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Making Learning Easier With Picture Books

The genre of children’s literature has been discovered only in the recent years of human history. This genre includes picture books, fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs, and other types of literature. Children’s lit must not only embrace the child, but also the entire world of a child – his/her imaginary friends, toys, dolls, imagined animals, and grown-ups as children see them. Picture books are now a common, everyday object in our lives. We have story time with them in the classroom, we read them before we go to sleep, and some of us even make them. What researchers are discovering more and more of lately, is that children actually learn a lot more from reading a book with pictures than they would if they were reading a book with just text. Using picture books in the classroom has not only become an important way for us to teach our children valuable lessons, but also to engage their imaginations and make them more productive. With illustration in children’s books becoming more learning- and emotionally-targeted, children can better read through a narrative, finding it much easier to learn where there are visual images involved.

Until the Industrial Revolution, the children’s book genre remained silently in the background of the literature scene. In fact, in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, children were not thought of as anything more than a pre-adult. Boys were just soon-to-be-warriors and girls were simply soon-to-be breeders of warriors. Therefore, authors did not think they needed their own genre of literature. “A sharp sense of generation gap – one of the motors of a children’s literature – scarcely existed” (Britannica). In 1658, Comenius published *Orbis Sensualium Pictus (The Visible World In Pictures).* This was a teaching device that was also the first widely known picture book for children. This novel played with the idea that children were actually their own brand of human, not just “pre-adults”. This idea was not explored deeper for yet another century. After World War II, the realism in children’s literature took off. Authors began to write about and illustrate the ideas of race, class, war, gender, etc. There is a constantly changing balance between two extremes of children’s literature: the reality of the schoolroom and the vast imagination that a child possesses. The discovery of children led to the realization that children need imaginative, exciting works to teach them the life lessons they need to know.

Children’s pictorial literature is designed for entertainment, use of imagination, and evoking feelings within the reader. Starting with basic shapes and colors, we can examine how the reader would feel according to differences in the images. In the first two chapters of her book *Picture This*, Molly Bang explains how looking at sharp, straight edges make us feel different than looking at rounded, soft edges. By changing the mother figure from a triangle to a rounded version of a triangle, Bang points out in her first few pages that the mother now appears more “huggable”. “What do I feel about the mother now? It has shown some of the ways that shapes and colors affect us emotionally” (Bang 5-6). Bang goes on to explain that by placing the base of the thinner objects higher up on the page, it creates the illusion of depth in the picture. Making a triangle smaller in a picture can make the picture feel scarier and more daunting. “Diagonal lines give a feeling of movement or tension in the picture” (Bang 14). Making the wolf (the picture being illustrated is Little Red Riding Hood) large, pointed triangles in a dark color makes the wolf seem scarier. In the next chapter, Bang explains all of the basic rules of illustrating children’s books in order to evoke the right emotions. If every author knew how these rules worked, they could correctly depict the exact emotions they want in their illustrations, and the reader could understand the point or the story more easily and can learn more from an underlying lesson that is often common in children’s literature.

An article written by Kathleen Ellen O’Neil examines the fusion between words and images and how that can lead the reader to understand the larger message of the story. “Picture books offer many opportunities for emergent and novice readers to develop visual literacy. There is much to read from a picture, much to be inferred and understood implicitly as well as what is obviously depicted” (O’Neil 222). She explains how the child is a visual reader and learns a lot of their basic lessons through pictures and picture books with simple text.

A great example of children learning from illustrations is a case reported by Cheri Williams and Mari McLean. They studied a class of deaf children as opposed to a class of hearing children. Williams and McLean begin by stating that reading has always been an accepted way for our children to learn lessons in the classrooms. Story time in classrooms and bedtime stories at home have long been a part of our nature. New research is now being conducted specifically on children’s responses to picture books. “Early studies suggest that young children’s responses to storybook reading reveal what children understand about story and about written language as well as their efforts to construct meaning from text” (Williams and McLean 337). Addressed is the fact that there have been plenty of studies done on hearing children, but almost none done on deaf children. This study focused on two things; “1. The children’s responses to the oral and signed reading of picture books by the classroom teacher, and 2. The children’s responses to independent and social explorations of picture books during free-choice reading sessions in both the classroom and school libraries” (Williams and McLean 338). There are seven categories (developed by another researcher, Hickman) to classify the responses that children have during reading activities in elementary classrooms. They are as follows: “1. Listening behaviors, characterized by body stances, laughter and applause, exclamations, and joining in refrains; 2. Contact with books, including browsing, showing intent attention, and keeping books at hand; 3. Acting on the impulse to share, such as reading together and sharing discoveries; 4. Oral responses, such as retelling, storytelling, discussion statements, and free comments; 5. Actions and drama, including echoing the action, demonstrating meaning, dramatic play, and both child-initiated and teacher-initiated drama; 6. Making things, such as pictures and related art work, three-dimensional art and construction, and miscellaneous products (games, displays, collections, cookery); and 7. Writing, including restating and summarizing, writing about literature, using literary models deliberately, and using unrecognized models and sources” (Williams and McLean 340). Williams and McLean used these seven categories as a guide to compare their results of the deaf children’s studies to those done on hearing children. One example used in the study is when the classroom teacher (Anna) is reading a book about zoo animals to the class. One child calls out “House play no!” meaning that the lion in the book cannot play in the house. This random comment shows that Andrew understands the ideas of the book and what is happening in the story. During the class’s free choice reading time, children could pick whatever book they wanted to out of the classroom library or the school library to read. “Anna displayed her enthusiasm for the new titles she introduced, and the children shared her excitement as they selected these books during free-choice reading time” (Williams and McLean 349). Not only is the students’ joy coming from being able to read, it is also coming from their ability to finally comprehend what is going on in the books because of the pictures and illustrations. Through all of their language delays and development, it has been hard enough on these children not being able to read. But not taking part in classroom story time because they can’t hear the story being told is on a completely different level. Helping these children receive that same sense of joy as when a hearing child reads their first book or leafs through their first picture book and understands what is happening in the story is something that will forever be pursued in children’s literary research.

Another revolution in research in the past couple of years is the studying of different new technologies recently implemented in classrooms. Things such as SMART boards, laptops, iPads, and Proxima projectors have turned today’s youth into an extremely digital culture. The focus of *Theories and Practices of Multimodal Education: The Instructional Dynamics of Picture Books and Primary Classrooms* is to describe and explore all of the different modes of education. The heart of the study is using these newer modes of education (like computers and SMART boards) to read picture books. The point is to see if these different modes of reading have any effect on the children’s learning. “A transition from print-based education to multimodal education indicates a shift in the notion of reading as a whole” (Hassett and Curwood 270). The authors state that written language of picture books is no longer completely central to understanding the text. Students and teachers both focus on other things in the book, like pictures and the interaction between the words and images. Social interactions like side conversations and discussion questions also alter the perception of a book in a child’s mind. In these complex media worlds, there are a lot of distractions for children to navigate through to understand the media they are looking at. Hassett and Curwood developed three roles for a teacher to help navigate his or her students through this complicated world of distraction. The three roles are as follows: 1. Teacher as a resource manager – the teacher manages print-based and other resources that they know will allow the students to develop the necessary abilities to be able to read newer and harder texts and understand their key ideas; 2. The teacher as a coconstructor of knowledge – the teacher and the students learn together because the teacher acknowledges that sometimes their students know better or more on a subject than they do; 3. The teacher as a design consultant – the teach helps children learn by critiquing and giving feedback on the texts (papers, homework assignments, etc.) students design, with scholarly goals in mind. With the teacher working with the students instead of holding themselves in a hierarchical position over the children, the kids can learn a lot more from their classroom activities with the teacher, such as story time with picture books.

At the beginning of the previously mentioned article, the authors talk about the demands of reading through digital media and how it requires new complex ways of looking at image-text relations. According to David Lewis, author of *Reading Contemporary Picture books,* this interaction is called interanimation. “The pictures themselves can imply narrative information only in relationship to a verbal context; if none is actually provided, we tend to find one in our memory” (Lewis 35). Our own personal life experiences affect how we read books. For example, we can read a picture book for the first time and have no idea what it’s even about. If we see the main character wearing a red jacket that looks very similar to one we loved wearing when we were younger, the book will be set in a different tone than if someone who hates the color red were reading it. The same goes for characters. In Anthony Browne’s *Voices in the Park*, the characters are gorillas instead of people. If someone who does not like monkeys reads that book, they are less likely to enjoy the book and will take less away from it than someone who likes monkeys. The narrative in books can also change the meaning of the pictures for a reader. “Words can make pictures into rich narrative resources – but only because they communicate so differently from pictures that they change the meaning of pictures” (Lewis 35). A picture without a caption could mean something completely different than a picture with a caption. “This is a most important observation for it alerts us to the fact that although pictures and words in close proximity in the picture book influence each other, the relationship is never entirely symmetrical. What words do to the pictures is not the same as what the pictures do to the words” (Lewis 35). This is especially true within our constantly elevating use of digital media and electronics.

Learning through pictures and picture books can not only help small children with learning basic concepts, but it can also help older children (middle school or high school age) learn harder scientific concepts. In a study done by Chow-Chin Lu, Yueh-Yun Chen, and Chen-Wei Chen, they compared traditional teaching methods with the approach of putting some scientific textbooks on CD-ROMs to be used on a computer. “Even the best informational books and traditional textbooks face limitations in the physical presentation of science information using printed words, symbols and visuals in a linear, static fashion and in the cognitive demands placed on the readers as they attempt to make sense of the textual message” (Lu, Chen, Chen 48). The goal of the CD-ROM study is to achieve the same effects, if not better effects, than the traditional textbook method. One of the key findings of the study was that the CD-ROM method was actually better. “Furthermore, they provide opportunity for combining multimedia teaching with role-playing dialogue and explanations, dynamic images and background music. This technology also contains scientific terms and pictures that can be magnified while describing key concepts in a dynamic responsive context, which moves text from a linear two-dimensional media to a three-dimensional information source and further engaging students’ attention and helping them learn” (Lu, Chen, Chen 49). In result, the CD-ROMs tended to be far more engaging and interesting for the children to learn from. By watching continuous animation, videos, and listening to dialogue, the children absorbed a lot more of higher-level information about certain insects, including understanding of the relations in overall structure and function of the insects. In opposition to this group, the group that participated in the traditional teaching methods was very low on the knowledge spectrum. “When these students described concepts that were in the lowest two levels, it appeared that they depended on the teacher for a large amount of assistance and guidance. Furthermore, the static pictures in the textbook appeared to be difficult to interpret and link to the printed descriptions and explanations” (Lu, Chen, Chen 63). The conclusion insinuates that the CD-ROM method was better for the children learning because it enhanced the effect of coordinated visual and auditory learning methods.

Until recently, there has been little to no research done on how children take lessons learned from picture books and apply them to real life. A study done by Patricia Ganea, Judy DeLoache, and Lili Ma pioneered the research in this area of children’s literature. “Children’s success at transfer from picture books depends, at a minimum, on their understanding of the referential nature of pictures – the fact that pictures can represent objects and situations in the real world (Ganea, DeLoache, Ma 1422). This experiment had to do with showing children a book that explained why a predatory bird would be more likely to hunt a non-camouflaged animal than a camouflaged one. The results of this experiment showed that children as young as four years old can “learn, generalize, and explain new biological facts from a brief picture book interaction” (Ganea, DeLoache, Ma 1426). They can then apply those newly-learned facts to depictions of new and live animals. “This research points to the importance of early book exposure in framing and increasing children’s knowledge about the world. Increased understanding of the factors involved in young children’s learning and transfer from books to reality can help us devise more effective ways of teaching simple scientific concepts early in life” (Ganea, DeLoache, Ma 1430).

Children are clearly very visual learners. Educating them using picture books has been a part of our culture for a long time, and will continue to be for a while yet. Shown by all of the studies mentioned above, there is a lot of research still going on to this day that study not only the interaction between children and picture books, but how it’s affecting their scholarly and “life” education. It’s fascinating thinking that for as long as humans have been on Earth, they haven’t thought of children as different from adults until around the period of the Industrial Revolution. To think about how children learned everything before that time is interesting. I can remember learning a lot of my basic foundational building blocks of my knowledge on the carpet in my kindergarten classroom, reading book after book after book to my class. All of us can vouch from first-hand experience, that we as children were extremely visual and hands-on learners. If the “species of children” had not been discovered, I wonder where our society would be now. There would be no children’s literature market, no story time in pre-school or kindergarten classrooms, and a lot less pictures and illustrations in books in general. It would definitely make learning a lot harder. When I learned to “read”, it was by memorizing what my dad read to me every night and when to flip the pages at breaks in the narration (my book of choice was *Are You My Mother?* by P.D. Eastman). So we can thank the American people of the late 1700s for finally discovering the children. Thank you for giving me the countless picture books I’ve read in my adolescent years when I was learning how to read. For if it wasn’t for all of these picture books, I probably wouldn’t have learned as much as I did in my youth and continue to learn today.

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