

The power of pictures

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Ed Vere, author and illustrator

Charlotte Hacking and Ed Vere share information about the ground-breaking project they have developed together.

Picture books are an excellent resource for encouraging the development of more advanced reading skills, such as critical inquiry, inference, reader response and empathy. As Michaels and Walsh (1990) point out: 'Reading pictures is just as complex, perhaps more complex than reading print: it can also be just as rewarding as reading print. When the two symbolic systems work together the satisfaction, enjoyment and stimulation is more than doubled. In a world that relies increasingly on visual means of communication, picture books have established themselves as a complex literary genre in which both verbal and visual cues structure meaning.' The work of telling the story is done by both the pictures and the words, not the pictures just 'illustrating' the words. A text such as Ed Vere's *Banana* (2007) may at first glance seem a simple book containing only two words. However, the pictures convey a different story with a sophisticated range of emotions expressed between the two characters, from desire to rage, pride to humility.

In Ed's view, drawing is an unexploited resource; it is innate and rules should not be imposed on creativity. Visual literacy is crucial in getting children to read for pleasure. Children draw naturally, they don't need to be taught it, they just need to be able to continue to do it and not be stifled. They freely express themselves through drawing in a way that doesn't happen with writing at an early age. This is something incredible, and something we need to give more value to. Children have a complex and impressive ability to understand the world through visual means. Ideas and emotions that they haven't been taught yet can be understood readily through pictures. There are no language barriers to pictures.

In our experience at CLPE, teachers say that they receive a great deal of training on the technicalities of writing like phonics, spelling and grammar, but less on the creative aspects of composition and very little training in art or illustration. We were keen to explore the idea of a meaningful collaboration between teachers and author/illustrators, where teachers would get to spend time being trained by the expert, with support from CLPE in how these techniques would work in the classroom context and across the primary phase.

The project in action

Our aims for the project were to:

- create more lasting and fundamental relationships between teachers and author/illustrators, with greater impact
- give teachers greater confidence in choosing and talking about picture books
- develop teachers' own skills as writers and artists
- extend and deepen children's enjoyment of picture books and of writing
- raise the profile of emerging authors and illustrators and to support their work in what is seen as an increasingly competitive market
- stimulate an active and independent writing culture in schools.

The ability to work alongside a professional is at the heart of the project and has been a new and inspiring experience for many of the teachers involved. As one participant reflected: 'It's a real insight into a professional writer's creative approach; the link between art and writing has been made explicit in a way that is not always seen and is much welcomed! It was a fantastic course and a great and unique experience.' The course combines elements of illustration with a number of creative writing exercises, including the use of role play, drama and improvisation, as well as opportunities for teachers to write themselves.

Between the two course days, participants complete work around the texts and use the approaches in school, before coming back together to reflect on and evaluate what can be learnt about teaching writing in the classroom.

Across the pilot with Ed and three projects so far with Chris Houghton, David Lucas and Viviane Schwarz, the teachers and pupils have highlighted the importance of:

- collaborative talk and activities, deepening understanding of the texts and wider issues surrounding them
- slowing down the writing process, giving children the time and space to draw, draft and try out ideas
- using illustration alongside or as a way into writing
- the importance of the process before writing takes place; the ability to write and draw and speak concurrently and these not being separate events

- including creative approaches such as role on the wall, responding to illustration, a gallery walk where the pictures are displayed without the text to explore the story through the pictures, drama and improvisation to unlock ideas for writing
- building time for children to respond to their own drawing and writing, and that of others, to look at the impact this makes on the reader
- reaching a published outcome through presentation writing for display, bookmaking, including e-books.

Teachers' reflections on the project

The teachers were delighted with the success of the project:

'Drawing characters and getting to know the characters through drawing them really started to build up a picture of what a character is like and how they might react in different scenarios; it really helps with writing.'

'My class was thoroughly delighted with what we had completed and there was a real 'buzz' of excitement and ownership of these characters – they really got to 'experience' characters in a new way. After the session with Ed, I was excited too and I suppose in a way it rubbed off.'

'This has totally changed my attitude to using picture books with my children. Before, if I had seen one of them pick up a picture book, I would have said "Put that down and choose a proper book". Now I can see the value of using them in my planning and for developing children's reading and writing.'

'It made me think about how restrictive we have become by always deciding the format children's creative writing should take. I have never thought before about the limitations this could place on children's creativity and thought patterns.'

Authors' reflections on the project

Chris Houghton: 'I was amazed that my book, which takes two minutes to read, could be developed out into such engaging lessons and questioning and exercises over a full day with the teachers or even several days or weeks in the classroom. Not only that, but in the way it was presented with a few tweaks, the same book could work equally well in developing literacy from the very youngest to the older classes in primary. I was really amazed at how much engaging discussion could be drawn out by making predictions and drawing inferences, all from discussing a single drawing. Everybody in the class can bring their own ideas and prior knowledge to the discussion and I can't think of a better or more engaging way of developing critical thinking, vocabulary and thinking from different points of view. I like to leave open endings in my books to have some room for a little of this discussion afterwards but I never thought that so much could be brought to it. I learnt a lot from the course myself and hope to develop this more in my future books.'

Ed Vere: 'when as an author you see the outcomes of students' work, you can begin to see the merits of certain ways of working. Particularly for me was seeing how effective drawing actually was when added into the process of story building. The children seemed to take much more ownership of their work than previously according to the

teachers. I'd love further opportunities to explore 'visual literacy' to see where we could take it and how effective it could be for all children, but particularly struggling readers and writers.'

Next steps

Throughout the next two years, we will be holding a further six projects, in partnership with other authors and illustrators such as Alexis Deacon and Mini Grey. We will be filming each author/illustrator in their studio, creating illustrations *in situ* and talking about their writing process. These videos, along with the teaching sequences that accompany the chosen texts, will be available on a newly designed website for all schools to access. In this way we are hoping that we will be able to share the findings of the project, and the tools and experiences with as many schools, teachers and children as possible.

The project was externally evaluated as part of the Arts Council grant requirements. An interim report was published in May 2015, with a full report at the end of the project. The Evaluation focussed on what extent the project succeeds in making long term changes in teachers' practices and learners' attitudes and bringing about changes in the standard of children's writing.

The findings from nine courses over three years gives evidence for:

- developments in the teaching of writing
- any changes in the quality of writing
- links between teaching techniques and children's attitudes to writing
- the value of working with authors/illustrators
- what authors/illustrators learn from involvement with the project.

References

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Vere, E. (2007) *Banana*. Puffin. ISBN 9780141500591.

Vere, E. (2011) *Bedtime for Monsters*. Puffin. ISBN 9780141502397.

Websites

To find out more about the Power of Pictures sessions or to book, visit: www.clpe.org.uk/course/76.

To explore a range of high quality texts to use in the classroom, register on CLPE's Core Books online at: www.corebooks.org.uk.

To find out more about Ed Vere and his books, visit his website at www.edvere.com.