Seamless Integration of Informational Text: A How-to Guide
What are best practices for introducing informational text into the classroom? How can teachers incorporate such texts in a meaningful way? Angela Lalor discusses thoughtful selection of informational text as the first step for success, below.

Seamless Integration of Informational Text: A How-to Guide

By Angela Lalor

A classroom showcase includes books by Gail Gibbons and Eric Carle, selections from the Curious George series, non-fiction trade books about animals, and science magazines. While they appear to be disconnected, they have been brought together in a very purposeful way.

Students in this class are engaged in a unit of study called Fact or Fiction in which they investigate how authors use factual information about animals in fictional stories. The teacher has carefully selected these texts within the context of a meaningful unit of study and by doing so, has taken the first step to helping students be successful with complex informational text.

In order to choose text that allows for all students to access and be successful with high quality complex texts, teachers can consider the following questions:

- How will the text be contextualized within a unit of study?
- How does it complement the literature included in that unit?
- How does the text connect to skills and processes within a cohesive unit of study?

Careful choice of text can help students to:
- Build background knowledge
- Learn to make connections between different types of texts
- Practice focused skills for reading complex informational text

Informational Text Contextualized in a Unit of Study

An organizing center communicates the overall intent and purpose of a unit and can vary greatly in terms of focus. Oftentimes, the organizing center is a specific topic. For example, a unit titled The American Revolution could indicate an examination of the causes and events of
the American Revolution, and a unit titled *Fables, Folktales and Myths* might include a study of those genres. While this may seem a logical approach to creating units of study, units centered on topics can narrow the approach to the unit and limit the types and uses of texts which can support it.

A more robust unit of study is organized around an important concept, issue, problem, process or essential question that allows for in-depth study across disciplines and texts. For example, when the unit titled *Fables, Folktales and Myths* becomes a unit called *Exploring the Unknown*, it allows for more than a focus on these genres. *Exploring the Unknown* opens the door for students to read these fables, folktales and myths and examine how they are used to explain unknown events. It also allows for the exploration of the science that explains the natural phenomena found in the folktales, fables and myths by reading non-fiction articles or books.

Consider the possibilities when the unit *The American Revolution* becomes a unit called *Revolution* that explores the essential question, *Is revolution a bad thing?* The unit moves away from focusing solely on one event to an examination of several events from different perspectives. Students can read both fictional and historical accounts from American History including the American Revolution as well as the Industrial Revolution. They can also read about revolutions in places such as Latin America, Russia, Africa and the Middle East.

In both of these examples, the selection and use of informational text is impacted when the organizing center changes. Without a change in the organizing center, there would be no need for informational text in the original *Fables, Folktales and Myths* unit. In the new unit, students can read informational text from authentic sources to explain the facts behind the fiction. In the unit on the American Revolution, students could read texts exposing them to new perspectives and unfamiliar cultures.

**Complementary Texts**

In most units, literature and informational text can be used in a complementary way, meaning they can work together to achieve an overarching goal, although this might require rethinking the way topics have previously been taught.

For example, in a unit called *Great Literature*, students can examine books that have won Caldecott and Newberry Awards. During the unit, they can read non-fiction texts about the
awards and the criteria used to select them, as well as book reviews on the books themselves. As a result of the unit, students can create criteria for a school book award. After reading self-selected texts, they can nominate books that reflect the criteria for the school award. Books selected could receive a medal and a special place in the school library along with the nomination letter. In this unit, the primary focus is on literature. However, by reading about the Caldecott and Newberry Awards, as well as book reviews, students engage in the reading of informational texts.

A typical unit on *Romeo and Juliet* might focus solely on the reading of the play, with little room for informational text. However, by taking a step back and considering a central issue of the play - love - a teacher can incorporate more literature and poetry, along with contemporary non-fiction texts on love and relationships, or articles about the brain-basis of love or arranged marriages.

In both examples the use of complementary texts enhances and supports student understanding.

**Connections and Cohesion**

When selecting text, it is also important to consider the characteristics of the chosen texts and the skills embedded in the standards. For example, in a unit titled *Heroes*, students can read both literature and informational text that examine the qualities and portrayal of heroes in our society. The informational text could vary greatly but the choice of text and how students can examine the text should be driven by the standards for the unit.

If one of the standards was RI.5.3 *Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text*, the unit would need to include texts that describe such relationships and interactions. In addition, students should be provided the opportunity to practice the skills embedded in the standard: identify the individuals, events, ideas, or concepts within the text, identify the relationship or interaction between them, and then explain how the two are related to and interact with each other.

**First Step to Success**

If it is not carefully planned and managed, the integration of informational text in the classroom could have unintended consequences. Literature could be crowded out, or focus could be lost as texts are randomly accessed for the exercise of teaching isolated skills. Students can
disengage if they are unable to see the purpose for their reading. Struggling readers might continue to struggle when presented with complex informational text in an isolated and disjointed way.

By thoughtfully selecting text, teachers can increase their students’ success with complex informational text. They can help build students’ background knowledge and assist them in making connections across texts, themes and concepts. They can teach with clear learning targets in mind, helping students to independently apply the skills and strategies necessary for reading complex informational text.

In turn, students can learn the value of as well as the skills needed for reading a variety of informational text. They can develop a deeper understanding of issues, events, theories or concepts; learn to reconcile and negotiate differing perspectives; and develop a deeper appreciation of literature. For success to occur, the first step is carefully selecting text that is contextualized, connected and cohesive within a unit.

This article was adapted from “Thoughtful Selection of Informational Text”, published in the November 7, 2013 edition of ASCD Express, 9(3) online at http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol9/903-lalor.aspx. © 2013 by ASCD. Adapted with permission.
About the Author

Angela is a senior consultant at Learner-Centered Initiatives. Her work includes facilitating school-wide initiatives in the areas of curriculum, instruction and assessment. Angela’s strengths lie in her ability to help groups of teachers work collaboratively to rethink and reflect upon their practices.

Angela has presented nationally at the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Conference, and she is a published author, currently working on a book on curriculum for ASCD.

Angela began her career as a seventh grade social studies teacher. An avid runner, Angela completed the New York City Marathon for the second time this past November. She can be reached at angelal@lciltd.org.

About the Publisher

Learner-Centered Initiatives works to improve education by focusing on teaching, learning and leadership practices. Our Professional Development programs, products and services integrate relevant neuroscience approaches and focus on research-grounded, field-tested educational practices.

At LCI, we practice the priority that our name establishes, integrating learner-centered practices into our work, engaging participants’ perspectives, energy and expertise and tapping their passion for education.

We are a certified MWBE in NYS and NYC, and have been successfully helping clients since 1995.

- To learn more about our Curriculum offerings, click here
- To view some of our free downloadable Curriculum resources, click here