

Columns

Wordless Picture Books: One Way to Scaffold Reluctant Readers and Writers

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As a former middle school language arts teacher, I was amazed when I found out that my seventh-grade students did not really like to write. Oh yes, they loved to write on Facebook or Instagram, but write in class...no way. In my frustration, I searched for ideas to help facilitate writing. I read about wordless picture books as a way for students to create their own narratives using visual cues in wordless picture books (Louie & Sierschynski, 2015). My students were not very impressed when I told them I had a “fun” to help them with writing ideas and in order to create ideas or topics for writing, we were going to read books with only illustrations. At first, several students’ thought reading books without words was silly and childish. “How do we read this book, Miss?” or “this book has no words...what a dumb book or these are books are for first and second graders” were the most common comments the first couple of days when I introduced wordless picture books to the class. I wondered why they were so reluctant to “reading” a book that did not have written text. I finally realized many of my students were not familiar with wordless picture books. See Table 1.

Wordless picture books, have little or no text. Dowhower (1997) defined wordless picture books as “books that tell a story through a series of illustrations without written text” (p. 63). There is no one single genre for wordless picture books as they vary in “topics, themes, and levels of difficulty,” (Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad, and Zhang, 2002, p. 167). Wordless picture books encourage students’ creative thinking using clues of the “artistic mediums of color and style as well as thinking about what the story means as told through illustrations” (Brodie, 2011, p. 46). In addition, Serafini, (2014) states that wordless picture books are “visually rendered narratives.” (p. 24).

Armed with the knowledge my students were not familiar with wordless picture books, I asked the school librarian if she would be able to provide us with multiple copies of the book *Flotsam* by David Weisner (2006). When the books arrived two weeks later, I placed students in small groups and our journey began. *Flotsam* was chosen because students had just finished a water pollution unit in their science class. *Flotsam* was one of their science vocabulary words and I knew they would have the background

knowledge to create their own original text. (Students were asked to look through the book and comment on what was happening in the book by looking at the pictures throughout the book using a picture walk strategy. A picture walk is a pre-reading strategy (Clay, 1991; Briggs & Miller, 2009) that provides a conceptual organization (Holdaway, 1979) for reading.

Before we read the book *Flotsam* (1993), I began modeled the picture-walk strategy with a favorite wordless picture book of mine; *A Boy, A Dog, and A Frog* by Mercer Mayer (1993). I asked students to make predictions on the title alone. “Miss, it is a book about a boy, a dog and a frog.” We moved to the first page of the book and asked them questions like the following: ; What do you see in the picture? Where do you think this story takes place? When do you think the story takes place? Who are the characters in this picture? Students were able to advance from literal questions to inferential questions making personal connections as they moved forward in the story. I then asked students to picture-walk through the rest of the book in their small groups using the visual cues from each page to orally tell the story. After modeling with the whole group, I asked students to write the name of one person they would like to work with and why they choose that specific classmate. Roberto and Jordan (all names are pseudonyms) stated they wanted to work together because they worked well together their science unit project. .. Using the visual cues from the setting and personal connections, each group had to create an original title, negotiate the name or names of characters, and construct an original piece of writing When all groups were finished writing, we shared them in class and displayed them in the school library.

Reading and writing are both literacy skills that can be taught and learned through the

use of wordless picture books (Crawford & Hade, 2000; Votteler, Carwile, & Berg, 2010). These books may inspire struggling or reluctant readers and writers to develop vocabulary, make connections between the spoken and written language and create writing and reading skills based on the pictures (images) that are present in the books (Cassady, 1998; Miller, 1998). In addition, telling or retelling a story from a wordless picture book may improve, fluency, story recall, and oral vocabulary (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004). Instruction for literary devices can be modeled through the use of wordless picture books. Point of view, creative writing, theme, tone, and visual literacies are some of the different literary devices that a wordless picture book can help develop (Dallacqua, 2012). Through wordless picture books , students are creating their written stories using their own background knowledge (Rosenblatt, 2004).

Wordless picture books can be useful teaching tools in any classroom to support reading and writing for all students. Promoting oral literacy through the retelling of the story using the illustrations along with student’s prior knowledge will scaffold students’ writing literacy. Students create their own stories using their own imagination, thus becoming more successful middle school readers and writers.

Table 1. Wordless Picture Books for Middle School Students.

Title	Author	Date	Publisher
Anno's Journey	Anno, M.	2007	Puffin Books: East Rutherford, NJ.
The man who walked between the towers.	Gerstein, M.	2007	Square Fish: New York, NY.
Mirror	Lee, S.	2010	Little, Brown Books: New York, NY.
The lion and the mouse	Pinkney, J.	2009	Little, Brown Books: New York, NY.
The mysteries of Harris Burdick	Van Allsburg, C.	1984	Houghton Mifflin: New York, NY.
Queen of the falls	Van Allsburg, C.	2011	Houghton Mifflin: New York, NY.
Flotsam	Weisner, D.	2006	Houghton Mifflin: New York, NY.
Sector 7	Weisner, D.	1999	Houghton Mifflin: New York, NY.
Tuesday	Weisner, D.	2011	Houghton Mifflin: New York, NY.
When pigs fly	Weisner, D.	2001	Houghton Mifflin: New York, NY.

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