Non-Fiction in the Literacy Hour

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Byline: Margaret Mallett on using the best non-fiction enjoyably.

Children’s informational reading and writing is energised by strong and interesting contexts. Margaret Mallett suggests criteria for choosing non-fiction and looks both at links across the curriculum and the different parts of the Literacy Hour. She also considers how teachers can stick to the Literacy Hour guidelines and still help children enjoy the best non-fiction books and resources.

In the last few years there has been new interest in children and the reading of non-fiction after a long period of relative neglect. One outcome has been a huge burgeoning of reference material in print and on CD-ROM, information books on every possible topic and multi-media packages of videotapes, charts and posters.

The impact of the Literacy Hour

Not surprisingly, the National Literacy Project’s requirement that children use a range of non-fiction to meet specific Literacy Hour objectives has further stimulated the market. The sheer volume of publishers’ output and the large claims for the books and materials as the answer to resourcing the Literacy Hour can be overwhelming. The speed with which the initiative is being introduced and the highly prescriptive nature of The Framework for Teaching are also daunting. But there are several positive things about the Literacy Hour which can be exploited. First, it promotes the use of real texts: teachers can still choose quality resources to suit their classes. Second, there can be a mutually enriching interaction between reading and writing across the curriculum and the Literacy Hour content and vice versa. Third it encourages knowledge and understanding about language and offers a framework for looking at books and resources at text, sentence and word level. There is welcome reinforcement of the importance of teachers modelling appropriate reading strategies important in non-fiction reading.

Like all classroom initiatives it is the skill, judgement and imagination of teachers which makes the difference between success and failure when using non-fiction to meet the objectives of the literacy strategy. There are some excellent books and literacy materials available but only teachers know what will suit their particular children best. However good a publishing house, it is best to avoid letting any one firm dominate your provision. Within a well praised series there may be some weaker titles; teachers need to inform themselves about the wide range of titles available.

What is non-fiction?

Non-fiction? is an umbrella term covering many different kinds of text, but in general we look for books with a clear format and, where appropriate, the headings, sub headings and retrieval devices which help identify a book with the informational genres. Clear language which contextualises new vocabulary is important and an authorial voice showing genuine interest rather than being patronising or remote. We must remember too that the dynamic relationship between writing and illustration gives an information book its vitality. On the social front, there is now more awareness...
of unwelcome kinds of bias and stereotyping. Not only does knowledge increase, but our attitudes to certain facts and bodies of information change. Thus the point of view of the existing populations in the countries once described in children's books as 'discovered' by fifteenth-century explorers is now included under entries like 'settlers' and 'explorers' (see, for example, The Dorling Kindersley Children's Illustrated Encyclopaedia).

In the end what matters most is the vitality and motivating power of a truly original book. Margery Fisher, one of the most respected and inspiring writers on non-fiction, maintained (Matters of Fact, 1972) that an information book, however simple, can be 'individual, strong and alive?. The quality of new non-fiction continues to vary but there are some exciting new books, particularly for younger children. I would be inclined to keep such delightful information stories (a category mentioned in the 1995 English Orders) as Tom's Rabbit: A True Story from Scott's Last Voyage for appropriate lessons across the curriculum where it can be read in its entirety for sheer enjoyment and inspiration. The contextualising summary of the 1910 journey on the Terra Nova on the last two pages can then be used in the Literacy Hour in line with the requirement that information texts on topics of interest be included in Years 3 and 4.

Favourite authors and illustrators

One welcome consequence of the new interest in informational materials is that favourite authors and illustrators are emerging such as Claire Llewellyn whose science and mathematics books are enjoyed by younger children. Her My First Book of Time can be used to show children how they can make labelled diagrams and charts and there is no reason why this should not be exploited in the Literacy Hour (see, for example, page 9 on making your own calendar. It would fit with 'following instructions?', Year 2, Term 1). Look out for Llewellyn's latest title, My Best Book of Creepy Crawlies, which includes intriguing details about giraffe weevils, honeypot ants and burying beetles and includes the unpleasanter details of these creatures? habits which children like to hear about. As we know, the tame and bland rarely provoke curiosity and questions.

The authors and illustrators of the 'Read and Wonder? series bring a human dimension to non-fiction ? how people feel about spiders and pigs and so on, the mysterious and only partially known life cycle of the eel and personal memories of apple trees all feature. These are not conventional information books but they do have some of the features of non-fiction texts ? labelled diagrams for example in Spider Watching.

Older primary children (and adults!) enjoy Stephen Biesty's books on cross sections ? Incredible Cross Sections, Man-of-War, Castle and, most recently, Incredible Everything which concentrates on the processes involved in making things (a good link with the requirement for explanatory texts in Year 5, Term 2). The combination of meticulous research manifest in both text and illustration together with quirky humour and a willingness to include the startling and even distressing (medieval tortures are described in Castle) makes Biesty's books exceptional and inspiring. While parts of these books can be used as a special focus for the Literacy Hour shared reading time, they also deserve to be read in their entirety in different contexts ? including just browsing.

Links across the curriculum

The danger with too structured and prescribed a programme is that children will spend time on exercises unrelated to their broader interests and preoccupations. It is these which energise non-fiction reading and writing and make it meaningful and enjoyable. A narrow study skills approach to non-fiction is unlikely to inspire young readers.

However, on page 13 of the Framework for Teaching there is welcome encouragement to link Literacy Hour activities to what is happening in the rest of the curriculum. '... during the Literacy Hour, pupils might be searching and retrieving from information texts used in science, writing instructions linked to a technology topic, studying myths, autobiographies or stories linked to a study unit in history. There is every reason to bring books and materials to the Literacy Hour after or before lessons across the curriculum. Meredith Hooper explains the story of water on our planet in The Drop in my Drink round Chris Coady's clear and sometimes poetic illustrations. The book has no retrieval devices, only one conventional diagram at the end and lacks even pagination. Yet the text is an example of inspirational science writing ? savour the sheer exhilaration of reading this:
The drop in my drink has whizzed across continents, carried by winds. It has howled 10 kilometres above mountains in icy jetstreams. It has been dragged violently up and down through thunderclouds, growing layers of ice, and hurtled to the ground as hailstones. The drop in my drink has been an endless number of raindrops.

I would read this to children as part of science at Key Stage 2 and choose some extracts to place on the overhead projector in the Literacy Hour. Discussion with the class could range from the labelling of the water cycle diagram to the new vocabulary which introduces dynamic concepts like trickling, dripping, dribbling, swirling, leaking, condensing, evaporating, recycling, dissolving and polluting. The last page is a plea for protecting water and links well with the requirement for children to experience persuasive kinds of reading and writing.

Joy Richardson’s beautifully designed book Making Faces has good potential links with both history and art. The double spreads could be used in the Literacy Hour to show how we read illustrations and how writing extends and links with pictures. Two geography alphabet books match well with one of the objectives for Year 2, Term 2: learning about alphabetic formats. Ifeoma Onyefulu’s A is for Africa (now in big book format) and Kathryn Cave’s W is for World introduce interesting vocabulary and ideas in the strong context of the photographic alphabet. Both books explain about our shared world in a warm, sympathetic way and children will enjoy just browsing through them and talking about the photographs.

Sometimes it is necessary to use a text to meet a particular objective which does not happen to link with any other current lesson. Teachers may yet find a way to create a context: perhaps linking the text to the children’s interests, to other books they have read or to experiences they may have had.

Whole class shared reading and writing sessions

As well as an overhead projector there needs to be a stand to support big books, smaller books, pamphlets, charts and large pieces of writing paper and a computer.

Non-fiction big books

Non-fiction ‘big’ books (titles published in giant format) have great potential as shared texts for looking at particular aspects of literacy. The big book must be able to sustain children’s interest over a few days and, in addition to meeting the criteria already set out (clear inviting language, good match between illustrations and texts and so on), it is important that the typeface is large, clear and sufficiently well spaced to be seen from a distance. Illustrations need to be sharp and inviting without too much detail or use of very subtle colour. Thus, not every good information book will necessarily make a good big book. The Stopwatch series, from A & C Black (very well liked science books for Key Stage 1) is one that has adapted well to big book format; it makes particularly good use of photographs in showing animal life cycles.

A touch of humour is appealing to teacher and children: Hilary Minns’ Snakes is clearly set out and amusing and I believe Manning and Granström’s Splish, Splash, Splosh! (about the water cycle) and What’s Under the Bed? (about the structure and content of the earth’s layers) will become much loved big book classics.

Literacy Hour books must, of course, be matched to particular purposes and some consistency of design may be needed: for example to teach about retrieval devices (contents pages, indexes and glossaries). Pelican Big Books provide this in two beautifully illustrated historical books for the 4-7 age group: Looking at Teddy Bears and What Babies Used to Wear. Several titles in this series are suitable for younger children at Key Stage 2 including The Human Body and You Can Make Your Own Book! As well as providing an excellent example of how instructional text is organised and illustrated, the latter also reinforces the sound idea of children making their own information books in a range of formats from simple concertina books to the more ambitious pop-up books and wallet books with exciting enclosures.

Progression is also built into Cambridge Reading’s Big Book Literacy Packs. Their books for Reception and Year 1 do not overwhelm with too many retrieval devices all at once. Thus, Dinosaur is an information story about one particular species: the Maiasaur? from egg to adult but with information boxes to introduce non-narrative text. The illustrations of the creatures in their environment are most inviting. Coral Reef, aimed at the final term of Year 2, features contents
Older children (9-12) would learn much about genre from Longman’s imaginative World War II Anthology which combines fiction and poems with non-fiction forms such as telegrams. This would be a book to return to for different purposes in and outside the Literacy Hour.

Use of reference books, as teachers know, is best modelled in context. But I think Pelican Big Books? An Encyclopaedia of Greek and Roman Gods and Heroes could be used in history and reinforced and discussed in the Literacy Hour. Their Words Borrowed from Other Languages creates its own context and is therefore a particularly interesting and appropriate Literacy Hour choice.

Extracts from information books, newspapers and pamphlets

So that the Literacy Hour range and specific objectives are covered for each primary school term, extracts from information books featuring recounts, explanation, autobiographical and biographical kinds of writing will need to be presented to the whole class on an overhead. Extracts from Chris Powling’s Roald Dahl and from Dahl’s Boy: Tales of Childhood could be used to pinpoint some of the differences between first and third person writing.

Some kinds of writing will be best taken from newspapers and pamphlets, particularly the persuasive and journalistic kinds of reading and writing to be covered by older children. In Year 6, Term 2, for example, children are required to see the different sides of an argument and be able to distinguish opinion from fact. An extract from a local newspaper on a current issue could serve as the shared reading text and the different viewpoints discussed. This could lead to shared writing tasks and children producing their own letters to newspapers setting out an opinion.

Learning about impersonal language, for example in the passive tense, is an objective for the final primary school term. Children can examine public notices and leaflets as well as write their own.

If whole class shared reading sessions are well resourced and planned, all the children, including children with literacy difficulties, should find the collaboration and discussion round quality texts involving and enjoyable.

Whole class ? phonics, spelling, vocabulary and grammar

At Key Stage 1 a non-fiction big book will usually last a week and the word and sentence level work can take up a different focus each day. The first day’s work might centre round new vocabulary and making a joint list ? teacher scribing children’s suggestions on the overhead. The following day the time might be used to concentrate on the shape of the words, at letter strings and how they are spelt and pronounced. Next an examination might be made of the smaller second level text ? a feature of quite a lot of information books big and small (What?s Under the Bed?, Splish, Splash, Splosh!, Dinosaur and Coral Reef). The meaning of the harder words and concepts in the smaller text level could be explored: in What?s Under the Bed? for example ? insulation, prehistoric, stalactites, stalagmites, pothole, fossilised, magma and pupae. This might take more than one session.

It is probably best to keep scrutiny of punctuation points for later in the week when the children are more familiar with the text. Finally, it might be helpful to put the new words into the children’s word lists or dictionaries.

At Key Stage 2, word and sentence level work will include a focus on sentence structure in informational texts, spelling and pronunciation of challenging vocabulary and labelling of more complex charts and diagrams.

Guided group work ? reading and writing

Schools will need to build up their stocks of non-fiction texts for group reading ? National Literacy Strategy funding is earmarked for this as well as for shared reading texts. Sets of six are an economic way of resourcing this part of the Literacy Hour. Big book kits often usefully include a set of six smaller books. Some bookshops offer sets of books for both Key Stages chosen for relevance to particular years and terms in the National Literacy Strategy framework (for
Many publishers are providing detailed suggestions for guided reading and writing. There is nothing wrong with taking up good ideas?who could blame teachers for taking a few short cuts when so much is demanded of them? But there is a danger in letting others dictate too much; our confidence in our own ability to plan appropriate and interesting tasks may be shaken.

Guided group work is an excellent context for teacher modelling of different kinds of non-fiction reading and writing.

**Independent reading, writing or word work**

This is an opportunity to practise the skills and strategies covered in the taught sessions. Teachers worry about younger children and older children with special literacy needs being unsupported during this part of the Literacy Hour. Careful resourcing for the three independent groups and clear initial explanation help. Schools will build their own store of resources. Worksheets have a place if they are attractive, imaginative and at the right reading level.

At Key Stage 1 tasks might include putting into sequence broken up parts of a text, making lists of terms and placing them in alphabetical order, labelling diagrams and making simple information books. Appropriate tasks for older children include note taking and summaries of parts of the shared text, writing tasks based on the genre of the week and labelling of more difficult diagrams like cross sections.

If a shared reading text has good illustration, children can write their own explanatory text round the pictures. *Making Faces*, for example, is a good model for successful integration of text and portrait.

**Plenary**

Potentially one of the most positive elements in the Literacy Hour, the plenary provides an opportunity for the teacher to summarise achievements and for children to share what they have done in an atmosphere of constructive criticism. Where the shared text has been informational a cloze procedure could be beamed up on an overhead or written on a board or flip chart and children invited to fill the spaces with some of the new technical vocabulary covered. Links to current topics in history, science or geography can be clinched by adding new vocabulary to class charts?words to describe mini beasts or vocabulary round a history topic like The Ancient Greeks or The Tudors.

**Enjoying non-fiction**

The Literacy Hour provides a framework for teaching flexible reading strategies. But we also need to nurture a positive attitude by making non-fiction reading enjoyable. Student teachers returning from teaching practice concluded that two things help?quality books and resources and the chance for children to talk about and share opinions and ideas. These are enduring principles in a time of change.

**Books discussed**

**BIG BOOKS**

*A is for Africa*, Ifeoma Onyefulu, Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 1388 7, £12.99

*Coral Reef*, Meredith Hooper, Cambridge Big Book Literacy Pack (one big book, six small books, teaching notes and worksheets), 0 521 64959 5, £34.50, Big Book only, 0 521 57695 4, £18.95

*Dinosaur*, Meredith Hooper, ill. Bert Kitchen, Cambridge Big Book Literacy Pack (one big book, six small books, teaching notes and worksheets), 0 521 64948 X, £20.50, Big Book only, 0 521 56460 3, £10.95

Looking at Teddy Bears, Sallie Purkis, Longman ?Pelican Big Books?, 0 582 33349 0, £16.99 (pack of six small books, £19.99)

Snakes, Hilary Minns, HarperCollins, 0 00 301451 7, £15.99

Splish, Splash, Splish!, Mick Manning and Brita Granström, Franklin Watts, 0 7496 3287 9, £14.99

What Babies Used to Wear, Anne Witherington and Bobbie Neate, Longman ?Pelican Big Books?, 0 582 33352 0, £16.99 (pack of six small books, £19.99)

What?s Under the Bed?, Mick Manning and Brita Granström, Franklin Watts, 0 7496 3288 7, £14.99

World War II Anthology, various authors, Longman ?Pelican Big Books?, 0 582 33383 0, £17.99 (pack of six small books, £19.99)

You Can Make Your Own Book!, Paul Johnson, Longman ?Pelican Big Books?, 0 582 33388 1, £17.99 (pack of six small books, £19.99)

REFERENCE TITLES

The Dorling Kindersley Children?s Illustrated Encyclopaedia, Dorling Kindersley, 0 7513 5489 9, £29.95

An Encyclopaedia of Greek and Roman Gods and Heroes, Brian Moses, Longman ?Pelican Big Books?, 0 582 33411 X, £17.99 (pack of six small books, £19.99)

Words Borrowed from Other Languages, Sue Palmer, Longman ?Pelican Big Books?, 0 582 33410 1, £17.99 (pack of six small books, £19.99)

INFORMATION STORIES, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND BIOGRAPHY

Boy: Tales of Childhood, Roald Dahl, Puffin, 0 14 031890 9, £5.99

Roald Dahl, Chris Powling, Evans ?Tell Me About Writers? series, 0 237 51762 0, £7.99

Tom?s Rabbit: A True Story from Scott?s Last Voyage, Meredith Hooper, ill. Bert Kitchen, Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 1183 3, £10.99

INFORMATION BOOKS

The Drop in my Drink: The Story of Water on our Planet, Meredith Hooper, ill. Chris Coady, Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 1181 7, £10.99

Making Faces, Joy Richardson, Franklin Watts ?Looking at Pictures? series, 0 7496 2592 9, £9.99

My Best Book of Creepy Crawlies, Claire Llewellyn, Kingfisher, 0 7534 0213 0, £6.99

My First Book of Time, Claire Llewellyn, Dorling Kindersley, 0 86318 784 6, £9.99

Stephen Biesty?s Cross Sections: Castle, Stephen Biesty, Dorling Kindersley, 0 7513 5046 X, £12.99 (Also Incredible Cross Sections, Man-of-War, Incredible Everything)

Spider Watching, Vivian French, Walker ?Read and Wonder? series, 0 7445 2818 6, £7.99 hbk, 0 7445 4735 0, £4.99 pbk (Other titles include Think of an Eel, The Apple Trees, All Pigs Are Beautiful)

W is for World, Kathryn Cave, Frances Lincoln with Oxfam, 0 7112 1260 0, £9.99

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