Chapter 2
Critical Thinking and Writing Informational Texts in a Grade Three Classroom

Robin M. Bright
University of Lethbridge, Canada

Bev Smith
Jennie Emery Elementary School, Canada

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this chapter, the authors present a case study that explores grade three students' work with informational text over a month-long unit in order to document the students' developing thinking skills about text structures and features. Students were introduced to informational mentor texts to discover insight into expository text structures and create their own "All About…" books using their own background knowledge and interests. In writing their own informational texts, the students were encouraged to use a variety of visual representation formats such as lists, checklists, and diagrams. They also used common expository text structures found in informational trade books including description, sequence, and comparison. These structures provided an overall framework for students to organize their writing and use the skills of conceptualizing, applying, synthesizing, and evaluating their knowledge. One of the primary successes of the unit for developing students' critical thinking was the opportunity to teach others about an area of expertise. Scaffolding for student success in a variety of ways throughout the writing process was also important

for student learning. Choosing mentor texts with text features and visuals that were desired in the students' finished pieces provided concrete examples for the class. Overall, the reading and writing of informational text was successful in promoting the development of important thinking skills that support students' need to critically evaluate information from a variety of sources.

INTRODUCTION

Bev (co-author and grade three teacher), while completing work for her Master's Degree in Education, focused her course work and research on literacy and content-area writing. After attending the Teachers' College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP) Summer Writing Institute and engaging in a graduate-level independent study with Robin (co-author and supervisor), she began transforming the way she taught writing informational text in her grade three classroom. This chapter documents Bev's and her supervisor's research of the students' month-long unit of study of informational writing. We share the background research into critical thinking and informational writing, the visual instructional procedures followed, the children's thinking and writing, and the teacher's reflections, to show how students can become effective learners of nonfiction content.

In the primary grades, teachers focus the majority of instructional time available to them on helping students learn to read and write. Acquiring these early literacy skills consists of developing knowledge of phonics, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary (Adams, 1990). Once students become proficient readers and writers, they are encouraged to use their literacy skills to learn and focus on comprehension and fluency. That is, once students in the elementary grades *learn to read and write*, they quickly shift their attention to *reading and writing to learn*. This area is known as content area literacy and "has to do with the ways teachers meld effective reading and writing strategies into core subject instruction…" (Cooter & Perkins, 2011, p. 565).

In school and beyond, children read and write informational (expository) or nonfiction texts in the disciplines of school, for instance, in science, social studies, mathematics, and other curriculum areas, in order to apply their literacy skills to other areas of learning. Young and Noss (2006) indicate that when teachers provide access to nonfiction trade books, they are giving them experience to a genre that will comprise most of the reading they will do throughout their schooling and into adulthood. Students continue to read fiction, but are introduced more and more to nonfiction texts in order to become academically literate. While fiction allows the reader to take an "aesthetic" stance towards the text for the purpose of enjoying it, nonfiction often requires an "efferent" stance in which information is presented and considered critically by the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978). According to Cooter and

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