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Teaching visual grammar in the context of digital texts

[Jennifer Asha](#), literacy educator, explores using the metalanguage of visual grammar and targeted questioning to scaffold student interpretation of digital texts.


Introduction

I love using all manner of rich texts to encourage students and teachers to think about their interpretations and understandings. In this article, I look closely at a selection of quality digital texts to share my understanding of the metalanguage of visual grammar and the potential of targeting teacher questioning to scaffold student interpretation of digital texts.

Using digital texts in the primary classroom gives teachers the opportunity to teach the skills students need to comprehend and interpret texts. The NSW English K-10 Syllabus tells us to use digital texts in our literature repertoire for a wide range of literary purposes, as [Outcome EN1-10C](#)  shows with the inclusion of a content descriptor - 'engage in wide reading of self-selected and teacher-selected texts, including **digital texts**, for enjoyment, and share responses' (English K-10 Syllabus, 2012).

The syllabus also suggests the type of talk that should be included in our lessons that use digital texts, for instance, [Outcome EN2-4A](#)  includes the content descriptor - 'use **metalanguage** to describe the effects of ideas, text structures and language features of literary texts (ACELT1604)' (English K-10 Syllabus, 2012). This particular content descriptor indicates that 'metalanguage' is needed for students and teachers to engage in meaningful conversations around texts, an idea that is reoccurring throughout the English syllabus outcomes.

Metalanguage and questioning

So what is the metalanguage of visual grammar? Metalanguage is a set of terms used to speak about the meanings made within a language. Teachers are already familiar with the metalanguage of grammar to do with the written and spoken word. When we use a visual metalanguage, we are using specific language to describe the way text creators may choose to use visual elements to create meaning. Our syllabus suggests terminologies that have been derived from the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). Examples can be seen in [Outcome EN2-2A](#)  in the content descriptor - 'create imaginative texts based on characters, settings and events

from students' own and other cultures using visual features, for example **perspective, distance and angle** (ACELT1601, ACELT1794)' (English K-10 Syllabus, 2012) and [Outcome EN2- 8B](#) with content descriptor - 'explore the effect of choices when **framing** an image, **placement** of elements in the image, and **salience** on **composition** of still and moving images in a range of types of texts (ACELA1483, ACELA1496)' (English K-10 Syllabus, 2012).

What is notable about these content descriptors, and many others in the syllabus, is not just the inclusion of metalanguage but the way students are encouraged to create meaning and consider the effect on the viewer as a result of the choices made by the text creator. This is due to the functional model of language that underpins the syllabus and encompasses all modes of communication including verbal language, images, gesture, sounds and digital affordances (Derewianka and Humphrey, 2014). I believe that purposeful teacher talk, particularly questioning, can be supportive of this type of student learning.

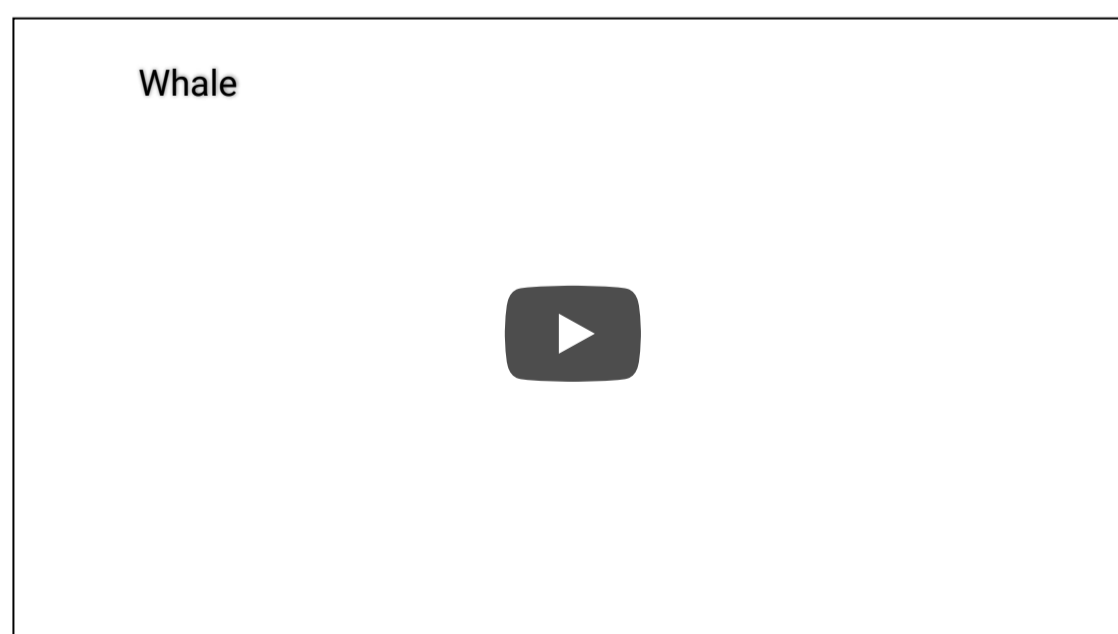
The way in which teachers pose questions has the ability to scaffold student thinking and encourage their understanding of the metalanguage of visual grammar.

The questions that follow the description of each digital text are open-ended to promote discussion and allow differences of opinion to be shared. However, they are carefully worded to model the use of visual metalanguage to encourage students to think about possible meanings within the text. The questions are also phrased to encourage engagement in the role of text analyst as students break the visual codes and participate in the meaning systems of the digital texts, interpreting its affect on them as the audience (Freebody, 1992).

Digital texts

Here are some starting points that can be adapted by teachers to make them age and stage appropriate for the students they teach.

Whale by Filmbuilder (3 mins 55 secs) uses stylized, low modality illustrations to tell a simple story of a whale looking for someone to play with.



The characters are depicted in a flattened way and seem to be cut out and stuck onto the background of the ocean. They move unrealistically and do unrealistic things, such as shed tears while underwater. All of these visual choices work together to give the text its lowered modality and help make the theme of 'you have to be a friend to make friends' easily discernible. Towards

the beginning of the clip the whale is shown front on, as if it is swimming towards and up close to the viewer, at an eye level angle. These visual choices help to position the viewer as another sea creature and serve to generate viewer empathy for the character of the whale.

Teachers can prompt discussion about these visual concepts through the use of careful questioning. For example:

- What do you think the text creator is saying to the audience about being a friend?
- How does the text creator use shot size/distance and angle to position the viewer?
- How do the lower modality/less realistic illustrations help you to align yourself with the whale character?

These types of questions contextualise the metalanguage so students are supported in understanding the visual element that is the focus. The questions also support the students to consider the meaning being made within the digital text.

The short story of a fox and a mouse by ESMA Movies (6 mins 20 secs) uses distance as an episode marker.



The clip orients the viewer to the setting with a 'long shot' showing the vast and bleak wintery landscape and then 'zooms' in on the fox, introducing this character. Later in the story, the scene is shown from a 'long shot' again and can be seen to signify the resolution within the narrative structure of the clip.

The text creators have utilised different levels of realism for the setting, the peripheral characters and the main characters. The snow-covered countryside is shown via a realistic, higher modality compared to the characters of the fox and the mouse. In turn, these main characters are illustrated in a more naturalistic manner compared to the owls, with realistic colouring, the shape and texture of real foxes and mice, and with their movements reflecting those of living creatures. The auxiliary characters of the two owls are represented in a much lower modality. They are evidently drawn, with exaggerated body shapes and unrealistically coloured plumage. The effect of this visual choice is to encourage suspension of disbelief and to alleviate viewer awareness of the unlikelihood of an alliance between a predator and its prey.

Teacher prompts can guide students towards an interpretation of the digital text. For instance:

- How is distance used to signify certain points in the narrative structure?
- What do you notice about the shot size at the beginning compared to the rest of the clip?
How does the modality of the setting differ from the modality of the characters? Why may the creators have made this choice?

Chimère by ESMA Movies (6 mins 53 secs) is the story of good versus evil, of motherly love winning out over self-centred destruction.



The fantastical creatures of Chimère, part eagle - part woman, and a Medusa-like reptile are almost surreal. This is shown through heightened modality, with the softly textured, vibrantly coloured feathers of the Chimère contrasting with the cool grey sleekness of the reptile character.

Angle is also used to characterise the protagonist and antagonist. The Chimère is shown at the viewers' eye level putting the viewer on equal standing with this character and encouraging empathy, while the reptile is 'shot from below' positioning the viewer as less powerful than that character and heightening the viewer wariness of the creature.


Focused questions can scaffold students towards this type of interpretation, for example:

- How are the different participants characterised through the use of colour and texture?
- How does the angle that each character is shown from further accentuate the effect for the viewer?

Viewing and talking about digital texts can let teachers and students meet many of the NSW K-10 English Syllabus outcomes in an engaging and motivating way. The use of visual metalanguage can serve as a resource for teachers and students in sharing their interpretation of digital texts. Careful use of teacher questioning can develop student understanding of the metalanguage, scaffolding students towards purposeful discussion and reflection about how digital texts construct meaning and have an effect on an audience.

References and further reading

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[English K-10 Syllabus](#)  © NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) for and on behalf of the Crown in the State of New South Wales, 2012.

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How to cite this article – Asha, J (2018). Teaching visual grammar in the context of digital texts. *Scan*, 37(7).



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Make a difference (MaD) – spotlight on teacher librarians

School libraries are not what they used to be. With changes to the design and function of school libraries, how information is managed and accessed to support curriculum priorities, and programs focusing on STEM/STEAM, teacher librarians respond to the teaching and learning needs of staff and students. In this section, teacher librarians share insights into their teaching practice, learning spaces and library initiatives and how this can make a difference to student learning and engagement.

From shush to engagement - revitalising your school library

[Belinda Cameron](#), teacher librarian at Maclean High School on the North Coast, shares her top tips on how to convert your school library into an engaging and fun space for students.

What is this 'shush!' business? More importantly, why is a student saying it to his friends with his lips pursed around his pointed finger, and not me, when I'm the teacher librarian?

Introduction

Redefining 21st century library spaces within our school communities begins with the physical space and how students feel when they walk into it. In promoting a school library as a community centre, library spaces should reinforce that learning can be crazy, amazing and, most importantly, collaborative fun. When students walk into our library, affectionately known as 'The Hub', I want them to be intrigued, amazed, excited and feel part of their broader school community. Information is everywhere, so let's get excited about it!

With this collaborative intention, how does a teacher librarian transform their library from a 'shush' space into one of collaboration?

Tips for an engaging space

Based on my two-year library revitalisation project I will share with you my top tips for converting your high school library from a 'shush' space to an engagement space.

Tip 1

Ask. Question. Interview teens. What ideas do they have? What needs? Invite staff to comment also.

Tip 2

If you are new to your library, observe. How is the library already being used, by whom and for what purpose?

Tip 3

Don't be afraid to move furniture to create the zones you need. Yes, there's thousands of books to shift. Students will help you. Create the spaces thinking about their primary role. To collaborate? To study?

Tip 4

Lunchtime Clubs are opportunities for engagement: Origami, knitting, gaming, movie making, colouring in, craft. Keep kids busy, and clearly sign expectations for behaviour. If one lunch is all about 'shhhh!' they will modify their behaviour accordingly, which is a valuable lesson for life. You can offer to run tournaments and competitions that support unique student activities. Cook some popcorn for your movie maker crew to share their clips at the end of the term. Always use volunteers to assist you, another opportunity to engage and build vital 21st century learning skills.



Maker Mondays: transforming curtain rings into framed vintage artworks

Tip 5

Know your students. Every student in the school comes to your 'classroom'. Get to know as many as you can. Why do they use the facility? What can you offer to improve their experience?

experience:

Tip 6

When it comes to furniture, you can ignore expensive furniture catalogues. Look at what's popular in places that kids access, or that you access in your private life. Elements of your favourite store or place can be introduced. The cheap \$5 floral couch becomes 'Nanna's couch for ninja knitters'. Inject humour with elements of popular culture and design staples such as chalk paint, retro fun and intrigue. Students will enjoy the changes, mystery and silliness.



Nanna's couch for ninja knitters

Tip 7

Plan fun and unexpected events such as a pop culture festival, a chicken fashion parade, turn your library into a quarantine centre for Halloween and invite staff to dress up as well. Remember to organise Book Week dress up parties. (Who says dressing up for Book Week must end in primary school). Make sure the Easter bunny leaves eggs in the collection every now and then.



Grandparents Day chook walk models



Halloween quarantine centre with staff participating in the fun

Tip 8

Have a theme for the year to which you connect library events, activities and resources. During our 'yarnology year' we created knitting, craft, mindfulness, decorations and inter-generational learning with our local retirement village residents, who visited the library to knit with our Ninja knitters. Wool really can bring a lot of students, staff and school community together. Origami is also an easy theme to introduce that teaches skills, encourages mindfulness and collaboration. Our school and community created 2,015 cranes, which now decorate our library space. It's a sight to behold for all visitors to the library, setting a tone of creativity and collaboration.



Students created over 2000 origami cranes

Tip 9

You are never too old for Lego. A Lego creation station is a must. Students can then film Lego people with kinetic sand, thus making digital artefacts that can be shared on the school website.



Lego factory

Tip 10

If you have an idea, run with it. If it doesn't work, change it. Students love to see new and evolving changes as they visit the library over the year. Something as simple as changing seating arrangements gets them excited.

Positive changes

'Are you coming to the hub?' has replaced 'Who goes to the library?' At lunchtimes, our numbers have grown from 45 kids (counted by my library minion volunteers) to our current maximum at 152. The bags outside the door grew quickly and sometimes block the way in. It's fascinating to watch kids relate to a finely crafted and constantly evolving organic space.

A colleague commented last week that every time she enters 'The Hub' 'It seems to always have a hum, an amazing energy about it. Nobody says 'shhhh this is the library'. It's a place the kids are desperate to be.'

Just how we like it.

How to cite this article - Cameron, B. (2018). Make a difference (MaD) - spotlight on teacher librarians. From shush to engagement - revitalising your school library. *Scan*, 37(7).

'Finding our treasure' at James Erskine Public School ^

Cathie Cattermole, teacher librarian and I-Centre coordinator at James Erskine Public School, reveals her library's spectacular pirate ship display and other preparations for Book Week.

Over the past two years, James Erskine Public School has been constructing the most beautiful sensory garden. With the instalment of a pirate ship signalling the garden's completion this year, the 2018 Book Week theme - 'Find your treasure' - proved serendipitous. What a wonderful way to honour the launch of our garden - with a celebration of literacy plus a whole lot of pirate fun!



Pirate ship display in the library for Book Week 2018: 'Find your treasure'

The library is the centre of our school. Using recycled materials and inexpensive props, we've decorated this special space, creating a grand pirate ship display to celebrate the theme and this year's short-listed titles.



Constructing the pirate ship display: the masts are made from mailing tubes, a photocopied wood grain floorboard, and black duct tape. The treasure chest is made from cardboard boxes.

Book Week festivities stretch all week at James Erskine Public School, with a special, action-packed program. We have wonderful authors – Lesley Gibbes, Tim Harris and Matt Cosgrove – each joining us for a day to spend time with individual classes. We also have a whole school pirate dress-up event, and writing and STEM activities inspired by treasured picture books, with our whole school community invited to join the fun.

But beware – playing host to pirates courts danger and invites the unexpected! Late one night, strange things are expected to unfold at JEPS... And the following morning, students will arrive at school to discover a large mound of dirt scattered with pirate coins, jewels and goblets! The police will have taped off the area and – using this scene as their writing stimulus – students will explain what happened.

With Book Week rapidly approaching, the excitement is building! Costumes are being organised STEM materials are being collected and most importantly books are being

organised, STEM materials are being celebrated and, most importantly, books are being celebrated. Bring on the festivities!

How to cite this article – Cattermole, C. (2018). Make a difference (MaD) – spotlight on teacher librarians. 'Finding our treasure' at James Erskine Public School. *Scan* 37(7).

Treasured times!

Beryl Aylett, teacher librarian at Metella Road Public School, describes how she inspires students' love of literature and shares the joys of her move into teacher librarianship.

Going through the wardrobe, as the children in the Narnia chronicles did, was a great inspiration to me from an early age. New worlds to discover; special treasures to surprise and delight in. The journey through books helps us discover elements of ourselves, our character and our values. Just as my students grow through their literary explorations, my transformation from classroom teacher to teacher librarian (and, in the chapter ahead, author and illustrator), finds its roots in the library.

About five years ago – and after two decades as a primary teacher – a twist of fate brought me to the teacher librarian role. I inherited a library that had not enjoyed a full-time teacher librarian for some time. Cleaning and reorganising became the priority. New duties emerged as I grew into the role and completed a Master of Education in Teacher Librarianship through Charles Sturt University.

I became an information provider, cultural events organiser, administrator, and – most crucially – a learning facilitator, helping students master skills related to literacy, history, geography and research. Programs were developed and a plan established to totally overhaul the library spaces with colour and new decor. Painting is currently underway and the floors will hopefully be recarpeted soon. With many students using the library daily, the transformation to a dynamic information and literary hub is nearly complete!



Our library in early 2018, with some new decor and colour. Next steps – fresh paint and carpet!

Book Week is a highlight each year. Artwork is collected from every student, with each stage contributing to a themed display. We have a huge dress-up parade for Kindergarten to Year 6 based on the annual theme, and an author or performance group attends every second year.

For 'Connect to reading' (2014), students studied fairy tales from other countries, illustrating pictures and maps, and Andrew Daddo joined us. 'Books light up our world' (2015) found us making golden items from pirate days (linked with Horrible Histories) and fish (based on the story of The Rainbow Fish). 2016 Book Week celebrations included a visit by Aaron Blabey. For 'Escape to everywhere' (2017), we had passports to places we wanted to explore, and a large map of Australia. This year's festivities, centred around the theme of 'Find your treasure', will include a visit from Anna Fienberg, and a display containing a huge treasure chest, spewing out our favourite books (including lots of Tashis and Mintons)!



Part of our Book Week display in 2017: 'Escape to everywhere'

Regardless of the theme, our regular engagement with a variety of quality texts provides rich opportunities for learning and enjoyment. From beautifully illustrated picture books, amusing chapter books and hilarious read-alouds (Year 2's current favourite is Aliens Love Underpants!) to historical fiction and the classics, we continue slipping through the wardrobe.

How to cite this article - Aylett, B. (2018). Make a difference (MaD) - spotlight on teacher librarians. *Treasured times! Scan 37(7)*.

Outback book drive ^

Fay Prideaux, teacher librarian at Yarrawarrah Public School, describes her school's successful mission to collect and fly 320 kilograms of donated books to outback families in NSW.

Always on the lookout for a recycling initiative, this year I up scaled up our annual book swap into an outback book drive, sending new and preloved books to children who receive their education via School of the Air in outback NSW. With sometimes limited or non-existent access to libraries, book clubs or book fairs, outback families were the perfect match for city excess.

A self-appointed Outback Committee of students enthusiastically set about creating advertising posters for each classroom and making announcements at weekly assemblies to drum up donations. Books were sourced from the school community, local libraries, friends, publishers and authors. By the end of term, we had a bounty of diverse texts suitable for all ages.

The committee members sorted the books into genres before packing them into boxes decorated with their artwork and messages from our school. Families from the Broken Hill campus of School of the Air were our recipients for this inaugural project and library lessons incorporated information about School of the Air, maps of Broken Hill, and photography of outback landscapes. Recipient families sent videos and photo essays of life on the land.

School of the Air families meet annually for mini-camps and the location for their May camp was Fowlers Gap Station, a research station for arid environments owned by the University of New South Wales. Over a hundred students, their parents, governesses and teachers attended the camp. Students and parents were overwhelmed at the range and diversity of donations. Future mini camps will provide perfect opportunities for the books to be shared many times over.

Supporters of the outback book drive included local pilots from my area, the Illawarra Flyers, who generously arranged freight for the books and flew me to Fowlers Gap Station to meet the convener of the school camp.

One school, 320 kilograms of recycled books, 50 outback families.

Instant pop up library.



Storage of books at Silver City hangar (Broken Hill) and Outback Committee members (Yarrawarrah Public School)

How to cite this article - Prideaux, F. (2018). Make a difference (MaD) - spotlight on teacher librarians. Outback book drive. *Scan 37*(7).