Practical Strategies

Using Picturebooks to Empower and Inspire Readers and Writers in the Upper Primary Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The Australian Curriculum: English highlights the importance of using multi-modal texts in our classrooms to allow children to connect with and appreciate literature. Picture books provide students with opportunities to interpret and evaluate texts and then to create their own multi-modal texts. This link between reading and writing can be highlighted through the use of mentor text and when children begin to read like writers and have choice around what they read and write, it becomes a powerful motivator.

Bull & Anstey note that students are being asked to interpret linguistic, visual, auditory, spatial, and gestural semiotic systems that are becoming increasingly popular in new forms of text (2010). Typography, the design of typefaces and the way that text is laid out on a page, is also a feature worth considering. Through the use of picture books, children are able to critically engage in author’s message and consider what it will mean for their own texts.

Picture books are popular in the early years, but often these picture books are put aside once children reach years 4–6. This paper will provide practical examples of how diverse and controversial picture books can be used to engage and inspire both reading and writing in the middle years, through an example of what happened in an upper primary classroom. The semiotic systems, the crafting of text and typography are discussed as students become enriched through the literature and then produce their own picture books.

What are picturebooks?

Picturebooks may be familiar to all of us but what is a picturebook? Picturebooks ‘...represent a unique visual and literacy artform that engages young readers and older readers in many levels of learning and pleasure’ (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). There may be several spellings: picture book, picture-book or picturebook. The emphasis on the spelling picturebook has been a deliberate one. The joining of the words represents the union of the text and art (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007), as the story depends on the interaction of the written text and the image where there has been aesthetic intention by both author and illustrator (Arizpe & Styles, 2003). Readers respond to each element of the book and can form new meaning from the text or the image or both.

What makes picturebooks so intriguing is that the text and the images rarely tell the exact same story (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). In many picturebooks the images complement the text and follow a similar story, giving more detail to characters, settings or conflicts. However, there are books such as *Come away from the water, Shirley* by John Buriningham...
where the images attempt to tell a contradictory story from the text. On the left side of the page the reader meets Shirley’s boring and bland parents and the right hand side of the page, the reader sees Shirley’s imagination run wild. The reader must construct Shirley’s dream as there is no text attached to this part of the story (Goldstone, 2002).

Nicolajeva & Scott (2001) suggest that there are five ways that text and images interact within picturebooks: 1. symmetry – the words and pictures are equal; 2. complementary – each element provides information; 3. enhancement – each extends the meaning of the other; 4. counterpoint – the text and image tell a different story; and 5. contradiction – the words and pictures assert the opposite of each other. This notion of how the text and images work together or against each other can be useful to teachers who are engaging children in picturebooks and wish to extend, challenge or focus their thinking.

Postmodern picturebooks

Postmodern picturebooks are books by authors and illustrators ‘who deliberately work against a linear story-telling pattern’ (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007, p. 275). Traditionally, postmodernism is characterised by ‘the mocking of traditional art forms’ and today, many authors and illustrators are experimenting with ways of mocking traditional picturebook designs and characteristics (Swaggerty, 2009, p. 24). Goldstone (2002) identifies four characteristics of these books that distinguish them from more traditional books: nonlinearity, self-referential, a sarcastic or mocking tone and an anti-authoritarian stance. These characteristics will not all be present in any one book.

Nonlinearity is used where the author doesn’t follow the traditional sequential structure of a story and parts may be mixed up or absent (Swaggerty, 2009) as the reader moves forward and backward through the text. The text also may have multiple narratives present, allowing for multiple genres or multiple characters telling differing narratives. Some authors may include more information in the borders of the pages such as the Tales of the Dead series by Stewart Ross and Richard Bonson. One Tiny Turtle by Nicola Davies and Jane Chapman is a powerful example of how a text can use two different social purposes for writing to tell the same story. It challenges readers as they turn a new page, as they are often torn between which piece of text to read first. This picturebook tells the narrative of a Loggerhead turtle’s lifecycle whilst also including facts written in an informative, explanatory style.

Self-referential refers to the way the text and images depict the book itself being created. Pantaleo (2004) notes that many of these books use devices that accentuate the fictional state of the book. Illustrations often fall off the page, jump out at the reader and reveal the fictional reality of the story (Swaggerty, 2009). Characters challenge the author’s story and set out to create their own throughout the book. David Wiesner is well-known for creating self-referential texts. In The Three Pigs, Wiesner sets out to re-create another version of The Three Little Pigs, however, the pigs jump out of the story, free to create their own adventure. In Art and Max, Wiesner sets out to tell the story of an accomplished artist, Art, sharing his wisdom with an inexperienced artist, Max. Max, after convincing Art to help him, is trying to find inspiration for what to paint and Art suggests, ‘Well... you could paint me.’ Max goes about literally painting Art and as he tries to shake the paint off, Art loses his original colour and later in the book becomes an outlined shape. The characters here are creating their own story that seems to take a new turn on each page.

The mocking or sarcastic tone Goldstone (2002) refers to is playful not negative. Fractured fairy tales are an obvious example of these texts and set out to challenge children’s perspectives and allows the stories and characters to be questioned, ‘not merely followed in a linear pattern’ (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007, p. 276). The possibility for teachers to pursue
the interrelationships between the linear forms and the postmodern forms are vast. *Jim and the Beanstalk* by Raymond Briggs follows the pattern of the linear story and the same giant who stars in the linear story starts as the giant again, only now he is an old man with very modern problems. *Snow White in New York* by Fiona French is an example of how an author playfully sets out to tell the modernised story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. In this story, Snow White’s stepmother likes to see herself in the *New York Mirror* newspaper and demands her bodyguards take Snow White into the dark streets to get rid of her. Snow White finds seven jazz-men in a club where they ask her to sing with them. Before long, Snow White’s stepmother finds out and she secretly drops a poisoned cherry into Snow White’s cocktail. There are many examples of these picturebooks and the connections with the original versions are very clearly made by the authors and illustrators so that the children can identify and connect with the characters. Intertextuality is popular with fairy tales, where the story being told has been influenced by two or more familiar texts. In *What Really Happened to Humpty?* by Jeanie Franz Ransom and Stephen Axelsen, Humpty’s brother Joe Dumpty doesn’t think Humpty Dumpty’s fall was an accident. He sets about trying to find out the real story, seeking information from many nursery rhyme and fairy tale characters, including Little Miss Muffet, Chicken Little and The Three Little Pigs.

The anti-authoritarian text refers to the reader, author and text not being as straightforward as the reader expects. Goldstone (2002) suggests that the reader ‘enriches and supports the storyline by infusing personal emotions and experiences but also actively creates parts of the narrative’ (p. 366). Often, the text is so brief that the reader is forced to allow the image to tell the story. The reader is forced to construct their own meaning and is often left asking, ‘What does this all mean?’ (Swaggery, 2009). *Tuesday* by David Wiesner is an almost wordless picture book that relies on the images to tell the story and the reader’s own connection to make sense of the story. Readers begin the story on ‘Tuesday evening, around eight’ and begin to see frogs on lily pads float into the sky. Readers follow the frogs’ adventures throughout the night with Wiesner giving approximate times when certain things happen. The story ends with police and detectives at a crime scene where the lily pads have been left on the road. As the reader turns the final page, it reads ‘Next Tuesday, 7.58 pm’ and there is a new animal that begins to fly.

These postmodern picturebooks allow deep, novel responses from children. They provide playful and insightful opportunities to develop literary understandings and comparisons with other texts. Research by Sipe (2000) suggests that three impulses appear to guide children’s responses to literature:

1. the hermeneutic impulse or the desire to know;
2. the personal impulse or the need to connect to one’s own life; and
3. the aesthetic impulse where children can experience the story as if they were there.

By allowing children to fulfil these impulses, teachers are encouraging children to respond to and manipulate texts in imaginative ways so that the children become the ‘active agents in the story rather than merely passive spectators of someone else’s telling’ (Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007, p. 277).
Additional Postmodern Picturebooks to Use


Why use picturebooks? The Link to Curriculum

Literature has always been an important aspect of teaching, and recently there has been an increased focus and attention to how picture books are used in the classroom. First, the NSW Quality Teaching Model (QTM) (2003) introduced the importance of picture books by including *Narrative* as an element in Dimension 3, Significance. The QTM (2003) believes that the

Use of narrative is high when stories are written, told, read, viewed or listened to help illustrate or bring to life the knowledge that students are addressing in the classroom. Narratives may include personal stories, bibliographies, historical recounts, case studies, literary and cultural texts and performances (p. 50).

However, the QTM (2003) does suggest that the significance of the narrative needs to be high to be effective:

Narrative does not increase significance if the stories used are unconnected to the substance of the lesson or unproductive in terms of student learning. Narrative may be high if there is only one narrative present in the lesson as long as that narrative enhances the significance of the substance of the lesson. Lessons may employ narrative as content (e.g. when students are reading or listening to stories) or as a process (e.g. when students are writing or telling stories). (pp. 50/51)

The introduction of the Australian Curriculum: English brought literature to the forefront of our thinking again with the explicit links to text in the Literature Strand. The Australian Curriculum: English includes the following three sub-strands: Literature and context, responding to literature, examining literature, creating literature.

Texts provide the means for communication. They can be written, spoken or multimodal, and in print or digital/online forms. Multimodal texts combine language with other means of communication such as visual images, soundtrack or spoken word, as in film or computer presentation media. Texts provide important opportunities for learning about aspects of human experience and about aesthetic value. Many of the tasks that students undertake in and out of school involve understanding and producing imaginative, informative and persuasive texts, media texts, everyday texts and workplace texts.

The term ‘literature’ refers to past and present texts across a range of cultural contexts that are
valued for their form and style and are recognised as having enduring or artistic value. While the nature of what constitutes literary texts is dynamic and evolving, they are seen as having personal, social, cultural and aesthetic value and potential for enriching students’ scope of experience. Literature includes a broad range of forms such as novels, poetry, short stories and plays; fiction for young adults and children, multimodal texts such as film, and a variety of non-fiction. Literary texts also include excerpts from longer texts. This enables a range of literary texts to be included within any one year level for close study or comparative purposes.

English educators use many ways of categorising texts. The descriptions of texts used in the Australian Curriculum: English are based on practical as well as conceptual considerations. The specific designation of a strand labelled ‘literature’ is aimed at encouraging teachers working at all year levels not only to use texts conventionally understood as ‘literary’, but also to engage students in examining, evaluating and discussing texts in increasingly sophisticated and informed ‘literary’ ways. (http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/Content-structure)

Putting theory into practice
At the beginning of Term 3, 2011 I took over a Year 5 class which had experienced a very disruptive start to the year including a series of relief and short term contract teachers. I was excited by this challenge and was really looking forward to getting to know these students and gaining their trust.

After observing the Year 5 class for the first couple of days, I noticed that they were disengaged and disconnected from their learning, particularly literacy learning. Most students chose a different book for silent reading each day and due to the teaching disruptions that had happened previously, guided reading was not taking place regularly. I realised quickly that I was going to need to motivate these students and get them to feel like learning was worthwhile. Layne (2009) suggests that a complete, successful reader needs to develop the five components of reading: first skill then interest, attitude, motivation and engagement. There were several strategies I used, in sequential order, to motivate, engage and empower this group of students.

Strategies

1. Engaging students through reading aloud
I began to introduce the students to Circle Time strategies (Mosely, 2012) and as part of this routine, I read a picture book to the class each morning. Fox (2001) suggests that we should read aloud to children for as long as they’ll let us, even when they can read themselves. During read-alouds, children are able to experience a text that may be inaccessible or challenging to read independently. This experience aids comprehension, vocabulary development and enjoyment (Miller, 2009). The class immediately became engaged during this time and were eager to discuss the themes and their personal responses to the books. I didn’t focus on a particular theme, author or age appropriate text.

Reading aloud builds community, exposes children to books, authors, genres and supports developing readers. It also provides a model of a fluent reader and helps children to develop and continue a love of reading. I wanted to ensure these students were read a variety of picture books so that later in the year they would have experienced these texts ready to develop their own writing.

To benefit from reading aloud, children must listen and ‘build the world of the story in their minds’ (Calkins, 2001, p. 228). Calkins states, ‘Helping children think about texts is as essential to the teaching of reading as it is to the whole of our lives, and the most powerful way to teach this kind of thinking is through book talks based on read aloud books’ (p. 226). This time also allowed for vocabulary development as we discussed particular words the
The author had used and how effective they were. The students were not aware yet, but this was also a lead into their writing.

The most powerful connection I witnessed during reading aloud and in discussion times was that the students were connecting with a particular author or authors and read more of their books later during silent reading or in the library. Miller (2009) recommends that teachers read more children’s books and take recommendations from our students on what we should read. Through reading aloud, we can introduce children to authors that they may never have known which will enable them to develop their own writing styles.

Some of the books I read are listed in the references.

2. Choice in the guided reading program

Guided reading was a routine that I set up from week one. Based on their running record results from earlier in the year, I grouped the students into groups of four. Atwell (2007) strongly believes that children must be given a choice when it comes to reading programs in schools and I allowed each group to choose their own books. On day three, I took the whole class to the book room and allowed each group to browse the shelves. I pulled out 15 sets of texts and began to ‘sell’ these books to the students. I read the blurb, I told them about the themes of the books, humorous characters and why I enjoyed reading the book. I would strongly encourage any teacher to read children’s books so that they can not only sell the books to the students, but also so that you can have conversations with them as they read the book.

‘To do their best, they must be vitally interested in what they are reading’ (Carbo, 2003). Ultimately the children choose what they read. I began with the group of four choosing the book, as the children learned to choose books based on interests. As adults, we choose the books we want to read in numerous ways including recommendations, advertisements, browsing a library or bookshop and knowledge of authors. Children must also learn these ways of choosing books to read. Many children may turn to these methods naturally, others may need guidance or support in using a variety of the above methods for choosing books (Senior, 2008. p. 78). More reluctant readers may need high support early in this process to find a book or series of books that are entertaining and pleasurable to read. High interest reading material may include bright and colourful magazines, *The Guinness Book of World Records*, ‘choose your own adventure’ books or humorous books such as *Captain Underpants* and those written by Paul Jennings.

Once the children were familiar with choosing books, I allowed them to break out of their groups and begin individual guided reading tasks. Many children began selling books to their peers and I needed to create a waiting list for some of the books. It was so exciting to see not only the passion for reading present in the classroom but also the willingness and engagement of the children during discussion times. These conversations that I had with the students during guided reading time helped me to get to know each of the children and their thought processes. It allowed me to identify reading and comprehension strategies the student was using and which strategy would help them next. The deep thinking that occurred about authorial details, such as, ‘Why did the author use the word ‘ginormous’ instead of the word ‘enormous’?’ or ‘Why did the author create this character? What is their role in the storyline?’ highlighted the students’ engagement and level of self-motivation.
3. Modelled enthusiasm for books and provided resources
I quickly recognised that silent reading was a daily wasted activity as the children were choosing different books each day, the books currently in the room were falling apart and looked uninviting and the children saw this time as a social opportunity. Research by Krashen (2004) has concluded that no single literacy activity has a more positive effect on student comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, spelling, writing ability and overall academic achievement than free voluntary reading.

Each day I allowed 20 minutes of silent reading time and the students knew that this was
their time to choose their own books to read. I talked constantly about ‘being in the reading zone’ (Atwell, 2007) and forgetting about where you were and falling into the book. I used the time I read the children picturebooks as an example of this and I encouraged the children to experience ‘the zone’ whilst I read to them. I gave the students permission to ‘fall’ into the books and live the experiences of the characters. This became so effective that I often heard sighs and grunts when I asked the children to put their books away after the 20-minute period. I had children asking me if they could take their book home to finish reading them, and others asking if they could take their books to the library at lunchtime. Of course I agreed to all of these requests, not wanting to squash the engagement they had finally discovered.

During this time I often read to model to the students, and as I began to get to know the students I began to connect with them by talking with them about their interests. From this connection I was able to recommend appropriately when the search was on for a new book. I often asked other students in the class to tell another student about a book that they had just finished reading. I didn’t restrict the students to chapter books. Many of the students chose to read picture books during this time. Due to their reading ability, they were often able to read three or four picture books during this 20-minute period. Often they chose the book I had read to them that morning or the week before, but many began to explore the range of picture books that were available to them. Some of the more popular books were fractured fairy tales, Colin Thompson books, humorous poetry books, Shaun Tan books, wordless picture books where they could create their own stories, and non-fiction books with titles such as *Predator Showdown* by Scholastic.

Selling books to the students worked for almost the whole class, except for Todd. One afternoon I was having a conversation with Todd, about what he might like to choose to read. He said to me, ‘I don’t read books. The only book I like is *Tomorrow When the War Began*’ (John Marsden). I think he thought he’d get a reaction from me trying to persuade him to read a book but I just said, ‘Oh Todd, I love that book! I have a copy at home so I’ll bring it in tomorrow for you to read.’ That afternoon I raced home to find my copy of the book. It was well worn and didn’t look appealing at all. I was convinced that I was going to change Todd’s perspective on reading so I went and bought another copy that afternoon. This copy had the cover of the movie on the front of the book, which had been released a few months earlier. As I handed it to Todd the next morning I’ll never forget the look of surprise on his face. I’m not sure if he was surprised that I had remembered or that I had handed him his favourite book, a brand new copy. From that moment on, Todd read this book during guided reading and during silent reading. Interestingly, once he had finished the book, his peers were selling him books that they had read and Todd began to read the Bear Grylls non-fiction series.

As an avid reader, I own an amazing collection of picture books and children’s chapter books. I was constantly buying new books and bringing them in to share with the class. Layne (2009) suggests we set up a ‘Hot Reads’ table in the classroom to recommend books and excite the children about new books. Each time I bought a new book, I would leave it on the corner of my desk. For the first few weeks a few students came to ask me about the new book and asked if they could read it. I continued this practice and each week, a few more students became interested. By the end of Term 3, it was a race to see who could get to my desk first to read the new book I had bought. It was at this moment that I knew I had the students engaged in reading.
Connecting reading to writing

The next step for me was to try to anchor this enthusiasm for reading and transfer it to the children’s writing. I wanted to link the texts they were reading and I was reading to them, to their writing. Routman (2005) believes that teachers must connect reading and writing through literature by noticing what authors do, including student authors and how they use words to get the intended message across.

‘If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot.’ (King, 2000, p. 164). I began to talk with the children about real authors. I showed them Steven Herrick’s website and we listened and laughed along with him reading his poetry online. We talked about Roald Dahl and how he kept a notebook to collect all of his ideas in, and how one day when he was sitting on a bus he wrote in this notebook, ‘Write a story about a friendly giant’ and years later, this became the BFG. I was trying to demystify the writing process and what it means to be an author. I always addressed the children as authors and began to clue them in to finding great ideas for writing.

4. Every student is an author

Our job as teachers is not to teach writing but to teach authors (Frank, 1995). Every time a student wrote in the classroom it was to ‘Write with the door closed, rewrite with the door open’ (King, 2000, p. 56). The students began to look closely at the books that we had read and they began to use the picturebooks as ‘mentor’ texts. That is, they asked questions, found answers, looked closely at how the authors used descriptive language to convey a message and began to link this to their own style of writing. Very quickly, the children had an idea for their picturebooks and they were excited to write.

I began to take the students through the writing process that authors use to eventually present their work to an audience. Frank (2002) suggests ten stages in the writing process:

The Writing Process – A 10 stage plan that works (Frank, 1995, pp. 96–103)

Romance Stages

1. The Motivation

‘They always say they can’t think of anything to write’ (Frank, 1995, p. 65). The motivation stage is about the engagement or the sparks that make us want to write. It requires the teacher to provide connections to experiences as our experiences are the catalysts that ignite expression (Frank, 1995). It is very difficult for us as adults to be given a blank page and to be expected to write straight away without any input. Writing isn’t taught by saying, ‘Write …’ and then assessing what they already know how to do. It is taught by offering challenging directions, presenting patterns, and providing endless examples that open doors to original expression (Frank, 1995). Within this stage teachers need to provide literature, questions, memories, experiences and discussions to help children form their ideas for writing.

2. Collecting Impressions

This stage is fast, fun and spontaneous. It is critical to generating content, preparing for use at a later stage. The purpose of collecting impressions is not a plan for writing but to simply collect thoughts, words, phrases and ideas. Individual or class notebooks can be a great way to store all of these ideas. This stage can be compared to collecting a ‘seed’ in writer’s notebook (Fletcher, 2003) and it is important that the children know that not everything they write down in this stage needs to be included in a piece of writing.
Draft Stages

3. Organising
Authors take a close look at the impressions and begin to see what fits together and visually represent ideas for a piece of writing. There is no one right way to do this as it will depend on the individual writer, their age and ability. Frank cautions us not to overdo this stage – we don’t want children to spend so much time on designing their web of ideas, that when it comes time to write they are finished with the idea.

4. The Rough Draft
This stage involves letting the children write! It is not the appropriate stage to think consciously about spelling, punctuation or structure. The aim is to get all of those ideas down. In my own experience as a teacher, once I have given children permission to just focus on writing, not spelling and punctuation, I have watched children develop their confidence in writing and their engagement increase. I always remind children that I want them to write the words that they want in the story, even if they cannot spell it. I never want a child to write the word ‘big’ instead of ‘enormous’ because they can spell it. This restricts the flow of writing as children are focusing on the editing instead of the writing development.

Response-Revision Stages

5. Author’s Review
This is the ‘author’s chance to get the writing out into the light and see how it looks and how it sounds’ (Frank, 1995, p. 100). This review is intended strictly for the author and allows the children to ask questions such as, ‘Does it make sense?’; ‘Is this my intended message?’ and ‘Does it develop the way I want it to?’ Frank (1995) suggests that reading aloud to yourself is the best way to do this.

6. Sharing for Response
Author’s in this stage can share their writing with the teacher or a small group to gauge reactions, questions and feedback. It is vital that teachers explicitly show children how to respond to authors. Author’s need to understand that they get the final say in what changes or what remains the same in their writing piece.

7. Editing and Revising
After receiving feedback and reading the piece out loud to an audience, it is time for the author to make any other necessary adjustments to their writing. This stage is still in the author’s hands. This is not where the teacher goes ahead and marks the work, instead, the writer has control over the adjustments and ensures the intent is correctly perceived.

8. The Mechanics Check
Now is the time to check the draft for spelling, grammar, punctuation and structural errors. Teachers can certainly help in this stage, however, I would try to do as much as possible with the author. Frank (1995) advises that we should throw the red pen away, and instead use pencil or another way to avoid writing on the children’s work.
9. Polishing
It is time to complete a final copy that is, polishing after all the hard work of all the prior stages. This stage should bring the author back to the romance stages again. The hard work is now over and the final version of the writing can be enjoyed. It may also be a time for the author to begin to think about who to or where they might present their writing. This may have been decided on prior to writing, but even if it has, are there other ways of presenting that this individual author may like to engage in?

10. Presenting
A powerful way to engage children in writing is to ensure there is an intended purpose prior to writing. The writing should reflect the intended audience and should be motivation for the writing. Why share? Sharing is communicating. It allows authors to bring their writing out into the light which brings them back to the purpose for writing. As previously mentioned, this sharing of student work is sharing literature which may then spark some more impressions. Most important of all, this build’s self-confidence and writer’s esteem.

Cautions
Frank (1995) also gives us some cautions about the writing process:
- Don’t always go through all ten stages
- Do them all, some of the time
- If you think the final product is the most important, think again – the PROCESS is the most important thing
- Don’t skip the romance but don’t overdo the romance either

11. Publishing for an audience
Over a period of six weeks, the children began to write their own picture book using the ten stages of writing (Frank, 1995). The intended audience was the children’s preschool buddies. They wanted to read their picture books to their buddies at the end of the year. To help romance the children, I took out a great pile of picture books and gave the children time to read, explore and connect these stories to their own experiences or interests. Surprisingly, they came up with many impressions and great ideas for a children’s picturebook very quickly.

As the children were progressing through the ten stages of writing (Frank, 1995), the picturebooks I read to them had a new purpose. I began to read to them picturebooks that highlighted the semiotic systems (Bull & Anstey, 2010) and typography (Pantaleo, 2012).

The semiotic systems
Bull & Anstey (2010) allow us to think deeply about the five semiotic systems and what they mean for us in a world where we are asked to read an increasingly number of multi-modal texts. The five semiotic systems are:
1. Linguistic – the vocabulary, generic structure and grammar of oral and written language
2. Visual – colour, vectors and viewpoint of still and moving images
3. Audio – volume, pitch and rhythm of music and sound effects
4. Gestural – the movement, speed and stillness of facial expression and body language
5. Spatial – the proximity, direction, position of layout and organisation of objects in space (Bull & Anstey, 2010, p. 2).
I began to make my own connections with these semiotic systems through picturebooks. After hearing Bull and Anstey speak at the ALEA National Conference in 2011, I began to relook at the notes that I had made about certain picturebooks that gave exemplary examples of these semiotic systems and began to show them to the children. We spent a long time looking through Bob Graham’s *How to Heal a Broken Wing*. In his text Graham shows us how designing a picture based around point of view can dramatically change the readers/viewers thoughts about a character and an event. The way Graham has drawn a bird in front of the building from the view of the bird helps the reader to feel sympathy for the bird and connect with how he must be feeling (p. 4).

The children were challenged by thinking about these systems as they very quickly realised that they needed to have the intended message clear in their own minds before beginning to design the graphics on the page. To help with this process, the children designed frames in their books where they could practise drawing the designs for the pages. They received feedback from the teacher as well as from their peers.

**Typography**

After reading an article about typography by Pantaleo (2012) in *Literacy Learning: the Middle Years*, I began to change my ideas about publishing. Typography can be defined as ‘the art or process of printing from type … the arrangement, style, or general appearance of matter printed from type’ (Guralnik, cited in Pantaleo, 2012, p. 38). There were so many picturebooks that had already explored this area and I ensured the children were exposed and understood the effect typography had on a published book. One of the first picturebooks that sprang to mind as I was reading the article was *Fox* by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks. The text type that they use and the way they have positioned the text on the page adds to the unsettledness of the characters relationships with each other. ‘Thick, textured paint in shades of brown, peachy beige, and bluish grey, detailed in black line and frequent scratchboard like technique, sets off the rich, fiery tone of Fox’s fur and allows readers to sense the excitement and danger that his presence engenders in Magpie’ (Scheps, 2001).

Pantaleo (2012) also reminds us of another example of typography:

Jon Scieszka (1998) has provided insights into the integral role of typography in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992). For example, Scieszka (1998) explained how the Red Hen’s red font ‘visually accentuate[s] her annoying voice’ (p. 201), and that the decision of the book’s designer, Molly Leach, to use ‘a classic font (Bodoni)’ for the entire book, including the manipulation of the font in unusual ways (‘expanding, shrinking, melting’) emphasized ‘the fact that these were classic fairy tales told in an unconventional way’ (p. 201). (p. 43).

When we came to the publishing stage, the children were excited to think about and use the appropriate forms of the semiotic systems and typography in their writing. Some of the children accentuated the key or big words by writing them in larger font and some children began to think about what the text on the page actually felt like. They used smooth, wavy lines of text for calm and composed parts of the text and hard, sharp lines with jagged edge fonts for the harsh and unforgiving parts of the text. It was dizzying at times to see just how engaged and motivated these reluctant readers and writers were. The feeling of satisfaction and pride was evident in the body language the children displayed when sharing their books with their preschool buddies at the end of the year.

**Conclusion**

Most of these strategies are not new to teachers, however it is good to be reminded of just how powerful they can be for a group of reluctant, disengaged children. Through the use of
picturebooks, including postmodern picturebooks, we can excite children about the reading process, the writing process and how these two processes can be linked together to provide meaningful, contextual literary experiences.

References


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