Approaching, Navigating, and Comprehending Picturebooks

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As students go about their daily lives, they are presented with a vast array of visual images which affect the way they come to understand the world and themselves. In today's society, visual images have come to equal, if not dominate, the modes used to communicate and represent information in contemporary society (Fleckenstein, 2002). In how-to manuals, recipe books, websites, reference materials, advertisements, billboards, and the other texts in the lives of elementary and middle school students, students are confronted with a vast array of visual images contained in "multimodal texts." Unfortunately, these multimodal texts, texts that utilize a variety of visual and textual forms and structures, have not been as prominent a feature in the language arts curriculum as they are in the lives of the students for which the curriculum was intended (Anstey & Bull, 2006).

Reading comprehension strategies, for example predicting, summarizing, and visualizing, often focus exclusively on written text. However, many of the texts that readers encounter in their daily lives are dominated by visual images. Comprehending visual images requires a variety of strategies and skills just like comprehending written texts. In order to develop the skills and strategies necessary for readers to make sense of both written texts and visual images, teachers need to become aware of the theories and practices involved with comprehending visual images, and develop techniques for teaching these strategies and ways of approaching visual images to their students (Serafini, 2005).

Multimodal texts, comprised of written text, visual images, graphic elements, hyperlinks, video clips, audio clips and other modes of representation require different strategies for navigating and comprehending than written texts alone (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Calling students' attention to the various components of multimodal texts is an important aspect of the reading workshop. The most prominent multimodal text in elementary and middle school classrooms is the picturebook. This "sanctioned" multimodal text may serve as a bridge between the traditional print

based literacy of traditional reading instruction and the visual or multiliteracies needed in contemporary society.

In order to construct meaning in transaction with picturebooks, readers need to first recognize what is being offered in these multimodal texts and how to navigate and make sense of its constituent components. Based on the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), Lewis (2001) Doonan (1993), and other educational and literary theorists focusing on multimodal texts and the analysis of visual elements, this article will present a framework for navigating, analyzing, and comprehending the visual images and design elements in contemporary picturebooks. Understanding the artistic styles, choices, and components of individual images and the contexts in which these images appear, together with discussions focusing on the design and formatting choices in picturebook publishing, will expand readers' interpretive repertoires beyond written text to address challenges of interpreting visual elements and images.

Contemporary Picturebooks

The compound word "picturebook" has been used by various researchers and literary theorists to connote the unified nature of the written text and visual images of this literary form (Kiefer, 1995; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). The picturebook is a unique literary experience, where meaning is generated simultaneously from written text and visual images. (Sipe, 1998) has described the relationship between written text and visual images in the picturebook as "synergistic," suggesting that what is constructed from the combination of the two sign systems is greater than the potential meanings offered by either text or image in isolation.

Both sign systems, written language and visual image, transact and transform the other during the reading experience, allowing readers to oscillate back and forth between the textual and visual elements during their transactions with picturebooks. In addition, "picturebooks give children the opportunity to engage in an unending process of meaning making, as every rereading brings new ways of looking at words and pictures (Sipe, 1998, p.107). The complexity of design and variety of multimodal components requires teachers help readers to attend to the visual and textual

components when approaching, navigating and comprehending contemporary picturebooks. In this article, I will address how readers approach, navigate and comprehend picturebooks, offering some pedagogical suggestions for each process.

Approaching Picturebooks

Too often, novice readers pick up a picturebook and skip through the paratextual information, including the dedication, title pages, cover art, author's notes, jacket information, and endpages, heading straight for the opening lines of the story. Considering the "extra-textual" or "paratextual" (Genette, 1999) resources, those included within the book, but not directly part of the story, and those elements outside of the book, for example advertisements, author websites and interviews, and critical analyses, can enhance one's comprehension of a picturebook. Teachers need to demonstrate the role and importance of these elements by attending to them during read alouds and literature discussions, and helping students attend to these resources during independent reading.

Demonstrating how to approach a picturebook requires teachers to "think aloud" about the visual and textual elements they attend to as they being reading the picturebook, and openly discuss the meanings they are constructing with a variety of visual and textual resources. Discussing the relationship between the art included on the endpages and the story, the significance of the title, fonts, design, and cover art, whether vertical or horizontal formats were selected, the design and visual components of the title pages, the possible significance of the dedication, and the information provided by the publisher on the book jacket are important considerations for classroom discussions.

In demonstrating how proficient readers approach picturebooks, teachers need to begin by discussing what they notice, what elements they are attending to as they begin to read and analyze a particular picturebook. The comprehension of visual images, and for that matter written text, begins with perception of visual components, including; composition choices, color, borders and other semiotic resources utilized to represent information and communicate to readers (van Leeuwen, 2005). However, comprehension does not end with perception. Attention to the visual

and textual elements of a picturebook should be conceptualized as a "point of departure" (Serafini & Youngs, in press), starimg point for the interpretation of picturebooks, not the destination or primary goal. One way to do support this expansion beyond the literal image or text, is by creating a chart that demonstrates the need to interpret what has been perceived. I have called this a "Noticing, Interpreting, Implications" chart. This chart asks students to consider what they initially notice in the text or visual images, then ask themselves what it might mean, and finally to consider the implications for their interpretations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Noticing, Interpreting, Implications Chart

What did You Notice?	What Might It Mean?	So What?

This chart provides readers with a demonstration of the ways in which the literal text is not the final destination of our literature discussions, rather it is the point of departure for our interpretations and critique. By demonstrating that "what we notice" is only one aspect of the process of interpretation, we are providing support for readers to interpret and critique these works of literature.

Navigating Picturebooks

Picturebooks require students to navigate the visual and textual elements, and design features in ways that written text alone does not require. For example, many "postmodern" picturebooks (Bull, 2002; Goldstone, 2004) have multiple reading "paths" that require readers to make decisions concerning how to read them. Non-linear picturebooks, for example, *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne, and *Black and White* by David Macauley, present unique challenges for readers. These texts are closer in design to web pages and hypertext than they are to traditional

picturebooks. As one approaches a website or hypertext, decisions need to be made concerning what to read next, what links to connect with and how to proceed "through" the text. With picturebooks there are visual images, design elements (fonts, borders, size and shape) and written text that must be addressed and navigated in order to construct meanings. Readers make conscious and unconscious decisions about what to attend to and how to proceed through the book. As teachers, we need to pay close attention to how readers navigate the features of a picturebook and what visual, design and textual elements students are attending to and which ones are being overlooked.

One way to observe and monitor how readers attend to picturebooks is to have them "code" texts with post-it notes or have them think aloud as they progress through a text. We can help students to do this by simply asking them, "what do you notice and what do you know so far?" We can attend to what meanings they are making, but we can also attend to what they are missing or overlooking. By reviewing the codes they place in a text, or the contents of their think alouds, we can assess how they are navigating a picturebook. Helping readers make sense of picturebooks begins by helping them know what to attend to and how to approach and navigate these books.

Comprehending Picturebooks

As mentioned previously, many of the comprehension strategies taught in elementary and middle school classrooms focus on written text. Since a picturebook is synergistic combination of visual and textual elements, drawing on both systems of meaning to tell a story of relay information, we need to be sure that we provide strategies for making sense of visual images as well. Drawing specifically on the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), I will provide a few suggestions for reading the visual images and designs of picturebooks.

When looking at visual components and images in picturebooks, it is important to consider where they are located in the text and how they are bordered. Ask yourself:

1. Are the images "full bleed," meaning do they go to the edges of the page?

2. What types of borders are used? Are they picture frame-like borders, or is white space used to border the images?

3. Is the text combined into the image, or is there a separate "text-box" separating the text from the images?

Asking these questions helps the reader understand the distance or level of involvement of the reader. In other words, when we have heavy borders around the images, we are positioned as a "voyeur" looking through the window into the events of the story. Full bleed illustrations seem to invite the reader into a more intimate relationship with the events and characters. Text that is separated from the images tends to set it off from the image, suggesting a separation in what is being presented in the visual and textual elements, rather than a combination of the two elements. For more things to consider, see Figure 2.

Figure 2: Picturebook Analysis Guide

Approaching a Picture Book:

- Pick up the picturebook, attending to the size, format (horizontal or vertical), materials used in construction of book (papers, graphics).
- Consider the author of the text and the artist. What media is used in the illustrations? What fonts are selected? Where is the text located on the page? Borders etc.
- Look at the cover, title and illustrations. What expectations are set up for you as you approach the picture book? What does the cover, title and illustrations suggest?
- What is included in the peritext? The dedication, title page, author's note, summary statement etc..
- Skim through the book, reading quickly to see where the story goes. What is the overall structure of the book? Home-Away-Home ? Repetitive structures or language? Cumulative? The Hero Cycle? Circular, chronological, or other?

Read through the picture book more deliberately, coding / marking important aspects you want to consider. Consider the following questions:

- What were your initial reactions to the text and illustrations?
- What is the overall structure of the text?
- How does the opening of the story compare with the closing of the story?
- How do the illustrations relate to the text?
- Words propel the reader forward and images slow us down. How did this tension between reading and viewing affect your experience?
- What kind of gaps does the author / illustrator leave for the reader to fill in? Are details purposefully left out to create tension?
- How does the story flow from page to page? Are there borders that separate things or does it cross over in language and image from page to page?

- Consider each opening separately. What emotional connotations came to mind?
- Whose background knowledge is privileged in reading this text?
- Is there a relationship between form and content? Does the design of the book add to the content being presented? How?
- What themes were constructed as you read?

Analyzing Visual Images and Design in Picturebooks

- Begin by considering the format of the images and their placement in the picturebook
- Where is the text located? Within the image? Separated by borders or white space, Why?
- Are the illustrations double page spreads, single page images, collages, overlapping images, or portraits?
- Consider the series of images in the picturebook. Do the images change over the course of the book? Do they get bigger, smaller, change?

- Select a particular image to consider. Ask yourself the following:
    - What is fore-grounded and in the background?
    - Consider the "path" your eyes follow as you approach the image. What catches your eye first? Why is that element salient?
    - What colors dominate the image? What effect does this have on you as reader?
    - Consider the use of white (negative) space. Are the illustrations framed or full bleed? How does this position you as a viewer?
    - What is the "reality value" or level of abstraction? Are the images life-like or stick figures?
    - Are there any recurring patterns in the images?
    - Are there any anomalous elements? Things that stick out, or seem out of place? Are these important to consider?
    - What is the artist trying to get you to look at through leading lines, colors, contrast, gestures, lighting?
    - Are there any recurring symbols or motifs in the images?
    - Consider the style or artistic choices? Are the appropriate, and how do they add to the meanings of the picturebook?
    - How are the images framed? Are there thick borders or faded edges?
    - Consider the setting of the story. How is this realized in the images? Realistically? Metaphorically?
    - Consider size and scale. What is large? Why are certain elements larger than others? Does this add to meanings of power, control?
    - Consider the viewers point of view. Do characters directly gaze or address the viewer? Are the characters close up or distanced? How does point of view add to relationships with the characters?

Concluding Remarks

Contemporary picturebooks present possibilities and challenges for novice and experienced

readers alike. Due to their limited length and size, they offer the reader many "gaps to fill" when

reading and constructing meaning in transaction with the visual and textual elements of a picturebook. It is this process of "gap-filling" that provides a conceptual space for readers to attend to the visual and textual components of a picturebook, generate a variety of interpretations, offer these interpretations within a community of readers and negotiate meaning with other readers. This process of generating, negotiating and reconsidering meaning is the foundation of the reading workshop. The primary goal of any reading instructional framework should be to support readers' thinking and talking about what they experience, and provide opportunities to help expand their "interpretive repertoires."

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