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Blending Informational Texts and Readers Theatre to Promote Authentic Inquiry



Abstract

Learning with informational texts doesn't need to be restricted to the recall of information and facts; instead, challenging students to interpret and present their findings in the form of readers theatre performances requires the application of synthesis and analysis skills. This article frames informational texts and readers theatre as complimentary approaches that, when used together, address the demands of the reading, presenting, and writing standards of 21st century English language arts classrooms while also providing opportunities for students to write creatively. Through an example based on a student-directed inquiry of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, the authors present an in-depth discussion exploring how teachers can invite students to critically informational text sets, synthesize findings, and write their own expository and narrative readers theatre scripts that convey their findings. Using informational texts to explore questions associated with literature and inviting students to present their ideas through readers theatre productions offers a new and innovative way to engage students in critical analysis of informational texts as well as the kinds of writing demanded by the standards.

Keywords: informational text, readers theatre, nonfiction, standards

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Girl 1: In 1910 I was twelve, the same number of hours I worked every day in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, except the days the bosses turned the clocks back to trick us. Then I worked thirteen or fourteen.

Girl 2: I was fourteen, the youngest age kids were allowed to work in factories, according to the law. I had been working there four years.

Girl 3: I was six, the number of dollars most women earned a week. That's \$140 a week in 2013 money.

All girls: We decided to strike. Strike! Strike! Strike!

Individual and collective voices in this readers theatre excerpt present statistics and facts that explore the cause of the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. Gleaned from a variety of primary sources and secondary sources, information provided the starting point for inquiry that led to textual analysis synthesis, writing, and performance. Examples such as this demonstrate the rich and substantive potential of informational texts—including books, photographs, cartoons, interviews, and other primary source documents—to offer students opportunities to engage with texts, ask questions, search out answers, and make meaning from the information they read.

The excerpt also shows that learning with informational texts doesn't need to be restricted to the recall of information and facts;

these texts can also become catalysts to help students critically examine texts and present their findings. Challenging students to represent their learning in readers theatre scripts allows them to critically analyze their research, synthesize findings, and write their own expository and narrative interpretations of their findings based on evidence—all skills emphasized in the standards.

This article frames informational texts and readers theatre as complementary approaches that help teachers address the needs of language arts classrooms. Through an in-depth discussion exploring how teachers invite students to critically examine informational text sets and then to use their research to create readers theatre scripts that convey their findings, we present a pedagogical approach that expands the possibilities for using informational texts within language arts classrooms.

Why Blend Informational Texts and Readers Theatre?

Readers theatre is generally defined as “text that is expressively and dramatically read aloud by two or more readers” (Young & Vardell, 1993, p. 398), typically based on fictional works where a “story is converted to a script,” rehearsed, and prepared for performance (Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008, p. 338). These performances lend themselves to the classroom because rather than involving such theatrical elements as memorization, sets, costumes, movement, or props, readers present in such a manner that the audience members visualize the images, events, and actions in their minds (Young & Vardell, 1993). Beyond the creative opportunities readers theatre offers, opportunities also exist to improve students’ reading and academic skills, particularly for struggling readers or ELL students who often increase in fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills as a result of practicing and performing readers theatre scripts at the elementary (Keehn, Harmon, & Shoho, 2008; Poe, 2013; Young & Vardell, 1993) and secondary level (Black & Stave, 2007). Further, informational texts support content learning and building background knowledge (Flynn, 2004; Young & Vardell, 1993) as well as increase retention through engagement in the readers theatre process (Flynn, 2004).

Readers theatre proves particularly valuable in light of the demands of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English Language Arts and Reading that expect students to read informational texts. Duke and Billman (2009) defined an informational text as one with the primary purpose of expressing “information about the natural or social world, and that has particular linguistic features to accomplish that purpose” (p. 110), and may range from newspaper and magazine articles to digital information to nonfiction trade books to textbooks and reference materials. In conjunction with attention to informational texts, students are expected to be able to analyze two or more texts that address the same topics to build knowledge; synthesize information across texts; and write arguments based on expository and other informational texts. Creating readers theatre scripts based on informational texts offers opportunities for students to simultaneously hone all of these skills and meet performance competency standards, making readers theatre a valuable classroom activity.

Putting It Into Practice

Although teachers and students may use informational texts to create readers theatre presentations in a variety of ways, we found the following steps particularly helpful when implementing readers theatre in the classroom. The use of invitations allowed students to explore a variety of informational texts while critically examining social issues as the subject of their readers theatre presentations. Specifically, the discussion that follows demonstrates this process with our inquiry into the 1911 New York Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.

Step One: Inviting Inquiry

What ultimately results in a readers theatre performance begins with an authentic inquiry question surrounding student interest and high quality texts; otherwise, it can become just another way of reporting information. Van Sluys (2005) described literacy invitations as opportunities to invite students to “learn through language” (p. 2) as they critically investigate texts and issues in collaboration with their peers. In this tradition, we used invitations to invite and ignite collaborative inquiry as students explored issues of power and privilege through informational texts and then crafted scripts that portrayed their findings to their classmates.

The inquiry began as we invited readers to interrogate issues of race, gender, and class as we posed the question, “How were race, gender, and class inequities illuminated through the events of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911?”

Step Two: Gathering Sources

Next, we compiled high-quality informational texts for students to use as they explored the inquiry question. These collections, often termed “text sets,” were composed of a selection of books, magazines, websites, music, movies, articles, and other texts that represent varying perspectives about a common inquiry and appeal to a diversity of interest and ability levels (Ebbers, 2002; Ivey, 2002; Tovani, 2004).

When identifying sources, we recommend beginning by exploring award-winning informational texts for young adults. Both the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children and the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults highlight a variety of high-quality informational texts. Other lists, such as the National Book Award Winners and Finalists in Young People’s Literature, also offer suggestions of worthy texts.

Beyond the informational books on these lists, additional resources can be found in print and online. In some instances, these include lists of sources the authors discovered in their own research or texts suggested for further study. Also, websites and online libraries offer a myriad of additional resources to consider, such as primary documents, photographs, and audio recordings.

For example, websites such as PBS.com and nationalgeographic.com offer a variety of high-quality informational resources for educators and students designed to fuel inquiry about a variety of subjects and issues that invited students to consider the inquiry from additional perspectives.

In our inquiry, the National Book Award Finalist *Flesh and Blood So Cheap: The Triangle Fire and Its Legacy* by Albert Marrin (2011) served as one of the foundational texts in our text set. This book begins by recounting the events of the fire from the perspective of a social worker that witnessed the tragedy, followed by chapters that offer in-depth examinations of the events and issues that contributed to the cause of the fire. Throughout, the text narratives are supplemented by excerpts from newspapers, photographs, and other graphics that recount the stories of the immigrants who manned the sweatshops, the unions who fought to eliminate inhumane working conditions, the aftereffects of the fire on the lives of New Yorkers from all levels of society, the role of organized crime in the garment industry, and modern sweatshops in today's world.

Besides this and other texts, libraries and databases offered volumes of primary source documents for students to read and examine. The *New York Times* website showcases digital archives of actual newspaper articles and political cartoons printed in the wake of the tragedy, as well as a special issue devoted to reporting on the tragedy in 2011, one hundred years later. PBS.org houses biographies of individuals that demonstrate how individuals from various levels of society were affected by the fire. This site also includes a timeline of events leading to the fire, videos, and maps that provide background information. Another site called "Remembering the 1911 Triangle Factory Fire," housed at Cornell University, provides transcripts of survivor interviews, audio recordings, various texts, photos, and political cartoons for students to use in their research. These and other resources can be found in the list in Figure 1.

Finally, when creating the text set, choose a wide variety of materials on a given topic available across reading levels in order to allow learners with a range of skills and abilities to find texts of interest that challenge them, but also allow them to study the same content as their peers. For instance, in this text set, struggling readers could read Michell Markel's (2013) *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909* while stronger readers are reading more difficult text such as Albert Marrin's (2011) *Flesh and Blood So Cheap: The Triangle Fire and Its Legacy* when focusing on the Triangle Factory Fire. Readers of both texts would learn about the topic and be able to contribute to the development of a readers theatre script.

Step Three: Initiating Inquiry

Introducing students to the invitation and supporting their initial explorations of the texts are key to inquiry. One of our favorite ways to introduce the inquiry is to share a picture book that raises the central issue of the question. In secondary classrooms, picture

books have been used to help students explore adolescents' understandings of others (Taliaferro, 2009) and to help them focus on topics for deep research (Dean & Grierson, 2005). By using a picture book to initiate inquiry, students can simultaneously learn more about the central issue and begin asking questions that will drive their own research.

In this instance we selected the picture book *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909* (Markel, 2013) to introduce students to the inquiry and help them begin thinking about some of the issues that ultimately contributed to the cause of the Shirtwaist Factory Fire. As they began to understand more about the people working in the factories and the working conditions they faced, students began to generate questions for further research.

After introducing the inquiry, reviewing techniques for previewing texts will serve as another crucial part of initiating the research and writing process. Important techniques to review include the importance of reading the book summaries on the back and inside flaps of the book, scanning the index and table of contents for potentially pertinent sections, skimming the section headings, and looking at pictures, graphics, and text boxes of interest.

We suggest introducing students to the various texts using a bookpass, which will "help students choose books from a diverse selection or to match themes, historical projects, genre study, and classroom inquiries" (Allen, 2000, p. 106). During a bookpass, students skim and scan the content of a book to decide their interest in the text and what useful information the text offers. At the end of the two minutes, students record notes on the form (see Figure 2) and pass their book to the person sitting next to them; the process is then repeated for the next book.

Ultimately, this activity serves two purposes: First, it helps students begin the overwhelming task of working through the resources by inviting them to skim the index, table of contents, pictures, and other elements of the text to see which sources seem most appealing to them. Second, it gives students a chance to read, explore, and decide which element of the question might be most interesting to them as they start investigating. Using this activity to help students focus their inquiry will help them as they gather information to inform their inquiry.

Step Four: Facilitating Student Research

Although students will do the researching and writing, teachers can support them through the research process and drafting of scripts with a variety of minilessons. For example, a minilesson on possible note-taking techniques might encourage students to record their research notes on individual slips of paper or notecards, including individual events or quotes they found useful or want to include in their script. Then groups can compile their notecards and draft their script as they arrange, rearrange, and group their notes in different ways. This organizational approach

How Did the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 Illuminate Race, Gender, and Class Inequalities?

At the turn of the century, many immigrants to the United States saw this nation as a land of opportunity and freedom. However, these opportunities were often fraught with complexity, and oppression still existed in many ways. This text set uses the events of Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire as a catalyst to interrogate how issues of ethnicity, gender, and class influenced the lives of citizens in the early 1900s, as well as how these issues influence our society today. The following questions will help guide your inquiry:

- How did the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire affect different classes of society?
- What differences existed between the rights of women and men?
- Does the struggle for ethnic, gender, and class equality continue today? Why or why not?

Books

Informational

- Bartoletti, S. C. (1999). *Kids on strike!* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Bial, R. (2002). *Tenement: Immigrant life on the lower east side.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Hopkins, D. (2012). *Shutting out the sky: Life in the tenements of New York, 1880-1924.* New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Marrin, A. (2011). *Flesh and blood so cheap.* New York, NY: Knopf.
- Sherrow, V. (1995). *The triangle factory fire.* Brookfield, CN: Millbrook Press.

Picture Books

- McCully, E. A. (1996). *The bobbin girl.* New York, NY: Dial.
- Markel, M. (2013). *Brave girl: Clara and the shirtwaist makers' strike of 1909.* New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Primary Source Newspaper and Magazine Articles:

- "Police Mishandle Girl Strike Pickets," *New York Times*, December 10, 1909 <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/triangle-pickets/>
- "141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire," *New York Times*, March 26, 1911 <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/triangle-nyt/>
- "Deathlist is 141; Only 86 Identified," *New York Times*, March 27, 1911 <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/triangle-death-list/>

- "Shorter Factory Hours," *New York Times*, October 1, 1912 <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/triangle-legislation/>
- "Triangle Fire: A Half-Hour of Horror," *New York Times*, March 21, 2011 <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/21/triangle-fire-a-half-hour-of-horror/>
- "Triangle Fire: Liberating Clothing Made in Confinement," *New York Times*, March 22, 2011 <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/22/shirtwaist-fire-liberating-clothing-made-in-confinement/>
- "Triangle Fire: A Frontier in Photojournalism," *New York Times*, March 23, 2011 <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/23/triangle-fire-a-frontier-in-photojournalism/>
- *New York Times* special section, March 25, 2011 <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/tag/triangle-shirtwaist-factory-fire/>
- *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, interviews, photos, transcripts, newspaper & magazine articles <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/primary/index.html>

Biographies:

- "Biography: Harris and Blanck" article, Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/triangle-harris-blanck/>
- "Biography: Clara Lemlich" article, Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/triangle-lemlich/>
- "Biography: Anne Morgan" article, Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/triangle-morgan/>
- "Biography: Pauline Newman" article, Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/triangle-newman/>

Audio Texts:

- *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire*, audio files, Retrieved from <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/primary/audio/index.html>

Visual Texts:

- *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire* 9th floor model, Retrieved from <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/supplemental/3Dmodel.html>
- *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire* "Timeline of Events," Retrieved from <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/supplemental/timeline.html>
- *The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire* "Editorial Cartoons," Political Cartoon Collection, Retrieved from http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/primary/photosillustrations/slideshow.html?image_id=765&sec_id=10#screen
- "Triangle Fire" interactive map, Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/map-widget/triangle/>
- "The Price of Fashion" Photo Gallery, Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/photo-gallery/triangle/>
- "Remembering the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire" Photo Gallery, Retrieved from http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,2061268_2258989,00.html

Figure 1. Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire resources.

also helps students recognize areas where details remain unclear or need more research.

Additional minilessons that explore different script options may help students decide how to best represent their research and conclusions. For instance, one group might adapt a portion of an informational trade book to a script format. Or students may

read expository information and utilize it to create a story; at other times, students may read multiple narrative informational texts and combine elements of those actual stories into a single composite narrative for their script. Black & Stave's (2007) *A Comprehensive Guide to Readers Theatre: Enhancing Fluency and Comprehension in Middle School and Beyond* discusses considerations for additional minilessons helpful for adapting

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Title & Author	Possible Focus Topics	Comments

Figure 2. Sample bookpass form.

informational texts to readers theatre. In each case, minilessons can help students focus on different aspects of the research and the presentation of their research. Monitoring student progress and talking to students about their struggles can often be the best way to decide on topics of focus for minilesson support.

Step Five: Using Peer Feedback and Editing

As students draft and prepare final versions of their scripts, peer feedback will assist them in the editing process. Bomer (2011) explained the importance of paying attention to layout and design in editing because “every written text is a visual object as well as a linguistic one” (p. 218). In the case of readers theatre, this particularly applies as layout, stage directions, and other features specific to scripts influence how the audience reads and understands the performance.

One of the best ways for students to identify missing or unclear elements in their own scripts is to switch with another group and perform one another’s pieces. As the other group performs, the writers of the script can take notes about stage directions, narration, or other elements that need to be added for clarity, as well as spelling corrections and grammatical errors, as they hear

their words spoken. Students can also see what stage directions need to be added to make the performance successful, or what lines might be unclear. Asking for feedback from the performers—such as “What parts needed more explaining?” or “Were there any sections that didn’t make sense?”—will also provide another level of review.

Step Six: Performing

For successful performances, practice and assessment are essential. Not only does practice result in better performances, but it also gives struggling readers and ELL students opportunities to reread the text, thus aiding their fluency. At showtime, consider inviting the whole class to be a part of the informal assessment process by allowing students to keep track of their favorite performances. Consider voting and handing out awards for the best actor or actress, best group performance, best adaptation, or other categories. This additional element offers a theatrically appropriate twist on the publishing parties often held to celebrate student writing. In addition, a variety of ways exist to formally assess student participation and performance, including individual versus group grades, rubrics that focus on student participation throughout the research and writing process, self-assessments, or checklists to be completed by group members. Be sure to consider the rationale for this assignment in your particular class as you consider which tools to use to grade student learning.

Conclusion

The increased demand for including informational texts in secondary classrooms can still allow for critical examinations of significant issues that affect the human condition. Using informational texts to explore questions associated with literature and inviting students to present their ideas through readers theatre productions offers a new and innovative way to engage students in critical analysis of informational texts in addition to the kinds of narrative writing demanded by the standards.

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