

Why Teach Young Adult Nonfiction?

When I first started teaching 13 years ago, I had great dreams of teaching literature and transforming children’s lives with books. The kids who hated reading would learn to love reading because of the way I used literature in the classroom. Unfortunately, after my first year of teaching, I realized that some of my students still hated reading. It didn’t matter that we had read *Holes*, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, or *Maniac Magee*—those were just books I had forced them to read. They were part of the game of school. My students were not connecting with the literature; they saw the reading as a hoop through which to jump.

With a move to the Common Core (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), there is a greater emphasis to help students connect with what they are reading and to comprehend nonfiction and informational texts. There are three standards given for nonfiction or informational texts within the common core. The first states, “Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text” (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RI/9-10/3/>). A second standard that appears in the Common Core for nonfiction states, “By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently” (<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RI/9-10>).

Students also need to read nonfiction to be prepared for reading outside of school, and I expose them to nonfiction texts to prepare them for real-world read-

ing. Mary Lamb states, “students are constantly faced with nonfiction genres, including their textbooks, editorials, blogs, informational websites, business writing, and instruction manuals” (2010).

My main reason for teaching nonfiction is to help my students understand that we are all a part of the past, and we can make a difference. Russel Baker states, “We all come from the past and children ought to know what went into their making, to know that life is a braided cord” (1984, p. 16). Like Baker, I want my students to know that what happened in the past affects their lives today, and they can make an impact on the future. For this reason, I try to find nonfiction that talks about the past and how people can make a difference.

I have had great success with using two nonfiction texts in my classroom. The first is *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* (2003) by Chris Crowe. My students love this book because they connect with the story of a teenage boy who was judged unfairly; after all, they are often judged unfairly because of their age. In class, we discuss how they are treated when they go into a store as a large group, and I get the following responses, “People watch us like we are going to steal something. I don’t like it. Just because some teenagers steal doesn’t mean all of us steal,” or, “Just because we are loud doesn’t mean we are going to get in trouble.” After reading the story of Emmett Till, my students feel a need to speak out and get involved when people are judged unfairly. They see that what happened in the past does not have to continue to happen in the future.

To follow the reading of *Getting Away with Mur-*

der, we read the abridged version of *Warriors Don't Cry* by Melba Patillo Beals. I discuss the chapters with the students, and they complete study guides so I can make sure they comprehend what they are reading. My students also write a Poem for Two Voices to demonstrate their comprehension about the events of the book from two different points of view. Below is an example of a student poem for two voices:

Character #1: Thelma	Character #2: Woman
	Screaming
Hate!	Hate!
I don't want to go.	
	How dare you come to our school!
	I don't want you here.
I have to go, but I don't want to.	
Hate!	Hate!
Why do they hate me?	
	My kids are better than you. You don't deserve this.
It's not my fault my skin is black.	
Hate!	Hate!
Maybe I should leave.	
	Go back to where you came from.
	Let us scare you away.
No, I won't back down.	
I won't let HATE win.	I will let HATE win.

Upon completion of the novel, my students complete an Act of Intolerance multigenre paper. The students research an act of intolerance from the past or present and then write about the act using different genres, such as journal entries, PowerPoint presentations, newspaper articles, songs, and poems, or any other genre they feel would work for the assignment. Students then share one genre with the class, and as they share, they explain how they can make a difference to help prevent similar acts of intolerance from happening in the future. The students are invested in this assignment because it is not another research paper. It is a way for them to connect with the nonfiction texts through their own writing.

After teaching the two nonfiction books and completing the paper with my students, I have asked some of them to share what they liked about the nonfiction and the assignments. One student stated, "I loved it! The fact that the book wasn't fiction made the history

very real. We have heard stories of prejudice and segregation since we started going to school. *Warriors Don't Cry* came from the kids who actually experienced the stories we hear, and that made it even more real."

I also asked another student what she gained from studying the nonfiction texts and completing the paper. She told me, "I learned that sometimes people are not nice to others who are different. I've learned to wait to get to know people who are different before I make those judgments."

Through teaching nonfiction texts such as *Getting Away with Murder* and *Warriors Don't Cry*, I have seen the impact literary nonfiction can have. My students come away from the reading with the ability to read and comprehend informational texts, tools for reading nonfiction in the real world, and the knowledge that they are a part of the past and can make a difference in the future. As a result, I will continue to seek more literary nonfiction to use in my classroom, and continue to encourage my students to read and study it outside of school.

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