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# Understanding Multimodal, Multigenre Text Sets

Imagine peeking through the window of an elementary classroom where students are studying trees.  The students and their teacher are in and out of the school doors, walking in a wooded area near school or in a nearby city park, drawing and sketching what they see, binoculars in hand, and documenting their evidence further with digital cameras.  Back inside the classroom, they examine their digital photographs of leaves, bark, individual branches, and whole trees in small groups, and as a whole class they use the LCD projector.  Once a week for over a month, the class continues to venture out to document the changes in the trees, be it spring or fall, and notice which parts of the tree change and which stay the same, graphing their data to share the results.  All the while, seeds are growing inside the classroom, and students are documenting those changes with words and pictures and are generating questions about what they observe.

As students interact with the natural world around them, they also research trees through print.  They read survey and concept nonfiction books in small groups, drawing and writing down information that begins to answer the questions that they and their teacher have about trees, and documenting their new questions.  Within small groups, students explore texts that are a good fit for where they are as readers—not too hard, not too easy.  As they finish one book, they move on to another, adding to their knowledge, comparing information from one book to the next, and synthesizing what they learn in print with what they observe in the natural world.  Some students who are not the strongest readers in the class have an immense knowledge of trees and are reading more complex books than they might otherwise.  Some of the stronger readers know less about trees and are starting off with easier books to build their knowledge and support what they observe in their data collecting.  While in these groups, students receive instruction to strengthen their reading

# The Reasons for Teaching with Text Sets

Now you know what a text set is. So, why would you want to teach with text sets?

Do you ever wonder why districts spend thousands of dollars on one-size-fits-all curriculum that winds up fitting very few? No teacher has the time to consider, let alone strategically use, all the bells and whistles that accompany most curriculum packages. For far fewer dollars, individual or teams of teachers can construct multimodal, multigenre text sets that use authentic texts in all of their diverse formats, meet the varied needs of students regardless of where they fall on the literacy continuum, utilize 21st century literacies, and ground students in exploring their community and the global community in meaningful ways. We find these possibilities thrilling.

If customizing curriculum to meet the needs and interests of your students was not enticing enough, the Common Core State Standards for Language Arts and Content Literacy are a clarion call for using text sets and diverse literacy practices. The Common Core State Standards suggest that "[t]hrough reading a diverse array of classic and contemporary literature as well as challenging informational texts in a range of subjects, students are expected to build knowledge, gain insights, explore possibilities, and broaden their perspective" (Common Core State Standards 2010). This is a vision of reading we are excited to make a reality.

## Capturing Interest and Cultivating Engagement

The world is infinitely interesting, and you want your classroom to reflect the energy and diversity of thought that students bring with them each and every day. You want your students to become more skillful readers, but you also want to cultivate a passionate engagement with reading and the content of science, social studies, literature, and the arts. You also know that when students are engaged with what they are doing, learning occurs more expeditiously and at a deeper level. Teaching with text sets stimulates student interest and motivation by offering them choice and variety.

## Prompting Inquiry

One way to channel student interest and engagement is through inquiry. The careful layering of content through the use of multimodal, multigenre texts allows students to generate questions that can guide their learning. One unit of study might start with a song, another with a portrait of someone from the past, yet another with a current newspaper article. As each text is confronted, students' questions can deepen and change. This inquiry also cultivates interest and engagement, allowing students to care deeply about pursuing answers. Ownership of their learning then follows.

## Reading for Multiple Perspectives

Teaching with text sets allows teachers to highlight the fluidity of content knowledge and perspectives in any content area, and the interesting connections, contradictions, and questions that naturally arise when texts provide multiple perspectives on an area of study. When texts that represent a diversity of perspectives on an issue are used, students are forced to grapple with conflicting, questionable, or missing information, exactly the kind of thinking skills required of them by the Common Core State Standards.

As students read literature, informational texts, and multimodal texts of increasing complexity and variety across the grade level continuum, they will develop the ability to analyze how texts represent authors' worldviews and to think about the particular choices made by an author as he or she composed the text.

## Building Prior Knowledge

When starting a unit of study, it can be difficult to fully understand what knowledge of the topic students in class already bring into the classroom. Often, it can feel difficult to manage the wide range of prior knowledge that exists. Teaching with text sets allows you to carefully layer content by using multimodal, multigenre texts to build prior knowledge for topics of study that are abstract or distant to students. In many cases, short texts have the greatest potential for building prior knowledge on a topic so that students can later tackle longer, more complex texts or ones that are more abstract.

Reading fiction and nonfiction picture storybooks aloud is a wonderful way to introduce background knowledge. Works of art, historic photographs or maps, short videos, or live webcams, such as ones at zoos or animal sanctuaries, are also great introductions to a unit of study that scaffold exposure and provide students with working knowledge of a topic that they can draw upon in future readings.

## Encouraging Student Writing: Text Sets as Mentor Texts

Today, new genres of text are being created all the time. For example, apps are considered a new genre of text. Only a few years ago, apps did not exist. Now, even the youngest children know what a phone or tablet app is. When students are provided with multiple genres in multiple modalities, they are given an expanded range of possibilities for both demonstrating learning and selecting the type of writing they want to do.

So often we ask students to read large quantities of fiction in school, particularly in language arts, but we then ask them to write nonfiction in the form of a memoir, a personal response to the text (in terms of the testing world), or a literary essay. We ask them to write these forms over and over again, but rarely do we give them models of authentic memoirs or personal responses from which to learn. To write quality nonfiction, students need to read quality nonfiction, have working models of a variety of nonfiction text structures, and have an understanding of how similes and metaphors are functional in that genre to explain concepts and ideas in ways readers can understand. Only after studying a genre as readers can students write within that genre as authors. Multimodal, multigenre text sets model a world of writing possibilities for students.

## Differentiating Instruction

One of the most exciting features of a text set is the opportunity it provides for differentiated instruction. As opposed to the one-size-fits-all model of a basal reader or prescribed program, teaching with text sets allows teachers to select the kinds of texts that are appropriate for scaffolding learning at all levels in the classroom, providing for the range of needs in today's culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse populations. For example, a teacher might use a nonfiction chapter book as part of a whole-class read-aloud because the text has important content but is slightly beyond the reach of many students' individual reading capacities. Through the read-aloud and whole-class discussions, all students can access the content.

Within a unit of study, a teacher can divide students into flexible groups for different purposes on different days. On some days, students may be grouped based on their reading needs so that they can read texts that are an appropriate fit and work on focused reading strategies and content exploration. On other days, students might be grouped based on a subtopic of interest to collectively explore an audio or visual text. As study progresses, students might explore another subtopic or perspective, but within each group, students read different materials selected purposefully by the teacher to meet their reading needs.

Multimodal, multigenre text sets dramatically increase options for differentiating instruction within a unit of study. With a variety of texts related to a chosen content focus, texts can be appropriately selected and layered to make the content more comprehensible for English language learners (Echevarría, Vogt, and Short 2007). The array of modalities in a multimodal, multigenre text set engages a broader spectrum of learning styles, allowing the needs of all students to be met, but in particular addressing the needs of students who have Individual Education Plans. Additionally, a multimodal, multigenre text set will naturally incorporate texts of varying text complexity, which is a key area of attention in the Common Core State Standards. As students read multiple texts about related content, they build their ability to read texts on the topic at increasing levels of complexity; concepts and vocabulary become more familiar with multiple exposures, making texts at higher reading levels more accessible to all students.

## Supporting Vocabulary Development

Teaching with text sets expands students' vocabulary development. The fields of social studies, mathematics, and science have particular vocabulary associated with them, and vocabulary instruction is one of the most important aspects of developing content literacy. Students need multiple opportunities to interact with important words and concepts in order for those words and concepts to become a part of their working knowledge and expressive language. When teachers have students read a variety of texts on a topic, view photographs or works of art, graph information, or write narratives on a particular event, students have repeated opportunities to confront and grapple with content vocabulary and hear, read, speak, and write those words. In this language-rich environment, students will develop an understanding of certain words through expert modeling and explaining by the teacher, repeated exposure, and specific meaningful use (Beck, McKeown, and Kucan 2002; Graves 2005), all of which are strategies particularly supportive to English language learners and students with learning difficulties.

Now that you know the benefits of teaching with text sets, we want to share our vision of teachers as curriculum designers to ground you in a vision of teaching with text sets.

# Teachers as Curriculum Designers

Our vision of teaching with text sets places you in the driver's seat. Creating curriculum is a deeply creative and intellectual endeavor. It can be fascinating, exhilarating, and, at times, overwhelming! It is certainly messy.

Both of us have always worked in elementary and secondary schools where we had the privilege to design and plan almost all of our curriculum and instruction. When Erika had a mandated program for language arts, she was able to use the program as a base, which she extended and deepened to meet her expectations of what her students needed to know and be able to do.

Certainly, we had state content and skills-based standards to incorporate into our planning and to measure student learning against, but there was no packaged curriculum, product, or textbook that we had to follow. When we entered the teaching profession, we were expected to craft units of study that met the needs and interests of our students as well as the state standards. Because our principals and superintendents trusted us to do this work, we threw ourselves passionately into curriculum design year in and year out. It was a joyful and complex enterprise and also time consuming. However, we found that the benefits of ownership over our curriculum saved us time in the end because we were integrating instruction and teaching what we believed was most important for our students to learn.

Curriculum is not fixed, and creating it is not always a linear process. Planning and designing curriculum is a constant give-and-take as you attempt to balance your goals for your students, the demands of state standards, the opportunities and limitations of your school culture, the books and materials that you have, and the new ones you discover. Sometimes you cannot find the resource that you want for the unit, and so your design changes. Sometimes it is the discovery of a new resource that changes the design because the resource provides such important learning opportunities. You will see examples of both of these instances in this book. In a study of immigration, as discussed in Chapter Six, we struggled to find books that students could read independently and that met our curriculum design goals, and so we altered our vision slightly. In an exploration of the solar system, discussed in Chapter Seven, a nonfiction picture book was the perfect catalyst for the unit, modeling how theories about the solar system have changed over time.

Finally, curriculum work is never really "done." It is always a work in progress, a labor of love. What you experience with one group of students is not the same experience the following year. You recalibrate with each group as students change. You discover new resources, or the content itself changes, and you learn alongside your students, always striving to meet their needs.

Now you may be reading this and thinking, "But that is not *my* world. That is not *my* school. I do not have those choices." We realize that many teachers who entered the field in the past decade have not always had the same opportunities to design curriculum. We think you should. We think you can. *You* are why we are writing this book. We believe that with the advent of the Common Core State Standards and the standards' emphasis on authentic literacy practices, critical-thinking skills, and diverse texts, more and more curriculum can and should be designed at a district and school level.

Now that we have shared our vision of teachers as curriculum designers, we will introduce some of the processes that we will be sharing with you throughout the book so that you, too, can learn to teach or refine your teaching with text sets.

# Our Process for Teaching with Text Sets

This book is designed as a "how to" manual for teaching with text sets.  Using examples throughout, we'll walk you through the processes that we use when we develop curriculum with multimodal, multigenre texts.  These processes include:

1.  **Starting with content**—work with your curriculum and standards documents to identify the content that you will teach.

2.  **Building a text set**—locate and identify high quality print and digital resources related to your content.

3.  **Organizing texts**—make instructional decisions about how the text resources you have identified will be used to scaffold, immerse, and extend content for students.

4.  **Creating and responding to texts**—consider how students will read and respond to the texts in the text set, what texts they will create, and how you will assess content and literacy learning.

## Step One: Starting with Content

The unifying concept, topic, theme, or question of a multimodal, multigenre text set can be based solely on language arts content or include one or more content areas, such as science or social studies.  Content will drive both the text selection and purpose.  In Chapter Two, we walk you through a process for considering content covered by state and local standards, as well as the Common Core State Standards, as a starting point for your curriculum planning.

## Step Two: Building a Text Set

Once you have established which content standards you think will help scaffold your unit of study, you will search for appropriate texts on the topic in a wide variety of genres and modalities.  The kinds of texts you discover may help shape and fine-tune the goals of your study.  In Chapter Three, we will share with you some of the best resources that we use for finding and locating texts.

## Step Three: Organizing Texts for Instruction

Once you identify texts that could be used in your curriculum, you must figure out how to use them and decide which to include and which to exclude.  The goals of the curriculum and the needs of students will determine the role each text has for an individual, a small group, or a whole class.  Each text can be considered both on its own and in relation to the other texts.  Depending upon the unit of study, one type of text may serve as an introduction or scaffold, such as a nonfiction picture book.  In another unit of study, primary source artifacts or photos of those artifacts might be the scaffold that builds prior knowledge and sparks student interest.  Other texts might serve as a core portion of the

unit, providing important content and modeling writing structures and styles as a mentor text that students return to again and again. Still other texts might be read or viewed by some students to build strategic knowledge about subcategories of information within the unit, thereby extending their knowledge of the content. In Chapter Four, we will walk you through several models for organizing and arranging texts within a unit of study.

## Step Four: Creating and Responding to Texts

When exposed to a broad array of different text types in a text set, students develop an understanding that writers shape their texts to match their purposes for writing and the perceived needs of their audiences. This awareness of the subjective nature of texts and the wide array of choices, such as genre, structure, and voice, that an author must make when composing is a necessary component of students' own abilities to produce original texts, which allows for synthesizing and presenting their learning in a content area, another requirement of the Common Core State Standards. In Chapter Five, we will discuss some of the different ways that students respond to texts in a text set and create their own texts to add to the text set.

# Summary

This chapter demonstrates how teaching with text sets can:

- Capture student interest and cultivate engagement
- Prompt inquiry
- Provide opportunities to read for multiple perspectives
- Build prior knowledge on a topic
- Encourage authentic student writing practices
- Differentiate instruction to meet the literacy needs of students
- Support vocabulary development

# Reflection Questions

1.  How does the definition of a text set resonate with your understanding of the kinds of texts students are currently reading in and out of school?

2.  What do you think are the most important benefits of teaching with text sets for your students, particularly your culturally and linguistically diverse students?

3.  What are some of the ways that you see the Common Core State Standards as an opportunity to use authentic texts and tasks in your classroom?