

Picture This - Visual Literacy

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Picture this. Rosie, a free-range hen, goes for a stroll. Her walk takes her across the farmyard, around a pond, over a haystack, past a mill, through a fence and under beehives before she meanders back to her coup. In your mind's eye you may have seen a haystack, pond and swarming bees, but did you warn Rosie, "Look out; a fox is right behind you!"? If you'd seen the illustrations in "Rosie's Walk" by Pat Hutchins, you would know there is another layer to this story that words alone do not convey. "Rosie's Walk" exemplifies the importance of visual literacy.

Visual literacy, first defined by John Debes in the late 1960's, is the ability to interpret and create meaning from information presented through images. It includes maps and charts, illustrations in books, symbols on signs, icons on computer screens and graphics in video games.

In our rapidly expanding information age, adults sometimes debate an emphasis on visual literacy that teaches children how to navigate complex internet and media technologies versus an emphasis on linguistic literacy (print and spoken word) that teaches reading and writing. History offers insight into this debate. Animal drawings in ancient caves, such as those found in Lascaux France, are early forms of visual literacy. From visual representations such as these, writing systems emerged. Rather than dichotomies, visual literacy and linguistic literacy interlace. Both are significant and weave together in the expression and comprehension of meaning.

So what does this mean for children's literacy learning? It means that pictures in children's books do much more than literally portray printed text. When children see only a long wispy tail at the side of the page in "I Went Walking" by Sue Williams, they use this partial picture to anticipate the horse that will appear in the story on the next page. When they see pigeon tracks beside Wombat's tracks on the beach in "Sometimes I Like to Curl Up in a Ball" by Vicki Churchill, they see how friends imitate one another in play, and they learn what the term "pigeon step" means when you're not a pigeon. Taking time with children to study the pictures in books for story clues, mood, emotion and inferences has an enormous impact on children's comprehension skills.

The interplay of these two types of literacy sheds light on why children from all reading levels enjoy comics and graphic novels. Although sometimes discredited as less sophisticated reading material, stories told through comic strips can explore topics in complex ways. Many struggling readers complain that they cannot visualize the text. Comics and graphic novels blend print with images. Ideas are written in brief sentences with significant information highlighted through dialogue bubbles or captions. This format helps children who find long paragraphs daunting, or who have trouble picking out the important elements of a story. Both visual and linguistic literacy skills come into play, helping the reader understand the magazine or book with greater depth.

Well-developed visual literacy skills can boost children's confidence with books and the internet, and motivate children to think more deeply about words and images that surround them everyday.