

Tips for Planning a Successful Author Visit

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ABSTRACT

Author visits are an exciting way to generate students' interest in reading and writing. They offer the opportunity for students to hear directly from an author about the process and value of various texts. However, successful author visits require careful planning and collaboration. This teaching tip article explains how author visits can support learning outcomes, describes the steps involved in planning a visit, and identifies possibilities to fund a school or campus visit.

KEYWORDS

author visit;
children's
literature; literacy
promotion

An author visit occurs when a writer or illustrator visits a classroom to educate learners about their books, writing process, inspirations for writing, etc. Author visits can be impactful for K–12 students, such as motivating them to tell their own stories (Booth, 2018) and generating excitement about reading and writing (Murphy et al., 2014). Meeting an author can also be a meaningful experience for college students. Walker and Feldman (2014) investigated the effect virtual children's author visits would have on pre-service teachers (i.e., teacher candidates). The researchers had their teacher candidates interview authors virtually as part of a college children's literature course. Using Skype video calls, they found that “teacher candidates were able to converse with a children's author, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the use of children's literature, author's visits, and technology in their own teaching” (Walker & Feldman, 2014, p. 39). Based on the findings of this research, we sought to use an author visit to better prepare elementary/special education teacher candidates for teaching with and about nonfiction children's books.

We created a half-day professional development workshop for candidates enrolled in our institution's elementary/special education program. The workshop focused on the nonfiction genre of children's literature, including types of nonfiction, using nonfiction books to teach the craft of writing, and integrating nonfiction across subject areas in the elementary-level curriculum. It was led by Patricia Newman, an award-winning author of nonfiction books for children. Our goal in implementing this workshop was to help the candidates in our courses develop a stronger appreciation of the nonfiction genre and a deeper understanding of pedagogical possibilities for nonfiction books. We shared our goals with Ms. Newman, who valued the collaboration and designed her presentation accordingly. She said, “My goal is to supplement your classroom

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curriculum, not distract from it. That’s why my visits empower readers of all ages to think about the world from different points of view and then make connections to their own lives” (Newman, personal communication, January 2, 2023).

Specific outcomes were for candidates to know why children enjoy reading nonfiction and to be able to describe types of nonfiction, as well as to explain approaches and strategies for teaching nonfiction text structures and informational writing traits. We also wanted candidates to understand various ways to integrate nonfiction across the curriculum. As a result, our candidates would be better prepared for leading elementary classrooms of their own. After participating in the author visit, one candidate shared:

I realized that I can use nonfiction to engage reluctant readers and to support curiosity in my students. I actually tried using a nonfiction book to engage a reluctant reader in my current placement, and it worked! She read the whole thing quickly and was excited to talk to me about it!

Outcomes like this one are what we hoped to achieve through the author visit.

Planning an Author Visit

Preparing for our author visit with Patricia Newman involved making multiple decisions. These decisions are outlined step-by-step in Table 1 and described throughout the rest of this section. First, we had to determine a date for Ms. Newman to come and how to accommodate the large number of teacher candidates that would attend her presentation. We decided to separate our students into two groups so that the half-day professional development workshop could be offered twice in the same day, one in the morning at one location and another in the afternoon at a different location. This was necessary for finding a space with enough capacity for everyone, but also to allow for a more personalized experience that made the interactive activities more manageable.

Table 1: Steps for Planning an Author Visit

Step 1	Reflect on the standards and units in your grade level or course to decide what type of literature and which author would align best with your needs.
Step 2	Identify a date and time for the visit.
Step 3	Determine the size of the audience and secure space.
Step 4	Contact the author and schedule the visit.
Step 5	Discuss details of the presentation and coordinating necessary materials with the author.

Through a virtual meeting with Ms. Newman, we were able to discuss what the presentation would look like and begin coordinating her travel plans. We talked about how Ms. Newman’s visit could connect to the objectives of the content literacy and children’s literature courses our teacher candidates were taking at the time of the scheduled author visit. For example, Ms. Newman’s suggestion to explain the different types of nonfiction during her workshop directly supported one of the main objectives of the children’s literature course, which examines formats and genres of youth literature.

As professors, we discussed how best to prepare our teacher candidates for Ms. Newman’s visit. We wanted to make certain that candidates had exposure to at least a couple of her books before the workshop was held. This involved scheduling them in our course calendars prior to the

visit and deciding which ones fit best with our courses. In their children's literature course, candidates were asked to read Newman's 2018 Sibert Honor book, *Sea Otter Heroes: The Predators that Saved an Ecosystem*. They were introduced to Newman's (2004) book, *Jingle the Brass*, in the content literacy course through a model lesson demonstrating how to use it as a mentor text when teaching informational writing to elementary students.

An additional virtual meeting took place between the three of us and Ms. Newman within a couple of weeks of the scheduled workshop. The purpose was to finalize details in terms of what materials we needed to have with us and what she would need as a presenter. A major part of making the workshop meaningful and interactive was to have enough nonfiction books for the teacher candidates to explore to gain a better understanding of the possibilities associated with what Ms. Newman was teaching them. This required us to pull books from our personal and public libraries and to coordinate with one another to ensure we had nonfiction books that fell into the specific categories Ms. Newman would be referencing when presenting to the teacher candidates (see Stewart & Correia, 2021, for details about the five categories of nonfiction).

While we designed this author visit for teacher candidates at the university level, we believe K–12 teachers could follow a similar path in planning their own author visit. Among the factors to consider when developing a plan would be to reflect on your standards and units in your grade level and decide what type of literature and which author would align best with your needs. If you are not sure where to start finding potential authors, there are websites available that provide information about authors who are willing to do school visits. For example, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators at [scbwi.org/speakers-bureau](https://www.scbwi.org/speakers-bureau) allows you to search based on author's name, student age level, and topic. Additionally, publishing companies' websites may offer information on author visits, and many published authors have their own websites, which can provide useful information regarding having the author come to your school for a visit. You can even seek recommendations from your school's media specialist.

Once you have determined which author is coming, you should consider when and how you can integrate some of the author's work into your classroom prior to the author visit. Providing students with the opportunity to interact with the author's work prior to meeting them can make the visit more meaningful. Collaborating with your school's media specialist to integrate the author's texts could also prove beneficial.

Funding is certainly something to consider, including how much you might need and where you can obtain it. There are many options available if you take the time to search. In fact, some possibilities are included in the next section to help you get started in your search.

Funding an Author Visit

When planning an author visit, locating funds is a foremost consideration. We were fortunate that an internal grant from our university funded Ms. Newman's honorarium and travel, and we were even able to purchase copies of her books to share with teacher candidates during her visit. While not all institutions offer such financial support, other grant opportunities are available to educators. Table 2 summarizes some of these possibilities.

Nonprofit groups are one potential source of funding. Professional organizations for educators sometimes offer grants and awards to support classroom or school-wide projects. For example, the Georgia Council of Teachers of English offers mini-grants of up to \$500 for educators planning projects that will directly impact the literacy experiences of K–12 students. Other nonprofits also provide support. The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi offers grants of up to \$2,500 specifically for literacy projects. While one must be a member of this honor society to apply,

educators could collaborate on an application with a university-based chapter if they are not members themselves. Many Georgia colleges and universities have chapters, including the University of Georgia, Kennesaw State University, University of West Georgia, and the University of North Georgia.

In addition, philanthropic organizations provide funding for educators. The Dollar General Literacy Foundation has a variety of grants; the Youth Literacy Grant may be especially appropriate for educators who wish to spark students' excitement about reading and writing with an author visit. Educators who teach children from low-income families are eligible to apply for a McCarthy Dressman Education Foundation grant. This grant, which provides up to \$10,000 annually and is renewable for a second year, is intended to fund both in-class and extracurricular enrichment opportunities. Believe in Reading, which is supported by the Steve and Loree Potash Family Foundation, also provides grants to schools serving children with exceptional needs. Another possibility is the Voya Unsung Heroes Awards Program, which provides up to \$2,000 to educators who facilitate innovative projects directly impacting students' learning.

Sponsorships are another avenue for author visit funding. Barnes and Noble provides sponsorships to schools at the local level; inquiries about sponsorships may be directed to store managers. Local businesses may also be willing to provide financial assistance.

Table 2: Grant Opportunities for Literacy Projects

Organization	Website
Barnes and Noble	barnesandnobleinc.com/about-bn/sponsorships-charitable-donations
Believe in Reading	believeinreading.org/grant-guidelines
Dollar General Literacy Foundation	dgliteracy.org/grant-programs/
Georgia Council of Teachers of English	wildapricot.org/GCTE-Teacher-Minigrants
Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi	phikappaphi.org/grants-awards/literacy
McCarthy Dressman Education Foundation	mccartheydressman.org/academic-enrichment-grants/
Voya Unsung Heroes Awards Program	apply.scholarsapply.org/unsungheroes/

Conclusion

During Ms. Newman's visit, the three of us were able to observe our teacher candidates working with the books and engaging in discussions about how they could be used in classrooms. We distributed a post-survey asking them to rate their comfort levels with nonfiction texts and share what they learned. Although we did not receive a significant number of responses, the ones we received demonstrated that the author visit was beneficial. We were also able to engage in informal conversations with candidates after the visit, and these also showed that the candidates had enjoyed it and learned from it. One student said the visit allowed him to "see all the different ways that

nonfiction can be used in the classroom,” and after the visit, he understood, “that nonfiction has a place in the classroom that should never be taken away.” Another student echoed her peer’s statement in claiming that the visit helped her “gain a greater perspective on the benefits of including nonfiction literature in the classroom.” Specifically, she stated that she knows now that nonfiction allows students to “make real-world connections and apply critical thinking skills.”

Prior to the author visit, teacher candidates experienced two of Patricia Newman’s books in their college courses. They saw a model of using nonfiction mentor texts to teach informational writing using *Jingle the Brass* (Newman, 2004), and they read *Sea Otter Heroes: The Predators That Saved an Ecosystem* (2017) as a book club assignment. Ms. Newman noted the value of this practice: “The most meaningful author events establish a genuine connection between me and your students. One way to fuel this connection is by reading my books with students and integrating them into your curriculum” (Newman, personal communication, January 2, 2023). To advance that connection, it is valuable to have students continue working with the author’s works after the visit. Based on the timeline for our grant proposal and candidates’ course calendars, some had already completed assignments that would have allowed them to directly implement tips that Ms. Newman provided. Coordinating an opportunity for application of learning after the author visit would likely produce more long-term impact on candidates’ instructional strategies.

While planning an author visit, consider your space and resource availability. If you have a specific author in mind for the visit, their website may provide valuable information for planning the visit. Patricia Newman has a frequently-asked question page and video to support educators in scheduling author visits (Newman, 2023). Ms. Newman was intentional in making her visit interactive. Teacher candidates reviewed a wide variety of nonfiction styles across children’s books. They browsed about 30 books in small groups. This format was very effective in helping our students understand the content of her presentation more deeply. Gathering the books for this component took forethought. We used our personal and public libraries as resources to gather more than enough nonfiction texts for the visit. Our first professional development session took place in an auditorium. Teacher candidates were in rows and did not have tables. In our second session, candidates were in an amphitheater-style room with tables on each level. This was much more conducive to collaboration and efficient transitions.

Collaboration was key throughout the process of implementing an author visit. Working as a team allowed us to discuss the objectives of this professional development opportunity from a variety of perspectives, as we teach different candidates in different courses. Communication with the author helped facilitate planning important components, including the necessary materials. Careful collaborative planning led to a successful event that met our goal to help teacher candidates develop a stronger appreciation of nonfiction literature and a deeper understanding of pedagogical possibilities for nonfiction books.

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Received: January 5, 2023 | Accepted: March 2, 2023 | Published: April 3, 2023