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An eloquent silence: The value of wordless narratives

Dr Cathy Sly

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An eloquent silence: The value of wordless narratives

Dr Cathy Sly investigates the significance of wordless graphic novels and picture books, and offers practical suggestions for exploring these silent narratives with students.

In his introduction to David A. Beronä's 'Wordless Books', comics artist Peter Kuper claims, 'We humans have been using drawings to tell stories as far back as when our ancestors called caves home' (2008, p 7). Kuper goes on to argue, 'Wordless picture stories have a unique and especially intimate relationship to their reader' (2008, p 7). This article explores the merits of graphic novels and picture books that have been referred to as wordless, almost wordless, silent, mute, visual stories, or pictorial narratives. In other words, books in which a story is told almost exclusively through images.

Apart from the aesthetic qualities of wordless narratives, researchers have identified significant pedagogical assets associated with this medium of production. They postulate that books without words can activate the imagination, energise inferential reasoning, cross language barriers, and evoke affective responses. It is a mode of storytelling that conspicuously calls for co-authoring by a reader. Anna Gibbs argues, '... experimental studies ... have found that humans react physiologically to images faster than we can cognitively process and make sense of them' (2011, p 252). Thus, the visual narrative is a powerful means of communicating the nuances of characters and their emotional states. Similarly, Suzanne Keen suggests that '[t]he art of the comic book can freeze ... expressions in close-up frames that arrest time and enhance recognition of the subject's feelings' (2011, p 146). Whether human, posthuman or animal; whether photorealistic, cartoonish or abstract, picture book characters readily elicit feelings from a reader.

The significance of silence

Before moving on to consider how to analyse 'silent' texts, it is worth briefly contemplating the notion of 'silence', which often subsumes symbolic meaning in the 'wordless' narrative. Apart from people who are unable to speak, there are other factors that cause people to be temporarily 'silent' or 'lost for words'. Silence may be positive as in the case of excessive joy, meditative or spiritual contemplation, as a means of honour or respect, or in empathic unity with another person. On the other hand, silence can result from distressing situations such as grief, trauma, fear, powerlessness, resistance, or disrespect. Phrases such as: 'I was speechless', 'it was beyond words', 'words could not describe', or 'they were dumbstruck' are not unusual in our verbal interchanges. When reading and studying wordless narratives, it is important to ask how and why the omission of a verbal track is important to the particular story. For instance, in Shaun Tan's 'The Arrival' there is the silence of trauma and alienation, as well as a silence resulting from people not having a shared language. In 'The Only Child' by Guojing, silence conveys the loneliness of a very young child who is left on his own while his parents go to work. When charged with symbolic meaning, it can be argued that silence itself is eloquent. The best wordless narratives powerfully articulate issues and feelings while verbalisation lies dormant below the surface of the visual manifestations.

Graphic novel or picture book?

'Graphic novels are both like and not like picture books, ... while they are similarly visual narratives, they are nevertheless distinctive and different forms ...' (Mallan, 2014, p 1). Without the conventional balloonics used in comics-style narratives, the boundary between wordless 'graphic novels' and 'picture books' can be particularly porous and requires some flexibility in classification. For instance, 'The Snowman' (1978) by Raymond Briggs was considered to be a wordless picture book when published in the 1970s, but in today's context it could also be referred to as a graphic novel, because the story is told predominantly through a series of sequential panels. Similarly, contemporary picture book author, Shaun Tan, discovered himself to have become an 'accidental graphic novelist' (2011) because of his extensive use of sequential panels in 'The Arrival'.

For a wordless book to be a graphic novel it requires the layout of images to follow the comics-style convention of being predominantly in sequential panels. The panels sit within a 'grid' on a page, with 'gutters' between them. This convention encodes transitions in time, place and/or perspective. Thus, the grid layout and framing of the panels contribute to meaning, as do their shape, size and placement on the page.

There are instances where picture book creators incorporate sequential panel pages in their layout, as does Marla Frazee in 'The Farmer and the Clown' and David Wiesner in 'Flotsam'. Conversely, graphic novelists sometimes include picture book style 'splash' pages in the form of full- or double- page spreads, as is the case in 'Robot Dreams' by Sara Varon or 'The Only Child' by Guojing. Splash pages operate as a longer punctuation point in the rhythm of the narrative. They require a reader to pause and think about what has led to this point and consider what is to come.

Reading and meaning making with silent narratives

In order to comprehend, critique and share ideas about visual stories, teachers and students should be familiar with the relevant navigation skills, elements of visual literacy, and the associated metalanguage. For the purpose of explicit teaching or revision of these techniques and conventions, the resources below offer an overview of the main features to consider when interrogating visual images:

- Reading images: the grammar of visual design by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen.
- Empowering 21st century readers: integrating graphic novels with primary classrooms by Cathy Sly. In K. Mallan (ed.) Picture books and beyond.
- [Representation in picture books: picture books and graphic novels.](#)
- [Visual techniques: composition and representation.](#)

Suggested steps for reading visual narratives

It is best to read and enjoy a wordless narrative individually for the first reading, then later to share personal perceptions with a partner or group. However, in the classroom situation, individual reading of the same title in hardcopy is not always possible. YouTube videos of silent stories could be used for a class group. The ones with a musical backing rather than a person telling their version of the story are a better choice. However, for a more authentic reading, the video of the book should be shown with the background music (or speaking voice) muted so students can focus solely on the silent images and perceive the story in their own way.

First reading

Read the book at your own pace. Get a feel for the story. Questions that might be considered initially include:

- Who are the main characters?
- Where/when is the story set?
- Generally, what is the story about?
- How does the story make you feel? Why?

Second reading

Reread the book at a slower pace, focusing on particular details. The following questions could guide this reading:

- Like works of art, wordless books usually have a verbal title. What does the title tell a reader about the book?
- Does the setting (place or time) change in the course of the story? How and why?
- What is the main mood or atmosphere in the story? What techniques does the illustrator use to convey this?
- How does the colour scheme enhance the story?

Third reading

Reread the book with more detailed questions in mind. For example:

- In what ways are the characters important to the delivery of story?
- Select one character to follow closely. Can you explain the role of this character in the story? Does the character change? How and why?
- What themes or ideas are conveyed through the narrative?
- Are there any important symbols? If so, what are they, what do they mean, and how do they enhance the story?
- Are there any sections of the story that you think work better visually than they would if conveyed in writing? Which? Why?
- Select a segment from the story and retell it orally. In written prose, or by using speech or thought balloons and caption boxes, where appropriate, like a graphic novel with written text.

Subsequent readings

Revisiting wordless books over time often brings surprises, as our understanding and experiences develop, stimulating different perspectives.

Modelling a close reading of an extract from a silent narrative

By way of example, I will focus on two pages from the well-known picture book 'Flotsam' by David Wiesner. This highly acclaimed picture book is about a boy spending time on the seashore and investigating the marine creatures he finds there. An old box camera washes in on the tide and this gives the boy something even more intriguing to examine.

Although it would be better to have a copy of the book, a digitised version of 'Flotsam' can be useful. The two pages selected here exhibit elements of a wordless picture book. They also include a panelled layout that requires the tying together of sequential panels and making inferences in the gutters between the panels, which is more typical of a graphic novel. Thus, an analysis of these pages can serve as a model for interrogating either picture books or graphic novels. Terminology related to critiquing visual media is noted in bold font.



Extract from Flotsam by David Wiesner (2008, New York: Houghton Mifflin)

The **focal point** of this **double page spread** is the **close-up** of the old box camera in the hands of the boy. We **infer** that the hands are those of the boy because of the **inserted panel** to the left, in which the boy is holding the camera. The style of the camera **symbolises** a connection with the past, which becomes significant later in the story. Ornate writing on the front of the camera suggests a brand name, 'Melville underwater camera'. Melville is an **intertextual** clue to the 19th century author Herman Melville, famed for stories about the sea, notably 'Moby Dick'.

On the **opposite page** is a **grid** of seven **various sized panels**. Firstly, a **horizontal panel** provides an **extreme longshot** of the boy standing at the water's edge holding the camera. Although he is **centrally placed**, he is small in relation to the vastness of the natural surroundings. Through an **action-to-action transition**, the next **panel** shows the boy running up the beach with his find. It locates the reader's **point of view** to behind the boy's parents. Again, the boy is **centrally located** clutching the camera as he runs towards his parents waving. His **gesture** suggests anticipation or excitement. The third panel **zooms in** on the boy showing his find to his parents. Their **expressions** convey interest and curiosity. The following **panel**, created through a **scene-to-scene transition**, requires more from a reader in terms of **inference**. It appears the boy has been prompted to show his find to the beach lifeguard. Supported by his parents, the boy presents the camera to this 'authority figure' on the beach. Given the final three **panels**, it seems the boy has been given permission to keep the camera, which he investigates closely and discovers it has a film inside.

Apart from the obvious messages in these two **pages**, other clues enhance the narrative. For instance, the cool **colour scheme** of blue, aqua, grey, off-white, black and yellow ochre, provide a sensory portrayal of the seaside atmosphere. As a piece of technical equipment, the camera stands in direct contrast to the natural environment. **Bodily gestures** and **facial expressions** convey feelings and possible verbal interchanges. Smaller details carry **symbolic meaning**. For example, the barnacles on the camera, its style and its name suggest that this piece of flotsam is old. The film canister within the camera is certainly predigital. All of these clues, and no doubt many more, assist a reader in making meaning of this wordless tale. The type of silence exhibited in this story is a contemplative silence of a curious boy investigating creatures that live at the seaside and later the flotsam that is washed in by a constantly rolling sea. This short commentary on a brief segment of an acclaimed picture book should serve to demonstrate the richness to be found within the eloquent silence of wordless narratives.

As Silvia Adler argues, a creator may choose to 'turn off the vocal channel in order to invite the reader to gain understanding through observation and deduction, and ... to let symbols and icons 'talk' [and] ... deliver information on the implicit level' (Adler, 2011). There are many high-quality wordless picture books and graphic novels that can be enjoyed and pondered. Some of these are listed below.

Wordless picture books

- Baker, J. (2004). *Belonging*. London, England: Walker Books.
- Baker, J. (2010). *Mirror*. Newtown, Australia: Walker Books.
- Baker, J. (1991). *Window*. Newtown, Australia: Walker Books.
- Banyai, I. (1998). *Zoom*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- Becker, A. (2013). *Journey*. Sommerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Becker, A. (2014). *Quest*. Sommerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Becker, A. (2016). *Return*. Sommerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Dubuc, M. (2018). *The fish and the cat*. New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Frazee, M. (2014). *The farmer and the clown*. San Diego: CA: Beach Lane Books.
- Geisert, A. (2011). *Ice*. New York, NY: Enchanted Lion Books.
- Lawson, J. & Smith, S. (2016). *Sidewalk flowers*. London, England: Walker Books.
- Lehman, B. (2004). *The red book*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Lehman, B. (2011). *The secret box*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Oswald, P. (2020). *Hike*. Sommerville, MA: Candlewick Press.
- Pinkney, J. (2009). *The lion and the mouse*. New York, NY: Little, Brown Books.
- Thomson, B. (2010). *Chalk*. Seattle, WA: Two Lions.
- Thomson, B. (2013). *Fossil*. Seattle, WA: Two Lions.
- Wiesner, D. (1991). *Tuesday*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Wiesner, D. (2008). *Flotsam*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.
- Zoboli, G. (2017). *Professional crocodile*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.

Wordless graphic novels

(Some of these titles were published as picture books but also fit the criteria for graphic novels.)

- Briggs, R. (1978). *The snowman*. London, England: Random House.
- Chabouté, C. (2017). *The park bench*. London, England: Faber Faber.
- Guojing (2015). *The only child*. New York, NY: Schwartz & Wade.
- Jurevicus, N. (2012). *The adventures of Scarygirl*. Sydney, Australia: A&U Children's.
- Lupano, W. & Panaccione, G. (2018). *A sea of love*. St Louis, MS: Lion Forge.
- Ma, D. (2015). *Leaf*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics.
- Rogers, G. (2004). *The boy, the bear, the baron, and the bard*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Rogers, G. (2007). *Midsummer knight*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Rogers, G. (2012). *The hero of little street*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Runton, A. (2004). *Owly: vol. 1. The way home & the bittersweet summer*. New York, NY: Graphix.
- Tan, S. (2006). *The arrival*. Sydney, Australia: Lothian Children's Books.
- Varon, S. (2007). *Robot dreams*. New York, NY: First Second.

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Developing EAL/D student writing practices in a digital age: A focus on informative text types

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Developing EAL/D student writing practices in a digital age: A focus on informative text types

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Developing the skill of writing is one of the core goals of schooling for all students. Given that learning to write is a process that takes many years to develop for students who begin their schooling during the early foundation years, consider the enormity of developing this skill for beginning or emerging phase English as a second language or dialect (EAL/D) students who enter the education system at a later stage. More than a third of students enrolled in NSW public schools are from homes where languages other than English are spoken (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2020), which is a significant percentage in any given school. EAL/D students may enter the education system at any time during their primary or secondary schooling years, with varying levels of exposure to schooling and writing instruction. How do teachers and educators address these EAL/D students' needs to enable and facilitate the development of their writing skills? This article will consider the development of EAL/D students' writing of informative texts in the primary syllabus.

Making explicit the social processes of writing to EAL/D students

Writing is not an innate feature because it is not a skill that develops naturally. To develop writing skills, students must consciously create, learn and manipulate aspects of written language in a way entirely unlike the way they learn spoken language as a child (Bromley, 2014). The development and use of written language is a social activity because it requires interaction between people through text, or a combination of text and visual or multimodal form (Harris, Fitzsimmons, McKenzie, & Turbill, 2003). People engage with written language according to the context of situation (Halliday, 1978), meaning that people engage in writing tasks for different purposes. Teachers are familiar with a functional approach to language.

They understand that students need to learn how to communicate in a variety of text types in order to succeed in their academic lives and have access to the powerful ways of using language in society and culture (Derewianka & Jones, 2012).

However, the social nature of writing in a new cultural context may be an unfamiliar concept to EAL/D students, particularly if their previous schooling experiences have been of writing through a 'traditional approach' (Campbell & Green, 2006). The traditional approach 'presents a decontextualised view of language' (Derewianka & Jones, 2012, p 15) because it focuses on teaching writing through a series of isolated skills, such as spelling, punctuation and grammar leading into the composition of extended writing pieces (Harris et al., 2003). EAL/D students who enter the Australian schooling system with an experience of writing as a series of isolated skills will need explicit instruction to view the connections between written skills and practices. The National Literacy Learning Progression describes the development of writing as a movement 'from representing basic concepts and simple ideas to conveying abstract concepts and complex ideas, in line with the demands of the learning areas' (ACARA, 2020, p 39). It is important that teachers of EAL/D students draw on explicit instruction which demonstrates writing as both a process and a product, as suggested by the Four Resources Model of Writing (Harris et al., 2003).

The writing sample below, from the key learning area of English (ACARA, 2014), examines the social practices of writing that guide a student to compose an effective information report. The four writing practices of text encoder, participant, user and analyst practices (Harris et al., 2003) will be contextualised in the student work sample to offer suggestions on how teachers in mainstream classrooms can assist EAL/D students to develop their writing when composing an informative text.

The image shows a student's handwritten work on a lined paper. The title 'Turtles' is written in red at the top. The first paragraph, written in blue ink, states: 'A turtle is a sea creature who swims in the ocean.' The second paragraph, also in blue ink, is titled 'Shell' in red and describes the composition and function of a turtle's shell. The third paragraph, in blue ink, is titled 'Baby turtles' in red and describes the early life of a turtle, including hatching from an egg and surviving in the water.

Turtles

A turtle is a sea creature who swims in the ocean.

Shell

This paragraph is all about shells. A turtle is the only reptile that has a shell. The shell is made of leathery material. A turtle get protection from their shell. Sea turtles have light shells, so they can swim more easily. Tortoises have heavy shells.

Baby turtles

This paragraph is about Baby turtles. When a baby turtle is born it digs it way to the surface. When their mother dies they are okay to take care of themselves. They hatch out of their eggs. Baby turtles are really really small and tiny. Their eggs are all covered in sand. Baby turtles can survive in the water. When baby turtles get big, they lay eggs.

Sample information text on Turtles (Australian Curriculum: Work sample portfolio – year 3, 2014)

In the Australian Curriculum: English, informative texts that students learn about include explanations and descriptions of natural phenomena, recounts of events, instructions and directions, rules and laws and news bulletins (ACARA). The information report is an example of this text type, easily branching into multimodal form as students draw on print text, visual images, or spoken word as in film or computer presentation media to learn about and compose information. The information report shown in the sample requires an engagement with the following writing practices.

Text encoder

Encoding words and images about the topic into the text.

Focus questions for teachers include:

- What knowledge of written language do students need to compose this text?
- What knowledge about visual resources do students need to compose this text?
- What explicit teaching will support students in understanding the language and structure of this text? ([The four resources model for writing](#)).

At Stage 2 students are demonstrating increasing fluency when writing (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2019). Composing an information report will require EAL/D students to understand how to decode and encode linguistic and visual data into meaningful text that demonstrates an understanding of the informative content. EAL/D students who enter the Australian schooling system during primary school may have come from a previous schooling system where they were also developing an awareness of text encoding in an alphabetic script that is similar, or different to the English alphabet. When teaching informative text types, some aspects of linguistic and visual text decoding may need to be explicitly taught to EAL/D students.

Lesson ideas

- In mainstream classes, teachers can help EAL/D students to build their encoding of word skills in English by drawing on bilingual instructional strategies to teach the key words about the topic. For example, by creating a word bank or word wall of translated words and accompanying images or infographics about the topic of turtles, EAL/D students will be supported to build their word recognition skills about the topic as they are building new text encoding practices. This can be carried out as a communicative task between EAL/D students, or with the support of a bilingual teacher or teacher's aide. In addition, there are online educational platforms which offer spoken and written translations of key words. For example, there are free educational apps such as [Google Translate](#) and [iTranslate](#) as well as the [Microsoft Translator](#) app which can be used to translate text as well as voice messages. It should be noted that a small margin for inaccurate translation exists when using educational translating apps. As with all good teaching practice, it is important to make sure that EAL/D students are explicitly taught how to refer to these translated resources during their learning.

- Composing an information report in a digital age will also require students to have a sound understanding of how to interpret visual data to compose an informative text. For instance, to develop an understanding of turtles, the EAL/D student will need to examine maps and graphs to learn about their natural habitat, distribution and key facts relevant to the animal. Visual data may be in hardcopy, such as in a book, or the visual data may be digital, on a website, with graphic features that change as the viewer interacts with the image. How to interpret these forms of visual resources needs to be demonstrated to EAL/D students, facilitating their development of how to learn information from images and multimodal texts and then how to use relevant details in the composition of an information report.

Text participant

Accessing knowledge about the topic to affectively express meaning into the text.

Focus questions for teachers include:

- What experiences and prior knowledge of the topic do students bring to the composition of the text?
- What research and preparation do students need to compose the text?
- What is their knowledge of similar texts? ([The four resources model for writing](#))

Lesson ideas

- Teachers can build bridges between the content of the curriculum and the topic of the information report by finding out what their EAL/D students already know about the subject. For example, teachers can draw on short educational clips, progressive brainstorms or 'myth buster' activities about turtles which promote discussion in the classroom. EAL/D students can contribute and develop a great amount of information about the topic through communicative activities that are introduced while building the field. They can then include these in their composition of an information report. It is useful to note that EAL/D students benefit from the teacher's use of 'recycling of information', that is presented repeatedly in various forms to the student, so that coherent expressions of meaning are regularly modelled for the EAL/D student to use in their writing.
- To build upon this prior knowledge, EAL/D students need to be shown how to participate successfully in investigation activities which are often called research tasks. EAL/D students are often unfamiliar with forms of learning that require them to search independently for information about a topic and need high levels of support through purposeful modelled and guided teaching activities that scaffold students in the research process. It is suggested that teachers provide their EAL/D students with clear instructions about the key points of information that they need to locate during the research task.
- EAL/D students are shown many examples of how to locate and summarise information from primary and secondary sources of information as this is a particularly unfamiliar task. To implement purposeful guided teaching activities, it is recommended that teachers incorporate communicative tasks into a sequence of lessons which allow EAL/D students to practice their research skills, such as a 'jigsaw

activity' that uses listening, speaking, reading and writing skills to build various aspects of knowledge about the topic as students work together in groups.

Text user

Understanding the social purpose and text structure of an information report to frame the composition of the text.

Focus questions for teachers include:

- What knowledge do students bring of the social purposes and uses of the kind of text they are composing?
- What explicit teaching will support students in composing this text for particular purposes? ([The four resources model for writing](#)).

EAL/D students need explicit teaching about the social purpose of the informative text that is being studied, as well as how to organise their writing into the appropriate structure. Students at Stage 2 of the English Syllabus are learning to 'use simple and complex sentences, paragraphing, punctuation and grammatical features characteristic of the various texts to support meaning' ([NSW Education Standards Authority: English Stage 2 Syllabus](#)).

Lesson ideas

- EAL/D students rely on the teacher's use of the teaching and learning cycle to build an understanding of the text type and its structural features (Derewianka & Jones, 2012). This includes explicit instruction in the use of paragraphs to organise ideas, topic sentences and supporting examples to sequence an information report.
- Similarly, EAL/D students need clear models of the language features in the informative text, as well as opportunities to practise the use of the language features such as relating verbs, noun groups, technical vocabulary and simple and complex sentence structures that are characteristic of information reports.
- As EAL/D students move towards the written end of the mode continuum, they have to take greater responsibility for constructing the text independently. It is important that teachers provide ample time for EAL/D students to 'look up references, to make notes, to draft and revise, to edit out irrelevancies, to think about relationships between ideas, and to structure the text into coherent stages' (Derewianka & Jones, 2012, p 127). Digital technologies provide some assistance in planning and proofreading EAL/D student writing, as the use of word translations, spell-check, and sentence coherency notifications are available in Word processing documents as well as online platforms such as [Google Docs](#).

Text analyst

Presenting a viewpoint that is implicit in the composition of the text.

Focus questions for teachers include:

- What knowledge do students bring of the ways this text can be designed to represent particular views and interests?

- What explicit teaching will support students in developing critical language awareness of the ways language works to create particular meanings in their written texts?
- What explicit teaching will support students in developing critical awareness of the ways visual elements work to create particular meanings in their visual texts? ([The four resources model for writing](#))

EAL/D students face a range of challenges in developing critical writing skills (Allison, 2011; Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999). Teaching EAL/D students about presenting a viewpoint in the composition of a text is a skill that can be built through ongoing engagement with imaginative, informative and persuasive texts. The information report is a text which presents factual knowledge, although there is scope for the writer to present their underlying values and views about the topic through their choice of vocabulary and adjectives used, or images included in the information report.

Lesson ideas

- Teachers can create engaging, communicative activities which encourage EAL/D students to identify the linguistic, visual and multimodal features that represent the composer's view about the topic. For example, students can participate in a progressive brainstorm about how the view or values are suggested in a small collection of different informative texts.
- Students work in pairs to sort a list of given linguistic and visual features which present the values or views that are implicit in a text. Implementing a teaching and learning cycle which demonstrates how language and visual elements can present different meanings is an important part of explicitly teaching EAL/D students to develop critical awareness (Derewianka & Jones, 2012; Harris et al., 2003).

Teaching EAL/D students provides a view into how the intricate wheels of learning must be acknowledged. Learning to write is necessary to develop self-expression, as well as to assess what students have learned from our teaching. However, it is important for teachers and educators to remember that before writing becomes a 'product' of expression, it is a social 'process' of learning which needs to be developed and planned for during our teaching.

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Guided inquiry in Stage 4 history: Collaboration between teacher librarians and classroom teachers

Amber Sorensen, teacher librarian at Cherrybrook High School, describes two Stage 4 history units which used Guided Inquiry to develop students' skills in research, note taking and synthesising information.

Inquiry-based learning invites curiosity, questioning, critical and creative thinking, and analysis. It lends itself beautifully to collaboration between classroom teachers and teacher librarians, and can be used in specific topics or cross curricular subjects. It is also a good base upon which to support ACARA's general capabilities and to help students develop their information literacy skills.

In the original Greek, ἱστορία, historia is an inquiry. By affording our students the opportunity to participate authentically in a guided inquiry, we are giving them agency to direct their learning and to share their findings with the community. This project has been a valuable exercise in discovery learning and an engaging way to finish the Stage 4 history course.

Peter Hartman, Acting Head Teacher, HSIE.

In 2017, together with a fellow teacher librarian (Coni Halder) and history teacher (Peter Hartman), I began developing a unit of work for Year 8 history – The Spanish Conquest of the Americas. The initial program was based on a presentation by Lee FitzGerald, books co-authored by Kuhlthau, Maniotes and Caspari (2007, 2012), and [Lee FitzGerald's blog](#) about Guided Inquiry, with assistance from teacher librarian colleagues Wendy Quarmby and Kate Mathews. The unit outcomes were based on the Stage 4 history syllabus and the ACARA general capabilities.

The Guided Inquiry (GI) model

Guided Inquiry (GI) is one of a number of models for an inquiry-based learning approach. The key elements of inquiry-based learning include:

- An authentic task/audience
- Student choice
- Curiosity
- Questioning
- Reflection

There are 7 stages in a full GI unit – open, immerse, explore, identify, gather, share, create and evaluate (Kuhlthau, Maniotes and Caspari, 2007, pp. 1-6). Due to time constraints, our GI units were condensed and stages merged. Following consultation with the teachers involved, and in response to student feedback, later iterations of the units focused on developing students' skills in note taking and synthesising information.

The process worked so well with Year 8 that we also developed a unit on Ancient China for Year 7 history students.

How it worked for us

All lessons for the classes undertaking the GI units were held in the library. The teacher librarians were available to direct the project, in conjunction with the subject teachers as the content experts. This allowed for the curation of hard copy resources that students could access during and outside of class time for the duration of the project. The school's learning management system was used to host curated online research resources, outlines of each lesson with directions for students, and worksheets. For each new stage, the lesson opened with explicit teaching of the skill required to successfully complete that stage.

Open/immerse

Both projects began with students exploring a variety of resources that covered various aspects of the civilisations they were working on. The Year 8 classes were provided with laminated images and snippets of texts to pique their interest. Students worked in groups to categorise various aspects of the civilisations they explored, using topic headings they were given.

The Year 7 classes received a slightly more prescriptive introduction. They were required to answer questions about Ancient China to give them an overarching view and basic understanding of the civilisation. They still used a variety of books and images to do this.

Our school has recently purchased some virtual reality goggles, which we plan to incorporate into the next iteration of the 'open' and 'immerse' stages of the units.

Explore/identify/gather

Following these introductory lessons, each student provided a list of ideas/topics/people that they were interested in pursuing further. These lists were collated by the classroom

teacher and informed the groups students would work in for the remainder of the project.

Using curated resources, students followed the [Cornell note taking method](#) to record relevant information over several lessons. Following this, each group collated their notes and used a [lotus chart](#) to synthesise the information. This information became the basis from which students created their projects.



The lotus scaffold supported students to structure their notes and facilitated deep thinking.

Share/create/evaluate

Year 8 students created picture books that they read to Stage 2 students at one of our feeder primary schools. Topics explored included Aztec and Inca religion, war and warriors, social hierarchy, lifestyle, cities, everyday life and the conquistadors.

Year 7 students created a project of their choice. These projects have ranged from paintings to models and posters, which were presented to the class, then displayed in the library. Topics explored included Chinese religion and philosophies, Terracotta Warriors, the Great Wall of China, social hierarchy and the role of women.



Collaboration and creation using various mediums

At the conclusion of the project, students were asked to evaluate their own work, both as individuals and in their groups, as well as evaluating the program itself.

The results

Collaboration between teacher librarians and classroom teachers brings together a wealth of knowledge and expertise that benefits student outcomes. Both Stage 4 units have been very successful. We have continued to run them each semester, with minor adjustments based on the feedback received from participating staff and students. The two focus areas – effective note-taking and synthesising information – are core skills which students will continue to use as they progress through high school and beyond. As teacher librarians, we maintain and further develop these skills when we work with other classes and year groups on their various research projects, with the idea that they become embedded within the school's learning culture.

The Year 8 unit, in particular, has provided our students with an authentic audience who don't pull any punches when providing feedback. It has also strengthened ties between our two schools. Year 3 students had explored the topic of colonisation and conquest prior to our visit, and were able to make connections between their learning and the books our students read to them.

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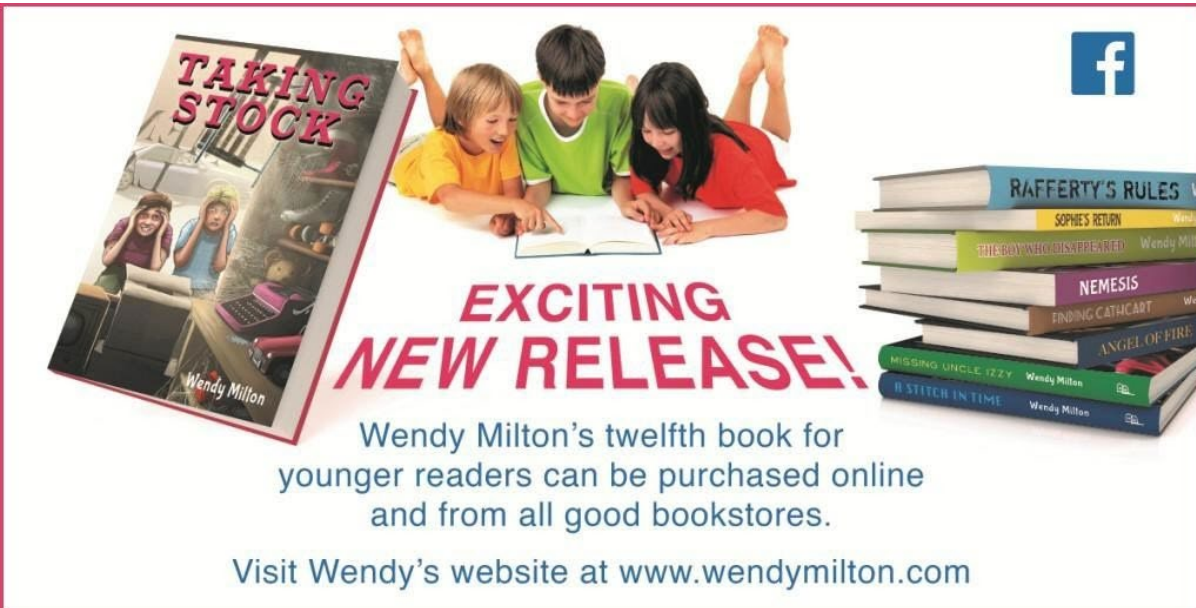
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