

Mirroring Alice: Using picturebooks to develop metacognitive skills

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This paper explores the potential of picturebooks in an educational context. It presents the form and the function of postmodern picturebooks. It explains why and how teachers can use them with their children and it underlines some benefits: picturebooks enhance the level of visual literacy and develop pupil's metacognitive skills. Finally, it proposes a methodology to help pupils and students to become more articulate interpreters of the visual narrativity.

Picturebooks, Illustrations, Visual Narrativity, Metacognitive Skills, Children's Literature

Postmodern picturebooks

Introduction

Children live in a highly complex visual world and are bombarded with visual stimuli. Although the image is now at least as powerful as the word, few teachers spend time in helping children recognise and understand the many forms of visual information they encounter. Learning how to look and developing visual skills help young learners to become more critical and discerning subjects.



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A silent revolution

In recent years, a silent revolution has deeply modified an important branch of children's literature. The picturebook has become a very sophisticated object: it masterly combines two parallel types of narrative, the verbal and the visual, to create a medium unlike any other that encourages an active and critical interpretation of its contents in a multi-modal way.

This assertion is confirmed by a high number of international studies which analyse picturebooks from different perspectives: as educational vehicles, as objects for art history, focusing on the thematic and stylistic diversity or on the visual and design approaches, giving evidence of the internal dynamics of the picturebook structure or discussing the complex interaction of words and image from the semantic point of view (Roxburgh, 1983; Nodelman, 1988; Mitchell, 1994; Evans, 1998; Spitz, 1999; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).



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Postmodern picturebooks

“Thinking directly in terms of colours, tones, images, is a different operation technically from thinking in words” (Dewey, 1978).

In this context, picturebooks are an extraordinary resource to approach the postmodern complexity because they lead young readers into a world of alternative meanings. The picturebook “is thus not just a form of text, it is also a process” (Lewin, 2001): it arises questions which children have to deal with, it invites them to fill semantic gaps, it rouses their intellectual curiosity and aesthetic pleasure, it stimulates their imagination because of the appealing use of visual metaphors. The different possibilities of interpretation of these picturebooks encourage children to play an active role towards the narrative and visual text. On the one hand they can give free play to their imagination: original pictorial solutions offer children new imaginative horizons to play with and enrich their visual wealth of experience. On the other, children are stimulated to look carefully for details and make connections between text and pictures in order to infer the meaning of the picturebook.



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These achievements lead them to develop their own visual vocabulary and to discover how a pictorial symbolic system works.

Exploiting visual literacy to develop metacognitive skills

Children have no difficulty in analysing most of the visual metaphors depicted in picturebooks (Arizpe and Styles, 2003). Visual image is, in fact, more effective than spoken or written language in evoking an affective response from the reader (Gombrich, 1965). Adopting a Vygotskijan approach, the teacher can stimulate children to move their attention from a first level of response, more immediate and sensuous such as the emotional and aesthetic response, to a second one where the cognitive and symbolic meanings of the narrative are involved. Through the pictures, teachers and children can find a “fertile soil” to learn how to develop metacognitive skills.

External visual elements such as composition, line, form, dimension, pattern, colour and texture are part of a visual syntax that helps children to find out and carefully reflect upon the different symbolic interpretations of a picturebook.



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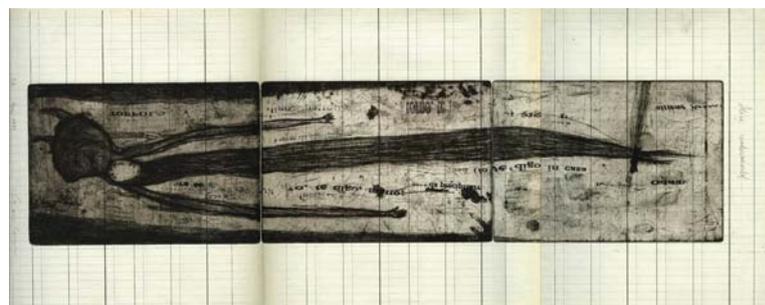
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From the educational point of view, this approach undoubtedly brings three important advantages within the classroom: the first one is the possibility for all children to have equal access to the discussion about pictures and the illustrator's intents, even for younger children, inexperienced readers or readers with learning difficulties, "pictures provide a landscape in which minds can meet for contemplation rather than competition" (Bromley in Arizpe and Styles, 2003). Secondly, while trying to unravel the intriguing visual sequences of a picturebook, children reflect upon their past and learn to manipulate their memories. Past experience becomes a meaningful medium to search for similarity or to explore differences. Finally, encouraging young readers to talk about their "visual" ideas creates a good environment to work within each other's "zone of proximal development": children get pleasure in co-operating in the negotiation of the different meanings and become conscious of the process that leads them to elaborate their own personal interpretation of the narrative.

A methodological proposal

"What is the use of a book," thought Alice,
"without pictures or conversations?"

(*Alice in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll, 1865)

One text, several pictures

With young readers or inexperienced ones, words may form a barrier but visual image is universal: children demonstrate an ability to decode symbolism, identify intertextual links, construct a virtual text, understand feelings and behaviour and have an emotional engagement with the important human issues in the book (Arizpe and Styles, 2003). The proposal consists in reading together a story (such as *Alice in Wonderland*, see Appendix A), presenting many different picturebooks of that story within the classroom and, then, starting a group discussion which gives the opportunity to listen to the ideas of all peers about some similar or different visual stimuli.



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While discussing with the teacher and peers about the different visual narratives, children improve their visual skills: through comparing and contrasting more picturebooks, they become conscious of different pictorial styles, creative processes and symbolic clues used by artists.



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They start paying attention to image, details, light, colours, facial expression, body language as techniques the artists use to convey emotion, ideas and relationships. Looking at more picturebooks stimulates their ability to put themselves in the artist's head and imagine how he wanted the reader to react to certain scenes.

The methodological approach can be summarise as follows:

- listening to the narrative text
- looking at more picturebooks regarding the same narrative text
- discussing the different pictorial artist's approaches
- making connections and coming up with explanations about different artist's interpretation
- stimulating meaning-making process by reflecting on the relationship between the verbal and the visual texts
- using inference (memory's land) to detect pictorial symbolic systems
- elaborating one's own visual preference/interpretation

This process will consequently help them to go inside their own heads and to describe what they are thinking and feeling as regards to different pictorial narratives, expressing their own preference about stylistic choices and visual impact of pictures. Thanks to the group discussion, children can go through images again and revise their first visual reading opinions.

Conclusions

“Much of the process of education consists of being able to distance oneself in some way from what one knows by being able to reflect on one’s own knowledge” (Bruner, 1986).

The revisitation of one narrative text through many different pictorial narratives has a high educational value, particularly for the purpose of developing metacognitive skills: it provides a meaningful context to reflect not only on one’s ability to decode visual narratives but most significantly on how to become articulate interpreters of the visual.

Picturebooks are mirrors in which children see themselves reflected and through which they become conscious of their skills as thinkers, learners and users of language.



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Primary sources

The primary sources of Alice's pictures used for the PhD research, which is currently carried out by Marnie Campagnaro at the Department of Educational Sciences - University of Padua (Italy), are the following:

Picturebooks

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Alice's unpublished pictures:

- Gialma, L. Venezia (Italy)
Nanni, L. Pesaro (Italy)
Rea, S. Roma (Italy)
Sanna, A. Mantova (Italy)
Schiavon, L. Venezia (Italy)

Biographical Notes

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Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others are referenced.