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## Building teachers' understanding of art as meaning-making in picture books

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*A small group of seven-year-old children are discussing their favorite parts of **Hansel and Gretel** (Galdone, 1982) when Pat suddenly comments, "I think that the witch is really the stepmother in disguise." His teacher looks at him with surprise and skepticism, "What makes you think that?" Pat takes the book and carefully points to the illustrations, "Look. The witch and the stepmother are never in the same part of the story. When the children kill the witch and go home, they find out that the stepmother has died while they were gone. And the two look a little bit alike in the pictures." "Yeah," comments Harmony, "the witch didn't even act or look like a real witch." The group crowds around the picture book carefully examining the illustrations and the written text to excitedly explore this new interpretation of a familiar story.*



**P**at's comment is a reminder that reading the illustrations along with the written text can dramatically change the interpretation of a picture book. As adults, we often become so focused on words that we quickly skim the illustrations and forget that readers interpret both print and pictures to actually "read" a picture book. When readers skip the illustrations, they miss a great deal of the story. The illustrations are not an extension of the print that only reinforce the meanings of the words, but are essential for constructing understandings of the story. In a well-

designed picture book, the total format reflects the meaning of the story so that the written text, illustrations, and book design are essential to the telling of the story (Shulevitz, 1985). A picture book must be a seamless whole conveying meaning in art and language. The illustrations do more than reflect the action in the text—they share in moving the story forward and in conveying and enhancing the meaning behind the story. In order for readers to fully engage with the story, they must read both the written text and the illustrations—they need to be visually and verbally literate.

Children are much more visually oriented than most adults because they are immersed in the visual mass media culture of television, videogames, computers, and advertisements. Many adults have had the experience of reading with young children who pore over a single illustration or who notice visual details adults miss even with multiple readings of the same book. Even though children constantly use and interpret visual images, however, they often are unable to analyze and think critically about those images. They need to "see" in the fullest sense and to recognize the significance of what they are seeing-to become visually literate in their ability to critically discriminate and interpret visual images (Considine, 1986).

As children become visually literate, they are able to communicate effectively through interpreting and creating images in a variety of visual media. Picture books offer a unique potential for children to develop visual literacy because they can return to the books to explore, reflect, and critique these visual images (Kiefer, 1995). As they explore illustrations and develop the ability to read images, they attain deeper meanings from literature *and* an awareness of how visual images are used in their own meaning-making about life.

The problem is that, as educators, we often put so much emphasis on written language that we do not involve children in classroom experiences that allow them to explore the role of illustrations in picture books and of visual image in our ability to read our world. Teachers need knowledge about how pictures and visual images create meaning in order to plan classroom experiences and to take advantage of "teachable moments." That knowledge, however, is something many of us lack. Like many educators, my strength is oral and written language and my understandings of visual image were initially limited to a single course in art education as a preservice teacher. I also had a great deal of art anxiety based on school experiences where I was labeled as *not* an artist.

Knowing that many other educators have similar backgrounds and anxieties about art led me to develop a graduate course called The Art of the Picture Book where we could explore art as meaning-making. I co-teach the course with Cheri Anderson who is a visual artist and the director of a district-wide visual literacy program using artists-in-residence. We have combined our strengths in literature and art to create a learning environment where educators can become visually literate through discussing picture books in literature

circles and creating their own art pieces in studio. Our hope is that as educators develop their own understandings of art as a meaning-making system, they will more powerfully support their students in exploring the role of illustrations in making meaning from picture books.

### INTERPRETING AND COMPOSING ART

Within this course, we want to provide many experiences for adults to interact with picture books. Because of our previous experiences with language, we know that they need to be both composers and interpreters of art. It has become a cliché that we learn to write by reading and to read by writing. We believe that for adults to really be able to "read" and interpret pictures, they also have to compose their own illustrations. If they see themselves as artists and authors, their responses to picture books are more complex because of "insider" knowledge on how to tell stories through illustrations and words. On the other hand, their close examination and interpretation of picture books and art prints provides a more extensive repertoire of artistic strategies to pull from in their own artwork.

While *interpreting* and *composing* are both processes of constructing meaning, we use the two terms to signal the different roles taken by the learner. Interpreting art involves constructing meaning through "reading" illustrations and artwork while composing art involves constructing meaning through "authoring" a piece of art (Short & Kauffman, 2000).

These understandings about art as a meaning-making process are based in semiotic theories of sign systems (Peirce, 1966; Siegel, 1995). A sign system perspective defines literacy as all the ways in which people share and make meaning, including music, art, mathematics, movement, drama, and language. These sign systems are tools for thinking as well for communicating. Each sign system has a special contribution to make to human experience and a different potential for creating meaning (Eisner, 1994). Based on these understandings, "text" is any chunk of meaning that has unity and can be shared with others, such as a picture book, a piece of art, a dance, a mathematical equation, or a song (Short, 1993).

Although schools have focused almost exclusively on language, all of the sign systems are *basic* processes that should be available to all learners (Eisner, 1994). These sign systems are not special talents possessed by only a few "gifted" people. Although there are differences in our abilities within

different systems, we all possess the potential to use these as natural ways of making and sharing meaning—we do not have to become professional artists in order to use art in our daily lives to think and communicate. Although many children and adults are uncomfortable with some sign systems, this is usually the result of a lack of exposure to, and use of, those systems. If learners were immersed in all of the sign systems in the same ways they are surrounded with language in schools, they would more likely use these systems in powerful and meaningful ways in their lives. The ability to use a range of sign systems is significant because these systems are the basis for critical and creative thinking and because each system provides access to understandings that are not available through other signs (Eco, 1976).

These beliefs about sign systems are the basis for our inquiry into "how pictures mean" (Bang, 2000) and art as a meaning-making process involving both interpreting and composing. Teachers study art as a process, but also have opportunities to use art as a tool for making meaning and communicating as they respond to picture books and create pieces of art.

### **ART AS A MEANING-MAKING PROCESS**

The Art of the Picture Book was designed as a course for teachers and librarians to examine the role of visual literacy in understanding picture books. In addition, some class members want to write and/or illustrate books for children. The course focuses specifically on picture books and illustration, but the broader purpose is for educators to see art as a sign system. I create the same kinds of experiences and learning environments for adults that I hope they will bring into their classrooms.

### **Exploring our understandings of picture books and art**

The course begins by exploring several broad questions - What is a picture book? What is art? How do art and words work together to create meaning within a picture book? Teachers' own experiences and understandings are foregrounded *before* engaging in professional readings. To explore "What is a picture book?," we talk about **Where the Wild Things Are** (Sendak, 1963) as a class and browse many picture books. Teachers also engage in hands-on art experiences with artists' tools to examine the relationship between print and illustration.

Based on these experiences, teachers work in small groups to web their definitions of a picture

book. Only then do they read how scholars in the field define a picture book (Kiefer, 1995). We begin the next class by discussing the work of scholars, comparing their ideas to those of teachers, and adding new insights to the webs. I want to validate teachers' experiences instead of prioritizing the views of experts but I also want teachers to learn from experts. By reversing what typically happens in a university course and reading *after class* members engage in experiences on a topic, teachers bring their backgrounds and a greater interest to their reading.

In the next class session, we explore "What is art?" To tap into teachers' understandings, they bring an artifact that reflects their definition of art. These are shared in small groups using *Save the Last Word for Me* (Short & Harste, 1996) where each person displays an artifact and the others talk about how they think it might reflect art. The person who brought the artifact speaks last, talking about what the personal meaning of that artifact after hearing a range of other possible interpretations. All of the artifacts are then put into a museum display on a table to reflect our definitions of art. We also read *The Monument* (Paulson, 1991) and use *Sketch to Stretch* (Short & Harste, 1996) to sketch the book's meaning and then share these responses in literature circles.

Studio always includes a range of artists' tools and mediums along with open-ended suggestions to support teachers in further exploring the class focus. In this class session, the studio invitations explore various aspects of the art world, such as sculpture, painting, drawing, weaving, collage, textiles, and photography. These studio invitations include art prints and artifacts as well as materials for teachers to make their own creations.

These initial classes establish the complex relationship between interpreting and composing. Teachers come into the course expecting to look at books and interpret the illustrations. They are not expecting studio and some react with fear and trepidation at creating their own artwork, even though we reassure them that our focus is process, not product. We usually begin class sessions with interpretation since that is often more comfortable for teachers. They browse picture books that have been organized into different text sets, conceptually related sets of 10-15 picture books that highlight particular aspects of illustrations we are considering in the class session. They also meet in literature circles, small groups of 4-6, to discuss and analyze a particular picture book. Sometimes the

entire class discusses the same book in small groups and then we share as a whole group. Other times, teachers meet in literature circles with each group reading a different book.

One of my concerns about these literature discussions is that teachers do not become so involved in analyzing the technical aspects of illustrations that they do not respond personally to the **meaning** of the **book**. They need to be able to connect their personal experiences, their understandings of the book, and their knowledge of illustration in exploring a book. The following small group discussion of **Rainbow Goblins** (Rico, 1994) is typical of the talk which occurs in these groups as teachers **talk** their way into understanding the book through "reading" illustrations and text.

*Deb: This illustration is so peaceful. I've been in places like that where you could see the stars.*

*Nojood: With the storm starting. You see? Is this wind? Are the branches this way because of the wind?*

*Carmen: That does look like wind to me, but I see a little bit of movement by the ripples on the border.*

*Deb: But, it really looks peaceful. I think this is sort of a mental peaceful. This one, the shadows—right away, I was thinking he makes it seem scary and ominous with the shadows on the wall. They're so evil.*

In each class session, the browsing and literature circles are followed by studio invitations that build from the aspects that teachers have examined in the picture books. During the studio time, they can play with a wide range of art materials to explore the same concepts, but through a composing process. Picture books and art prints are always available for use during studio so they can move back and forth between composing and interpreting.

From the beginning, it was clear that teachers would need more time to play at composing **in** a nonthreatening way than what **we** could provide within the class studio. They need to broaden their experiences of using art so that they can get inside the thinking processes of illustrators. Sketch journals provide this time, although teachers do not necessarily see them as nonthreatening. They are asked to make entries outside of class twice a week and then share their entries with someone infor-

mally at the beginning of the class, although they can choose not to share. We spend one studio exploring different types of entries that could be made in the journals and I reassure teachers that we will not evaluate their entries, only check whether they have made regular entries. Some class members already keep sketch journals or have kept them in the past and are excited to have the journal as a legitimate part of their university life as well. Others literally turn white with fear and I have had to talk with some individually to reassure them so that they don't immediately drop the course. Their fear is usually based in memories of having their art critiqued negatively as a child in school.

The journal is a place to observe and capture what is happening around them through sketches, webs, and words (Robinson, 1996). The observations can come from daily life, their classrooms, readings, professional experiences, studio, etc. Some class members use the journal to sketch subjects of interest, such as children or flowers. Some use it to explore a particular medium, such as watercolor, or an aspect of art, such as line or color. Others use abstract images to explore emotions. Some reproduce famous works of art or a book illustration. Still others use the journal to plan a particular project, such as quilt blocks, a classroom arrangement, or their own picture book. Some use it to refine their skills as artists and are very deliberate in their entries, while others use it for free exploration or to relax and unwind.

### **Examining the strategies of illustrators**

These initial explorations are followed by several sessions examining the strategies of particular illustrators so that teachers can see the interplay between strategies and the complexity of illustrators' choices. Strategies are defined as the methods used by illustrators to create meaning as they make decisions in their composing. Each illustrator develops a repertoire of methods to draw upon in particular circumstances. We engage in a range of experiences so they can develop their own language and understandings of these strategies before moving to the technical vocabulary and concepts from the field of illustration.

**In** one class session, each small group closely examines a picture book and talks about the book's meaning and the illustrator's strategies. They then move to studio where they reproduce an illustration from that book using the same media as the illustrator. This process is designed to encourage them to go "inside the illustrator's head" and to

closely attend to the media and to small details such as how color and line are used to create a composition. They have to look much more closely than in their literature discussions to see very small details that they would normally miss when only attending to the overall impact of the illustration.



**Figure 1.**  
Nojood's reproduction of an illustration  
from *Ben's Trumpet* (Isadora, 1979)

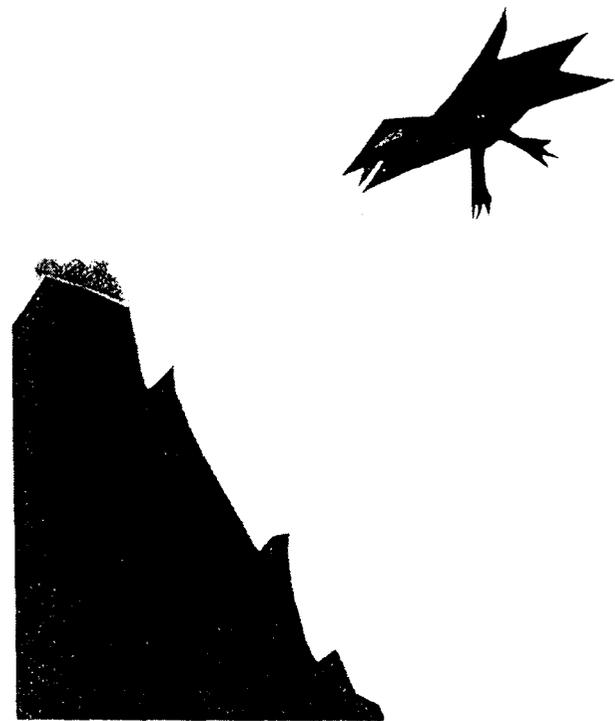
The following week students meet in literature circles to examine text sets of particular illustrators. They then go into studio and explore the same medium that the illustrator used, but make their own original artwork. We also begin reading professional books that introduce technical art vocabulary and concepts (Kiefer, 1995; Shulevitz, 1985; Stewig, 1995). By this point, teachers feel a strong need for these concepts and are not overwhelmed by these technical aspects. Their experiences with looking at books and creating their own art have created a strong need to explore the ideas and knowledge of experts in the field.

### Learning about art

Over the following weeks, we examine art elements, style, technique, and book design through the discipline of illustration. In each case, teachers engage in professional reading and then look at text sets set up to highlight these aspects. For example, when we study book design, the text sets are sets of 10-15 picture books that highlight unusual formats, formal and informal text placement, kinds of paper and print, borders, endpapers, front matter, and pop-ups. In studio, teachers can use a storyboard to compose a story or lay out a book,

create a double-paged spread, make multiples images for borders, explore print placement with *self-stick* notes, make endpapers using a range of mediums, explore different kinds of bookbinding, and assemble their own pop-ups. For technique, they look at sets that each highlight a particular medium, such as watercolor or pen and ink and then explore these media in studio. In addition, we explore current trends, such as the postmodern picture book and picture books for older readers.

Many class members have indicated that the studio invitation which follows the text sets on the art elements of color, shape, line, light and dark, texture, and space is the most powerful experience in the class. Building on their professional reading (Bang, 2000), they quickly create scary pictures using simple shapes cut from sheets of white, red, black, and purple paper. These pictures are taken to the center of the room and we gather around them to talk about which are most effective in their use of the elements to create fear. Because the shapes are not glued down, we move shapes around on a few pictures as we talk about ways to increase tension. Teachers then retrieve their pictures and return to their work tables to discuss tension and make revisions.



**Figure 2.**  
Scary picture (Carmen, adult)

The final part of the course focuses on teachers' inquiry projects. Some take the text set and studio invitations from our class and try them out with their students. Many create and illustrate their own picture books. During this time, we revisit particular invitations in studio based on their requests. In our class sessions, local elementary teachers share their experiences using picture books in their classrooms. We also visit some type of art museum, often the photography museum at the university, to engage in aesthetic scanning, experience how engaging with the actual art piece is different from looking at reproductions, and consider how visits to museums can become part of the classroom curriculum. In addition, a local illustrator of picture books shares with his/her process of illustration with class members as well as discusses the difficult process of getting published.

At our last class session, we return to **Where the Wild Things Are** (Sendak, 1963) to examine the book in small groups and then share as a whole class. The discussion of this book during our first class is usually quite brief. During the final class session, we often have to cut off their responses after 40 minutes because we have run out of time. Even though I have been part of these discussions many times, class members always find new insights that have never been mentioned before. They talk about the light source on the pages, the book planning and layout, and the use of flatness and depth in the figures. They note how the technique for painting the water varies and gets softer at points and wonder whether Sendak might have added the water last to the illustrations. They examine the use of sharp angles along with curves to communicate that the monsters are not as scary as they seemed initially. They talk about the organization of the pictures, particularly the rhythm that Sendak established to match the movement of the storyline. They are curious about the placement of the print on the page and how the pictures expand and take over the page as Max moves more deeply into his fantasy adventure. They note Sendak's use of crosshatching and question whether there is a pattern to when he chose to use it in relation to the events in the story. They notice the changes in the moon to signal the passage of time, the changing perspectives, the use of implied lines in the trees, and parts that bled off the page. They complain about the loss of the quality of the color in the paperback editions of the book.

Another indication of the growth that teachers have experienced in their responses to illustrations and thinking about art as meaning-making are

found in their final self-evaluations. The following excerpt from one teacher's final self-evaluation reflects the comments that many have made over the years about the course:

*At first, I wasn't sure exactly what I would get out of the course other than an intense exposure to children's literature. As the semester progressed, I found that I was looking at things in a different way. I am spending more time in my classroom and life delving into and discussing illustrators, illustrations, and processes. I am more curious about illustrator techniques and thoughts. I am also realizing the value of creating and gaining meaning through a variety of sign systems, and noticing how different children show different strengths when they have an opportunity to express themselves in a variety of ways. I am realizing how much children already read from illustrations and am hoping to nurture and further develop that ability.*

### REFLECTIONS

The complex interplay of interpreting and composing creates a powerful environment for learning within this course. When in studio, teachers continuously refer to picture books and art prints as they play with art materials. When they discuss books in literature circles, they sketch and web their responses. Their experiences as artists become important reference points for interpreting the books they are reading. Through professional readings, illustrator studies, and visits to the photography museum, they gain insights into how other illustrators think and work. These insights into others' composing processes inform both their reading and artwork.

Another important aspect of the course is the balance between open-ended contexts where adults can engage in the doing of art and specific engagements where they learn about art. The sketch journals and studio experiences where they can freely play with art immerses them as artists. These experiences create a need for learning about art through discussions, specific engagements, and strategy lessons. These lessons are demonstrations of what learners *might* think about or do in their work, not models of what they *must* do. The focus is to provide them with more options, not impose a particular procedure or way of thinking.

It's important to point out that the course does not begin by teaching about art. We start out looking at books, talking about our interpretations, and creating art. Based on these experiences, we determine

the types of engagements, discussions, or lessons that might support learners in deepening their understandings of art. Teachers later learn about art and use art to compose and interpret because they *need* these understandings for their inquiries. They are involved in questions that matter to them as learners and use art and picture books as tools to further that inquiry. Because their questions matter, so do their use of art and illustrations to make meaning.

Visual images and picture books become a way to explore and understand the world and their lives—part of the inner vision that mediates their actions and understandings. Because their understandings of "how pictures mean" have changed, their interactions with children around picture books open up possibilities for visual image to become a critical part of children's own understandings of literature and life as well.

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