

Stimulating Critical Thinking with Wordless Books

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In today's classrooms, wordless books -- those in which the story is told only through a series of pictures -- often provide a meaningful context for enhancing students' oral and written communication skills. The typical process involves individual students, or small groups of students, dictating sentences or captions for each of the pictures in the book. However, students in grades K-3 can also begin to learn difficult critical thinking skills when wordless books are used (Wason-Ellam, 1989). This article will suggest ways that teachers of young students can use wordless books to begin to develop their students' critical thinking skills. Specifically, the article will describe a model for using wordless books to promote an understanding of character and develop critical thinking, and also provide suggested wordless books to use along with the model. The article will also suggest adaptations for older students.

Advantages of Using Wordless Books

Wordless books, because of their lack of written text, create in students a desire to use language and communication skills (Fields & Spangler, 2000; Norton, 1999). Through dictating or writing the text to accompany the pictures, young students begin to understand that stories are told in a sequence, that the plot is related to

the sequence and to the pictures, and that stories or text are read left to right (Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 2001; Tomlinson & Brown,

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Norton (1999) notes that the vivid detail of some wordless books invites observation and promotes the use of equally vivid vocabulary words. Yellin and Blake (1994) note that:

such books give students the opportunity to use knowledge about story structure gained from listening to stories to create a story of their own. These books help students develop inference skills since the entire story develops from whatever the child can 'read' in the pictures. (p. 195)

Furthermore, wordless books are advantageous to use when students of mixed reading levels are combined because the ability to read printed text is not a factor (Ellis & Preston, 1984;

Galda & Cullinan, 2002). Similarly, because multiple responses are often appropriate and encouraged, students of different cultural and language backgrounds can participate equally in discussing a wordless book (Cassady, 1998; Perry, 1997). Early (1991) notes that using wordless books with English second language learners “encourage students to produce longer, more detailed, coherent, and cohesive texts” (p. 250) because the intact story structure provided through the pictures allows second language learners to focus on their linguistic competence rather than on the creation of the story structure. There is rarely a wrong answer. Thus, all students can succeed. This makes them an ideal tool for today’s inclusive classrooms.

Most wordless books are brief. This brevity often supports a more in-depth analysis of specific story elements such as plot, setting, characterization, and point of view. In wordless books, students must think about the nature of the story element and how the pictures depict that element. Because the author’s words can not provide easy clues, recognition of the specific traits

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encompassing story elements must begin with scrutinizing the pictures and then discussing the results. Galda and Cullinan (2002) posit that “because the story line depends entirely upon the illustrations, students become much more aware of the details in the pictures” (p. 108). Glazer (2000) adds that “...body language and facial expressions are emphasized” (p. 232). Scrutiny of the pictures and corresponding discussion provide a basis for the development of critical thinking and character analysis.

As noted previously, the activities described in this article develop critical thinking and an understanding of characterization with young students and can be done with many of the wordless books available. While one specific wordless book is featured in the explanation for the development of characterization, other wordless books can be used and are listed in Figure 1.

Additional Suitable Wordless Books

- Blake, Q. (1998). *Clown*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Collington, P. (1995). *The tooth fairy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Day, A. (1985). *Good dog, Carl*. New York: Green Tiger Press.
- DePaola, T. (1978). *Pancakes for breakfast*. New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich.
- DePaola, T. (1981). *The hunter and the animals*. New York: Holiday House.
- Felix, M. (1995). *The mouse books: The boat*. New York: Harcourt.
- Felix, M. (1995). *The mouse books: The plane*. New York: Harcourt.
- Geisert, A. (1990). *Oink*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Goodall, J. S. (1988). *Naughty Nancy goes to school*. New York: Atheneum.
- Henterly, J. (2001). *Good night, garden gnome*. New York: Dial.
- Inkpen, M. (1996). *The blue balloon*. New York: Little Brown and Company.
- Keats, E. J. (1999). *Clementina's cactus*. New York: Penguin Putnam.
- Maizlish, L. (1996). *The ring*. New York: Greenwillow.
- McCully, E. A. (2001). *Four hungry kittens*. New York: Penguin.
- Omerod, J. (1982). *Moonlight*. New York: Lathrop.
- Schories, P. (1991). *Mouse around*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux.
- Smith, L. (1988). *Flying Jake*. New York: Aladdin.
- Spier, P. (1982). *Rain*. New York: Doubleday.
- Turkle, B. (1976). *Deep in the forest*. New York: Dutton.

Figure 1. Wordless Books

Developing Characterization with Wordless Books

In the book *Sunshine* (1983), by Jan Omerod, a little girl wakes up before her mother and father. The book follows the little girl's movements from

the time she wakes up, rubs her eyes and yawns, until she is dressed and leaving the house, hand-in-hand with her mother. The pictures in the story depict three characters: the child's mother and father, and of course, the little girl. The simplicity in number of characters, the familiarity of the setting, its relationship to everyday life, and the numerous illustrations make the choice of this book appropriate for use in developing concepts related to characterization. The model described below and summarized in Figure 2 suggests a way characterization and critical thinking might be approached with young students.

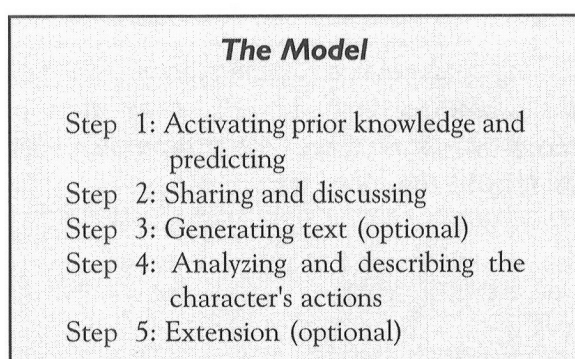


Figure 2. *Critical Thinking Framework*

Step 1: Activating Prior Knowledge and Predicting

The first step begins before “reading” the book and concentrates on the activation of prior knowledge. The cover of the book is often quite useful in doing this. The teacher starts by showing the book cover and asking questions about the scene pictured. The teacher encourages students to predict what the story might be about. Using *Sunshine*, the teacher might say, “Why do you think that the little girl is climbing into bed with her dad? Did you ever do this? Why? When did you do this? What do you think this story might be about?” This questioning encourages students to identify with the characters in the story by relating what they can see to their previous experiences and is crucial for the development of the critical thinking skills necessary to understand the story and to develop characterization. Furthermore, this discussion begins the process of predicting, enhancing young students' ability to comprehend the plot.

Step 2: Sharing and Discussing

Once prior knowledge has been developed, the book is shared and discussed. If the students are not familiar with wordless books they should be told that the book is different from some other books that they might have seen because the story is told only through pictures and that there are no words to be read. Consequently, instead of hearing the book read, the students must look carefully and think about the pictures as the pictures are shown to create the story. Students may benefit from viewing the entire book prior to a focused discussion (Burns, Roe, & Ross, 1988). Once the students have created the story in their own minds from seeing the pictures, the group or class can begin to talk about it. Obviously, some students will make comments about the pictures as they are shown, but for the most part, such comments will not interrupt the flow of the story. These comments should be viewed as natural expressions of the students' interest and enthusiasm for the story and evidence of their involvement in it. Teachers, however, should not plan to generate questions or provide prompts during this initial viewing.

Following the initial viewing, teachers should proceed much as they would with most books -- asking appropriate questions and allowing students to describe the pictures in their own words. Questions would include asking why something is happening and how the characters feel about what is happening. Teachers should also review

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the students' prior predictions about the book. This review should be nonjudgmental, but should link the predictions with the actual story. In *Sunshine*, the teacher might say, “When we looked at the cover we thought that the little girl might have had a nightmare and was climbing into bed with her father because she was scared. But when we looked through the book we decided that the little girl was just tired of waiting for her parents to wake up, so the little girl went to wake them

up.” With wordless books, discussion helps students derive meaning by observing and linking their observations with prior knowledge and to predictions about what will or should happen.

Step 3: Creating Text (Optional)

From this point, teachers and students may want to produce a text to accompany the pictures. For *Sunshine* and other wordless texts that have multiple picture frames per page, a decision must be made as to whether the entire page is to be represented by the text or if each picture frame will be represented by its own text. While it is somewhat easier to develop separate texts for each frame because less synthesis of ideas across several pictures is required, the multitude of frames in the book may make this a laborious task for some students. With *Sunshine*, developing a line of text for each page is suggested. The text, if written, can be read and reread. When shared this way, the book becomes much like any other book with text.

McGee and Richgels (1990) suggest using sticky notes to fasten the text to the page. This also allows for the text to change as groups of students switch or as students' thoughts change. Additionally attaching the text with sticky notes permits the separation and reunion of text and pictures. This feature may be useful for developing the concept that text and pictures match as well as for developing vocabulary and sequencing skills. These additional activities and the strategies for developing an understanding of characterization may be completed when the story is shared at a later time. However, if the additional activities are completed following a lapse in time, the additional activities should begin with a review of the story, its text, or both.

Step 4: Analyzing and Describing the Character's Actions

Because characterization is expressed through descriptions of actions, motivations, and related thoughts of a character, development of characterization begins with the teacher asking students to tell what one character in the story did. In the case of *Sunshine*, the obvious choice is the little girl. As students relate the girl's actions, the

teacher should record the actions on the chalkboard or on chart paper. The actions do not need to be in sequential order. The teacher can review the actions listed, noting similarities in types of actions. The teacher thereby encourages students to perceive the character's behavior or actions as part of a pattern. Furthermore, the teacher is helping students to understand how to verbalize that pattern. Recognizing the pattern in actions develops critical thinking skills in young students.

In *Sunshine*, for example, the little girl is often pictured as helping one or both of her parents. The word “help,” may actually appear in the students' listing of story events. The students may

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also recognize that the little girl also does many things for herself. While young students will probably not use the word “independent” to describe these actions, teachers can help students recognize that the little girl did many things for herself without adult help.

Some students need to experience the action and movement in order to verbalize the actions and events of the story. Having students act out the story or role play the characters may also help young students recognize motives for actions or determine ways to describe the character.

With other wordless books, the teacher may need to encourage students to think why the character did some of the events. Reasons can be listed along with the events. These reasons may be useful to generate descriptive words that can also be listed on the board or on a chart. Whatever strategy is used, generating descriptive words is an important aspect of understanding characterization. Furthermore, descriptive words are often examples of actions or easily lead to other descriptors that are actual character traits. For example, in *Sunshine*, the description of the little girl as “helping,” leads naturally to summarizing her behavior as “helpful,” the actual character trait.

Reviewing the students' descriptors can pro-

vide closure to the event. A statement such as “So when we thought about what the little girl did, we discovered that she seemed to like to help her parents. She was helpful and she was also able to do a lot of things for herself. Just by showing us how she acted, the author told us some things about her as a person.” This review or summary links the separate descriptors into a holistic entity and enables students to recognize that a character is a multifaceted yet unified individual. This is critical thinking for these young students!

The students' work with the wordless book could stop at this point. However, teachers can also extend the development of characterization with another activity. For example, teachers could involve young students in drawing a picture that fits the descriptors previously generated. The extension activity noted below extends the students' problem solving and critical thinking with the book and requires the students to apply their knowledge about the character.

Step 5: Extension (Optional)

On another day, students could be reminded of their conclusions about the character. The charts created previously along with the cover of the book can provide the basis for a review about the character. The students can then use these ideas to write a new story for the character. The teacher should pose the idea first as a brainstorming session. For example, with the little girl in *Sunshine*, the teacher might say, “How do you think the little girl would act at bedtime? How do you think she could help her parents then? What would she do for herself?” After the students have had time to brainstorm, then they can plan and dictate the new story using **Language Experience Approach**. New charts created during the brainstorming may help students recall ideas. More capable students could write and illustrate individual versions of the story.

Adjusting the Model

The procedure described above is easily adjusted by adding or eliminating the options noted to match the developmental levels of the students. For some students who are on their way to understanding story structure, writing text to accompany the pictures prior to discussing the

character may not be a needed step. Other adaptations include using the procedure with other wordless books. For example, Mercer Mayer's *A Boy, A Dog, and a Frog* (1967) series captures the humorous antics of a little boy and his love for animals and is well-suited to this approach. Raymond Briggs' *The Snowman* (1978) is another appropriate choice as are the series about the mouse family created by Emily Arnold McCully which depicts everyday events such as having a picnic, playing in the snow, attending school, and coping with a new baby. In each of these books, events familiar to most primary age students are portrayed through a series of pictures. Familiar situations enable easy comprehension, allowing students to focus on thinking about the character.

Teachers wishing to substitute other books should consider the book's age-appropriateness, its ability to capture the essence of a character through pictures, and the familiarity of the situation to students. As noted previously, Figure 1 includes some additional suitable wordless books to help teachers get started.

Teachers may also adapt the model for students who are older, who are second language users, or who have special learning needs. In each of these cases, teachers need to think about their students' readiness for and ability to complete each of the steps in the model. The optional steps, for example, may be eliminated for older students. Additionally, in step 4, teachers of older students may skip over listing the character's actions and move directly into the verbalization of character descriptors. Obviously, the teacher's wording for each step should be adjusted to students' levels. Similarly, teachers of older students should select books that are age-appropriate.

Conclusion

As Considine, Haley, and Lacy (1994) note, “by teaching students to read the pictures we give them the potential of understanding the story on a deeper level...comprehension of the pictures must be related to the narrative role they play, not just their artistic contribution” (p. 123). While this article has described a process to develop critical thinking and an understanding of character with young students, wordless books are excellent teaching resources for teachers to use to teach a

variety of concepts because their use invariably requires students to think critically in relation to their own experiences, thus, extending their knowledge in an appropriate way.

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