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Field Notes

Modeling Informed, Interested Reading

Janine S. Davis

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."

—*Shunryu Suzuki*

As a new teacher in the early 2000s, I moved among various worlds: I taught more than 100 students in my English courses, I commiserated with other new teachers after work, and I tried to fit in exercise at the gym or play soccer whenever possible. Time for personal reading, which was once a passion, began to wane. So, I worked to combine the need for reading with the need for exercise by reading on the treadmill or exercise bike. I read the books my students were reading so that I could stay on top of their questions, but I also read *The New Yorker* and any other magazines that happened to be hanging around the gym.

As I read movie reviews, short biographies of celebrities, descriptions of scientific findings, and other nonfiction articles in that 24 Hour Fitness in northern California, something happened: I kept circling back to my students and my teaching. Here was a way to share interesting writing with them without the commitment of reading a whole book as a class, or even individually. It was a way to share the traits of good writing—such as ideas, organization, voice, and conventions—with my students in a quick, interesting way. It was a way to model what lifelong learners do: they read constantly in a wide variety of fields, asking and answering questions along the way.

I was an English teacher then, and now I work with preservice teachers. Since that time, I have internalized Tina Fey's words from her book *Bossypants*. She says that one of the goals of improvisational acting is to say yes to everything. It is a stance of openness that also serves teachers and students. Instead of closing in, locking down, and determining that your content area is only about certain writers, books, textbooks, and skills—the way it has always been done—teachers should model for their students the way to walk in the world as a literate individual.

Research briefs and high-interest features on topics related to the curriculum abound. Universities' alumni publications are filled with these kinds of rich content-area articles about many different disciplines. My experiences finding informational texts occurred before Twitter and Facebook, but that is another way that many people (myself included) find articles to share with students today. Blog posts offer yet another window on the ways that people think about and interact with content-area concepts and problems.

So, you've identified some high-interest, authentic informational texts; what now? First, you can share the text with interested students. Give them a copy or share it online. This is an easy way to acknowledge that you know about or want to help develop students' interests. Another option is to bring the article into class for a discussion of the author's writing choices or the content itself. Instructional models such as the Socratic Seminar are well suited to this kind of investigation of text. Finally, you can ask students to read informational material on their own and then summarize or share their findings with the class. This option might not utilize the articles you've found, but you will have paved the way for this kind of task by sharing with the students how you stumbled (or ran, maybe, if you were at the gym, too) across the perfect article.

We often forget how important it can be to see the world with—as the opening quote states—a "beginner's mind." As teachers, we have the power to shape our students' identities. One of the most important qualities we can instill in students is the desire to learn more about the world through reading informational text. One of the best ways to do this is by modeling it ourselves.

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