

Pirates in Historical Fiction and Nonfiction: A Twin-Text Unit of Study

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In this article we outline an interdisciplinary unit of study using quality children’s literature, and we describe several instructional strategies and activities for reading and responding to historical fiction and informational texts.¹

The focus of this fourth-grade unit is on one of the **TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**.² This “piratical study” integrates social studies and the language arts. Several social studies topics emerge during the lessons: (a) the economic impact pirates and privateers had on American colonies; (b) the roles that pirates and privateers played in the wars between England and Spain, the American Revolutionary War, and the War of 1812; (c) the absolute and relative location of major landforms, bodies of water, and ports of call in the early Americas; and (d) the emergence of some democratic practices among some pirates: Pirate’s Code-The Articles of Agreement.

Piquing Curiosity

The unit began with a CD of pirate music playing as the students entered the classroom.¹ Books, photographs, maps, and other piratical “artifacts” were arranged in two or three areas of the classroom that featured: (1) piratical picture books, including both fiction and poetry; (2) books on topics such as pirates, pirates most wanted, “pirateology,” and pirate soul (variously containing a timeline, glossary, dictionary, booklet of pirate slang, advertisement to recruit pirates, maps, pirate biographies and articles, letter of marque (a privateering license), Jolly Roger (flag), ship’s log, diary entry, a last will and testament, and other informational texts about pirates.

The students were divided into three groups that rotated through each area, writing down “What I Notice” (their observations about the material and what “kinds” of things were in each area) and any questions. Each group then shared its findings, observations, and questions in a class discussion. This was the perfect segue to a KWL (what I Know, what I Want to know, what I have Learned) discussion, because students had developed enough background knowledge about pirates to arouse their curiosities about time, place, people, culture, and ideas associated with these seafaring souls.

A Notebook

The teacher invited students to begin their own “Pirate Diary-Notebook” and “Dictionary of Piratical and Nautical Terms.” The front of the notebook is reserved for a reader response journal where KWL notes and other responses are recorded, and the back is an illustrated dictionary.

After the class discussion, students worked with partners and recorded their “K” page where they wrote down “What I think I KNOW” about pirates. Next, they recorded what they wanted to learn in the “W” section of the KWL. The teacher circulated around the room and assisted students in developing their questions, prompting students to begin their questions with: WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY and HOW. She guided students toward composing questions that she knew would be answered in future lessons. Students left space in their notebooks for writing answers later.

At the back of the notebook, students reserved a half page for each letter of the alphabet. During their reading and research, students recorded many new vocabulary words about pirates and sailing, wrote “child-friendly” definitions, and often illustrated the meaning of the words. The dictionaries developed as combinations of the vocabulary words that the teacher selected from the books as well as vocabulary that the students found interesting.

Side by Side

The unit “launch” continued with students collecting information about pirates by exploring web sites, viewing DVDs, and reading child-friendly informational texts. For example, students “partner read” the brief, child-friendly text, *Pirates*.³ Written on a third grade reading level, *Pirates* introduces the life of pirates through intriguing facts presented in a caption-like format. Each page includes colorful illustrations and photos. A large-print glossary with various historic terms and references is beneficial to readers. Richard Platt, author of *Pirate Diary* (discussed below), served as a consultant for *Pirates*; thus, students had the opportunity to read similar information presented through different contexts, genres, and artistic media by reading two books.

The teacher provided the following questions to guide students in their research as they recorded information in their notebooks:

- In your words, what is a pirate?
- Why did so many sailors turn to a life of piracy?
- What was life like on board a pirate ship?
- Describe piratical weapons and punishments and how they were used.
- Who were the pirates known as buccaneers? How was their name derived? What were their other nicknames? When and where did they live? What became their goal or mission?
- What is a Letter of Marque? Why were these letters issued?
- What is a privateer? Who commissioned privateers? What was their purpose or goal?
- Do you think privateers were pirates or patriots? (Be ready to justify your response through a class discussion.)
- What are the Pirate Articles? How would you describe a democracy?
- Do you think that a democratic society existed aboard a pirate ship?

Students now had basic background knowledge as well as some key questions to propel them into unit activities.

Reading Twin Texts

Pairing fiction and nonfiction is an effective method of enhancing students' reading comprehension, boosting students' interest and engagement, and expanding their knowledge and imagination. As students read both narrative and expository texts, they become aware of how similar topics or themes are presented through different genres.⁶

The Twin Texts read in this unit paired the award-winning historical fiction text *Pirate Diary: The Journal of Jake Carpenter*.⁴ with the engaging informational text *What If You Met a Pirate*.⁵

Pirate Diary is the fictional diary written from the perspective of ten-year-old Jake Carpenter. The year is 1716, and at his father's urging, Jake leaves the American colony of North Carolina to become a sailor. Pirates capture his ship, the *Greyhound*, and Jake becomes a member of the pirate company. He eventually returns home safely donning a purse filled with pieces of eight, ready for his next adventure.

Jake narrates his piratical adventures through historically accurate details. Notes for the Reader in the back of the book provide a thorough examination of the history in *Pirate Diary*. The author and illustrator describe Colonial America and the impact of pirates on them, along with a history of piracy, and biographical information about some of the most famous rogues.

Q and A

What If You Met a Pirate? is a nonfiction book that takes readers on a historical voyage through the history of pirates. The book immediately “hooks” readers through its Q&A format. Questions that a child would really want answered are posed along with cleverly crafted answers. Informative captions accompany the detailed illustrations. An index and glossary of pirate words assist readers in navigating the text.

These two intriguing books provide the source for rich content and offer the opportunity for teachers to engage students in meaningful learning. Readers construct understandings of texts as they read, and engaging students in instructional activities that facilitate this comprehension process will positively impact their learning and interest in the material. We use an instructional framework where teachers provide a scaffold to guide students through silent reading on their instructional reading level and help them monitor their comprehension.

We designed the activities described in the following **Pullout** to be used with these engaging, historically grounded twin texts. In our classroom, the teacher and students read the texts in different instructional settings that included: reading silently, reading aloud with a partner or small group, and the teacher reading certain sections aloud.

Conclusion

Combining good historical fiction and informational texts about key social studies topics with engaging and interactive comprehension activities will facilitate students' comprehension and understanding of social studies content. The activities we used in this unit were designed to enhance student learning and provide outcomes wherein student learning could be assessed. Such activities can be used in other areas of the social studies curricula. 📖

Notes

1. R. Olness, *Using Literature to Enhance Content Area Instruction: A Guide for K-5 Teachers* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2007); Michael O. Tunnell and Richard Ammon, eds., *The Story of Ourselves: Teaching History through Children's Literature* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993).
2. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
3. Brian Williams, *Pirates* (Milwaukee, WI: Gareth Stevens, 2005).
4. Richard Platt, *Pirate Diary: The Journal of Jake Carpenter* (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 2001). This book won the 2001 Kate Greenaway Medal and the 2003 Blue Peter Award-Best Book with Facts (both given in the U.K.). Visit www.richardplatt.co.uk/index.html.
5. Jan Adkins, *What If You Met a Pirate?* (New Milford, CT: Roaring Book Press, 2004).
6. We recommend that during language arts block, students read instructional-level texts that correspond thematically (citations on P3 of the following Pullout).

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