Expository Text and Middle School Students: Some Lessons Learned

Whenever I contemplate the thorny issue of how to help middle school students grapple with expository text, I am reminded of Pat and 1994. During that year, I spent many productive hours engaged in professional dialogue with Pat, a colleague and friend. Pat and I were middle school teachers who were fortunate enough to have arranged release time for the sole purpose of acting as collegial mentors to one another. Normally, we both taught language arts in the morning and social studies in the afternoon, but that year, we spent a great deal of time watching each other teach and offering supportive advice on how to improve our teaching practice. One day in particular stands out, since the events of this day forever changed the way I view the teaching of expository text to middle school readers.

I walked into Pat’s middle school classroom, chatting with her about how much I was looking forward to watching her teach that day. For her morning English class, Pat had planned a fabulous introduction to the novel A Day No Pigs Would Die by Robert Newton Peck. Lewis and Clark were on the agenda for her afternoon social studies class. As a trusted colleague and friend, Pat was excited to have me watch her teach both lessons.

Since Pat was raised in the rural southwest, she opened her lesson on A Day No Pigs Would Die with a fantastic personal story of life on a working farm. After capturing her students’ interest in the book, Pat gave each cooperative team a focus question and turned them loose. This was all the direction they needed, since Pat’s story had awakened a desire to jump into the adolescent novel as quickly as possible.

Pat circulated through the classroom and heard the contented hum of on-task, productive talk. Her middle schoolers communicated excitedly as they actively engaged with the novel. I took notice of Hector, a previously disengaged boy from group one, who maintained the spellbound fascination of his peers as he explained his conception of what an animal might feel as a knife was swiftly drawn across its neck. Other groups were similarly engaged in exploring the early pages of the novel. As I rushed out the door for lunch, I quickly told Pat how impressed I was with her students’ active involvement with the novel.

Returning to Pat’s classroom after lunch, I sat down as Pat opened the class by asking her social studies students to begin reading chapter seven. Settling back to watch the afternoon lesson on Lewis and Clark, I took note of the group she referred to as her “rowdies,” a pocket of students seemingly disillusioned with school. I was surprised that Pat spotlighted Hector, who was immersed with the novel in the morning, as one of the ringleaders of the “rowdies.” Two or three of the other disruptive boys had been held back before; well aware of their failures with the school system, they had decided to achieve a sense of success by disrupting the learning of others. Their purpose was to annoy, amuse, and disrupt their classmates. As the lesson progressed, it became obvious that they played their roles very effectively.
In fact, most of the students spent more time watching the antics of the rowdies than they did reading their textbooks. Those who were reading wore vacant stares and seemed utterly bored with the textbook. This class was anything but engaged with the reading assignment.

After the lesson, Pat told me that the difference between the two lessons was like night and day. Fluidity, productivity, and invigorating dialogue characterized the morning lesson. Sadly, the enthusiasm of her students from the morning English class did not carry over to the afternoon. The after-lunch class appeared chaotic, disjointed, and riddled with off-task behavior. Pat asked dejectedly, “How could these same students, who were so into class in the morning, be so out of it this afternoon?”

After school, Pat and I discussed what happened. We discovered together that the morning class had been engaged in reading a narrative text about which they were excited. As Hector’s morning tableau portrayed, her English students were actively reading the adolescent novel, connecting prior knowledge to new, visualizing the facts presented in the reading to form mental pictures, and clarifying misconceptions. The same was not true of her afternoon class. They had no knowledge of Lewis and Clark, nor did they have the strategic reading skills to learn more about these explorers from their textbooks. What reading did get done during her afternoon class was passive, with students simply skimming over the foreign words and pictures, making no real connections to their own experience.

As we continued our discussion, Pat and I realized that the power of the morning lesson centered on what students were reading. When I wondered aloud if seventh period was excited about reading their social studies textbook, I received only a blank stare. Pat finally replied, “They never like to read the textbook.” We spent the rest of the afternoon trying to understand what, beyond the obvious difference in narrative and expository texts, made the difference in the students’ attitudes.

Eventually, we decided to focus less on the types of texts and more on the learning experiences she offered students with each text. As Pat began to change the structure of her lessons that used expository texts, the reading attitudes and behavior of her students changed as well. No longer expecting that all students would eagerly read their textbooks, she now began to guide and support her readers before, during, and after reading. With the help of this scaffolding, Pat and her students began to view expository text differently. The turnaround was neither immediate nor profound, but over the course of the semester, all of her students—even her most disengaged—began to read their textbooks more actively and with greater interest.

In struggling to make meaning from these experiences, Pat reminded me of the vast differences between what we ask students to do when they read expository text as compared with narrative text. As Pat learned, and as most middle school teachers know, students often come to middle school with limited experience with content area texts; therefore, they don’t know how to read them. Furthermore, reading strategies that students have developed to comprehend fictional narratives do not always help them with textbooks. When students realize that concepts such as plot, character, theme, and setting offer no help when tackling a new textbook, teachers need to step in and offer support for these developing readers. Oftentimes, as Hector and his buddies demonstrated, students who do not know how to approach expository text act out and disrupt the learning process. Understanding that leads to two questions worth considering:

1) Why do middle school students have trouble reading expository texts?
2) What specific teaching strategies can we use to engage students with expository text?
Why Do Middle School Students Have Trouble Reading Expository Texts?

At about age nine, the emphasis of reading changes from learning to read to learning from text (Spor & Schneider, 1999). This gives students roughly two years to master the skills required to learn from texts before facing the challenging reading demands of middle school. No longer are they in elementary school where they likely spent a great deal of time reading short novels and chapter books. Now they are in middle school, where they are often shocked by the reading expectations of their content area teachers. Not surprisingly, it soon becomes apparent that many have failed to master reading expository text.

When we ask students which strategies they use when reading textbooks, they often look at us blankly. For the most part, students have not been taught how to read expository texts. They often try to read them the same way they do narratives, rather than thinking of textbooks as information sources from which they can learn. And it is not just struggling readers who experience this frustration. Sadly, students of all reading abilities can find themselves “totally against textbooks” (Wilhelm, 2001, p. 61).

It is not surprising that attitudes toward reading tend to grow negative in middle school. This is the point when teachers really begin to expect students to read dense, expository text. This clashes with what students have enjoyed reading previously, so oftentimes the reading that interests middle school students and the reading assigned to them no longer match (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000).

Middle school educators often serve as the professionals who are expected to teach students how to read expository texts. One simple but crucial thing that all middle school teachers can do to assist students with expository text is to activate and/or build up students’ prior knowledge on a topic before reading. The importance of this step cannot be emphasized enough. As educated professionals, we often assume students will approach a piece of expository text with a fair amount of background knowledge, but this is not often the case. Simply building up students’ background knowledge on the topic to be explored prior to reading will greatly aid reading comprehension.

Read the following paragraph and then ask yourself what it was about. I think you’ll quickly see the point about the importance of background knowledge.

With hocked gems financing him, our hero bravely defied all scornful laughter that tried to prevent his scheme. “Your eyes deceive you,” he had said, “an egg not a table correctly typifies this unexplored planet.” Now three sturdy sisters sought proof, forging along, sometimes through calm vastness, yet more often over turbulent peaks and valleys. Days became weeks as many doubters spread fearful rumors about the edge. At last, from nowhere, welcome winged creatures appeared, signifying momentous success.

Did you understand it? If not, then try it again, but this time keep the name Christopher Columbus in mind. With that missing bit of information, the passage probably makes much more sense. We all know that reading is more than simply understanding individual words, that it is about making connections with prior knowledge; however, sometimes we do forget to help students access that prior knowledge before the reading. (Try using this same paragraph with your students to help make the point that prior knowledge helps their comprehension.)

Strategies to Engage Students with Expository Text

The Structured Reading Lesson (Ryder & Graves, 1998) is a simple and effective way to structure a lesson involving expository reading. As these authors suggest, “the process of assisting students in becoming more proficient readers requires that teachers draw upon instructional activities prior to reading, during reading, and after reading” (p. 64). The three components of the Structured Reading Lesson (SRL) are outlined in Figure 1.

Before reading, we can help students build background knowledge by asking them to question
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what they already know about the topic. If they know little or nothing about it, then it is up to the teacher to devote significant time building up that knowledge before reading ever begins. Imagine, for example, how much easier the passage above would be to comprehend if the class had been discussing Christopher Columbus prior to reading. Effective readers also preview the text by looking at the title, the pictures, and the print in order to evoke relevant thoughts and memories. Finally, strategic readers set a purpose for reading by asking questions about what they want to learn as they read (Ryder & Graves, 1998).

During reading, effective readers monitor their comprehension by using context clues to figure out unknown words and by discussing, imagining, inferencing, and predicting. Ultimately, they integrate new concepts with existing knowledge.

After reading, strategic readers summarize what has been read by retelling the important aspects of the reading. They evaluate the ideas contained in the text and make applications of the ideas in the reading to unique situations, extending the ideas to broader perspectives.

While there are many before, during, and after reading strategies you might want to use (Tierney, Readence, and Dishner, 1995), I’ll offer three that always prove helpful with middle schoolers.

### Before Reading Activity: Think-Pair-Share

**Lesson Concept**

This activity encourages active participation in class discussions and allows for all students to collect their thoughts before responding openly. Students think and record ideas and reasoning before discussing first with a partner, and later, with the whole class. Working first with just one partner allows students to build up confidence before being asked to defend their positions in a whole-class discussion. Think-Pair-Share promotes a variety of responses, including analytical, comparative, inferential, and evaluative reasoning.

This all occurs after the teacher has provided students with a moderate level of background knowledge on a topic, but before the reading selection is actually read.

**Directions**

**Think**

1. Present students with a specific question or problem related to a topic that will be raised in a piece of expository text. The question should be open-ended in order to solicit a variety of responses and opinions. Here are a few examples:

   - What is your opinion about…? Why?
   - Take a position on this issue. Defend it.
   - Argue in favor of or against . . .
   - If this were to happen, what would result?
   - How do you feel about [social issue or person]? Why?
   - What suggestions do you have about . . .?
   - What do you think this person or group would say about this? Why?

2. Give the students quiet time to consider their responses and frame their reactions in writing before discussing in pairs.

**Pair**

3. Have students find a partner, close by or long distance (for example, students might share their responses over e-mail with other students).
**Share**

4. Have students share their responses with a partner.

5. Kick off a whole-class discussion where students share ideas and responses.

**During Reading Strategy: Reciprocal Reading**

**Lesson Concept**

Two students work together with one text. This is an instructional approach characterized by an active dialogue between two students as they respond to portions of a reading selection.

**Directions**

1. Student A reads one paragraph (or page) aloud. Student A stops and asks Student B one or two good questions. This can be difficult because some students will want to ask the obvious: “Who is the main character?” or “Where did this take place?” You’ll have to model what “good” questions are—those questions that encourage connections, predictions, clarifications, and wonderings.

2. B either answers the questions or explains the difficulty in answering. A and B discuss questions and answers.

3. Text changes hands. B reads next paragraph (or page) aloud and asks A one or two “good” questions

4. A either answers the questions or explains the difficulty in answering. A and B discuss questions and answers.

**After Reading Strategy: Fishbowl Discussion**

**Lesson Concept**

This activity engages a small group in a discussion of a reading while the remainder of the class observes. First, the whole class reads the selection and responds in writing to several guiding questions for the discussion. After the written responses are complete, the teacher selects a fishbowl group, identifies a conversation leader, and helps to facilitate the discussion. Participants in the fishbowl interact and engage in a discussion, modeling agreement and disagreement of ideas and following established discussion norms for an active conversation that promotes listening to other voices. Observers record main points of the discussion and share their responses or comments afterwards. Teachers may assign specific observers to watch and make comments about certain students.

**Directions**

1. Read the expository text aloud or silently.

2. Ask students to respond to a variety of questions about the reading.

   - What is your reaction or opinion to this issue?
   - What strikes you about this reading?
   - What things leap out at you?
   - What surprises you? What did you find that you didn’t know? What challenges something you thought you knew?
   - What puzzles you? What don’t you get?
   - What questions about this reading would you like to ask the writer?

3. Select four to six students to participate in the fishbowl in the middle of the classroom. Have the class make an outside circle or semicircle around the discussion group.

4. Choose a group leader to start the discussion. Remind the students in the fishbowl to listen to the statements and respond using previously established discussion norms. Also, be sure the leader shares only one idea to get the discussion going. Throughout the discussion, if one student has not participated, ask the group leader to invite that person into the discussion.

5. Have the observers write comments to share during the debriefing session about the fishbowl conversation.

6. After the discussion is complete, debrief with the class, inviting both observers and participants from the fishbowl to share thoughts.
7. Invite students to record a journal entry about the topic, summarizing their feelings or insights from the discussion.

**Final Thoughts**

The middle school years are a crucial time for student readers. Many students, during this pivotal time in their lives, turn away from reading. As Pat and I discovered together, reading narrative text and expository text are quite different tasks; as such, they require different skills and instructional approaches. The Structured Reading Lesson (SRL) is one simple way to structure reading activities so that the before, during, and after phases of the reading experience are all touched upon. For those of us who value all kinds of reading, we would be wise to guide our student readers as they struggle to read expository text with greater interest and skill.

**References**


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**Looking Ahead . . .**

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all have in common? Stay tuned for the September 2002 issue of *Voices from the Middle* to find out!