

Take a YA Inviting Informational Text , ELA Common Core Creative Classroom Experience Ready to GO

By Dr. Rose Reissman, literacy specialist

Mining the richness of YA informational texts to authenticate literacy

You are a middle school ELA teacher who takes pride in engaging students in studying literature. Now you are asked to balance that study with informational texts. You begin to consider what reference or adult informational texts you can introduce into your classroom. However, ELA Common Core professional development training suggests you should have been doing this yesterday and certainly by the beginning of your next class. What quality informational text material can you tap into immediately to get your students off on their balanced informational and literacy text reading menu?

Wait, you are already teaching YA literature with much success and often bridging from that genre to connections with classic literary works. Why not tap into YA informational counterparts? The advantage of immediately using these in the classroom, is that these texts can serve as the conversational immediate demonstration texts for building knowledge across the disciplines (those social studies, science, economics, mathematics, social issues) content areas that are tested on standardized ELA tests and on college entrance exams. Beyond the content use of these informational texts which are filled with illustrations, photos, maps, diagrams, and beautifully offset charts and graphs, the text offers the teacher a classroom ready excerpt for whole class –staircase of complexity discussion questions. With the engaging text at hand, a broad spectrum of student ELA test achievers, non-achievers, ELL, visual learners and ESL/immigrants- can be focused on the text at hand to respond to a set of differentiated questions as per their needs. The teacher can facilitate rich conversations among the students by directing them to reference the text. Writing from sources, often a lengthy teaching exercise, involving independent student research from many sources can using the class informational text, be done by everyone using the various sources included and attributed in these texts (letters, charts, graphs, informational sidebars, photos, maps). Finally, since YA informational texts, by definition are all about teaching students' specific domain and content nuanced vocabulary (some even have glossaries), academic vocabulary acquisition is guaranteed.

This all sounds very appealing. But how can this play out as part of a rigorous classroom informational text centered learning experience? How will using such an informational text, assuming that it is on grade level, work with your non grade level readers, your visual learners, inclusionary students, and ESL/immigrant students?

Here's a snapshot of how one informational YA work served as a rich text for addressing the crucial ELA Common Core Standards demands and addressing suggested shifts in teaching.

Captivating and Climbing the Staircase of Complexity with Sy Montgomery's

Temple Grandin-How the Girl Who Loved Cows Embraced Autism and Changed the World (2012).

Suitable for Grades 5 and beyond-this groundbreaking multi-content science, humane education and autism focused expertly told Temple Grandin biography uses direct quotes from Temple, her innovative animal humane equipment designs, photos, and animal/autism fact driven data sheets; to offer students grade 5 and beyond an “up close and personal” biography reading, reflecting and inspiring experience. Given its incorporating specific chapters on animal thinking, bullying, autism spectrum data, Grandlin advice for dealing with being different, humane treatment of animal issues, and actual diagrams for squeeze shuttle/cruelty free facilities into a page turning narrative, this book can support teachers in addressing the Common Core Standards of information/literary texts, text based answers, academic vocabulary, and building content knowledge. Excellent for ELA, Guidance, CTT, Science, and special needs students.

Sy Montgomery, a biographer who herself is an animal advocate, uses Temple’s own words, photos of her, and her designs to make this extraordinarily accomplished woman who is autistic and passionate about animals’ well being come alive for readers. The fact that Temple’s story focuses on how she uses her particular ability to think in pictures to imagine and then design doors for her self and for animals (who think in terms of pictures and sensory emotions as she does) into preferable and humane futures is immediately captivates and engages students in a personally inspiring story of a determined thinker and animal advocate who used imagination, invention, science observation, diagramming, problem solution and belief in her own capacities to overcome obstacles.

Getting Started:

1. Quote and Conversation- Text based Activities, Writing from Sources

You know you have to make certain that your students can respond to text based questions and if necessary you have to facilitate their response to these questions by helping them with appropriate question scaffolds. Use the Temple Grandlin foreword to her book to her book, select at least three key quotes that can apply beyond her life to that of students. For example, you might select: “I was one of those kids who did not fit in with the rest of the crowd,” “Individuals who have been labeled with disabilities-or even just quirky or nerdy kids-often have uneven skills, and “By finding friends who like the same activities that you like, you can avoid the bullies.” These quotes, like many of Temple’s and those of her childhood friends and family in the book, “hit” on informational and social issues that are common to every student. In particular, the angst of not fitting in, being labeled and having uneven talents and dealing with bullies. By using them as a start for a rich student centered and text based discussion, all students can start on inculcating the skill of text based references and comprehension of specific limited word and sentence components of informational texts. They can also use these teacher identified quotes as a platform for reading an informational source to select a set number of quotes that contribute to an argument or position, they want to present in discussion or in writing. In doing so they can reference the quotes as evidence and supports for their arguments/positions/viewpoints. The preliminary text based discussion using a few pages of the text, in this instance the Sy Montgomery

Temple Grandin biography can serve as the boot camp for independent student text based answers and writing from sources.

2. Write and Research from the heart through a range of texts to analyze sources and deploy evidence. Added value, tap into authentic academic vocabulary.

Another platform for writing from sources and getting students to work closely with the text in this book would be to have them independently read “Temple’s advice for Kids on the Spectrum” (which is actually applicable for all readers of any age) how to succeed in spite of potential opposition. Among the key suggestions the book shows worked for her and will work for her readers: work on cool projects with peers, get a real world task/part time job to do, develop a portfolio of your art, designs, writings to show your work, find someone to open the door for you, focus on your strengths, have faith and just do what you know you can. Of course, this specific target audience-kids on the spectrum- offers all student readers an opportunity and a prompt for researching what exactly “the spectrum” signifies for student learning abilities. This research will refine all students’ content and discipline knowledge in terms of psychology and education as far as the known facts/definitions of varied peer learners. In and of itself, this investigation affords a content eye opener- even for students who are in an inclusionary school and perhaps for students who have some learning ability classification or have a relative so classified. Finally since the advice is rich enough in applicability that it can be generalized to almost any student of any age or ability, it opens the door for multiple viewpoint and argument writing as students find personal life experience or other text resources which support or differ with Temple’s advice. Research into the spectrum will automatically immerse students into learning actual definitions of various learning styles and abilities. In doing so they use academic nuanced vocabulary for a nuanced purpose.

3. Leveraging Knowledge in the disciplines through document (diagram, photo, bibliography, web,)based answers and writings. Check off staircase of complexity, text based answers, and writing from sources, once again.

This book is beautifully designed to intersperse: inset pages of Temple’s actual designs for the livestock industry, with photos of her at various sites pictured with her beloved cows and other animals, fact (autism, factory farming by numbers, brain differences)sheets-presented as loose leaf pages. This stand out layout aptly divides for the readers’ knowledge in the disciplines (animal science, psychology, neurology, autism) and parallels events in Temple’s life with developments in knowledge. While many students be less than enthused about a necessary text based answer classroom rehearsal dealing with an AC battery diagram or instructions for assembling an exercise machine from scratch, talking about Temple’s own deftly drawn design for a dip vat entrance for cows or discussing her scale model for her squeeze machine or examining a Temple Grandlin hand drawn livestock handling design can come concretely alive for students in the context of her work, mission, and talents. Therefore building on this context to focus students as a class or through differentiated groups or even individually on document decoding and use in terms of spoken and written arguments- constructed response questions enhances crucial use of DBQs on standardized and perhaps in real life settings (maybe they will be able to follow instructions or diagrams in assembling purchases that arrive without preassembly).

4. Writing from Sources- Really have them review, research and then text base connect arguments in speech (Speaking and Listening) by requiring that students choose among the multiple format- print, web, and digital media resources listed in the back of the book. Almost every YA informational book includes extensive resources. Usually as in Montgomery's Temple Grandlin, these resources are divided into a print bibliography of other informational texts and articles, followed by a list of web sites. First call students' attention as a model to the way the informational text author uses APA or MLA to attribute sources referenced in the book and to the photo credits or acknowledgment sections of the book. Next ask the students to select two or more of these sources suggested by Montgomery, but require that they at least select one print and one digital media resource for review- guaranteeing that they will engage with a range and quality of texts that offer multiple perspectives. As a first writing from resource opportunity, have the students simply identify the main argument or perspective offered by each source and then evaluate making reference to specific text quotes the effectiveness/usefulness of that argument. In the context of the student prior immersion in the subject and content of Temple Grandin or any other informational text studied, this research has more context and makes real life research connections for them. They like Sy Montgomery are examining the pertinent perspectives of a variety of sources, as they write authentically from sources.
5. Accent on academic vocabulary by having the students compile their own multi-content glossary for the book. Some informational books have glossaries already, but usually they are not all inclusive. The idea here is to engage students in text based , staircase of individual reader and peer who did not read the work, writing from sources. As students become informational text lexicographers, they demonstrate and enhance academic vocabulary expertise. This of course , then feeds into their own research, speaking, listening and writing tasks as learners and as participants in real world exchanges. Given that the Montgomery biography focuses on Grandin's autism, neurodiversity, animal behavior, animal welfare, and animal handling, a glossary for this work will be extensive and can even be divided among teams in various disciplines.

YA informational books can serve as a one print stop for demonstrating and modeling knowledge in disciplines, staircase of text complexity, text based answers, writing from sources and academic vocabulary Common Core Shifts. Will having students read as a class a single YA book accomplish class or even individual student ELA Common Core and shifts skills competency? Of course not, but rather than put aside a genre already captivating and familiar to students to plan an ELA Common Core curricula, why not take the staircase already traveled and accessible as you accentuate infusing skills you already teach? Your students will be the richer, more fully engaged and more skilled by taking the researched and student centered resources, YA authors have already designed which totally realize ELA Common Core goals.

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For further reference:

Montgomery, Sy. (2012). Temple Grandin-How the Girl Who Loved Cows Embraced Autism and Changed the World. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Books for Children.

Publishers' Criteria (for the shifts)

<http://engageny.org/resource/>

Key Points in English Language Arts Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/key-points-in-english-language-arts/>

About the Author:

Sy Montgomery is an animal advocate and enthusiast herself. She has written Kakapo Rescue and the Quest for the Tree Kangaroo. She loves cows as does Temple Grandin.