

Service-Learning and Nonfiction Texts: Connections for Comprehension

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“It’s time for our annual school book drive!” the principal announces over the loud speaker, regarding the school-wide service project and fundraiser. Soon, students will hang book drive posters in the halls; later, pizza parties are awarded to the top contributing classrooms. Why not seize this opportunity to also use nonfiction texts in the classroom? This article will provide a number of examples of nonfiction texts, corresponding comprehension strategies, and ideas for service-learning projects that, when combined, can result in greater student motivation and comprehension when reading nonfiction texts.

Books About Books

To increase student motivation and participation in the book drive, teachers could read *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* by Jeanette Winter to introduce the school-wide event.¹ This nonfiction account tells of Alia Muhammad Baker, the chief librarian of the Central Library of Basra, Iraq, who managed to rescue 70 percent of the library’s books before it was bombed and burned to the ground during the Second Iraq War. Through reading this book, students more deeply understand the importance of books, reading, and providing books for children who may not have access to them. In addition, students have the opportunity to learn about events in Iraq.

An additional resource when learning about books and literacy is Julie Cummin’s *The Inside Outside Book of Libraries*.² Cummins describes a variety of libraries, from the Library of Congress to a library aboard a naval ship. This book also includes information on Braille, the Internet as a “library,” and even a tool-lending library in California.

If students decided to collect books for an elementary school in the 9th Ward of New Orleans that was severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina, they could learn about how hurricanes are formed and why such weather events occur in the Gulf Coast Region of the United States by reading selections from the *Scholastic Atlas of Weather*. Paired with *Super Storms*

That Rocked the World: Hurricanes, Tsunamis, and Other Disasters, students would gain an even deeper understanding of the human face of natural disasters.³

Why Service-Learning?

One of the difficulties of engaging students in nonfiction texts can be the lack of direct personal connection with the content of such texts. The purpose of service-learning is to connect content in the academic curriculum to meaningful service in the community. Service-learning is an excellent means for students to learn social studies content while at the same time increasing their comprehension skills and reading motivation. A deeper level of comprehension occurs when students apply their knowledge of a text to a real situation. A service-learning project can provide such a connection.

There are four phases in true service-learning projects that differentiate them from community service projects, providing opportunities for deeper learning and comprehension:

1. Preparation involves learning and understanding different facets of the project on which students will be working, including content from the academic curriculum;
2. Service is the work itself, whether it is a one-day reading event with a preschool class or a month-long fund raiser for Habitat for Humanity;
3. Reflection brings meaning to the service event and connects important aspects of the curriculum to the act of service; and
4. Demonstration, in which students recognize their accomplishments for both serving the community and learning the curriculum by demonstrating their learning to others.

Students derive personal, interpersonal, social, and academic benefits from participation in service-learning.⁴ According to the Search Institute, a non-profit organization whose mis-

sion it is to work toward the advancement of the well-being of children and youth, “service-learning becomes an important catalyst for shaping positive identity as young people discover their gifts and a place in the world through their acts of service and justice.”⁵

Service-learning also offers excellent opportunities for students to explore several thematic strands of the social studies curricular standards, especially ❶ CULTURE; ❸ PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENT; ❹ INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY; ❺ POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE; ❻ PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION; ❽ GLOBAL CONNECTION; AND ❿ CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES.⁶

Bringing It All Together

Enticing students to read nonfiction texts can be challenging. Pairing service-learning and nonfiction texts increases both motivation and comprehension. Through service-learning, students are drawn into nonfiction texts because they are more motivated to learn about topics for which they care deeply.

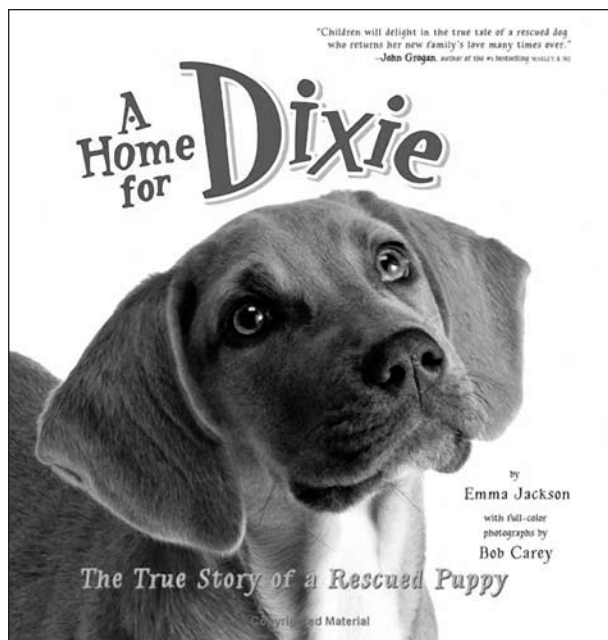
In the following section, various nonfiction books are summarized, followed by appropriate comprehension strategies and specific service-learning ideas. Additional books are also suggested for several topics.

A Home for Dixie: A True Story of a Rescued Puppy

by Emma Jackson

(New York: Collins, 2008).

Summary: Written by a high school student, this picture book follows the life of an orphan puppy who finds a home. Through child-friendly text and large, colorful photographs, Jackson



details the care and responsibility of raising and training a puppy.

Comprehension Strategy: Ask students to bring in an item for a Jackdaw Bag to summarize events in the story. A jackdaw is actually a bird in the crow family that is known for stealing bright objects and collecting them in its nest. In connection with this story, students might bring in a dog bowl, a book about caring for a puppy, for example.

Service-Learning Ideas:

- Raise funds to support an animal shelter in your community, or for Aunt Mary’s Doghouse (www.AuntMarysDoghouse.com), a non-profit organization that receives proceeds from the sales of this book.
- Research the issue of spaying and neutering animals. Write a pamphlet on the issue for distribution at area pet stores and veterinarian offices.
- Partner with an animal shelter or animal rescue center in your area to sponsor a pet adoption day at your school.

Extension:

For more information on dogs, read *Eyewitness Dog* by Juliet Clutton-Brock (London: DK Publishing, 2004), which includes brilliant photographs and short, interesting text to draw the reader into a variety of topics about dogs. This book includes information on the evolution of dogs, their care, different types of dogs, and the history of the relationship between humans and dogs.

To expand the topic to include the study of the social issues surrounding endangered animals, introduce students to *Knut: How One Little Polar Bear Captivated the World* by Craig Hatkoff and his two young daughters (New York: Scholastic Press, 2007). This delightful story of the survival of Knut, an orphaned polar bear born at Zoo Berlin in Germany, helps students appreciate the importance of protecting endangered animals. Included at the end of the book is detailed information about polar bears and their environment to help students learn more about the endangered polar bear.

A River Ran Wild

by Lynne Cherry

(Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2002).

Summary: This beautifully illustrated picture book depicts the history of the Nashua River from 7,000 years ago when the Algonquin-speaking Indian people settled there, to the 1970s when environmental activist Marion Stoddart coordinated a citizens’ campaign that resulted in the Massachusetts Clean Water Act of 1966. Students learn about the daily lives of people who used the river throughout history.

Comprehension Strategy: Place students in small groups to create segments of a continuous timeline for the entire book that can be joined together as one history of the Nashua River area. Each group names, explains in one sentence, and describes

major events from their section of the book, drawing symbols for each.

Service-Learning Ideas:

- Teach others about the effects of pollution, and the importance of clean drinking water, water conservation, or other topics related to the environment.
- Study a local water source and detail its history. Share what you have learned by writing an article for the local newspaper or presenting to a local civic group.
- Raise money and donate to the Ryan's Well Foundation (www.ryanswell.ca), a non-profit organization founded by a six-year-old boy, dedicated to drilling wells to provide clean drinking water for villages in Africa.
- Recognize a local activist who has made a difference in your community.

Whoopi's Big Book of Manners

by Whoopi Goldberg

(New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2006).

Summary: In kid-friendly language, Goldberg instills the importance of manners and appropriate behavior in a variety of situations. Students read about such topics as using polite conversation, remembering to clean up, knocking on closed doors, learning to say you're sorry, table manners, phone manners, and manners appropriate for different cultures.

Comprehension Strategy: In groups of two or three, re-enact the different manners explained in this picture book, or other scenarios students suggest. It is fun to have students enact the wrong way to behave, and then the right way.

Service-Learning Ideas:

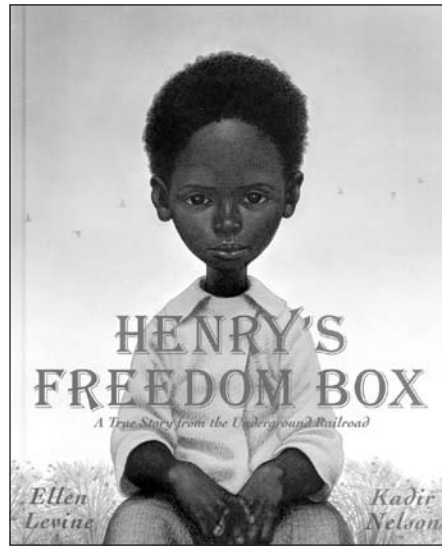
- Focus on community-building and personal responsibility in your own classroom. Determine ways students can be of service to each other by using proper manners. Keep track of these good deeds on a chart in the classroom.
- Create an alphabet book of manners to share with a younger class, and donate the book to the school library.
- Hold a traveling manners workshop where students in your class visit other classes and teach students about appropriate manners.
- Write a manners pamphlet to distribute at Parent Open House so families can work on improving manners together.

Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad

by Ellen Levine

(New York: Scholastic Press, 2007).

Summary: Henry grows up as a slave who does not even know his own birthday. His wife and children are sold to another plantation owner and Henry then decides he wants to escape to freedom. A local doctor actually packs Henry in a wooden crate



and mails him from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a city where slavery is illegal. He arrives on March 30, 1849, his birthday and adopts a new middle name, Henry "Box" Brown.

Comprehension

Strategy: Create a Sensory Figure where small groups of students use stick

figures to explain what the main characters in this picture book were thinking, seeing, hearing, saying, feeling, doing, and going, by drawing cartoon bubbles from the head, eyes, nose, ears, mouth, heart, and so on.

Service-Learning Ideas:

- Research and/or interview famous Americans in your community. Create posters or short stories of important events in their lives. Honor these famous Americans by hosting a school-wide recognition assembly.
- Create a puppet show to retell Henry's story to students in other classrooms in order to teach them about the Underground Railroad.
- Raise funds to donate to the Free the Children Foundation (www.freethechildren.org) which supports children who are trying to escape from lives of child labor.

Extension: For another perspective on the Civil War time period, share Clara Barton: *Angel of the Battlefield* (Prokos, Anna, ed., New York: Time for Kids, 2008) a biography explaining Barton's childhood, education, service in the Civil War, and founding of the Red Cross. For a present-day connection, the book includes an interview with the current chair of the Red Cross.

Also consider reading *Buzz Aldrin Reaching for the Moon* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), a more modern biography, in which the author tells his own story of being a young boy fascinated with the moon and flying. Aldrin focuses on character traits such as determination, strength, and independence that he developed during his years at West Point, the rejection of his first application to the astronaut program, and his experience of walking on the moon with Neil Armstrong.

For a multi-cultural perspective, read *Maria Paints the Hills* by Pat Mora with paintings by the featured artist, Maria Hesch (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2002). This delightful story, told from Maria's perspective as a child growing up in Northern New Mexico, describes many Hispanic

cultural events in her village and her interest in being an artist at an early age.

Museum of American History to help care for the American flag that flew over Ft. McHenry when Francis Scott Key wrote the “Star-Spangled Banner.”



American Flag Q & A

by Sarah L. Thompson
(New York: Harper Collins, 2008).

Summary: This picture book explains the history and purpose of the American flag, including famous events involving the flag, the history of the “Pledge of Allegiance,” and proper care of the flag. A unique perspective on the American Flag is told through an interview with the curator of the Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of American History.

Comprehension Strategy: Prior to reading, lead a Picture Walk by guiding the students in a discussion of the pictures in the book in order to elicit background knowledge regarding the American flag, and also to prepare students for the content and vocabulary included in the text.

Service-Learning Ideas:

- Teach the students who will be raising and lowering the flag at your school, about the history of the flag, and the importance of proper care for the flag.
- Visit kindergarten classes early in the school year to teach them the meaning of the “Pledge of Allegiance” and the history of the American flag, so they will have a greater appreciation during school-wide recitations of the “Pledge of Allegiance.”
- Write and sell pamphlets on appropriate care of the American Flag. Donate these funds to the National

Rio Grande Stories

by Carolyn Meyer
(Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2007).

Summary: Although this collection of short stories set in the South Valley of Albuquerque, New Mexico, is fictional, the author explains how the premise of the book (students researching and writing short stories of the local area as part of a “Heritage Project” to raise money to build a new school) is really catching on in many actual schools across the country. Teachers are using this book as a starting point to model the writing process for students to write historical accounts from their own communities to raise money for a variety of causes.

Comprehension Strategy: Have individual students or students in small groups fill in a graphic organizer about Albuquerque or New Mexico. Include spaces for topics such as: location, economy, population, major towns, environment, animals, plants, historical events, etc. Then have students create a similar graphic organizer for your own community, area, or state.

Service-Learning Ideas:

- Research and write stories about your own community. Sell your books to raise money for an important cause of your students’ choosing.
- After learning about the history of your area, partner with another classroom to write and illustrate picture books of important community events. Donate the picture books to a community or school library.
- Visit another classroom, civic organization, or after-school program to share the history of your community you have learned through storytelling, puppet shows, or re-enactments. 🌐

Notes

1. Jeanette Winter, *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005)
2. Julie Cummins, *The Inside Outside Book of Libraries* (New York: Random House, 1996).
3. *Scholastic Atlas of Weather* (New York: Scholastic, 2004); Mark Shulman, *Super Storms That Rocked the World: Hurricanes, Tsunamis, and Other Disasters* (Des Moines, Iowa: Meredith Books, 2007).
4. P. C. Scales and E. C. Roehlkepartain. *Community Service and Service-Learning in U.S. Public Schools, 2004: Findings from a National Survey* (Minneapolis, MN: National Youth Leadership Council, 2004).
5. Search Institute, *An Asset Builder’s Guide to Service-Learning* (Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute, 2000).
6. Rahima C. Wade, ed., *Building Bridges: Connecting Classroom and Community through Service-Learning in Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 2000); *Community Action Rooted in History: The CiviConnections Model of Service-Learning* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2007).

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