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Catching the reading bug: looking at how to immerse children in the literary experience using visual and textual literacy

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Abstract

This paper will explore the explosion of children's picture books, and the manner in which it may be exploited in the literary classroom.

Introduction

I started out writing this paper armed with a number of references, and good academic practice. Off I went to research the process of how visual and textual literature, predominantly in the form of picture books, counted towards the development of good reading practice. However, there is more to this than an academic argument. That would be a dry and reasoned perspective on the process. Let's get emotional instead. It may not be reasoned, and former Federal Education Minister, Dr Nelson, and his determined successor, Julie Bishop, would probably, if they could start it, drive a Mac truck through the holes.

What I firmly believe comes from a collage of personal experiences. One of them was leaning against the wall in my overcrowded training room listening to a colleague expound why a particular reading scheme was a bad trip for a proto-literate child, especially one from a EAL (English as an Additional Language) background. After an interesting sidetrack into clothing and culture, we went with her for a walk through *Dog in, Cat out*, and why it was a predictive classic, helping those same kids contextualise the reality of reading strategies in a western cultural classroom.

Next comes the reality for me, as a 16-year-old going with my father to the wool sales, and having to fill out the paperwork on a form. On the same day I stuck the L plates on the car for the first time, I learned

something else as well. My wonderful, strong, hard-working farmer father, was functionally illiterate. He had managed to survive a sniper's bullet in Bougainville, but he had failed to survive the literacy process in the school classroom. Like our son, and probably for similar reasons, he struggled with that light bulb moment on the way to literacy. Our son, Sam, too, always appeared a square peg in a round hole, labelled, by the colour of his basal reader, as one of the dummies, and bullied because of it. His passage through school was fraught with tensions, days off, long phone conversations with senior masters, and, finally, an early escape from school into an apprenticeship.

Our daughter, on the other hand, slipped seamlessly into the process, meeting the reading challenge head on, burying herself in books of all shapes and sizes, and eating up the MS Readathon, to my great financial detriment. What was the difference? One aspect was undoubtedly the amazing dedication of her teacher, as well as Sophie's natural, voracious curiosity. To me, however, a major issue was that her classroom was crowded with picture books, both old familiar friends, and new ones to tempt her imagination.

The next image is of the day I started writing this paper. The hide of me, I suddenly thought. I haven't been in a classroom since Terry Metherell was Minister for Education, in the NSW Coalition Government in the late 1980s. What do I know about the reading process, catching the bug or sliding kids into literacy? What I do know is what I see every day, as students find their way into the Curriculum unit where I work, often very vague about how they need to go about the process of building up their own teaching practice, and uninitiated into the diversity of literary choices at their disposal. I regularly ask the Primary and Secondary English teaching students, when they come to classes, if they have read a book in the last week they identify as a children's book. Few hands go up. By the time they graduate, I know I will get a very different response.

So what makes the difference?

Explosion of children's literature picture books

It is really not giving anybody information to say that there has been an explosion of picture books published in the last few years. It is no

surprise either to know that many of them court controversy. Many are clearly not written with shared bed-time or early literacy needs in mind. Picture books are now an experience for all ages. It is an issue that Shaun Tan (2001) grapples with when he argues that there is no barrier to the age group reading such a text, or enjoying it, nor should a picture book be created with a given audience in mind. Coupled with this, is the revived interest in graphic novels as a textual experience. Allyson Lyga argues that graphic novels are a workout, as the brain is “bombarded simultaneously with the graphic novel’s character, setting, plot, and action” (Lyga, 2006, p58). The same applies to the narrative constructions of the picture book. These developments are symptomatic of the way in which children are soaked in visual, textual and verbal messages needing to be received, filtered and understood, mostly in a very different classroom environment to that of the majority of their teachers and parents.

All this has meant that our approaches to picture books, especially, and literature in the classroom in general, has undergone a process of navel gazing. If we want kids to catch the reading bug through picture books, we need to provide a diversity of texts. There are those which offer, as does *Dog in, Cat Out*, a way in to decoding and meaning making for even the smallest kindergarten participant if there are successful engagement strategies employed. There are others, such as *The Watertower*, which have opened up a new discourse within the secondary classroom. Still others, such as the *Red Tree* or *The Lost Thing* offer a strongly visual narrative experience, dominating and often subverting the text. Texts such as *Voices in the Park* have become a convenient hanger for a postmodernist cloak in the secondary environment. The whimsically melancholic *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat* has acted as a flag carrier for a number of books which approach the question of death and grief, from *The Very Best of Friends* to *Lucy’s Bay* and *Let the Celebrations Begin*.

This explosion of texts has offered an increasingly exciting perspective for children in the classroom to develop much needed multiliteracy skills. These are the skills necessary to contend with the bombardment of visual and textual information forced on them through media outlets and daily life. It has also meant that strategies for decoding, for meaning making, and for analysing text and images have increased in importance.

Skills learnt in developing literacy experiences within the picture book genres can then be transferred to other media, such as film, advertising, print media and the virtual world. This means that the skills we encourage in the classroom can be developed into creating a socially more aware and astute observer, from pre-school to adulthood, with the strategies necessary for dealing with information overload. The student who has conquered the multimodal reading process has the skills to assess the information on a website, navigate the intricacies of Graeme Base's *The Waterhole*, and critically assess the veracity of the seemingly never ending collection of electioneering material currently arriving unsolicited via unsuspecting Australian letterboxes and television screens.

When I began my career as a librarian and a teacher, (back, as my daughter says, before the last ice age) picture books were undergoing a metamorphosis based on new printing techniques which allowed illustrators and authors to explore a wider visual experience. There was still a perception that picture books were for proto-literacy development and a shared-reading experience, conjuring up images of children snuggling down for sleep with cuddly books such as *Goodnight Moon* or wonderful rhythms such as *Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy*. A wise lecturer at Teachers College observed that a copy of *Where the Wild Things Are* should be given out with every child's birth certificate. *Rosie's Walk* and *A Very Hungry Caterpillar* were encouraged as reading tools in the Infants classroom, especially for those children whose first language was not English, whose needs were never entirely addressed by my training. We were a long way from *Woolvs in the Sitee*, *Way Home* or *My Hiroshima*. As the perspective of what makes a picture book has developed, so too have the differences of opinions on what is appropriate to be included, and how such a text would be used in the classroom.

I am coming to this topic as a teacher librarian, long Metherellised out of the classroom.³ My evangelism now rests with students starting out on their teaching careers, within both the primary and secondary spheres.

³ For those who may not have encountered the reforms led by the then Minister of Education in NSW, the period between 1988 and 1990 were a time of major upheaval and constant restructuring within both school and vocational education.

As such, I have both a captive audience, and one which has not had to weather the debate on the postmodern, and accusations of teaching nothing but cultural studies. These students also have missed out on the more acrimonious elements of the 'grammar wars' surrounding the initial changes to the NSW English Syllabus in the mid-'90s. This means that many cannot see what the fuss is about when the current NSW Stage 6 English Syllabus is discussed.

Reading through what has been written about teaching with picture books in the literacy classroom, over the time I have been Curriculum Librarian, demonstrates that, in the early '90s, our approach to teaching, and the literature with which we could indulge our students, gained an enormous boost through the adventurous spirit of authors and illustrators, especially in Australia. Seminal critical analysis of the picture book as a genre also found something of a high water mark at that point. This has allowed us, as professionals in the literary environment, to be spoilt for choice when looking for visual and textual narratives with which to work.

Parallel to the debate about the nature of the picture book, and intended audience, is the recent discussion about the nature of reading teaching. That this debate has created a number of tensions, not least of which have been around the use of sequenced reading schemes, has highlighted one of the dichotomies facing the classroom teacher, and the teacher librarian. Many of you will have listened to a constructive discussion delivered by Professor Derrick Armstrong (2006) and Professor Brian Cambourne (2006a), at the 2006 National Conference on Future Directions in Literacy (Simpson, 2006), in relation to the *Nelson Report*, and the tensions created by its findings (DEST, 2005). There is no news in saying that approaches to teaching reading, and in immersing students in a literature rich classroom, are areas fraught with challenges. As the mother of a child with learning difficulties, the greatest challenge was encouraging and maintaining his interest in what he saw as a losing battle to conquer reading. What the debates around phonics versus whole language, picture book versus reader, does is strengthen my resolve that there are many paths to literacy, just as every student will find different maps to get there. That this view is one shared with many others, is reinforcement of 'real' literature's importance.

The need to immerse children of all ages in a visual and textual soup of picture books and graphic texts was reinforced to me by watching one of my colleagues proselytise about the need to use good literature. By this, she meant literature that engaged the spirit and fed the imagination of the reader, not textual food which had been created to a bland recipe of unchallenging repetition and uninviting visual prozac. The iconic story recounted by Margaret Meek, of her student, Ben's, first meeting with *Rosie's Walk*, says volumes about engagement with a text which invites identification from the child (Meek, 1988, p11). Where picture books are concerned, I have to embrace the comment made by Maurice Saxby that "the best picture books are those that have the power to slide into a child's imagination" (Saxby, 1997, p185). When discussing with a student what texts are worthwhile, my litmus test is focused on whether the student feels he or she could reread it constantly. Is it still going to be the focus of a lesson or unit of work which excites them when they teach it the next time around, and then the next? If the answer is no, then perhaps it should stay on the shelf. When a new group of students comes through for a library orientation, this test wins through. They will reflect back on the titles which enticed their own childhood reading, reinforcing the manner in which they too have slid into books. To defer again to Meek, she argues convincingly for "the textual variety of children's picture books" against the reading scheme which "offers no excitement, no challenge, no real help" (Meek, 1988, p19).

Multitude of visual and literary experiences

So where does this place the visual and literary feast now available for inclusion in classroom practice? There are picture books which should entice the most reluctant reader into the literary experience, in the right hands and with the right approach. As is reinforced above, that could mean 26 right approaches for 26 different kids with 26 different learning styles. Despite the potential for teachers to be heavily criticised for their teaching practice in our current political climate, this is exactly what can be seen in most classrooms everyday. So the issue is to find the right germ to slide open the imagination. It also indicates that there is really nothing new under the sun. We are still dealing with Meek's need for textual variety, and we are still engaging with *Rosie's Walk*.

Our daughter Sophie's reading opportunities offered this textual variety. They also offered a visual smorgasbord which challenged and made it possible for her to engage in a different narrative experience. The recent awarding of the Premier's prize to Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* indicates how much more adventurous our explorations of these narratives have become. Any survey of picture books published in the last decade will demonstrate the diversity of texts. We have gone from struggling with defining the role of picture books to allowing ourselves to enjoy them on a number of levels. Dr Seuss's *The Butter Battle Book* and Raymond Briggs' *The Tin-pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman* may give pause to an adult's justification of war, and there is no escaping the message in David Miller's *Refugees*. These are picture books with a message, and have attracted criticism as well as praise. Their place in the classroom may occasionally cause comment. Contextualising the experiences of those who have come through war and escape, however, can have a positive effect on understanding, while helping to promote an inclusive environment.

The rich visual narrative of *An Ordinary Day* allows the reader/viewer to look at the manner in which a visual narrative subverts the textual one, just as the four focalisations in *Voices in the Park* offers an exploration of the manner in which meaning making is very dependent on point of view. Anthony Browne's wonderful habit of providing a metafictional conversation, such as including well known works of art, and intertextual play, gives participants the opportunity to explore the surreal, and look for hidden meaning set up in juxtaposition with the text.

The manner in which *First Light* plays the visual against the textual narrative with a sense of impending danger, with the sinister subtext of the boy's relationship with his father, demonstrates the manner in which text and visual can work to create, or undermine perceptions. The same can be said about *We're Going On a Bear Hunt*, where the illustrator, Helen Oxenbury, subverted the intentions of the author by discarding the knights and ladies of his original vision, and substituted them with a family jaunt through imagination and long grass. Oxenbury and her editor talked about this at length at the 2006 Australian Children's Book Council Conference (Oxenbury, 2006).

Develop the will to read

The most important issue is the will to read. The question has to be asked. What are the triggers that will build the will to immerse the child in the reading environment, make them savvy to the skills they need to extract meaning, enjoyment and knowledge, and engage them in the multiliterate community? While the Federal report into reading focuses on very specific skills, Cambourne argues against the toxicity of focusing exclusively on phonics before meaning making (Cambourne, 2006b, p33). What is important is to encourage in readers the sense that reading is fun, enticing and engaging, a skill for many purposes and a door into a number of different worlds, that “engaged reading has its own intrinsic rewards beyond test scores” (Bremner & Dufficy, 2006, p73). What comes through the discussion fostered by Meek and others is that the natural desire to read will be enhanced by the reinforcement of enjoyment. As we all know, by making reading a chore, or by creating laborious tasks, the thrill of reading is lost in the need to complete tedious or repetitive assessments. This is not new. As Jo-Anne Reid points out, this was recognised as an issue in 1922, when a classroom teacher, Miss Archibald, is quoted as reinforcing the need to foster a love of reading (Reid, 2006, p21).

So what is needed is to ask ourselves, what gets inside a child’s mind?

Open a mirror on the child’s world

Jon Callow and Margery Hertzberg argue strongly for the choice of culturally and linguistically appropriate texts (Callow & Hertzberg, 2006, p46) while Meek’s aged but much valued arguments on reading development indicate the importance of predictive and contextualised texts such as *Rosie’s Walk*. The opportunity to develop an awareness of book conventions, using *Rosie’s Walk*, *Dog In*, *Cat Out* or *The Stinky Cheese Man*, has been understood for many years. Indulging children in contextualised reading, as demonstrated by Callow and Hertzberg’s case study example, quoted in *Beyond the Reading Wars*, is crucial to the development of the reading process (Callow & Hertzberg, 2006, p44). When such an experience works, it is because there are visual hints, conventions to prompt the movement of the eye from the given to the new, and hooks to pull the child further into the process. *The Stinky*

Cheese Man, on the other hand, works because it is metafictional, highlighting the textual strategies we usually take for granted, such as the little red hen's fury at the "ISBN guy". It works with those in the know because they get the intertextual jokes. It also works with those beginning the literacy journey as a wonderful way to introduce the conventions of the book.

There is also a reinforcement of the need for cultural contextualisation. Scieszka and Smith's *Really Ugly Duckling* went off with a whimper not a bang when I read it in our workroom because my highly educated Mandarin and Cantonese speaking colleagues had never been exposed in childhood to the traditional telling of the same story (Scieszka & Smith, 1992). In the same way, choosing *Enora and the Black Crane* to read with a predominantly Wiradjuri class, while enjoyable, demonstrated that for children brought up distant from that particular culture, the contextual and cultural familiarity was missing. Town children, with different experiences, would, however, have gained pride from the Indij Readers, especially, amongst an AFL mad group, *All the questions you ever wanted to ask Adam Goodes*.

Mary Ryan and Michelle Anstey draw attention to the manner in which, what they refer to as Lifeworld and School-Based world, connect and intersect in their discussion of classroom readings of *The Rabbits* (Ryan & Anstey, 2003). Over the course of time spent working with the text, the meaning making or semantic skills dominated. When prompted for critical analysis, however, the students began to read the subliminal messages within the text, that of the European presence in Australia. Ryan and Anstey observes that "all literacy practices are a reflection of the sociocultural processes and knowledge of the learner" (Ryan & Anstey, 2003, p11). The redoubtable Miss Archibald would have agreed, having argued that there needed to be a "definite connection between the child's spoken language ... and the new written language" encountered in the school environment (Reid, 2006, p21).

Miss Archibald cannot have foreseen the arrival of syllabus documents calling for the study of picture books from the beginning of schooling till at least Year 10. The skills required to create meaningful learning may be challenging for both student and teacher, especially for those for

whom a visual literacy is a new and unscaffolded encounter. For them, the meeting of text, which, semiotically, carries a special set of signs, with the visual, which offers an entirely different set, may challenge preconceptions of textual competency. As I came originally from a Fine Arts background, I have always been attracted to the visual, and find the language offered by Kress and van Leeuwen a bonus when discussing the visual narrative. The lushness of Anne Spudvilas' illustrations for *Woolys in the Sitee*, or those of Donna Rawlins in *Digging to China*, strike a chord, as does the delicate whimsy of *The Nativity* illustrated by Julie Vivas. I could go on all day. Having the privilege of watching both Julie Vivas and Donna Rawlins work has been one of my life highlights. Every bit as much as Shaun Tan, these two, and many other gifted illustrators, utilise a talent one has to be born with. Constructing a textual narrative to complement and enhance the visual one becomes an awesome responsibility. Using such a complex medium in the classroom environment should extend the imaginative and creative processes of reading across the stages.

Awareness of how visual narratives develop

Exploiting the visual elements in the narrative to draw the reader/viewer into the reading experience, by using literature that is enticing, both visually and verbally, is a way of tapping into the child's enjoyment. While Rosie, and Max with his wild things, follow a predictive pattern, texts such as *The Stinky Cheese Man* offer a metafictional exploration of what makes a book work, exploiting and subverting the concepts of given and new, and textual protocols.

I see the issue as very much one of creating meaning makers with skills to interpret across a wide range of visual and textual media from web pages to picture books to advertisements. For this reason, the past decade's development of picture books which push boundaries have been a crucial part of my work with the students using our collection. Jane Torr argues "the fact that picture books are complex works of literature where the written text and illustrations together combine to construct the overall meaning allows for multiple interpretations and personal associations to be stimulated in the reader" (Torr, 2003, p12). Torr is discussing a preschool class. Mark Howie and Prue Greene offer a similar perspective, but in this case, their target group is a low ability

Year 9 class looking at *Gorilla*. Howie and Greene make the point that illustrated text has been around since the Middle Ages, illuminating meaning with beautifully embossed calligraphic visuals. What the students do is grapple with “literary theory and critical literacy in a most accessible way” (Howie & Greene, 2003, p7). What is coming through is the issue highlighted by Clare Bradford, when she quotes David Lewis, that “picture books are ‘inescapably plural’” and that this involves ‘the use of signs’ (Bradford, 1993, p10). As Bradford goes on to discuss, these signs convey meanings made complex by the combination of image and text, so that the deceptively simple text can create “subtle and layered works” accessible at different levels to different reader/viewers (Bradford, 1993, p13).

In conclusion, it would seem to me that there are endless possibilities for harnessing “the plurality of the picture book” (Grieve, 1993, p16), not just as a cuddly experience before bed, in a shared reading, or DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) program, but throughout the school experience. Each reader/viewer gains and contributes a complex perception. The crucial skill is to be able to scaffold from one experience to the next, a meaningful relationship with the visual and textual product in front of them. The preoccupation in the classroom with meeting the need to learn and make meaning, is one which will shape the way in which picture books come into play, especially in the English classroom. Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen have greatly assisted the rise of a vocabulary to work with picture books, and to assist in developing a critical literary theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). A language or rhetoric for the study of picture books inside and outside the classroom has been around for some years. I see my role as participating in the identification of picture books which encourages that act of sliding into the child’s imagination. For this to happen, we need to treasure and nurture our picture book creators, and the reader/viewer whose reading experience is enriched because of them.

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