Mediating wordless texts

(with thanks to the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education)

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In DIALLS, we are using wordless picturebooks from around Europe. These picturebooks will be shared with children of all ages as examples of quality cultural texts. They will also be used as springboards for discussions about key concepts such as diversity, tolerance and citizenship. It is not the role of the teacher to ‘tell the story’ and therefore this guidance is about how the story can be co-constructed together with the children through careful prompting and questioning.

We have included two pieces of guidance from the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE). The first is ‘Looking at Picturebooks’ and is generic guidance, not just about wordless picturebooks, but also for picturebooks with words. However, the general ideas contained within this document are very useful for DIALLS. The second is specific guidance for how to read Once upon a Snowstorm. It is written from the perspective of a literature teacher and would take a lot of time to implement; it must be stressed that DIALLS is not a ‘literacy’ project in the sense of teaching children to read visually, therefore not all of the activities included in the guidance would necessarily be needed. Once upon a Snowstorm is also a book for younger children. Picturebooks that are more suitable for older children may contain more challenging messages and/or more complex characters and drawings. However, the ideas for accessing it are useful for children of all ages.

Both the guidance for working with Once upon a Snowstorm and ‘Looking at Picturebooks’ highlight the importance of inviting children to engage more deeply with the pictures and encouraging them to notice different aspects of the text. Furthermore, by using questions to support children’s dialogue around the text, ideas may be built upon and new understanding may be co-constructed.

It is very important that children learn how to spend time on the pages and not simply skim through the text. A summary of the key ideas for mediating wordless picturebooks that may be relevant to DIALLS are outlined below.
Key ideas

- Enabling adults working with the children should read the book prior to sharing with their children, so they know the potential of what could be explored.
- Spend time discussing the front cover, endpapers, title page and back cover. How are they similar/different?
- Pictures early in the text can be used to invite prediction about character and plot. As the reading continues, these predictions can be re-assessed.
- When discussing pictures, children can point to evidence for their ideas and interpretations.
- Consider the perspective and the effect this has on the reader.
- Consider the colours, focus and shapes.
- Where is your eye drawn to in the illustration? What effect does this have?
- Use a viewfinder to help you focus in on the characters more clearly (a black sheet of paper with a cut out window). Look at the facial expressions and body language of characters and where they are in relation to each other. What feelings do the above effects induce in the reader?
- Consider how props are used in the pictures.
- What interesting things do you notice about the text? Look for repetitions or links between pages (for example, how does the end of the text link to what happened in the beginning?).
- Invite students to engage more deeply with the pictures through questioning – e.g. why might this be significant? How does this image capture the essence of the story?
- Consider how framing is used and the effect that it has.
Wordless films

Wordless films are easier to navigate as they have a linearity. Ideally a short film would be watched in its entirety (rather than broken into segments). However, with some films pausing them to talk about expectations might be appropriate, but this will have an impact on the viewing experience so needs careful consideration.

Below are some general questions that can help the co-construction of meaning for films:

- What do you think the film was about?
- Did it remind you of anything (other stories, world events, personal encounters)?
- What questions do you have about the film?
- Did anything surprise you in the film?
- Was there anything you didn’t understand about the film?
Looking at Picturebooks – Key Considerations:

Adapted from *Looking at Pictures in Picture Books, Jane Doonan* (Thimble Press, 1993)

‘The very best picturebooks become timeless mini art galleries for the home – a coming together of concept, artwork, design, and production that gives pleasure to, and stimulates the imagination of, both children and adults’


On First look: The picturebook as an object

Size & Shape

The size and shape of the text can play a defining role. Consider the book as an object. Why is it the size and shape it is? Is it appropriate to the content, the form and the reader? Does the size encourage sharing or promote the idea of a closer one to one reading? Does the size suggest that the picture book is special because it is so large or small? Is the book presented as portrait or landscape? How suitable is this choice?

Many narratives follow a landscape format, suggesting more of a journey, whilst illustrated poetry or information texts tend to be portrait or square.

Style, Design, Media, Quality of materials, Suitability of illustration for subject matter

Everything we see is affective, at times it sets our hearts knocking and always sets our brains ticking. What effect does the media have on you as a reader? Does it complement the subject matter and tone of the text? Are the production values of a high quality? Does the way the book looks and feels entice you to pick it up?

Every mark matters. Pictures are made of simple basic ingredients: arrangements of interwoven lines and shapes and colours, which the artist sets down in a particular medium and, at the same time organises. The movement of the pen or brush, the placement of collage, the design of sculptures and the organisational decisions, made either consciously or unconsciously and the medium itself induce an experience in the beholder.

Initial engagement

Look at the cover illustrations, the title and the names of the author and illustrator. If you already know the work of either, you may have pre-conceived expectations and assumptions, which it may be better not to have at this stage but which are inevitable. What are we to make of the cover image? Come back to this after reading and explore what you can make from this after reading. What extra information are you given from the endpapers? How do they take you into the story? If the title page contains a further illustration, what more evidence shapes your reading? The first reading will ignite the compelling curiosity to read on to find out what happens next, but this works against the pictures, which would have you stop and search. This immediate tension can be resolved by skimming through to get a general idea of the book and what you might make from it followed by reading all over again. The third look should give you time to read the
words and look at the pictures much more slowly to begin the process of discovering what relationship(s) they have using the deeper looking guidance below.

**Looking deeper: A step beyond what pictures literally represent to having an idea of how pictures are able to express and metaphorically display what cannot be pictured directly; ideas, moods, abstract notions and qualities**

‘Illustrators who understand their craft use all aspects of visual imagery to convey meaning.’

‘The meaning conscious mindset required to appreciate such pictures fully is always conscious of and always in search of meanings.’

Perry Nodelman: Words About Pictures (University of Georgia Press, 1988)

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**Composition:**

How are the elements in the scene held in balance? By drawing the horizontal, vertical and diagonal axes over a rectangular or square picture, you can consider how the elements are held in balance. Looking at a picture in this way invites the beholder to consider how the elements are held in balance so that they create the psychological and perceptual effect desired by the artist. An object in the upper part of the composition is perceived as heavier than one in the lower. Location on the right side of the picture makes for more weight than location on the left. Weight also depends on size: larger objects will be heavier than small ones.

**The lines and patterns**

Look at the quality of the lines; drawn, painted, created or shaped. These are a direct record of the artist’s hand, describing objects and events. The line that tells you about the pictured world reveals at the same time something of the personality of the picture-maker and how they think and feel about what they are doing. Does this have an effect on you as a viewer?
Facial expression, Body Language, Props

How does the illustrator extend our thinking about characters using facial expression? The slightest change to the eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth can change and enhance emotion in an instant. How does body language enhance this and allow us to understand and empathise with characters and their situations? Look at how characters hold themselves. What is happening with their arms, legs, hands, feet? What props are on or around the character that deepen this understanding further?

Perspective, Scale, Visual Links

The way that an artist controls space in a picture is extremely important. Establish the viewpoint of the beholder in relationship to the picture. Is the artist inviting us to look up to, or to look down upon the subject matter, or to look it in the eye? This has a marked psychological effect upon how we relate to what we are looking at.

Are there recurrent motifs that give signals to characters motives or actions? Do movements or placements of background characters or objects mirror or exemplify the main characters or action?

Layout, Framing and separation

Does the artist choose to use double page spreads, single page spreads or a combination of the two? How does the artist use framing and white space to open up or set scenes? Are frames deployed to move the narrative on or slow the narrative down? Does the positioning of character separate them from each other? What does this mean in the context of the story? Is white space used to separate, focusing our attention on character’s feelings or emotions or a particular incident that is taking place? Does the structure of the book, e.g. the page break or the page turn separate characters? What is the effect of this on the meaning of the story?

From Ssh! We Have a Plan by Chris Haughton, Walker Books
Colour, shading and tone:

Is the colour being used naturalistically, graphically or for emotional effect? Does the palette complement the subject matter or tone of the text? Does the colour symbolism have natural associations, conventional associations or associations particular to a specific book? Is it used consistently throughout the text or is it deployed for effect at points throughout? Light and dark not only represent lighting effects but also have symbolic and emotional associations for us. A colour scheme using light colours is able to suggest feelings of well-being whereas a scheme of dark colours may well have a sombre effect. Do shading and tone bring objects to the forefront or set them into the background?

Journey:

Look at the direction characters are looking and moving; usually the characters follow the direction of the story. If they don’t, why not? What does this mean? We read the text from left to right, this gives a sense of moving on. Are the pictures doing the same? Do lines of different weight or thickness suggest movement?

The interaction between the words and the pictures:

‘A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and foremost an experience for a child.

As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page.’

Barbara Bader: American Picture Books: From Noah’s Ark to the Beast Within (Macmillan, 1976)

Focus on the story told by the words. Look at the pictures separately then read the words and pictures as a whole. Do the illustrations:

• Complement the text
• Elaborate and extend it
• Contradict the text
• Show feelings that the words may only imply

Adapted from Nikolajeva & Scott: How Picturebooks Work (Routledge, 2008)

How does the typography integrate with the illustration? How are the words arranged on the page alongside the illustrations? Does the effectiveness of the placement give the reader cause to pause and reflect on the illustrations or on concepts raised in the text?
‘When we hold a picture book, we have in our hands a pictured world full of ideas. We play with these ideas and play with our own ideas around the pictured world. The more skilful we are, and the more ideas the picture book contains, the more the ideas go on bouncing. And in the process we create something of our very own.’ Jane Doonan, Looking at Pictures in Picture Books (Thimble Press, 1993)
Once Upon a Snowstorm by Richard Johnson (Faber and Faber)

In this story told exquisitely entirely through pictures, a boy and his father leave their cosy home with its log fire and venture out into the snow-filled woods. The shapes of the snowflakes take the forms of running deer, flying birds and fleeing foxes, prefiguring what will happen when the pair get separated in the snowstorm and the animals of the forest come to the boy’s rescue, sheltering and succouring him in a cave.

Questions to prompt co-construction:

These questions have been devised to support dialogue around the text. They share an insight into what could be explored and discussed in the illustrations. The notes are not a lesson plan or script. Enabling adults working with the children should read both the book and notes prior to sharing with their children, so they know the potential of what could be explored. The questions should not dominate the children’s discussions, they are designed to be used to enrich and extend observations made by the children.

Front cover:

Look carefully at the front cover image. How does it make you feel? What do you want to find out about this book? What predictions might you make about the characters, setting and storyline? Does it remind you of anything you have seen before in real life, in stories or film?

Front end paper:

Look at this page with the children. Where do you think this is? What do the colours, focus and shapes tell you about this place? Where does the perspective place you as the reader? How do you feel being here? What has the illustrator done to make you feel this way?

Look at the scale of the trees, how the tops of the trees in the foreground cannot be seen, how the trees continue into the background as far as the eye can see. Where does this place you as the reader and what effect does it have on you?

Title page:

What is the effect of the single page spread opening up into a double page spread? Does this change your perspective? How? Look carefully at the snowflakes, what do you notice about them? Why do you think they have been presented in this way? Look at the lines that are created on the page. Where is your eye drawn to in the illustration? Why? What do these pages make you think or feel about the story that might lie ahead?

First double spread:
Explore the spread together. How does it differ from the endpaper and title page spreads? Look at the use of colour, the sharper focus, the opening up of the trees that encircle the scene from the edges, almost framing it. What sense does this give you about the scene? Where are your eyes first drawn to when looking at the illustration? Why?

Now look at the two figures, the boy in the window and the man chopping wood outside. Study their facial expressions and body position, what does it make you think or feel about their relationship? You may wish to use a viewfinder, a black sheet of paper with a cut out window to help you focus in on the characters more clearly. Look at the distance between them, the boy being in the top floor of the house, the man being low down on the page. Look at the directionality of the illustration, the story will continue to the right of the page but all the action, gaze and directionality is pulling us backwards. What feelings does this induce?

**Second double spread:**
Explore the relationship further in the first single spread. Are any of your first feelings about the relationship between the two people confirmed or challenged by this page? Look once again at the facial expressions and body positions of the two characters. The man’s feet and the newspaper both act as a block between him and the boy. Look at the props that the illustrator has placed in the scene; what extra information might these give about the characters? How does the house look and feel?

Now look at the vignettes in the second spread. What is the effect of removing the wider scene? Where does it focus our attention? Look again at the gaze of the characters; what more might this tell us about their relationship? Look at the only prop left in the first vignette – the empty chair. Look carefully at the pattern on the cushion; have they seen this anywhere in the previous spread? Can they see it anywhere else in this spread? Look at the second vignette, compare the gaze of the man and boy; where is the man’s gaze drawn, why might this be? Look again at the only parts of scenery left behind, the coat pegs, is there any significance here?

**Third double spread:**
What is the impact of retuning to a full double page spread? Look at the man and the boy, the direction of their walk, the direction of the snow. What does this tell us about their journey? Compare their body positions and facial expressions, how do we feel about each character and the way in which they are feeling? Look at the way the colour changes as we follow the direction of their travel. What might this suggest about their journey? Look carefully at the snow that is falling, what do you notice about the shapes within? Have you seen these shapes and images anywhere before in the book? Allow the children to flip back and refer back to previous spreads.

Now focus in on the props. What is the man carrying? What might be the significance of this? What is the most noticeable prop the boy has? What might be the significance of this? Is the colour significant in any way? What are your predictions about how the story might progress from here?
Fourth double spread:

Look at the close up single spread of the boy, how do his facial expressions, scale and position on the page make us think about him? What do you think has caused the change? Look at how the illustrator has used framing on the next spread to separate the events that occur. What effect does this have on us as a reader? What is the effect of the change between close up, medium and long shots throughout these images? Why do you think the illustrator has chosen to focus in on the hands and right back out in the wide frame at the end of the spread?

Fifth double spread:

Look again at the use of framing on this double spread. Explore how the frames open out as the action progresses; what might this suggest about the boy? What is the effect of seeing him multiple times throughout the spread? Where does this focus our attention? How do we feel about him?

Now consider the direction of travel on the pages; the lines of the hill, the boy and the opening in the trees all lead us to the page turn. Why might the author have done this? What do you think might happen next?

Sixth double spread:

Explore the effect of the page turn on the children. Is it what they expected to see? What surprised them? Look at the use of colour, the dark background, the boy surrounded by a pool of light, how does this make us feel as a reader? Explore how the light illuminates the red scarf that he is curled up on; what is the significance of this? What can be seen in the stars that shine down on him? Why do we think the animals are of such significance? Why have their images been reproduced in different ways throughout the text? Allow the children time to flip back through the book if they have not noticed these previously.

Pause and reflect. What do you think will happen next?

Seventh double spread:

Again, explore the impact of the page turn; the introduction of light and colour as the animals appear. Look at the gaze and body position of the animals. Divide the page into thirds horizontally, notice how the characters all mostly appear in the middle third. What might this suggest? Do you feel the boy is threatened? Why or why not?

Eighth double spread:

Turn the page again; what is the effect of being bombarded by the multiple frames on this page? Why do you think the illustrator has chosen to use this technique on this page? Focus in particularly on the eyes and eyebrows. What do you notice about the expressions of the characters on the pages? What does this tell us about them?

Ninth double spread:

Look at the difference in size and scale between the bear and the boy. Explore how much of the page the bear takes up compared to the boy. What is the effect of placing the boy right at the left hand edge of the page? What do they notice about the lines used for the bear’s fur? Looking more deeply at the fur, what
else do they notice? What might this tell us about the bear’s character? What do they notice about the shape of its claws? What might this suggest? Explore the facial expressions and body position of the bear and the boy; do the children feel the boy is under threat? Why or why not?

**Tenth double spread:**
Explore the vignettes on this page, turning back to compare them to those of the boy and the man on the second double spread. Where are the similarities and differences? What can you tell about the relationship between the boy and the bear? Look at how the frames on the next page explore how this relationship develops over time; what might the synchronicity in the movements of the boy and the animals tell us? What is the effect of opening up the frames from a very close personal moment between the two characters to a wide, free social moment between multiple characters? Do the children notice anything about the boy at this point? Are any significant props missing? What might this suggest?

**Eleventh double spread:**
Compare the colour and warmth of the left side of the page with the white space surrounding the personal moment of the boy on the right. In the left hand side of the spread, look at the synchronicity between the boy and the bear, the mirroring of their movements and stance, the warm glow surrounding them, leaving the other animals in the background. What does this tell us about how their relationship has developed?

Now explore the effect of juxtaposing this with the solitude of the boy thinking about his father. Compare the facial expressions of the boy painting with the expression and body position of him reflecting on his painting. What do you think he is thinking about? What is the effect of moving him right to the bottom of the page at this point? Look at the proximity of the boy to the bottom right corner of the page; where do you think his story is leading?

**Twelfth double spread:**
Look at how the illustration again opens out into another wide double page spread. Look at how the lines on the page and the position of the boy and the bear exemplify the rapidity of their journey from the previous spread. Do they think this was a hard decision for the boy to leave? Why or why not?

**Thirteenth double spread:**
Look at how the author has shown the rest of the journey in frames; how can we tell how much time is passing and the distance they are covering between the frames? What does this tell us about how far the boy strayed and the determination he has to return? Consider the change in frames from the boy leading the bear, to them travelling together, to the bear leading; what might this suggest? Explore the placement of the boy right in the middle of the bear and the man, why do you think the illustrator has chosen to freeze the boy at this point? Look at the position and scale of the man and the bear. The man is large in the foreground, his elbow creeping out of the left hand edge, the bear is small in size and stature in the background of the frame. However, the bear is higher on the page and the position of the sun creates a triangular line link between it, the bear and the boy and the footprints remain between the boy and the bear. What might all these things suggest about the dynamics in the relationships portrayed?
Fourteenth double spread:
Investigate how the large single spread and the use of framing mirrors that of the fourth double spread. Explore the similarities in the boy’s expression; what is provoking this reaction within him now? Now compare this moment between the two with the vignette on the third spread. Look at the differences in the space between them, their gaze and expression. What has changed? Finally, compare this embrace with that between the boy and the bear in the vignette in the tenth spread. What are the similarities and differences in the relationships portrayed? What do you think the boy found in the bear that he was missing?

Now look at the rapid action that takes place in the frames in the second half of this spread. Look at the height and scale of the bear in the first frame – why do you think he is looking down over the boy and the man? Why do you think the man reacts in the way he does? Look at the reactions of the boy, first hiding behind the man, then stepping between the man and the bear. At this point, we only see the face of the boy – why do you think the illustrator has chosen to do this? Look at the mirroring of the facial expression and body position of the bear and the boy in the fourth frame on this page with the boy and the man in the opposite single spread. What do you think the man is thinking as he looks on in the fifth frame? Why do you think the illustrator has once again chosen to focus in on the hands of the characters in this last frame?

Fifteenth double spread:
Look at how the boy, the bear and the man finish the story all on the same level in the picture. Compare this to the first spread where we first meet the boy and the man. What might this tell us about how their relationship has developed? What is the significance of the other animals returning at the end of the story?

Sixteenth spread (single):
Look at the vignettes used to end the book. Compare the colour used with that in the rest of the story. Does this spread immediately follow the previous one? How do you know? Explore the body positions and facial expressions of the characters. What are these vignettes telling us about how all the relationships in the story have developed over time? Why do you think the illustrator has chosen to separate these two moments? How does he link them together? Use a viewfinder to explore the top image and focus in on the butterfly, what do they notice about this creature? What might this signify? Why do you think the illustrator chose to end the story with a flash-forward to Spring and set the rest of the story in Winter? Could there be any symbolic meaning to this?

Endpapers:
Compare the front and final endpapers. Why do you think the illustrator has chosen to complete the book in this way? Using tracing paper, draw the horizontal, vertical and diagonal axes over this square picture, and consider how the elements are held in balance. Where is the centre point? What might this tell us? Are any other elements significant – what does this reinforce about the story?

Revisiting the front and back cover image:
Why do you think the illustrator chose this image for the cover? What do you think the story is really about? How does this image capture the essence of the story?