BOOK CLUB: A VIEW FROM MRS NGUYEN’S GRADE FOUR CLASSROOM

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L ester, Armaan, Maya, Emily and Takeesha are year four students in Mrs Nguyen’s classroom. While sitting in a small group discussing the picture book *Shake a Leg* (Pryor & Ormerod, 2013), their talk reveals intriguing ideas about how they are ‘reading’ this visual text. Let’s listen in on their conversation.

‘Do you see the jagged way the speech bubbles are formed on pages eleven and twelve?’ Lester asks.

‘It reminds me of the way comic book authors use speech bubbles with words like “wham”, “bam”, “aargh” in my Batman comic books whenever there is a fight between Batman and one of his arch enemies like Cat Woman or The Joker.’

‘I bet the authors of *Shake a Leg* used that kind of speech bubble on purpose to show danger,’ Armaan suggests.

Takeesha chimes in, ‘I also notice how that same kind of speech bubble that represents danger is placed on top of some of the Indigenous images in the book. I wonder if the authors made this decision to show how white settlers (who spoke English like the words in the speech bubbles) often represented danger to Indigenous people and their language and culture?’

This excerpt is a snippet of a lively discussion between Lester and his peers. The student-led discussion was part of a larger instructional framework called Book Club (Raphael, Pardo, & Highfield, 2004) that Mrs Nguyen uses as one important component of her overall English program. Just what is Book Club and how does Mrs Nguyen choose to use it in her instructional practice? This question frames the remainder of our article.

What is Book Club anyway?

Think about your own life experiences as a reader. Have you ever been a member of a book club where you, and a group of your friends, selected books to read and discuss? If so, you already have a general sense of what Book Club is all about. Briefly, Book Club is an instructional framework designed by a group of teachers and researchers to meaningfully incorporate literature in classrooms (Boyd & Galda, 1997; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1997; McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Raphael & McMahon, 1994). A central goal of Book Club is to promote engagement with – and enjoyment of – literature (Raphael, Pardo, & Highfield, 2004). Having provided this condensed introduction to Book Club, let’s return to a discussion of the Book Club lesson on *Shake a Leg* in Mrs Nguyen’s classroom. A more detailed discussion of this lesson will provide you with an example of a ‘typical’ Book Club lesson.

**Opening whole-group community share** Whole group community share was the first component of Mrs Nguyen’s Book Club lesson using the picture book *Shake a Leg*. During this initial phase, Mrs Nguyen provided her students with a mini-lesson focusing on theme (McDonald, 2014) and two aspects of the grammar of visual design – layout and framing (Callow, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1995/2006). As a teacher learner, Mrs Nguyen and her colleagues had studied McDonald’s (2014) definition of theme in their professional learning community. She had taught her students about the nuanced difference between theme and topic, and reminded them that they had discussed these concepts with many other works of literature. She asked the students to ‘turn-and-talk’ with a partner to review their understanding of theme. After talking with their partners, the class constructed together the following shared understanding of theme:

- **Theme** centres on the essential or memorable message of a story.
- The **theme** is different from the **topic** because a topic has to do with what the story is about, while the theme centres on the significant message that authors want to reveal to readers.

Finally, the class talked about themes across various stories they had read together. As one example, ‘... in Perry Angel’s suitcase (Millard, 2008), the topic is the Silk family’s care of a young foster boy Perry, which leads to his eventual adoption, while one of the broad themes is that belonging to a loving family is significant in children’s lives’ (McDonald, 2014, p. 76).

Next, Mrs Nguyen reminded the children that they had been learning to ‘read’ visual texts. She displayed the image in Figure 1 on the whiteboard and asked the students to ‘turn-and-talk’ with a partner as they ‘read’ the image.

Ned and Jamaal shared that they knew this was a wedding picture of Prince William and Princess Kate. Deepna and Ruby noticed that Princess Kate...
studied the images. As a reminder, Mrs Nguyen told the children that they would be writing about their impressions of the story as well as what they noticed about theme, layout and framing once she finished reading the story aloud.

Writing After Mrs Nguyen finished reading, she reminded the students that she had asked them to think about theme, layout and framing as they were listening to the story. Because Mrs Nguyen had alerted the children about what they would be writing once the read-aloud was finished, they were poised to write when she finished reading. Most children wrote in their Book Club Logs quite steadily for seven to eight minutes after the read-aloud.

Student-led discussions When the majority of students appeared to have finished writing, Mrs Nguyen asked them to take their Book Club Logs and move into their small student-led discussion groups. Here we refer back to the initial conversation between Lester, Armaan, Maya, Emily and Takeesha that you read about at the beginning of this article. Mrs Nguyen had twenty-four students in her class; for student-led discussions, she grouped the children in four groups of five and one group of four. She reminded the children that the writing in their Book Club Logs was intended to be used as a springboard into a broader conversation about the book, *Shake a Leg*.

Closing whole-group community share While her students were talking in their small student-led discussion groups, Mrs Nguyen was walking around the classroom eavesdropping on the conversations that occurred within each group. She listened for particular insights that children discussed, or potential confusions that they displayed as they talked, writing down notes of key comments that she wanted to invite individual children to share with the whole class during the closing community share. The first part of closing community share, Mrs Nguyen was dressed in white – which signifies purity. Prince William was dressed in red – which signifies power. Additionally, Deepna and Ruby noticed that the viewer is eye-level with the royal couple looking directly at them – which demonstrates a closer and more equal relationship between viewer and the image. Mrs Nguyen applauded Ned and Jamaal for their attention to field – what’s happening in an image or text and Deepna and Ruby for their attention to tenor – how we interact and relate to an image or text. Mrs Nguyen was thrilled that the children could apply some of the conceptual tools of visual design that they had been studying to an image they had not yet discussed together. The class had not focused on mode – how design and layout build meaning – so, on this day, Mrs Nguyen focused her instruction on layout and framing – two features of mode. In particular, with respect to layout, Mrs Nguyen asked the students to pay attention to how and where Kate and William were placed in the photo, noting Kate is placed in the centre suggesting that she is the focus of the image. Regarding framing, Mrs Nguyen pointed out that if the viewer followed the gold of the carriage from the bottom left-hand corner of the image up and around to the gold on Prince William’s clothing and hat, Kate is literally ‘framed’ in gold in a large portion of the image. Table 1 provides an overview of the conceptual tools that Mrs Nguyen used from the grammar of visual design to teach her students how to ‘read’ visual texts (Callow, 2013).

**Reading** After providing an initial whole-group mini-lesson on theme, layout and framing, Mrs Nguyen proceeded to tell the children that she wanted them to enjoy the wonderful picture book, *Shake a Leg*, as she read it aloud to them, projecting images of each page on a screen in front of the class. She suggested that the students think about theme, layout and framing as they listened to the story and

| MODE: Design and layout (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1995/2006; Callow, 2013) | Field: What’s happening? (Participants and Circumstances) |
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| Tenor: How do we interact and relate? (Feelings, Attitudes and Relationships) | MODE: How do design and layout build meaning? (Structure of Visual and Written Texts) |
| MODE: How do design and layout build meaning? (Structure of Visual and Written Texts) | Salience (what attracts attention) |
| Salience (what attracts attention) | Reading paths (eye movement around the page) |
| Reading paths (eye movement around the page) | Placement (grouping, proximity, etc.) |
| Placement (grouping, proximity, etc.) | LAYOUT (top/bottom, left/right, centre/margin positions) |
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Table 1. Mrs Nguyen’s instruction: The grammar of visual design

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The lesson described in this article represents rigorous and extensive high-quality teaching and learning, and several months of hard work by Mrs Nguyen and her students. Mrs Nguyen’s central goal was to foster her children’s love and enjoyment of literature by teaching them to write, think and talk about literature in rich and compelling ways.

The Australia Curriculum: English is Mrs Nguyen’s central resource for choosing the conceptual content as related to language, literature and literacy. However, Mrs Nguyen also knows that both content and process matter if Book Club is to run smoothly in her classroom. Consequently, Mrs Nguyen has spent considerable time explicitly modelling and debriefing about how to have meaningful and powerful conversations about literature.

Notes
1 The teacher and children referenced in this paper are composites of teachers and children we have worked with in various classrooms over the years.
2 This may seem like a sophisticated insight for grade four students. This and other insights shared in this article reflect the level and quality of instruction and scaffolding that Mrs Nguyen has provided to her students.
References

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