“How Do You Draw Freedom?”

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"HOW DO YOU DRAW FREEDOM?"

Transmediation as a Tool for Thinking in a Third-Grade Classroom

Christine H. Leland • Anne Ociepka • Amy Wackerly

Art can be a powerful tool for making meaning. These authors describe what happened when students were challenged to draw a picture symbolizing the meaning of a story.

Henry’s Freedom Box (Levine, 2007) is a picture book about a slave named Henry Brown who watched in horror as his wife and children were sold to a new owner. After seeing his family get loaded into a wagon and carried away, Henry decided that he had to escape slavery—even if that meant risking his life. With help from friends in the Underground Railroad, he had himself packed into a wooden box and mailed to Philadelphia and freedom. After reading this story aloud to her third-grade class, teacher Amy Wackerly talked with her students about symbols and reminded them of familiar cultural icons like hearts, smiley faces, and peace signs. She then challenged the children to draw a picture to “symbolize what this story means.” She also asked them to write or dictate a caption for the picture that explained their thinking. Josh (all student names are pseudonyms) picked up a crayon and started to draw a picture of Henry sitting in the box. After a few minutes, he stopped drawing and looked thoughtfully at his picture. Addressing classmates sitting in his table group, he said, “Well, this was going to be a picture of Henry and the box—but how do you draw freedom?” No one had a quick answer, but there was a lively discussion about a number of possible responses. Before long, Josh and his classmates were reaching for crayons and sketching their ideas for drawing freedom.

Ron drew a picture of the boat that carried the box with Henry inside it to Philadelphia. He explained his idea by writing, “Henry had hope because he knew he was going to get freedom when he got into the box and went on that boat.” For Ron, the boat symbolized freedom because it served the purpose of taking Henry away from his life as a slave. Rita drew a birthday party (complete with a cake and balloons) and said it symbolized freedom because Henry was never allowed to celebrate his birthday until after he escaped. The day of his arrival in Philadelphia became the first birthday he ever knew. After talking with Rita about her picture of a birthday party, Josh turned his paper over and started a new picture. This time, he drew two pairs of brown hands with chains on them, but the chain on one set of hands was broken. He explained, “When I drew the chains broken on the hands, I was symbolizing freedom because Henry was free from slavery” (Figure 1).

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“HOW DO YOU DRAW FREEDOM?”: TRANSMEDIATION AS A TOOL FOR THINKING

These examples came from an informal classroom inquiry initiated by a third-grade teacher and two university collaborators who were interested in exploring the idea of transmediation and how it might affect children’s meaning construction. In this article, we share our experiences with two different groups of third graders as we challenged them to move from the traditional activity of drawing a picture about a story to drawing a picture that symbolized the underlying meaning of a story.

Transmediation

The process of transmediation involves taking something you know in language and moving that knowing into another sign system like music, art, dance, or drama (Suhor, 1984; Siegel, 1984). A strategy called Sketch to Stretch (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) focuses on art; students are invited to sketch what a book means to them. “They are not drawing an illustration of the book’s plot, but a quick sketch of the connections and images the book raise in their minds” (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000, p. 163). Moving across sign systems has been shown to help children generate new ideas and insights (Leland & Harste, 1994). In addition, research on transmediation has demonstrated how less capable readers repositioned themselves and achieved a measure of success when multiple sign systems were available and seen as appropriate ways to respond (Clyde, 1994; Leland, Harste, & Helt, 2000; Siegel, 2006).

Asking children to symbolize the meaning of a story requires them to construct signs—like a broken chain or a birthday party—to show freedom in the book about Henry Brown. The study of signs is known as semiotics (Halliday, 1978). Siegel (2006) defines semiotics as “an inter-disciplinary field of studies that examines how meaning is made through signs of all kinds—pictures, gestures, music—not just words” (p. 65).

Why do signs matter? As Gunther Kress (2003, p. 4) has argued, “Images are plain full with meaning, whereas words wait to be filled.” Kress goes on to claim that “a vast change is underway, with as yet unknowable consequences” (p. 22). This change involves a move from a text-based form of making meaning to an image-based form of making meaning. Since literacy is about making meaning, it is at the center of this change. The goal of making meaning through various channels is echoed in the work of the New London Group (1996) and more recently in one of the Anchor Standards for Reading in the English Language Arts Common Core, which focuses on the need for students to “integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words” (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 35).

Although our culture has historically privileged language as the dominant way of making meaning, other modes like art, music, drama, and mathematics can be used as well. Kay Cowan and Peggy Albers (2006) make the case that “a semiotic approach to literacy enables learners to develop richer and more complex literacy practices” (p. 124). It also prepares them to deal with the images and messages of popular culture more thoughtfully and critically. Others have provided evidence to support the claim that the ability to “read pictures” has a positive effect on both children’s overall reading comprehension (O’Neil, 2011) and their ability to communicate meaning through art (Martens, Martens, Doyle, Loomis, & Aghalarov, 2012).

Critical Social Practices

While a semiotic or multimodal framework provides an important lens for

Pause and Ponder

- Children have different talents and abilities. How might you stretch your literacy curriculum to include more frequent opportunities for students to use multiple sign systems? Transmediations work well with small groups and with the whole class. When working in small groups, children can share the oral reading and talk about how they might symbolize the meaning of the book.
- What is your own comfort level with multiple sign systems? If it is low, what might you do to develop your abilities and confidence in this area?
- Children are surrounded by advertising and pop culture. What media literacy skills, knowledge, and attitudes might be developed in schools to help children become savvy consumers and citizens?
- Some children’s books address difficult social issues like racism, poverty, and homophobia. How comfortable (or uncomfortable) are you with the idea of using “edgy” literature in your classroom?
making meaning, it does not necessarily address the goal of teaching children to be critical users of various sign systems and forms of communication. For that perspective, the “Instructional Model of Critical Literacy” as described by Lewison, Leland, and Harste (2015) and Leland, Lewison, and Harste (2013) is helpful. This model frames critical literacy instruction as a transaction that includes personal and cultural resources, critical social practices, and the critical stance one enacts in both the classroom and the world. Within this model, critical social practices are described in terms of four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace; (2) interrogating multiple perspectives; (3) focusing on socio-political issues; and (4) taking action to promote social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). The multifaceted design of the model makes it appropriate for use as both a planning tool and a lens for evaluating growth. In this case, the model influenced our choice of materials (books that highlight social justice issues) and later provided one perspective for analyzing the children’s meaning making.

Context and Procedure

Amy (third author) is a third-grade teacher in a large urban district. Her school has a diverse socioeconomic population consisting of students who receive free or reduced lunch (38%) and minority students of varying backgrounds (20% African American, 10% Latino/a, 2% Asian, 7% multi-racial). This public school houses a magnet program with an inquiry theme. Inquiry-based education is built on the assumption that learning takes place through a continuing spiral of knowing (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996). There is no required basal reading program in the school, and teachers are free to choose from a wide variety of fiction and nonfiction literature for reading instruction. Amy’s classroom is filled with books and her students are accustomed to doing lots of reading, both in school and on their own. Admission into this program is based on parental request and a lottery system. Within the inquiry program, Amy also characterizes her literacy-rich curriculum as having a critical perspective because students are frequently asked to consider whose voice is being heard in books, news stories, daily classroom activities, and so on. The other two authors (Chris and Anne) are teacher educators at a public university located in the same urban district. The three of us worked with groups of children in Amy’s classroom during each phase of the inquiry and collected samples of student work. These experiences took place over the spring and fall of the same calendar year. During this time, Amy had two different groups of students in her classroom.

Our original plan (which we later called Phase 1) was to work with Amy’s class in the spring and finish this brief classroom inquiry by the end of the school year. As it turned out, we ended up with more questions than answers, and we decided to change our focus and try again with Amy’s new class in the fall; this became Phase 2. Both phases had some common elements, like the use of transmediation (art, in this case) to respond to literature and the use of “edgy” picture books that brought up difficult social issues. We have worked together and with other teachers on both of these topics but have never focused on asking children to symbolize the meaning of a story as a pedagogical approach. Our previous work with transmediation took more of a Sketch to Stretch (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996) perspective and encouraged students to draw a picture of a personal connection they could make to the book.

Anchor Texts: Books About Tough Social Issues

The three picture books used as anchor texts for this classroom inquiry were

- **A Shelter in Our Car** (2004) by Monica Gunning,
- **Henry’s Freedom Box** (2007) by Ellen Levine, and
- **In Our Mothers’ House** (2009) by Patricia Polacco. We consider these books to be edgy because they deal with poverty, racism, and homophobia—topics often seen as difficult (or inappropriate) to address with children.

- **A Shelter in Our Car** tells the story of Jamaican immigrants—a girl named Zettie and her mother—who are homeless and live in an old car. The book provides a sympathetic yet realistic view of the problems faced by many homeless people as they attempt to find jobs while also navigating the challenges of daily life on the street.
- **Henry’s Freedom Box** (described at the beginning of this article) is about a slave who endures the pain and danger of traveling to freedom disguised as an inanimate object packed into a wooden crate. While he ends up achieving a safe haven in Philadelphia, the loss of his wife and children make this a bitter-sweet victory.
- **In Our Mothers’ House** features a family made up of two women and their three adopted children.

“**Amy also characterizes her literacy-rich curriculum as having a critical perspective.**”
“Although these books have relatively happy endings, they also have underlying tensions and pain.”

Although their home is filled with love and happiness, they have to endure discriminatory treatment from a neighbor who won’t let her children play with them—and who tells the two moms “I don’t appreciate what you are” at a public gathering.

Although all three books have relatively happy endings, they also have underlying tensions and pain that are hard to forget.

Phase 1: “Retell the Story First, Then Draw a Personal Connection”

The main question we explored during Phase 1 was whether children would remember more aspects of a story after engaging in an artistic transmediation. We wondered whether the process of drawing a picture that connected the book to their own lives would remind children of the events in the story and increase their understanding. Specifically, they heard Amy read a story, then did an individual retelling of the story to one of the three of us, who took careful notes on what they said. When children couldn’t remember anything else, they were provided with paper and asked to “draw something that the book reminded you of from your own life.” They were also asked to write a caption that explained their thinking for what they drew. Children later shared their drawing with the same adult who took notes on their retelling and who subsequently invited them to add anything else they remembered about the story after drawing. The decision to have the teacher do the read-aloud instead of having children read silently on their own was made consciously; we wanted to ensure that everyone would begin with the same information. In the interest of time, we also decided that Amy would not stop during the read-aloud to invite student comments or discussion, though this was the normal practice in her classroom.

When the three of us met to share what we had experienced with our groups, we were disappointed to discover that few children added anything to their retellings after drawing. Most of them drew scenes from the story or pictures of themselves doing something similar to an event in the story. For example, Will drew a picture of Henry’s family being taken away in a wagon (Henry’s Freedom Box), and Lori drew a picture of what she referred to as “the junky car” that Zettie and her mother lived in (A Shelter in Our Car). A few children drew pictures of themselves doing something similar to what the characters in the book did. For example, Nila remembered the Marshmallow Mine game from In Our Mothers’ House and drew herself playing a similar game with her friends.

While almost all of the children’s retellings covered the main points of the stories, some went far beyond the main points and included small details. In many cases, the retellings were so accurate the first time around that there was little to add after drawing. In addition, the children did not appear to be interested in the question we were asking and were not willing to pursue it. We hypothesized that the retelling task encouraged them to think narrowly and literally, not broadly or deeply. While the children’s retellings did provide evidence of their ability to recall details, this activity did not appear to encourage higher-level thinking. Engaging in transmediation after doing a retelling appeared to help some of them connect the stories to their own lives, but it did not expand their thinking in significant ways. At this point, we decided to refocus and start over again.

Phase 2: “Draw What the Story Means”

Before the next school year started, we met and developed a new plan. We decided to use the same three edgy books but go immediately to the transmediation activity instead of asking students for a retelling first. This time, after she read each book aloud, Amy asked her students to “draw a picture that symbolizes the meaning of the story” and “include a caption that explains your thinking.” She reminded them of symbols they already knew, such as hearts, smiley faces, and peace signs, and challenged them to generate others. This request was initially difficult for some of the children, prompting Josh’s question: “How do you draw freedom?” In response, with all three of our groups, we kept going back to common symbols, engaging the children in conversations about what meaning they could extend and how someone might figure that out. This time, the students were sitting in their regular table groups as we talked to them, so they also talked

“Before the next school year started, we met and developed a new plan.”
with each other and began to share ideas. This was different from the first phase, in which each child met individually with one of us to retell the story and then draw a picture.

Since the children knew that any drawing would be accepted, we expected to see lots of pictures like we got in Phase 1—pictures of something that happened in the book or some experience from their own lives that they could connect to the book. Happily, this hypothesis turned out to be wrong. Phase 2 yielded many examples of symbolic thinking. Children did not draw many scenes from the story or pictures of themselves doing something similar.

**Findings**

After examining all of the pictures from across the two phases, we designed a preliminary taxonomy to describe the levels of meaning making we found in the drawings. (As this was not a formal study, the taxonomy was not checked for reliability, though we think this would be a good idea for a more comprehensive follow-up study.)

**Level 1: Literal Picture or Explanation of the Text**

Responses at this level simply reproduce something from the story. The picture of Henry’s family being taken away in a wagon and “the junky car” that Zettie and her mother lived in are examples from Phase 1 that fall into this category.

**Level 2: Personal Connection to the Text**

The girl who drew herself playing a game with her friends that was similar to the Marshmallow Mine game from *In Our Mothers’ House* provides an example of a level 2 response. Another level 2 response depicts someone who is lost in a hotel. The boy who drew this picture said that Zettie’s night in a hotel (*A Shelter in Our Car*) reminded him of the time when he stayed in a hotel and got lost trying to find his room.

**Level 3: Common Icons Used Symbolically**

Student examples at this level include the use of hearts, smiley faces, sad faces, and peace signs. We acknowledge that these signs were not constructed independently by students but are ideological in terms of how they “carry the beliefs of…community and culture” (Cowan & Albers, 2006, p. 126). One level 3 example shows both a happy face and a sad face for *In Our Mothers’ House*. The caption explains that the happy face was for when family members were having fun building a tree house together and the sad face (with tears!) was for when their neighbor “did not like that there were just two moms [and no dad]” in the family. A level 3 example from *A Shelter in Our Car* shows two female figures reaching out for each other with a heart and smiley faces between them. Ebony explained that this symbolized how much Zettie and her mother loved each other and how happy they were when they found each other after Zettie got lost.

**Level 4: Symbols Go Beyond the Text to Send a Larger Message**

Pictures and explanations at this level show children generating original symbols that transcend the text they experienced as a read-aloud. For example, Leah explained her picture of a bridge over a rainbow (Figure 2) as showing hope that Zettie and her mother (*A Shelter in Our Car*) and other homeless people will be able to have a home in the future. A message of hope is also apparent in Rita’s picture of a cracking egg with a heart inside it (Figure 3). Rita explained the symbolism as follows: “They shouldn’t think the world is broken because it isn’t working right for them. A new love can still hatch.” We saw both of these drawings as going beyond the actual text. Other level 4 pictures include the birthday party and the hands with broken chains discussed earlier for *Henry’s Freedom Box*.

When we tallied up the number of responses in each category of our taxonomy, we found large differences in terms of overall numbers between the two phases. While we identified 23 examples of level 1 responses and 32 examples of level 2 responses in Phase 1, we found only 4 examples of level 1 and no examples of level 2 responses in Phase 2. Conversely, while we found 30 level 3 and 25 level 4 responses in Phase 2, we...
found no examples of either level 3 or 4 in Phase 1.

The table suggests that we got what we asked for. When we gave children a narrow task (retelling the story), they responded with narrow thinking. When we gave them a broad, multimodal task (transmediation), they responded with broad, multimodal thinking. We were also surprised to discover that even though we didn’t specifically ask for retellings in Phase 2, they happened anyway when the children talked about their drawings. In their attempts to generate symbols for the meaning of the stories, many children drew a series of pictures to show what was happening in different parts of the stories. As they talked about their symbols, they were also providing accurate summaries. The insight we gained from this finding was that the broader task gave us not only symbolic thinking but also the summaries we initially saw as important. With the increased demands on teachers to do more with less time, getting “two for the price of one” in this way seems like a good deal.

What Role Did Collaboration Play?

While the edgy books and the focus on transmediation remained constant for both phases, a major change that happened during the second phase is worth noting: Children were left in their normal table groups to do their drawings. While the task in Phase 1 (“what can you remember all by yourself?”) had to be done in relative isolation, the request to create symbols in Phase 2 seemed to encourage the children to share their ideas. We observed many instances of students’ conversations with peers as they were thinking aloud about what they were planning to draw. We were surprised by the extent to which conversation among peers fueled more drawing and deeper thinking. Children often built on the ideas of their classmates, and this took their learning to a new level. For example, many drawings included hearts, the symbol for love, in response to all three books, probably because parents and children showed love for each other in all of them and the heart worked as a common cultural icon. However, in her response to In Our Mothers’ House, Molly drew what she referred to as “a bleeding heart with a bandage over it” and then crossed it out with a large X (Figure 4). She explained that this symbolized Mrs. Lockner, the neighbor in the story who “lost love” and yelled at the two moms.

Two other children in Molly’s group built on the idea of “lost love” in their pictures. Julia drew what she described as “a heart buried in the earth” to show that “Mrs. Lockner lost her love and now shows only hate.” Ellie drew what she said was “a big heart with an angry woman inside it” and a storm cloud over her head. She then crossed out the woman and said the big X meant “she lost love” (Figure 5).

In all three of these cases, children started out with a heart, the cultural sign for love, and then did something to change the underlying meaning. Instead of leaving the heart as a common icon (level 3), their moves to bury it in the ground, cross it out, or make it bleed changed the meaning and took it beyond the text (to level 4).

Our initial response to this process of building on each other’s work was less than enthusiastic. “Oh, they are just copying each other,” we thought. However, a closer examination helped us realize that the children were engaging in a generative process of constructing new meaning. The insight we eventually came to was that we were held back by our unconscious allegiance to the traditional view that children should “do their own work.” Even though none of us sees herself as a traditional teacher, the cultural model of “copying” someone else’s work is negative and deeply ingrained. We see it in action in K–12 schools and in college classrooms when we talk about the evils of plagiarism and the importance of making proper citations to other people’s ideas.
But we also know that there is another side to this issue. The power of sharing ideas shouldn’t surprise us; we have all witnessed the positive effects of collaborative thinking in our own learning. Jerry Harste (2003) talks about this in terms of “what social practices we institute around our discussions of books.” He urges us to “think of it as opening up spaces in the curriculum for starting some much-needed new conversations” (p. 9).

Probably the one thing we can be sure of is that we are handing tomorrow’s adults problems of some magnitude—poverty, homelessness, pollution, over-utilization of our natural resources…the list goes on. There are no magic answers to these problems, nor is it likely that such problems will be solved simply or single-handedly (pp. 10–11).

In other words, the image of students working silently on their individual assignments belongs to the 20th century more than the 21st and needs to be updated. Knobel and Lankshear (2007) make this argument a bit differently in their discussion of new literacies. They refer to practices that focus on active collaboration, “leveraging collective intelligence,” and “willfully sharing expertise” as “new ethos stuff” (p. 20) and argue that this is exactly the kind of literacy teachers need to cultivate.

Finally, we need to consider the question of the extent to which we found the children taking on critical social practices. Returning to the four dimensions mentioned earlier (disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple perspectives, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote social justice), we identified several drawings that show evidence of critical social practices. First, the caption for Rico’s picture (Figure 6), “I drew a town with a cross over it because they could only drive through the town—they couldn’t afford to live there,” gets directly at the sociopolitical issue of having places to live (affordable housing) for everyone. This can be seen as disrupting the commonplace notion that there is no need for low-income housing, and it can also be seen as a call for social action to fix the problem.

In a second example, Kyle’s picture shows the world with a heart around it. The caption reads: “Love the world means everyone should have a home. When you see a homeless person go and ask them, do you need anything?” This message goes beyond the text and argues that homelessness is everyone’s problem. A social action theme is also apparent in Katie’s picture, which features a series of small objects, including a dollar bill with a slash through it, a house with a slash through it, and a broken heart. The caption reads: “The homeless [problem] is growing everyday and it is up to you to stop it.” This message disrupts commonplace notions about how our society responds to homelessness and calls on all of us to do something about it; it is a clear call for social action. While we can’t claim that these critical social practices are totally new for these children, we can say that nothing like this came up during the first phase, when we asked children to recount the events of each story. The insight here is that a multimodal approach to literacy coupled with social practices like sharing edgy books and giving students opportunities to interact with each other might have opened up spaces for critical social practices to flourish.

**Reflections**

We all remember drawing pictures and doing cool art projects to go with the stories we read or heard in school, so we might be tempted to think of transmediation as yet another fun activity that doesn’t help kids become better readers. Short, Kauffman, and Kahn (2000) address this point directly: “In our work with response to literature, we no longer do cute art or drama activities with a book. Instead, students use sign systems as tools for thinking about a book and for sharing their thinking with others” (p. 169).

Positioning signs and sign systems as “tools for learning” is important. It takes them out of the realm of “cute activities” and gives them a place of prominence in supporting reading comprehension and the development of critical social practices. We found many instances of children disrupting commonplace understanding, taking on multiple perspectives, and calling for social action to correct inequities. We also saw them using art to address critical issues that were not highlighted in the books they read. For example, Eddie drew a picture of a brown hand and a white hand next to each other for *In Our Mothers’ House*, even though race was not the main tension in this book about two lesbian mothers raising a family of adopted kids. His caption, “The hands are for they are always happy,” extends the meaning potential of the story by offering another perspective. While a neighbor’s homophobia is the issue highlighted in this book, Eddie remembered that the adopted children represented three different racial groups—and they lived.

Figure 6               They Couldn’t Afford to Live There
We end with Jazmin’s drawing that depicts Mrs. Lockner as a human volcano with lava erupting from her head (Figure 7). While volcanoes are best understood as a force of nature, we don’t believe that Jazmin was letting Mrs. Lockner off the hook that easily. It seems more likely that she was criticizing Mrs. Lockner for not having better control of her emotions. Third graders know about the importance of learning self-control, and they expect adults to model appropriate behavior. In the larger cultural context, we might see criticism for the lack of thoughtful (and respectful) public debate. It’s hard to miss people yelling at each other and making no effort to resolve their differences peacefully. By learning to think critically and multimodally, it is our hope that students will develop the imagination and literacy tools needed to create inclusive communities.

REFERENCES


**TAKE ACTION!**

- Try a transmediation with your students. Select a picture book that addresses an issue that your students will see as important and relevant to their own lives. Read it aloud with expression so that everyone understands what happened in the story. Although we did not discuss the books or major themes before asking children to draw, you might find that doing this helps them get them started.

- If your students are reluctant to draw, start with a class discussion first. Share a read-aloud, then ask students to get into small groups and talk about how they might symbolize the meaning of the story. Once a number of ideas have been generated, share them with the whole class and invite students to choose one or to develop an original idea to sketch.

- Talk about common icons (symbols) like hearts, smiley faces, etc. with your students. Challenge them to generate new symbols for ideas that you encounter in the books you read aloud and in other reading material as well.

- Set up a teaching inquiry on collaboration in your classroom. Have students do one transmediation without talking to each other about their ideas first and one with sharing ideas before drawing. See if you notice any difference in the quality of students’ thinking.

- Share an edgy picture book with your class and invite students to discuss the issues brought up by the author. You can make it an interactive read-aloud by inviting them to make personal connections to any of the issues in the book as you are reading—or ask them to hold their thoughts until you have finished reading.
Erratum

The last name of the author of the View From the Chalkboard column titled “Empowering Teachers” on page 448 of The Reading Teacher 68(6) appeared incorrectly as Elizabeth Nurmi. It should have appeared as Elizabeth Sites.