

Fiction vs. Non-Fiction Usage in the Classroom

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In the rise and fall of ever-changing curriculum, test, state, and district standards, English Language Arts instructors have consistently been asked to revisit and alter their classroom reading lists to accommodate these new requirements. One major topic of debate that continues to crop up alongside these various changes involves the use of fiction and non-fiction selections in ELA classrooms. As students are more likely to encounter nonfiction informational texts on high stakes tests as well as in the workforce at some point in their lives, it is interesting to consider if and how secondary English teachers incorporate a diverse range of these materials in their lesson planning and instruction. Another critical factor that affects the reading experiences of students that can also influence the learning outcomes of different reading selections involves students' choices and preferences in regards to fiction and nonfiction options. In order for a future English teacher to learn how to balance fiction and nonfiction works effectively for students, one must examine the existing research on this topic, gather data from current English instructors and students of all grade levels, and use these findings and correlations to make executive decisions in the classroom that will please and benefit everyone involved.

Topic History

The previous research involving fiction and nonfiction usage in the English Language Arts curriculum from primary to secondary levels tends to highlight the selection of fictional works over nonfiction, the range of difficulty between each genre, and gender differences and preferences in reading selections. While English Language Arts instruction at all levels is meant to expose students to a range of different writing styles, authors, and genres, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, short stories, novellas, essays, and drama, it appears as though nonfiction is neglected in an effort to accommodate more classical literature, suspenseful short stories, and

timeless poems. According to Topping (2015), “there are many studies that report that non-fiction books are often under-utilized in classrooms. Where they do exist, they are often of an inappropriate level of difficulty” (p. 353). As nonfiction texts typically include a variety of facts, figures, data, and subject-specific knowledge, it is hardly a surprise that reading difficulties occur when students are bombarded with new information and statistics rather than stock characters and an interesting plot. In response to a decline in reading following an increase of nonfiction usage in English classrooms, Stotsky (2016) reported that one major factor that influenced teachers’ fiction preferences and the decline in reading involved the difficult vocabulary often found in informational texts (p. 195-196). Rather than teaching and assessing students’ vocabulary knowledge and comprehension with each nonfiction selection, teachers tended to fall back on classical texts that did not have as much unfamiliar jargon. Although the technical vocabulary tended to “turn off” teachers from using nonfiction selections in regular classroom readings, Kuhn, Rausch, McCarty, Montgomery, & Rule (2017) found that when nonfiction texts were used in primary grades and students were taught how to approach reading informational works, students’ vocabulary knowledge increased as well as their reading comprehension abilities. Vocabulary, no matter in fiction or nonfiction selections, impacts the readability of a work and should not be ignored by instructors in ELA classrooms and across the curriculum but instead seen as opportunities for future lesson planning, activities, and instruction.

In addition to the vocabulary and reading difficulty factors, gender preferences of fiction and nonfiction readings have also been topics of debate in recent years. The common consensus that many researchers have found regarding gender differences in reading consistently find that boys tend to see reading as a feminine activity; however, studies also find that when given a choice between fiction and nonfiction selections, boys tend to choose informational works that

catch their attention over works of fiction (Topping, 2015, p. 353-354). Although gender can play a role in reading preferences, strengths, and selections, teachers should not automatically assume that a student prefers one genre over another based solely on gender.

Finally, another important area concerning fiction versus nonfiction that warrants study involves the inclusion of nonfiction excerpts or passages on standardized tests. In an older study of fiction versus nonfiction, Daniels and Zemelman (2004) report that “most high-stakes standardized tests contain predominantly nonfiction reading passages—as much as 80% on many of the big-name exams” (p. 57). Similarly, Hadaway, Vardell, & Young (2002) also note that “nonfiction passages far outnumber fiction passages” on standardized tests (p. 17). As many English classes typically pack reading lists with works of fiction, the contrasting test items that often make teachers more accountable has led to more nonfiction usage even though fiction is still emphasized. The Common Core State Standards (2010) regarding the use of literary nonfiction texts also reinforce their inclusion on high stakes examinations with the following:

Through wide and deep reading of literature and literary nonfiction of steadily increasing sophistication, students gain a reservoir of literary and cultural knowledge, references, and images; the ability to evaluate intricate arguments; and the capacity to surmount the challenges posed by complex texts. (p. 37)

With the incorporation of informational or nonfiction texts on standardized tests, the issue of fiction and nonfiction becomes much more relevant and vital to the success of students in ELA classrooms, especially if teachers fail to expose students to a variety of both prior to testing. As with the vocabulary, reading difficulty, and gender preferences and strengths, the content on standardized tests plays another role in teachers’ choices on what to include in their curriculum as well as what they *should* prioritize in the classroom even if they fail to do so.

Research Questions

Based on the previously studied factors that have been scrutinized concerning fiction and nonfiction, the purpose of this paper is to further analyze the quantitative and qualitative differences in these selections to assist in future lesson planning decisions. By collecting data from current students and teachers, one can see current trends in education as well as pitfalls that may be directly affecting students' performances on district and state tests. In order to bridge the gap between teachers' selections and students' preferences, the following questions will be researched, analyzed, and discussed in a broader context to improve the teaching-learning relationship in ELA classrooms:

1. Following the push for more informational texts due to standardized testing, do English Language Arts teachers use an equal balance of fiction and nonfiction in the classroom?
2. How do teachers' perspectives on their students' fiction or nonfiction preferences correlate?

Methodology

The methodology used to answer the previously posed research questions involves the voluntary responses of ELA teachers and students to two Google Forms surveys created to measure if and how English instructors incorporate nonfiction as well as how students' preferences align with these curriculum decisions. In the teacher survey created and administered, entitled "Fiction vs. Nonfiction Usage in the Classroom," the survey was sent to a small group of actively teaching ELA instructors via email to obtain their feedback on questions concerning the number of fiction and nonfiction novels they teach, if they let students choose their readings, the grade levels they teach, and their own literary preferences (see Appendix A

for teacher survey). At the conclusion of the survey, I also created an optional feedback blank that allowed teachers to give examples of how they use fiction and nonfiction in the classroom or any other information that pertained to the content of the survey.

In the email in which I sent the links to the surveys, I also requested that the participating teachers survey at least one of their classes if at all possible. In the student survey entitled “Fiction or Nonfiction?” students were asked about their reading preferences, how they felt about reading choice, and what subgenres of fiction and nonfiction they would prefer to read in class (see Appendix B for student survey). In creating two independent surveys for teachers and students, the data obtained can be compared and analyzed to see how well teachers’ interests and choices correlate with their students’ preferences.

Data Analysis & Results Discussion

In the data received from two ELA teachers who teach 7th and 9th and 10th and 11th grades respectively, it is not hardly a surprise that both teachers strive to include works of nonfiction in their classrooms and pair fiction with nonfiction even though they do not use any nonfiction novels in their longer required readings. Both teachers primarily teach American literature and strive to teach an upwards of three to six novels each year. In their usage of nonfiction in the classroom, the 9th grade teacher provided an example of how she uses nonfiction companion pieces with fiction, such as using the historical account of the Scottsboro boys with Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The 10th and 11th grade English teacher also justified her pairings of informational texts with classical fiction due to the inclusion of nonfiction on high-stakes tests, such as the ACT.

In the fifty-seven student responses received ranging from 9th to 11th grade, much of the data reflects the teachers' assumptions on what their students prefer to read, but also highlights some areas for future lesson planning (see Appendix C for Selected Survey Results). Three-fourths of students prefer fiction over nonfiction, just as both teachers prefer fiction, but approximately a quarter of the students reported that they would enjoy more nonfiction selections in classroom readings. In the recently enjoyed books from English class, a majority of the students preferred reading fictional works like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. Common works that students reported not enjoying from English class included *The Pigman*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and several works by Shakespeare. When asked about the subgenres of fiction and nonfiction, students reported that they would prefer to read fictional novels and autobiographies or biographies for nonfiction selections. One area of interest that is contradicting between the teacher and student responses involves student choice in their readings.

Both ELA teachers surveyed report that they **do not** allow their students to choose any of the novels they will study despite research that suggests students should have choice in their reading to build responsibility (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004). Nearly 70% of students responded that they would like classroom readings better if their teachers allowed them to choose the books they would be analyzing and studying. It is also worthy to note that nearly 30% of students feel that they *may* be more likely to enjoy readings if they are allowed some choice in the classroom readings. The contradictory attitudes concerning student choice is one area to consider in future lesson planning to help make classroom content more enjoyable, relatable, and successful for both the teacher and students.

Limitations

A few of the limitations that should be acknowledged with this survey process include the voluntary responses, limited number and grade level of student data represented, and the limited number of teachers (five) who were asked to participate in the curriculum study and those who actually participated (two). While the feedback and data reveal quite a bit of information concerning fiction and nonfiction preferences, the information does not take into account gender differences, long-term changes in preferences spanning primary and secondary grades, or the students' views of books in reflection at the culmination of the school year. Areas of future research concerning fiction and nonfiction could examine gender preferences ranging from 6th-12th grade, compare which fiction and nonfiction books are used in classrooms the most in a district/region, and trace how a select group of students' views of fiction and nonfiction change from the 6th grade until their graduation.

Broader Implications

The results of this study provide a future English Language Arts teacher with several new perspectives and considerations for implementing and using fiction and nonfiction in the classroom. The feedback and examples of using companion nonfiction texts with fiction can be one way to slowly integrate informational texts into the curriculum without starting with a longer nonfiction work. By using historical nonfiction pieces with fiction, the possibility of cross-curricular instruction with other content area teachers, such as social studies and history, creates an interconnectedness with different disciplines as well. Through the administration and analysis of the survey information in conjunction with the posed research questions reveal that while fiction and nonfiction usage are not necessarily balanced in the classroom, some ELA teachers strive to pair nonfiction and fiction whenever possible. In reviewing the correlations between

teachers' reading choices and students' preferences, it is evident that some areas, such as student choice and subgenre interests, require more consideration and attention during the lesson planning process than is currently given.

Conclusion

Following the study of previous research concerning fiction and nonfiction usage in English Language Arts classrooms as well as in some primary grade levels, designing and carrying out a curriculum intervention to examine current perspectives on the subject provide new planning criteria for professionals entering the field in the near future. In analyzing active teachers' curriculum choices and preferences alongside the thoughts, interests, and reading preferences of their students, one can conclude that while nonfiction has been more readily integrated into classroom study due to standardized testing, there is still room for teachers to consider utilizing nonfiction books in their classrooms in addition to allowing for more student choice in reading selections. In pairing nonfiction with fiction in the classroom, educators are able to cross into different content areas while providing their students with a rich selection of literary works to whet their reading appetites. As a great majority of mass media is comprised of informational texts, facts, and statistics, nonfiction should also play a role in English classrooms in an effort to prepare students for much of this type of literature in the workplace and society. Overall, to help make students' experiences in English Language Arts classrooms more relevant, productive, and enjoyable, perhaps it is worth a teacher's time to take his/her students' interests and preferences into account prior to making selections that only reflect testing demands, the teacher's own interests, or state standards rather than student growth, learning, and exploration in the classroom.

References

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Appendix A

Fiction vs. Nonfiction Usage in the Classroom

Live survey link available at:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1uyrRO55qZb4_ixJrFUfVMkfIQL-uAqNmexBBh9TkG9w

Appendix B

Fiction or Nonfiction?

Live survey link available at: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1v6MAYwgvNGWS-G0OjYQOXn3Dsk3lV4BQzXn-QljH510>

Appendix C

Selected Survey Results

Teacher Survey Results:

(Due to lack of printed color, statistics are explained next to charts when appropriate.)

Do you use works of non-fiction in your classroom?

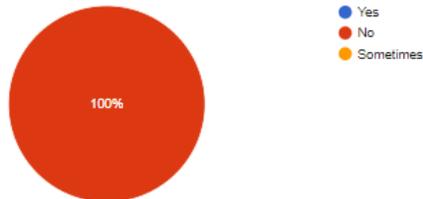
2 responses



*100% Usage

Do you allow your students to select the novels they will be studying?

2 responses



Of the novels that you teach each year, how many are non-fiction?

2 responses



*No Choice-100%

Do you ever pair fictional works with non-fiction?

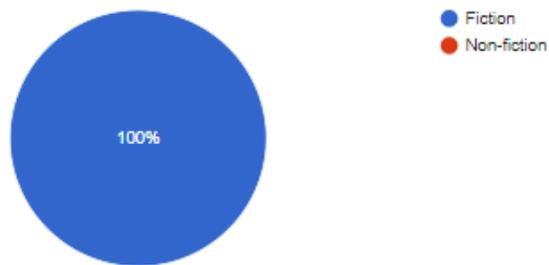
2 responses



*100%-Yes

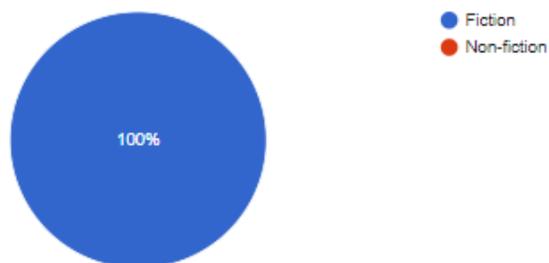
Which do you prefer to teach?

2 responses



What genre do your students seem to prefer?

2 responses

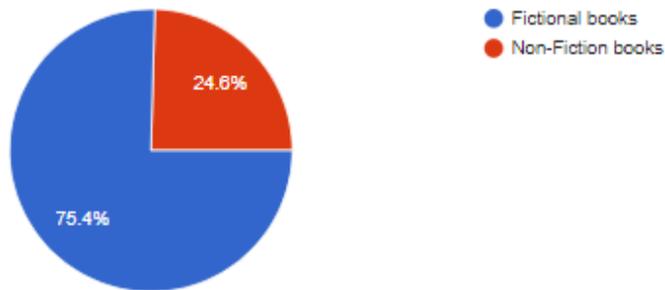


*100% Fiction on Each

Student Survey Results:

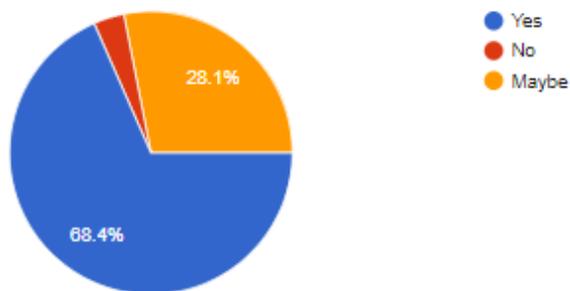
Which types of books do you like to read the most?

57 responses



Do you think you would like classroom readings better if teachers allowed you to choose the books the class would study?

57 responses

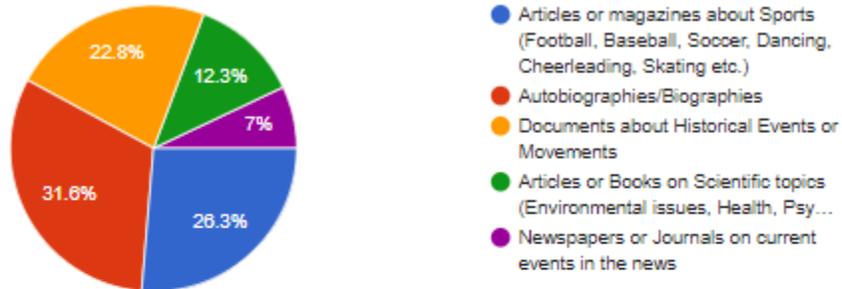


*75.4% - Fiction – 24.6% - Nonfiction

*Yes-68.4%; No-3.5%; Maybe-28.1%

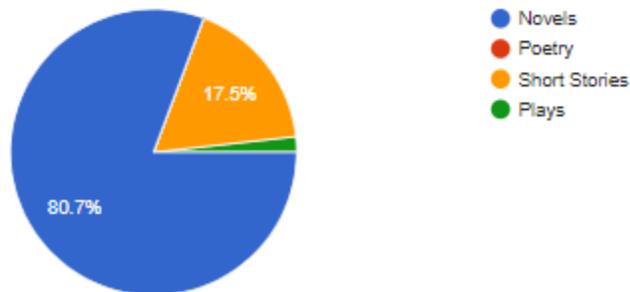
Of the non-fiction topics listed below, what would you be the most interested in reading?

57 responses



Of these types of fiction, which do you enjoy reading/studying the most?

57 responses



*Articles-26.3%; Autobiographies/Biographies-31.6%; Historical Documents-22.8%; Scientific Articles/Books-12.3%; Newspapers/Journals on current events-7%.

*Novels-80.7%; Short Stories-17.5%; Plays-1.8%.