

Active encounters: Inspiring Young Readers and Writers of Non-fiction 4-11

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Introduction

Much has changed since I first began to teach and to research about non-fiction kinds of literacy. Most obviously the range of resources has become much wider and use of the internet and multimedia sources has grown immensely. Children are more likely to use the internet than print information books to 'find out'. New literacies develop to meet social needs and changes. They do not just make information gathering easier, they change the way children think, imagine and learn. Even so, some of the central challenges remain the same. We still support children's efforts to choose and use texts to energise their research, learning and writing, albeit from a richer, wider repertoire. And teachers continue to seek ways of helping children become active readers who can transform the information they find.

This minibook suggests how teachers can support but also inspire young readers and writers to give shape to their discoveries and ideas through talk and writing. The 2006 *Primary Framework for Literacy and Mathematics* is informed by an understanding of how ICT can be embedded within the literacy programme. It gives welcome encouragement to a more flexible, creative approach and to more linkage across the curriculum using interactive texts, visual texts and interactive whiteboard files. This lighter touch leaves teachers scope to develop a non-fiction policy collaboratively and, as part of this, their own imaginative and effective ways of teaching study and library skills in their school.

Chapter 1 sets out the three guiding principles which I believe inform good practice in general, but which have not always been satisfactorily applied to non-fiction learning. First we need to embed non-fiction reading and writing in strong, lively contexts which, for younger children particularly, include practical and physical activity. Second, we need to encourage and plan for talk and discussion: genuine learning is so often social and collaborative. Chapter 2 aims to bring the first two principles to a practical level and we

join children of different ages in active encounters with informational kinds of learning. The third principle makes the teacher's role central and critical: as an expert on how to help children learn, as an expert on the huge range of texts now available and as an effective and sensitive assessor and recorder of children's progress. Reading and writing are, of course, two sides of one coin, but chapter 3 focuses mainly on the teacher's role in inspiring young readers, chapter 4 on guiding the acquisition of study skills and chapter 5 on inspiring young writers.

A major theme is the journey children make towards critical literacy in informational kinds of reading and writing. In the Cambodia example we find evidence of ten year old Amy's developing textual knowledge when she comments: 'The internet is so quick and easy and I got information on landmines, but in this book - *Running Shoes* - you get to know how Sophy felt and see the pictures of her running past the workers in the fields because she really *really* wanted to go to school'. It is when children feel passionate about the texts they use and become able to articulate their merits that teachers feel they have helped inspire as well as instruct.

Chapter 1

Non-fiction and learning

For many years models of non-fiction reading and writing have focused mostly on the acquisition of skills and risked encouraging practice which set this kind of literacy apart from the general business of learning. Here I suggest an approach which embeds the acquisition of non-fiction literacy deep in children's everyday activities and learning.

Children learn actively

How do children begin to make sense of experiences, encounters and activities? For me Piaget's adaptive model of learning which uses the metaphor of the digestive system is a powerful explanation of how a child organises new learning (Piaget, 1952b). This 'new learning' will include making sense of unfamiliar objects and new situations and, later on, taking on ideas from secondary sources. Food begins a process of assimilation, mixing with gastric juices to make it absorbable by the body. At the same time the body's digestive organs change and modify to accept the new input. So, says Piaget, it is with learning; we take in new knowledge and change it so it fits with what we already know, and as we do so we adapt the existing frameworks of knowledge to take in the new. He argues further that we have a self-regulatory mechanism which he refers to as 'equilibrium'. So when children become curious about some aspect of the world this mechanism kicks in putting them into a state of unsettled excitement and curiosity.

This gives them a tremendous eagerness to find answers to their puzzles and concerns: only when they are on their way to resolving these can they return to a comfortable equilibrium. In *How Babies Think* it is argued that young children, like scientists, have a passionate and persistent need to find solutions to challenges that come up in everyday activities (Gopnik et al, 1999). Piaget's work is less illuminating about the social context of learning and particularly about the role of language in making meaning and finding out. Here teachers have found help and insight in the work of

Vygotsky on language and thinking, on the value of talk and the role of literacy in organizing thinking (Vygotsky, 1986).

It has been worth returning to these now familiar ideas because they continue to illuminate and inform good early years practice and beyond. This recognizes the value of practical activities both in the classroom and in outdoor play areas. In these contexts spoken language is central to play and practical work. They are also powerful settings for the development of early literacy. We can bring texts into role play: catalogues for the 'baby clinic', notices in the 'doctor's surgery', menus in 'the café'. Outside, we help children write out bills and receipts in the 'garage', prices in the 'market garden' and, as we see in the first of the case studies in chapter 2, signs to help 'motorists' when road works are in progress. It is when children see written language as a means of making their role play more real that it becomes important.

Older children continue to need this connection with activity and practical work; this is the case even though learning from secondary sources becomes increasingly important as they learn to control the written forms valued by society. Practical work in science, outings and museum visits in history, field trips in geography all help sustain and deepen interest in learning. Drama continues to be an excellent way of exploring real, and perhaps especially unsettling, issues to do with the environment, the media, poverty and conflict. The much more than superficial involvement drama demands often links lessons across the curriculum, leading to exciting kinds of talk, writing and illustrating. And this kind of involvement makes it more likely that children will achieve that special, mind-stretching concentration and commitment needed when ideas and concepts and expressing them becomes demanding. The genuine care and interest in an issue that comes from active learning helps older children become able to write the sustained, thoughtful accounts which continue to be a challenge for many. To paraphrase James Britton - we cannot make difficult things easy, but we can help make the effort worthwhile (Britton, 1970).

Learning is social and collaborative

Why do we need to keep a strong collaborative element in learning from the nursery years through the primary school and beyond? It is discussion with teachers and other children that makes independent leaning fruitful and mature and which breathes life into notes taken from the internet or