group book reviews to engage students in exploring themes and identifying bias.

Chapter four, Application, addresses first the space of synthesis (drawing from all the information students have encountered through background knowledge, texts, and various perspectives and opinions) within social studies content, and then the space of application (processing and applying new content information) through writer’s workshops, dialogue poem creations, first-person narratives, dramatization and visual art, and reflection exercises.

Chapter five, Connecting the Past to the Present, reflects ways to contextualize the present using the past and to help students make concrete connections to the present so they can make parallels between what was and what is becoming.

The final chapter, Facilitating Change, may be one of the most insightful for educators as Agarwal-Rangnath provides examples of how students build off what they have learned about struggle, resistance, and social change during their social studies unit to examine and implement social action projects particular to their schools and communities. Some ideas for implementing social change include letter writing, performance, and art.

Inspired by the author’s research and work with preservice and beginning teachers, Social Studies, Literacy, and Social Justice in the Common Core Classroom: A Guide for Teachers

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presents a unique framework to guide educators to teach language arts and social studies as complementary subjects. It is grounded in the daily realities of today’s public schools, and it offers ways to plan curriculum and instruction that take into account the pressures of teaching to cover content and Common Core State Standards while preparing students for high-stakes testing. This text is a helpful and hopeful tool for teaching social studies, literacy, and social justice in real-world, Common Core education contexts. It is a stepping stone text for empowering yourself and your students to work toward equity and change while also learning about history, building literacy, and meeting standards. (LR)

Language, Ethnography, and Education: Bridging New Literacy Studies and Bourdieu

The study of literacy in education has shifted through the years from a behaviorist perspective that analyzed it as an object of study (which required the acquisition of certain skills) to a multimodal social practice (Street, 1984). This latter perspective is linked to an ideological model of literacy that is culturally sensitive and considers the context in which it takes place. Language, Ethnography, and Education offers such a perspective by combining the principles of ethnography, New Literacy Studies (NLS), and Bourdieu’s sociocultural theory. The authors of this book explored the emerging field of classroom language ethnography as a dialogue between theory and practice within a socioconstructivist framework based on rich traditions, but extending them to offer a robust “science of language in education” (p. 4).

The book is divided into three sections:
1) Bridging New Literacy Studies and Bourdieu—Principles; 2) Language, ethnography, and education—Practical studies; and 3) Working at the intersections—In theory and practice. The first section takes naturalistic approaches to literacy to what the authors call the “next stage” (p. 5). In order to accomplish this goal, the book starts with an exploration of the relevance of ethnographic studies to understand the different nuances of language in educational contexts. It offers a detailed account of the theory and practice related to this research tradition and highlights the importance of contextualizing classroom ethnographies to their local and temporal realities.

Next, it explains The New Literacy Studies (NLS) tradition, a research area that emerged in the 80s, which considers literacy as a social practice. This approach recognizes the fact that literacy happens in multiple ways that vary according to time and space and are contested in relations of power.

Street, the author of this chapter, advocates for a disciplined and reflective ethnographic inquiry that systematically examines specific educational processes. Such an approach functions as the guiding perspective in NLS and helps us understand the literacy events and practices of those around us. The first section ends with a chapter that analyzes Pierre Bourdieu’s perspectives on language and education, which becomes the third theoretical backbone of the book. Bourdieu’s structural constructivism is analyzed through some of his major concepts such as habitus, field, and linguistic and cultural capital, making explicit the relationship between his intellectual goals and practical demands.

The second section offers four practical studies, each located and affected by a unique sociocultural context. The authors of these studies drew from ideas and principles in the first section of the book—an ethnographic perspective, NLS, and Bourdieu. The projects focused on different forms of literacy in diverse contexts. Chapter 5 presents project LETTER (Learning for Empowerment Through Training in Ethnographic-style Research), an initiative that aimed to recognize the local literacy and numeracy practices of women in
Delhi, India. By understanding the epistemologies on which their practices were grounded, the project intended to empower women and bring attention to the different ways in which power relations obscure non-Western conceptions of the world. Chapter 6 describes a two-year ethnographic study in an elementary classroom in the North of England. The author traced the depiction of the teacher’s pedagogic habitus, which intended to promote creativity in her classroom. She focused on the literacy events and practices that took place in the classroom, especially the multimodal text productions of the children, which she described as ideologically situated.

Chapter 7 describes the digital stories created by a group of ninth graders in a US classroom and uses as its theoretical frame the notion of fractal habitus (pieces of habitus) that converge in multimodal texts. These types of texts make it possible for children to develop a meta-awareness of different options they can use to represent and express meaning. The last study in this section, Chapter 8, also took place in the US and explored classroom discourses to understand the dilemmas a high school teacher faced when teaching literature to a group of African American students. Her efforts to give her students learning engagements that responded to their local literacies are described as a jazz improvisation as she moved within two literacies: “that of the dominant (la langue), and that of the African American community (le parole)” (p. 72).

The last section of the book returns to the exploration of the relationship between theory and practice in a dialectical way. It looks at the practical examples offered in Part II and reconsiders them in the light of the methodological principles, theoretical relations, and practical engagements offered in Part I. By doing so, the authors explicitly outline the classroom language research methodology they advocate and reinforce their message that literacy and language in education should be approached from an ethnographic perspective. Classroom language ethnography appears as a promising perspective from which to conduct research on language in education. (PA)

References


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Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE’s Conference on English Education offers this award to support teacher research projects that further the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett. Moffett, a great champion of the voices of K–12 teachers, focused on such ideas as the necessity of student-centered curricula, writing across the curriculum, alternatives to standardized testing, and spiritual growth in education and life. This award is offered in conjunction with the National Writing Project.

Applications for the Moffett Award should be in the form of a proposal for a project that one or more K–12 classroom teachers wish to pursue. The proposal must include:

- A cover page with the applicant’s name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant’s current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).
- A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher’s practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the connection to the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett; initial objectives for the study (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the researcher and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).
- A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant’s teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2015 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to $1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project.

Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010 or cee@ncte.org. Attn: CEE Administrative Liaison. Proposals must be postmarked by September 15, 2015. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett’s scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.
Call for 2015 CEL Convention Proposals

The NCTE Conference on English Leadership invites proposals for the 2015 CEL Annual Convention (November 22–24), “A Leader’s Legacy,” immediately following the NCTE Annual Convention in Minneapolis, MN (November 19–22). **Deadline: April 1.**

How will our leadership in the field of literacy influence and impact the people around us? Leadership is having the vision to see the impossible become the possible. Effective communication inspires others to rise to challenges, take risks, and collaborate to create change in our schools and communities. In what ways do leaders encourage others to empower students and staff in our schools, districts, and states? How are we sharing our leadership capacities to promote literacy? In what ways do we build strong teams that promote positive and productive working environments? How do we optimize every moment we have with people?

What is our legacy going to be? Join us for the CEL convention in Minneapolis where we will chart the course by considering our legacy and the possibilities of how we influence through our leadership. We will explore these questions collaboratively and share our experiences. Through self-reflection, we are able to think about our craft, consider the decisions that we make, and be aware of how those actions can impact people around us.

We encourage you to submit proposals for the 2015 CEL Convention that address the theme for this session, “A Leader’s Legacy,” including:

- Maximizing change and making it work
- Influencing productive literacy leadership
- Developing collaborations
- Supporting literacy coaching
- Enhancing curricular and instructional design
- Diversifying assessment
- Being intentional with outcomes
- Learning to run effective meetings
- Building communities with teams
- Resolving conflicts
- Refining organizational management
- Building leadership capacity
- Contributing to the success of others

The Conference on English Leadership encourages interactive, participatory presentations. As a nonprofit organization of educators, we are not able to give a stipend or reimburse expenses for this appearance.

The convention proposal form can be found on the NCTE website, www.ncte.org/cel. We ask that you submit your proposal prior to the April 1 deadline via email to Karen Delbridge at delbridgek@laramie1.org.

We look forward to seeing you in Minneapolis, MN, on November 22–24, 2015. In the meantime, follow us on Twitter @ncte_cel.