Lessons in Comprehension

Explicit Instruction in the Reading Workshop

FRANK SERAFINI
Contents

List of Lessons ............................................................... vii
Foreword ................................................................. ix
Introduction ............................................................. xiii

The Role of Explicit Comprehension Instruction in the Reading Workshop .................. 1
How This Book Is Organized ............................................. 7

Comprehension Strands
  1. Inviting Children into the World of Reading and Literature ............................... 9
  2. Exploring the Structures and Components of Literature ................................... 30
  3. Navigating Text ...................................................... 47
  4. Promoting Invested Literature Discussions .................................................... 65
  5. Developing Comprehension Practices .............................................................. 82
  6. Investigating Informational Texts ................................................................. 100
  7. Extending Response to Literature ................................................................. 118
  8. Examining Critical Perspectives ................................................................. 135

Epilogue ........................................................................ 153
Professional References ................................................. 157
Children’s Literature References ........................................ 159
Interplay Between Text and Illustrations

The Challenge: Teachers and students have begun to learn how to focus on texts and on illustrations, but rarely do they focus on the relationships between the text and the illustrations in children’s picture books. There has been some interesting research in the area of visual design and art theory that provides unique insights about this relationship. While it is important to be able to discuss the media used by different artists and the literary devices used by various writers, we also need to provide readers with the language to talk about the relationships between text and illustrations and to call their attention to this aspect of children’s picture books.

My Intentions: This series of lessons is designed to introduce readers to three general relationships that have been described in the research literature about the interplay between text and illustrations, namely symmetrical, enhancing, and contradictory relationships.

Lesson Overview: Using examples of children’s literature, I will demonstrate the various ways that texts and illustrations are related to each other. Although these relationships often overlap, there are many picture books that provide clear examples of the three general relationships. A symmetrical relationship means that the text and the illustrations provide about the same information, for example the word ball and a picture of a ball. Of course, they don’t provide exactly the same meanings, but they are symmetrical in content. An enhancing relationship means that the text enhances the story told in the illustrations, and the illustrations enhance the story told in the text. This is the most common relationship in contemporary children’s picture books. The third, a contradictory relationship, occurs in many examples of postmodern picture books (see booklist on my website). In this relationship, what happens in the text is contradictory to what is represented in the illustrations. Perry Nodelman, a recognized expert in children’s literature, has described this relationship as having a sense of irony. In any case, the illustrations and the text tell a different story.

How It Might Go: Good morning, Readers! Remember when you used to read simple picture books where each page had one word and a picture of what the word was about? I remember Are You My Mother? by P. D. Eastman (1960). The pictures went along with the words on every page. Now that we are reading more sophisticated books, have you noticed that some illustrations go along with the story, and sometimes they are different than the story? This is because authors and illustrators create different relationships between the words and the pictures. I call this relationship the interplay between texts and illustrations. That’s probably a new word for many of you. Interplay is like singing and dancing a song at the same time. Two different things happening at once. Well, the same thing happens...
in children’s picture books. We have the illustrations to look at and the words to read at the same time. When we open to a page, we usually look at the pictures and read the words on that page before going on to the next page. We don’t read all the words through the whole book and then go back and look at all the pictures. That would be pretty weird, wouldn’t it? I am going to show you some examples of three kinds of relationships that exist in picture books. We will call them symmetrical, enhancing, and contradictory. We will talk about symmetrical relationships, just like we talked about symmetry in geometry. Then we will talk about enhancing relationships, like when someone enhances a picture in art. And then we will talk about contradictory relationships, like when someone disagrees with someone else. Let’s put those three words on a chart and see if we can begin to define what each of them means as we go along. Okay?

**Guided Practice:** Because this may be a very new concept for many students, I take my time discussing each relationship and provide numerous examples before having students look for the relationships in their self-selected picture books.

**Closing Comments:** This is not an exact science, so to speak. Many picture books exhibit characteristics from each of these categories. The idea is to get students to start looking at the text and the illustrations as interrelated symbol systems, instead of as separate entities.

---

**Symmetrical**

*I’m as Quick as a Cricket*, by Audrey Wood  
*Green Eggs and Ham*, by Dr. Seuss  
*Caps for Sale*, by Esphyr Slobodkina

**Enhancing**

*What Are You So Grumpy About?* by Tom Lichtenheld  
*David Goes to School*, by David Shannon  
*Grandfather’s Journey*, by Allen Say  
*Officer Buckle and Gloria*, by Peggy Rathmann

**Contradictory**

*Just Another Ordinary Day*, by Rod Clement  
*Bamboozled*, by David Legge  
*Changes*, by Anthony Browne  
*The Three Pigs*, by David Wiesner
Suspending Closure

The Challenge: Traditionally, readers have been taught to find the single main idea of a text when they are reading. This search for the one correct meaning forces readers to prematurely close down their interpretations and their construction of the possible meanings a text offers. Readers need to develop the ability to suspend closure, to think about the multiple possibilities a text offers, rather than reduce interpretations and discussion to finding the one “true” meaning of a text.

My Intentions: I want to help readers entertain ambiguity in their readings. When readers are able to deal with ambiguity and multiple meanings, they are better able to construct new meanings instead of reducing the possibilities to reach consensus. It is the unique interpretations that push our thinking about literature, not the commonly held ones.

Lesson Overview: Using a series of picture books that I have described as postmodern, readers will read and reread these books in order to construct multiple interpretations (see Figure L5.6). These books offer the reader ambiguity of meaning and contain elements that allow readers to widely interpret the text.

How It Might Go: Good morning, Readers! For the next few days we are going to read some weird picture books. I think they are great books, but some of you may think they are weird. They are certainly different. The books we are going to read have several different stories that overlap, or have different people telling their versions of the same event. These picture books are not like most of the books we have been reading, where there is one narrator or character telling a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In fact, some of these books don’t seem to have an end.

What is important in reading these books is not to get frustrated the first time you read them, but to be able to deal with ambiguity. Ambiguity means that there are things that aren’t resolved, things that can be looked at in several ways in the story. We will have to read through these books several times in order to discover all of the possibilities they offer us. Don’t decide too quickly what the books are about; instead, think of your first ideas as possibilities.

I know that many of you last year were asked in class to find the main idea of everything you read. Well, this year I am going to let you in on a secret: there is more than one idea in most of the books we read. In fact, there are several possibilities in each book that you could defend as main ideas. And you know, that’s all right! Great books should have
more than one idea in them. The challenge for us is producing or describing evidence that backs up what we think the ideas are. We have talked about this concept of defending your interpretations; now we will put it to work.

Guided Practice: After demonstrating how to read these postmodern picture books, I will provide numerous examples of these books and allow students to read, reread, and discuss them throughout the reading workshop. We will generate a definition for these unusual books and discuss ways to read them, ways to entertain ambiguity while we read. Throughout this unit of study, we will use the Walking Journal (see Lesson 4.6) and our response journals or book logs (see Lesson 7.1) to keep track of the many ideas that come to us and to explore the possibilities of these texts.

Closing Comments: If we want readers to construct multiple interpretations in transaction with a text, we need to read texts that contain ambiguous elements and multiple possibilities. The postmodern picture books I have selected are written using multiple narrators and perspectives. This technique does not privilege one version of the story over another. It is important for readers to be able to entertain ambiguity in order to revisit a selection several times and construct new and unique interpretations. The negotiation of meaning in a community of readers is the foundation of my reading workshop.

I believe that having the kind of literature I have described here as postmodern is vital to a reading workshop. I want students to be able to return to a text to construct new interpretations and negotiate the ones they constructed previously. It is through this suspension of closure and the providing of evidence for our interpretations that quality literature discussions ensue and comprehension is demonstrated.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.