

Book Talks: Generating Interest in Good Reading

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ELEMENTARY TEACHERS TODAY are under enormous pressure to teach children to read better. If we, as teachers, want social studies to have an important place in elementary schools, we need the vision and the imagination to see social studies as part of the literacy mix. The irony is that we have always had the key to doing this without sacrificing any of the themes and goals that we have embodied in our standards. In fact, the only thing some teachers may have to give up is their obsession with textbooks. Within the essence of the social studies is the complex nature of human relationships and human activity, the culture and history of the people of the world, the allure of lands near and far away, the sense of doing the right thing and of being the right kind of human beings. All of these things, implied and stated in the national social studies standards, are found in the best of today's trade books. And these very areas of study have an allure that can stimulate children to want to find out, to know, to read.

Teachers sometimes lose sight of the fact that if we can inspire children to want to learn, to want to read more about a topic, everyone wins—even the people whose sole interest is reading test scores. In the social studies, we want students to be thirsty for information and knowledge. We should be provoking, inspiring, and guiding our students into reading a wealth of informative books.

One step toward doing this is for teachers to make an all-out effort to pull children into reading a variety of nonfiction and fiction social studies-related books. The reasons are simple. Guiding students to books that feature strong content and strong characters representing various ethnic groups can be one way of demonstrating a more caring, personalized, and positive approach. One study found that many African American mothers felt that teachers were often uncaring and subscribed to a “deficit model” (i.e., teaching approaches that concentrate solely on challenges related to educating minorities without consideration of the cultural strengths and individual positives).¹ If we spend more time attracting students to books related to a greater range of topics, we will better communicate a more caring approach.

Second, such an effort will help teachers move positively and purposefully away from the biases and sanitized sterility that have become synonymous with textbooks. Publishers have worked to respond to pressures for the removal of potentially offensive viewpoints or bias in textbooks, yet the content and style have largely become sanitized and meaningless. Anything that might provoke reaction from critics has been removed. Observers note that pres-

sure groups have succeeded in purging texts of anything that is challenging, controversial, or interesting.²

The best social studies teachers that I have known have been those who draw their students to consider a variety of perspectives, inspire them to want to know more, encourage them to read for themselves, and give them a love of finding things out. These teachers introduce students to historical fiction, primary documents, and reference materials. Students are inspired to delve into these reading materials to find out what happened at a particular time or place, what the life of a particular individual or group was like, how individuals and groups dealt with common or unusual problems, how events and issues influenced the lives of people, or how a document came to exist, and what was its purpose.

To get students to read materials on their own, these teachers practice the principles of democracy in the classroom. They guide students towards interesting and exciting reading materials. At the same time, they are able to create opportunities where students find and select their own materials.³ Along with the diverse reading, they encourage freedom of discussion among students and serve as their mentors.

There is growing evidence that students who read well, read a lot, and learn well have teachers who do two things: (1) give their students choices; and (2) help students to relate to what they are reading, to see the connections to their own lives. When children have the opportunity to read self-selected materials, it increases their positive feelings about reading and increases their reading achievement.⁴ And when readers see the connections to their own lives, it improves their understanding of a story, and they are more interested. Recent work by Moss and Hendershot shows that children relate to nonfiction books in many of the same ways that they relate to fiction books.⁵

To inspire children to read, a teacher should become familiar with a variety of the best emerging new info-books and with children's literature related to social studies in general. Teachers need to envision how this literature can relate to the standards of the social studies and also become flexible and creative about incorporating such books into their teaching units. Finally and most importantly, teachers can become adept at predicting which books will connect with particular children.

Social studies teachers can also call on school and public librarians for help, as they are experts when it comes to finding books and making critical assessments about books. Teachers can

also learn much from librarians about promoting books to children. The technique, usually called the book talk, involves providing an overview, some “show and tell,” and creating a “tease” or a reason for students to examine a book more closely. Librarians have turned giving such talks into an art form. Fortunately, social studies teachers can emulate the art and utilize the techniques of book talks to get students interested in social studies-related fiction and non-fiction books.

What are Book Talks?

A book talk is a mini presentation about a book or a series of books, done in such a way as to make people want to find out more and read the book themselves. When a teacher makes book talks a regular feature of the classroom, he or she also encourages reading in general by communicating the excitement and joy of it. A book talk should be brief. Some teachers begin a unit of study with a stack of books, showing each one in turn and telling a little something about each book and about how it fits into the unit. Others prefer to take a broader range approach, talking about books related to a range of topics. Other teachers may opt for doing one or two books at a time. The more enthusiastic a book talker is about a particular book, the more students will be eager to grab that book.

How to Develop Effective Book Talks

There are a few simple guidelines for developing interesting, effective book talks that make students want to read books.

1. Choose good books, those with strong plots and characters or with information presented in an interesting and unique way.

This requires scanning through as many books as possible related to the topic(s) you are studying. Narrow the field by utilizing librarians and the many reviews and recommended lists, such as the *Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People* (published in this issue of SOCIAL EDUCATION). Limit the talks to the very best books. There are an increasing number of nonfiction and fiction books for older students with very strong visual images. Some contain excellent illustrations or photographs. Look for books that have the power to speak to readers with both words and images.

2. Choose books that you like and that you think you can “sell” to your listeners.

Do not try to promote a dull book; if you manage to convince a student to read it, you will lose credibility with that student. If you do not like a book, then it is unlikely that your students will like it. If you enjoyed a book, then your students will be enticed by your fervor during the book talk.

3. Get to know the books that you are going to talk about before you try to motivate students to read them.

If you have not read a book painstakingly, be honest about the amount that you have read, and be real about your intent to complete it later. You want interested students to ask questions, and you want to know the answers, even when some of the questions are

difficult. You want to be able to talk intelligently about the book with your students after they have read it. If they suspect that the teacher has not read the book, students will lose their motivation.

4. Present the book’s physical and aesthetic qualities as part of the “sales pitch.”

If the book has great illustrations, unusual graphs or maps, informative photos, historical documents, then those features can help attract new readers.

5. Relate books and their characters to your students’ experiences.

Reading is above all a constructivist process. The more students see that the information and ideas in a book relate to their own lives and experiences, the more likely they will want to read the book and the better they will understand it.

6. Share the “feel” of the book, the allure of the story, and the power of the characters.

Giving a good book talk is like creating a painting. You want your audiences to get a feel for what reading a particular book will be like. You want students to get a sense of the book’s flavor, its mood, its theme, and its message or lesson.

7. Read carefully selected excerpts and paragraphs aloud.

This is something that works for both novice and experienced book talkers. Novices can rely on the writer’s own words to draw in readers. Whether you are a novice or a veteran, reading or quoting passages can give listeners a sense of the language and mood of the book.

8. Give talks in series.

Make book talks a practice. An anxious and enthusiastic student, one who really wanted that first book you talked about, gets a second chance to get a book. By featuring several different books together, you change the pace and have a greater chance of finding one or more books that will appeal to every reader. All books do not appeal to all readers. As you get better with practice, you will have more takers (i.e., students who want to read a particular book).

9. Keep your book talks short.

Some books can be done in a couple of minutes. Others may take a little longer. Five minutes is fine. 15 minutes, or even 10, is probably too long. Be flexible; occasionally, you may create such interest with a really good talk that your presentation evolves into a read aloud experience.

10. Leave the listener hanging.

Walk the fine line between giving some intriguing information about what is between the book covers and giving too much away. If you tell too little, there will be no interest, but if you tell too much, students will no longer feel the need to read the book. Leave the students wanting to know more. If the book is fiction or history, you can choose a suspenseful incident with which to end your talk.

A Few Book Talk Suggestions

Almost any good book related to the social studies can be the subject of a book talk.

Since 1972, NCSS has published its annual selections of Notable Trade Books for Young People (available in this issue; previous years are available on the web at www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable/). Most books on these lists would be good choices for book talks. Nevertheless, here is a short list of excellent children's books, representing a variety of social studies topics and accessible to a wide range of students that would be especially suited for such talks.

Cheripko, Jan and Gary Lippincott (Illus.). *Caesar Rodney's Ride: The Story of an American Patriot*. Honesdale, Penn.: Boyds Mills Press, 2004. (Ages 8 and up).

In 1776, Caesar Rodney, ill with a terrible facial cancer left Congress to go home to Delaware. However, at the urging of a fellow delegate, he rose from his sick bed and raced on horseback through rain, wind, and storm to cast a crucial vote in the decision for independence.

Cronin, Doreen, and Betsy Lewin (Illus.). *Duck for President*. New York: Simon and Schuster Children's Publishing, 2004. (Ages 5 and up) (New York Times Best Illustrated Books Award).

Duck decides to replace Farmer Brown in running the farm. Duck then runs for governor and eventually president. This humorous story introduces children to the political process and the difficulties of leadership.

Fritz, Jean, and Hudson Talbott (Illus.). *Leonardo's Horse*. New York: Putnam Publishing Group, 2001. (Age 10 and up).

This book tells the story of Leonardo Da Vinci's never completed sculpture of a great bronze horse in fifteenth century Milan. Readers also learn about American Albert Dent's successful crusade, beginning in 1997, to raise funds to complete the sculpture based on Da Vinci's plans and models.

Kadohata, Cynthia, and Julia Kuskin, *Kira-Kira*. New York: Atheneum, 2004. (Age 11 and up). (Newbery Medal Winner).

A Japanese family moves from Iowa to Georgia to work in a poultry hatchery. This story describes the challenges they face—racism, prejudice, sickness, and dealing with change.

Park, Linda Sue. *A Single Shard*. New York: Yearling, 2003. (Age 10 and up). (Newbery Medal Winner).

Set in twelfth-century Korea, this is the story of a 12-year-old orphan called Tree Ear. In his struggle for survival, Tree Ear must rummage through trash piles to find food for himself and his crippled protector, the Crane Man. The boy eventually wins an apprenticeship with a master potter and earns the potter's trust for an important mission.

Rappaport, Doreen, and Cornelius Van Wright (Illus.). *We Are the Many: A Picture Book of American Indians*. New York: Harper Collins, 2002. (Ages 7 and up).

Individual incidents from the lives of 16 American Indians are related in snapshot style accompanied by a descriptive painting. Includes familiar figures, such as Jim Thorpe and Sacagawea, as well as lesser-known characters.

Stanley, Diane (Illus.). *Joan of Arc*. New York: Harper Trophy, 2002. (Ages 9 and up).

With distinctive artwork, clear writing, and careful historical research, Stanley recreates the story of the girl who was to be proclaimed savior of France.

St. George, Judith, and David Small (Illus.). *So You Want to Be President?* New York: Philomel Books, 2000. (Ages 7 and up) (Caldecott Medal Winner).

The theme of this seriously funny book is that anyone can be president. Through informative tongue in cheek style text and political cartoon style illustrations, readers learn about what it takes to be president.

Vernon, Louise. *Ink on His Fingers*. Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 2002. (Ages 11 and up)

This mystery-action adventure story about Johannes Gutenberg, the man who created movable type printing, blends imagination and fact and gives a sense of life in fifteenth century Europe.

Wells, Rosemary, Tom Wells, and Dan Andreasen, (Illus.). *The House in the Mail*, New York: Puffin Books, 2004. (Ages 8 and up).

Presented in scrapbook style, this story, set in 1927, follows one family as they order, receive, construct, and move into a mail ordered, prefabricated house from Sears, Roebuck and Company.

Spicing up Book Talks

Some teachers think that the younger the children the “cornier” and more gimmicky the techniques for book talks can or should be. That simply is not so. For one thing, older children can enjoy silliness as much as younger ones. Teachers just need a little more panache and chutzpa to bring it off. Here are a variety of ideas that might appeal across age groups.

Teachers may like to use some sort of signal that announces that it is book talk time. With older children, I sometimes pull out a microphone and go into my World War II radio newsman spiel: “Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea. There’s good news tonight! Here are some books that you are really going to want to read.” Another gimmicky signal is a hat. A slouch hat or a deerstalker cap and magnifying glass can announce the “book detective.” A jungle helmet and a net can announce the book hunter on the track of the “wily and dangerous” book. For younger children, pulling out a puppet or putting on a story apron (with each pocket containing a symbol of a different story), or even moving to a particular place in the room can be signal enough.

Book talks can be given in a variety of ways. One technique is to present a series of books in role, dressing and acting as one of the people living in a particular historical period. This individual can even be a character in one or more of the books. Or, bring geography into your book talk. Have students make illustrated tags for a map, indicating places where books are set.

A problem-solving dimension can be added by using only the book jacket for the talk and having the books themselves be hidden. At the end of the talk ask students which one of them would like to see that book first. Once the teacher has decided which child should have it, give clues to help that student find the book, hidden in, for example, the coat closet.

Yet another gimmick is the “canned” or “boxed” book talk. Scan the cover or an illustration from a book. Form the paper into a can shape or cover a box with it. Put items or artifacts in the can or box that reflect incidents in the book. Pull these out as you give the book talk. Students can use this technique when giving book reports.

Conclusion

Teachers who put thought and preparation into a book talk can make their students more aware of the qualities of good books; students also learn methods for identifying appropriate resources and how to use informational books; the characters in good books can also serve the students as strong role models. If students learn to inquire and solve problems without the teacher by going to a book, then the teacher has been successful. At the end of the day, that is what teaching is all about. 

Notes

1. Celene W. Cooper, “The Detrimental Impact of Teacher Bias: Lessons Learned from the Standpoint of African American Mothers,” *Teacher Education Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2003) 101-116; Robert J. Jagers and Grace Carroll, “Issues in Educating African American Children and Youth,” in *The Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* v. part 2. (2002) 49-65; Mark Akerlund and Monet Cheung, “Teaching beyond the Deficit Model: Gay and Lesbian Issues among African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans,” *Journal of Social Work Education* 36, no. 2, (2000): 279-92.
2. Jonathon Keats, “Textbook Publishers do Back Flips to Avoid Offense,” *Christian Science Monitor* (May 6, 2003). Available online at www.csmonitor.com/2003/0506/p17s01-lepr.html; D. Ravitch, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2003).
3. Caroline R. Pryor, “Creating a Democratic Classroom: Three Themes for Citizen Teacher Reflection,” *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 78-82; Landon Beyer, “Teachers’ Reflections on the Struggle for Democratic Classrooms,” *Teaching Education* 8 (Spring/Summer 1996): 91-102.
4. Gary L. Manning and Maryann A. Manning, “What Models of Recreational Reading Make a Difference?” *Reading World* 41 (1984): 266-273; Benjamin Carson, *Gifted Hands* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1990); Barbara Moss and Judith Hendershot, “Exploring Sixth Graders’ Selection of Nonfiction Trade Books,” *The Reading Teacher* 56, no. 1 (2002): 6-17.
5. Moss and Hendershot, “Exploring Sixth Graders’ Selection of Nonfiction Trade Books.”

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Not only do good reading skills benefit students academically, they are also a skill required for lifelong success. Reading develops vocabulary, increases attention span, and promotes stronger analytical thinking. Getting Your Child Interested In Reading. The key to encouraging reading habits in kids is reading with them at home from a young age. By reading together often, your child will learn first hand the joys reading can bring, helping him or her develop a motivation to read. However, every student learns and processes information differently. After your child has finished a book, talk about what happened and ask what his or her favourite part was. This will enhance your child's comprehension skills, and make reading a family activity. Expose your child to different book genres.

"The books I read that year opened my eyes to many things. As those who enjoy reading will know, books have an extraordinary power to take you out of yourself and into someone else's mindset, so that, for a while at least, you look at the world through different eyes. That can be an uncomfortable experience, particularly if you're reading a book from a culture that may have quite different values to your own. But it can also be really enlightening."

"Kids can get there a lot more easily than adults can, and that's why I love writing for kids. I think kids are the best audience for serious literary fiction. When I was a kid, I was obsessed with secret door novels, things like "Narnia," where you would open a wardrobe and go through to a magical land.