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Do You Know I(nformational) T(ext) When You See It? Towards a Workable Definition of Informational Text

Kevin O'Connor

Abstract: Scholars have noted that schools use very little informational text in instruction. This scholarship intersected with the movement to establish common learning standards for the English language arts. One of the results of this confluence is that the Common Core State Standards and, in turn, Ohio's English language arts learning standards require that a "significant amount" of informational text be used in instruction. Unfortunately, there is confusion about what sort of texts are considered to be informational texts. Practicing English language arts teachers would be greatly assisted by a reliable and understandable definition of informational text. This practitioner's definition should focus on texts that have the purpose to explain, inform, or persuade.

Introduction

In 1964, the United States Supreme Court was faced with the question of whether a French film shown at a Cleveland Heights, Ohio theater was obscene and therefore not entitled to the protection of free expression that is guaranteed by the United States Constitution. Justice Potter Stewart concluded that the film was not obscene and that criminal obscenity laws could be applied only to "hard core pornography." In explaining his conclusion Justice Potter wrote, "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description, and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it." (Jacobellis v. Ohio, 1964)

Nell K. Duke (2000) published what became the landmark journal article concerning the lack of informational text in American classrooms. In her article, Duke provided a definition of informational text which included a list of the common features of informational text, a division of informational text into three categories, and an explanation of her definition's rationale. At the conclusion of her explanation, Duke (2000) wrote, "as difficult as it may be to define informational text rigidly or absolutely, we know it when we see (and don't see) it" (p. 206).

Pornography and informational text make strange and unlikely bedfellows but both types of material are difficult to intelligently and absolutely define. Pornography's definitional woes are not an educator's concern, but informational text's definitional elusiveness poses a real dilemma for an Ohio English language arts (ELA) teacher. Ohio's ELA learning standards "demand that a significant amount of reading of informational text" take place (Ohio Department of Education, 2010, p. 4). Despite this demand, the Ohio standards do not specifically define informational text. Scholars, meanwhile, have provided myriad definitions and descriptions of informational text, but these efforts have "resulted in much confusion" (Moss, 2013, p. 11). This has left practicing ELA teachers to assume what informational text is (Watkins & Liang, 2014). The lack of clarity is so great that some scholars have encouraged "practitioners to ask those encouraging them to use more informational text in their literacy or content area programs to begin the discussion by asking what is meant by informational text" (Saul & Dieckman, 2005, p. 505). Rather than giving practitioners a reliable definition of informational text so they will know it when they see it, the standards and scholars have inadvertently created an unhelpful loop. The standards and, in turn, school districts expect ELA teachers to use more informational text in the classroom, which is already ill-defined, and then guess what texts should be used to satisfy the demand for "a significant amount" of informational text. ELA teachers should not be left to wonder if their "know it when I see it" determinations are on target. Instead, ELA teachers should have a readily understandable, workable guide to identifying an appropriate informational text.

Teachers and Recognizing Informational Text

The Ohio state standards require that more informational text be used in the classroom so Ohio ELA teachers need to know informational texts when they see it. Ohio's ELA learning standards, adopted in June, 2010, follow the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSS) push to use a greater amount of informational text in instruction in the ELA. With the research regarding the paucity of informational text in classrooms well established (Duke, 2000), Ohio's standards operate from the perspective that, "[s]tudents must be immersed in information about the world around them if they are to develop the strong general knowledge and vocabulary they need to become successful readers and be prepared for college, career, and life. Informational texts play an important part in building students' content knowledge" (Common Core State Standards initiative, 2010, "Building knowledge," para. 1). The introduction to Ohio's Learning Standards (Ohio Department of Education, 2010) for the ELA further explains the argument for the push to use more informational text:

Part of the motivation behind the interdisciplinary approach to literacy promulgated by the Standards is extensive research establishing the need for college and career ready students to be proficient in reading complex informational text independently in a variety of content areas. Most of the required reading in college and workforce training programs is informational in structure and challenging in content; postsecondary education programs typically provide students with both a higher volume of such reading than is generally required in K-12 schools and comparatively little scaffolding. The Standards are not alone in calling for a special emphasis on informational text. The 2009 reading framework of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) requires a high and increasing proportion of informational text on its assessment as students advance through the grades. (p. 4-5)

Standards-writers and scholars have confidence that a significant increase in the use of informational text will help students be better prepared for college or career and have the literacy skills needed in the twenty-first century. If educators are to use informational text in instruction, they need to know what types of text fall under that umbrella description. Unfortunately, there is no consensus on what material should be considered informational text, a condition which makes it difficult for an ELA teacher to know if her instruction is consistent with the standards' expectations or, in practical terms, be able to explain to an administrator how her instruction is consistent with the standards.

What are Informational Texts?

Over the years, scholars and standards writers have described informational text in different ways, from confining informational text to the very narrow category of procedural “how to” texts to broadly equating informational text with all nonfiction. The most relevant place to start to try to gain an understanding of how informational text is defined is the most influential article written on informational text: Duke (2000) seminal article about the scarcity of informational text in the classroom.

Duke’s Original Definition of Informational Text

Duke (2000) conducted a study with the research goal of addressing “the dearth of knowledge about students’ experiences with informational texts in early grades” (p. 205). She chose this goal because of the “few data about the extent to which informational texts are actually included in the early grade classrooms” (p.205). The results of her study provided “empirical confirmation of the suspected paucity of informational texts in the early grades” (p. 220).

To conduct a study about student experience with informational text, Duke (2000) had to begin by defining what she meant by “informational text.” She defined informational text as texts having many or all of nine features:

- (1) a function to communicate information about the natural or social world, from one presumed to have more knowledge on the subject to one presumed to be less knowledgeable;
- (2) an expectation of durable factual content;
- (3) timeless verb constructions;
- (4) generic noun constructions;
- (5) technical vocabulary;
- (6) classificatory and definitional material;
- (7) text structures such as compare/contrast, cause/effect or problem/solution;
- (8) reputation of topical theme; and
- (9) graphical elements such as diagrams, maps, indices. (p. 205)

With these nine defining features in mind, Duke (2000) went on to divide informational text into three types: informational (essentially expository text), narrative-informational (information conveyed through a story structure), and informational-poetic (information conveyed through the structure of a poem). She explained her definitional approach by arguing that it attends to both a text’s purpose and its linguistic features. The list of nine text features was helpful for her as she conducted her study on the experience with informational text in the early grades, but it is not a definition that a practitioner can readily apply when deciding what text to use in the classroom. In later writing, Duke (2004) simplified her description of informational text to focus on the first of her nine features: texts that convey information about the natural or social world.

Duke’s Influential Definition Undergoes Revision

Duke and Tower (2004) further honed Duke (2000) definition by dropping the categories of informational-narrative and informational-poetic from inclusion as informational text and excluding certain types of nonfiction from the informational text tent. In writing about texts for young readers, Duke and Tower (2004) considered only one type of nonfiction to be informational text and that is text that explains information about the natural or social world, a definition which borrows from the first of Duke’s previous list of nine features of informational text. Duke and Tower (2004) exclude biographies, procedural texts, and reference materials from the informational text umbrella. This revised definition greatly reduces the scope of informational text. Standards-writers and other educational policy wonks, however, did not go along with this restrictive view.

Standards Writers and Other Educational Policy Makers

Ohio’s ELA standards are based on the CCSS and refer in the introduction and the standards themselves to “informational text.” No specific definition is provided, but clues are dropped. The introduction, for example, informs the educator that “fulfilling the standards for 6-12 ELA requires much greater attention to a specific category of informational text - literary nonfiction - than has been traditional” (Ohio Department of Education, 2010, p. 5). Further, in a table designed to illustrate the range of text types for student reading in grades six through 12, Ohio’s standards list the following types of text under a heading of informational text: “exposition, argument, and functional text in the form of personal essays, speeches, opinion pieces, essays about art or literature, biographies, memoirs, journalism, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts (including digital sources) written for a broad audience” (ODE, 2010, p. 68). With this list, the ELA teacher in Ohio has some idea about what can be used as informational text but this list includes mostly nonfiction and is a departure from the definition of informational text most commonly cited in scholarship.

In addition, the standards also swerve from the definition of informational texts provided by one of its biggest influences. The thinking behind the standards was shaped, at least in part, by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and its 2009 Report Card on Reading. The NAEP (2009) reading framework divides the reading world into informational texts and literary texts. Informational texts can be categorized as “exposition, argumentation and persuasive text, and procedural text and documents” (NAEP, 2009, p. 4). Their definition focuses on the purpose of a text more than text feature. The result of its categorization does not include literary nonfiction as informational

text, but does include procedural texts. The standards refer to literary nonfiction as a type of informational text and both Duke (2004) and the NAEP (2009) would exclude such text from the informational text family. Neither of two major influences on the standards were faithfully followed on the question of what texts are included in the category of informational texts. This conflict among authoritative sources about the definition of informational text can easily leave practitioners in a state of uncertainty when they attempt to meet the demand to increase the use of informational text.

Can Other Scholars Help Resolve the Confusion?

Other scholars remain confounded by this foundational question when they study some aspect of informational text. Maloch and Bomer (2013) note that “informational text is a common term but it can be confusing” (p. 207). They describe a landscape in which some define informational text as nonfiction while others divide nonfiction into different categories with informational text only one slice of that five slice pie. Part of the scholarly mess around pinning a definition on informational text is that scholars focus on different aspects of text to help them decide how to characterize text. Some scholars focus on a text’s purpose, others on a text’s features or structure. These types of categorization strategies lead to sub-categories of informational text such as “nonnarrative-informational text, expository-informational text, and dual purpose texts” (Maloch & Bomer, 2013, p. 208). Saul and Dieckman (2005) found a similar stew of definitions of informational text and concluded that practicing teachers should press for specific answers about what texts are meant to be included under the umbrella term, informational text. Finally, Watkins and Liang (2014) express concern that “many teachers are unaware that differences in definitions even exist [and that] teachers may also assume that including more informational text in their classrooms simply means including more nonfiction” (p. 679). Watkins and Liang (2014) conclude that “a unified definition and consistency in its use will ultimately aid teachers in better helping students develop the large toolbox of skills and strategies they need when reading and writing for information” (p. 680).

A workable definition of information text for teachers

Ohio ELA teachers should have reliable guidance on what qualifies as informational text both to satisfy the demands of Ohio’s ELA learning standards and provide their students with exposure to a variety of texts to prepare them for what they will see in college and in the workforce. Informational text should be considered any text the purpose of which is to explain, inform, or persuade. This must include text found in print or digital format. A special emphasis needs to be placed on the digital formats given the world’s incomplete but steady move to the digital and the internet’s heavy lean toward text that explains, informs, or persuades as opposed to literary text. Texts that explain or inform may concern history, science, technical matters, or even procedural text that explains how to accomplish some task. These procedural texts should be included since such texts are precisely the kind often encountered in the workforce. Text intended to persuade also may include essays or speeches focusing on different forms of journalism. Given Ohio’s standards, literary nonfiction, which is often the political football in debates about what is or is not informational text, must be included. To have confidence that teachers know it when they see it, when selecting text to use as informational text, Ohio ELA teachers should ask themselves whether the text’s purpose is to explain, inform, or persuade. If so, proceed with confidence.

Conclusion

Scholars have pointed out the traditional absence of informational text from the ELA classroom and have provided a rationale for its inclusion. However, they have not delivered educators with a consensus, easy to grasp definition of informational text. A definition with a focus on the purpose of a text and whether that purpose is to explain, inform, or persuade would help ELA teachers identify informational text to use in the classroom, allow their students to benefit from the use of informational text, and meet the exceptions of Ohio’s ELA learning standards.

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