Today, when I think back to my own literacy instructional practices as a classroom teacher, I realize I lived in a narrow world of “read the book and answer the comprehension questions.”

Drawing a picture in response to literature was the easy way out, a frivolous response that did not work in a school world that privileged academic classrooms. Typically, I told my middle level students they could draw a picture only after they had written their real response first.

My assessment of students’ written work was also narrow and steeped in efficiency. For me, assessment meant grading papers or counting correct answers on daily assignments. While grading with numbers seemed simple and logical then, today I realize that form of grading was simply not sufficient to inform me about what was happening with specific students’ meaning making. Recording numbers in my grade book stripped my students’ written responses of valuable information that could help me plan student-centered instruction.

This article offers ideas about how assessment of young adolescents’ drawings can help teachers move toward better planning and instruction. I helped a fifth-grade teacher and her students read and respond to *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2002) with a variety of response modes. The examples offered in this article show not only what these young adolescents understood after reading this real-life text, but also what they misunderstood, thereby providing important implications for teachers who wonder how they might assess artistic responses. First, I offer related literature about using multiple sign systems as response modes, and then I introduce the project and students’ work samples.

**Why Sketching Is an Important Response Mode**

Art, poetry, music, and drama are communication systems that can help readers receive and convey meaning in abstract ways (Siegel, 1995). When students respond through a variety of communication systems, their created products become signs or stand-ins for ideas they have about how the world works. This stance is also consistent with Rosenblatt’s ideas about personal response or transaction. In her words, “a poem is not a ready-made object to which the reader is passively exposed” because the “reader not only interprets visual signs but also infuses meaning into them” (Rosenblatt, 2005, pp. 96–97). Today, many researchers are considering the importance of visuals as modes for meaning making.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) provide a visual grammar or metalanguage for analyzing and critiquing visuals in multiliteracies contexts. As they suggest, response images can draw on a variety of resources to:

- represent actions, events, or symbolic concepts in stories;
- consider interpersonal meanings in visuals using metalanguage to explain illustrative angles, color, and distance; and
- create organizational meanings within visuals.

Albers (2008) and Callow (2008) use Kress and van Leeuwen’s ideas to outline specific ways
teachers can help students recognize and read linguistic, artistic, musical, and other codes used by illustrators to construct visual texts and deepen meaning in texts. When middle level teachers teach metalanguage like shot focus, angle, and gaze, the reading of visuals deepens, and students begin to see how visuals can help them consider affective, compositional, and critical dimensions of reading, direct meaning making, and position themselves as readers.

**Fifth Graders Reading and Responding to Real-Life Texts**

After becoming interested in Siegel’s (2006) ideas about transmediation and Short’s (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1995; Short, Kaufmann, & Kahn, 2000) ideas about text sets, a fifth-grade teacher named Anne asked me to help her introduce literature discussion to her middle level students with a text set of materials about Afghanistan. (See Short, Harste, & Burke, 1995 for more information about text sets.) Anne had never tried literature discussions, and since she was enrolled in a graduate course with me, I agreed to assist her.

Many military personnel in our community had been deployed to Afghanistan, and Anne and her young adolescents wanted to learn more about what life would be like for people (and especially children) living in a conflict zone. We gathered images from Afghanistan, picturebooks like *The Roses in My Carpets* (Kahn, 2004) and *Afghan Dreams* (Sullivan, 2008), news articles from both adult newspapers and *Scholastic News for Kids*, a photo-story I created about Afghanistan, and related poetry, folklore, and novels about war in the Middle East.

Anne offered her students *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000) as a whole-class book to read independently and discuss in small groups. Sensoy and Marshall (2009) have critiqued *The Breadwinner*, saying the book endorses the idea that Afghani girls and women are helpless and need to be saved. We encouraged Anne’s middle grade students to read *The Breadwinner* critically, and they did find interesting epistemological ideas to discuss and consider: peace, conflict, and the similarities and differences between good and bad in relationship to the war in Afghanistan. The book also afforded the fifth graders opportunities to consider issues of social justice, especially related to gender, race, and class. We felt those opportunities made this an appropriate multicultural text for this classroom setting (Botelho & Rudman, 2009).

Anne, the teacher in this classroom, assigned reading for the day and asked her students to respond in a variety of artistic ways: drawing, dramatic play, and different types of writing. Even though this was an International Baccalaureate school that specialized in the arts, Anne did not feel comfortable assessing and evaluating arts-related responses associated with language arts. Together we discussed what she wanted the students to learn while reading and discussing *The Breadwinner*, and we then developed a question-based scoring tool, described below.

**CONNECTIONS FROM READWITETHINK**

**Making Connections through Art**

ReadWriteThink.org has several online student interactive tools where students are invited to draw their responses. The Doodle Splash interactive combines the process of drawing with analytical thinking about a text by pairing an online drawing space with writing prompts that encourage students to make connections between their visual designs and the text.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/doodle-splash-30022.html

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Assessing Sketches to Enrich Discussions and Increase Understanding

In developing the scoring tool, I first spoke with Anne about what she hoped middle grade students would gain during literature discussion. Anne mentioned the importance she placed on reading for understanding, but also her hope that using multiple response modes would motivate students and enrich their experiences with literature. Next, I gathered illustrations her students sketched as responses to *The Breadwinner* and completed a visual content analysis using Affective/Aesthetic, Compositional/Efferent, and Critical dimensions as themes. Within those categories, I coded places where action, gaze or transaction with characters, lines, angles, positioning, interpersonal meanings, organizational meanings, or understandings and misunderstandings identified students’ thinking. The following set of assessment questions for teacher assessment emerged:

- How does the student identify plot?
- What design choices does the student make?
- How does the student display understanding of the reading?
- Does anything in the response identify misunderstanding?
- What do I like about this response as an assessor?

In the next section, I describe our close reading of two illustrations using these questions, explain our analysis and assessment of the drawings, and outline how we used them to create lessons.

Adam’s Misunderstanding about Bombings

In Chapter one of *The Breadwinner*, Ellis (2000) writes:

> Bombs had been part of Parvana’s whole life. Every day, every night, rockets would fall out of the sky, and someone’s house would explode.

When the bombs fell, people ran. First they ran one way, then they ran another, trying to find a place where the bombs wouldn’t find them. (p. 14)

In his representation of Chapter one (see Fig. 1), Adam used dashed lines, arrows, and even a speech bubble (“run”) to depict action. Using the scoring tool in Figure 2, I analyzed Adam’s drawing and concluded that he seemed to understand the terror of living in a place where bombs were falling. In fact, Adam’s pencil/paper drawing took on the feeling of a multimodal experience because of the dashed lines he included to show the movement and direction of bullets and other ammunition. His love of video games very likely also shaped this response to Chapter one. Action was an important part of Adam’s meaning making; he appeared to be living in the story world (Parsons, 2006).

The salient feature of Adam’s illustration was the large airplane bombing a small village. Adam signifies danger with the label gas tank near one of the buildings and the “run” speech bubble.
While Adam understood danger, his representation of the Taliban is somewhat confused and very likely informed by television viewing or other media outlets describing the US role in the Afghanistan war. Adam labels the airplane Taliban because he believes the Taliban are responsible for the attack on the village, when in reality it is most likely NATO or American forces dropping bombs and not the Taliban.

During a discussion that followed Adam’s creation of this response, he admitted he did not realize that Taliban forces typically attack on the ground and infiltrate local areas by embedding themselves in communities. As his illustration indicates, he believes the Taliban are “bad” and want to destroy Afghani people with bombs. Stick figures drawn at the bottom of the visual do not all contain facial features, but at least three of the heads appear to be looking up at the aircraft and each of these characters is shooting at the airplane. Adam believes that at least some Afghani people have guns and would try to retaliate by shooting at the aggressors during a bombing raid like the one described.

As Anne and I discussed my analysis of Adam’s illustration, we agreed that his misunderstanding was very likely shared by other students. We concluded that students needed more about the history of war in Afghanistan in order to understand what was happening in the book. The day after Adam drew this picture, we engaged the whole class in further discussion about Chapter one, using questions to facilitate and enrich the students’ understanding based on what we saw in Adam’s picture. We developed a photo-story of images with a narrated timeline of war in Afghanistan during the past 50 years. Students were shocked to hear that it wasn’t the Taliban bombing the city, but could very likely have been NATO forces. After the photo-story presentation, one student responded, “Are we bombing people like Parvana? How do we make sure we don’t kill innocent people?”

Brian Struggles to Understand Identities

Another important topic Anne’s middle grade students continuously returned to while reading The Breadwinner related to understanding the differences between right and wrong and the overall complexity of human nature. In Chapter seven, Ellis introduces readers to a Taliban soldier who asks Parvana to read a letter his dead wife received from her aunt. In this portion of the text, Parvana realizes the soldier is crying:
His hands trembled as he put the letter back in the envelope. She saw a tear fall from his eye. It rolled down his cheek until it landed in his beard.

“My wife is dead,” he said. “This was among her belongings. I wanted to know what it said.” (p. 79)

The soldier’s tenderness surprised Parvana, and in the text Ellis draws attention to that surprise:

Parvana took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Up until then, she had seen Talibs only as men who beat women and arrested her father. Could they have feelings of sorrow, like other human beings? Parvana found it all very confusing. (p. 80)

A fifth grader named Brian found it confusing as well. For us, his drawing (see Fig. 3) asks the question, “Can bad people be good sometimes?” In his drawing, the Talib soldier is the salient element, and Brian has framed him with a cloud-like formation above his head with lines running down the sides of the cloud that outline and highlight the emotion in the picture. The soldier’s gun is prominently displayed across his chest, very much like one of the images we included in the photo-story we produced after the students read Chapter one. The soldier is also wearing a turban, typically worn by Afghani men during the reign of the Taliban. Brian’s use of the turban and other details in the picture identify his increasing knowledge of Afghanistan. The soldier’s gaze is fixed upon the reader and draws the reader’s attention in a relational way.

In Brian’s illustration, the protagonist Parvana is depicted as a very small figure sitting on a rug in the marketplace. In fact, in this illustration Brian does not name her Parvana, but simply tags her as the Letter Reader. She is drawn with her back to the reader of the illustration, and this distorts the reader’s ability to relate directly to Parvana and indicates that the creator of the sign wants the meaning maker to think about the soldier crying first. Parvana is a secondary character in Brian’s response to Chapter seven.

After reading these chapters, Anne and I noticed that not every reader in the class related to this part of the story like Brian did. Girls were more likely to respond to Parvana’s fear at translating the letter of a Talib soldier. We showed the students Brian’s illustration and asked him to talk about why he framed the soldier’s tears with a rain cloud and jagged lines. Brian told the class he thought at first that the Taliban was “all bad” and then added that he felt confused about why the soldier was crying. Brian’s explanation propelled a class discussion about emotions and good vs. bad.

Constructing Understanding from Misunderstandings and Extending Meaning

Our analyses of the illustrations evolved into lessons that helped Anne’s middle level students extend meaning making and think about real-life issues. Although Adam misunderstood who was bombing Kabul, his drawing provided his teacher with an important lesson idea for the next day of discussion: what is this war about, who is fighting and dropping bombs, and how are civilians in war zones protected? Supplemental texts and discussions about those texts were necessary and important for alleviating the misunderstandings we discovered as we were assessing and evaluating artistic responses to the literature.

We credited the text set (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1995) with motivating students to add more and more details to their creations. Adam’s illustration pointed not only to new understandings about Afghani culture, but also to significant misunderstandings that could become topics for future discussions and learning. For instance, although Adam included a mosque, it looked more like a Western church. Based on his picture, continued discussions about war and Afghani culture—and more information about how NATO forces work to protect civilians in war zones—helped young adolescents’ understanding.

In Brian’s illustration, a rain cloud depicted...
his symbolic understanding of emotion, and the fine details he included reiterated what he was thinking as he read and visualized this place. The soldier in his drawing was large and important; Brian drew a gun across his chest and a turban on his head, his fingers are open at his sides but his shoulders seem hunched in despair. Brian felt confusion about this seemingly “bad” character who also had “good” feelings of sadness and caring. Parvana is the protagonist of the story but a secondary character in this picture. That also shows careful thinking about how authors craft stories.

Rich Possibilities for Classroom Assessment and Instruction

Reading *The Breadwinner* and sketching responses to the story gave this middle level group of students the opportunity to think hard about what it means to be at war, what happens to civilians in the war zone, and what good and bad mean during periods of unrest. Transmediation through the use of multiple sign systems (Siegel, 1995; 2006) rather than only reading and then writing in response to literature was important for students’ understanding as well as motivational for them as readers and responders. Anne began to see ways she could assess illustrations carefully, and she also began to feel more confident using art and talk as assessment and evaluation artifacts in her classroom. Students’ sketches provided Anne with excellent information about what her students understood and what they misunderstood. The illustrations highlighted here also exemplify how important daily assessment is in the preparation of lessons that truly meet the needs of their own unique classes. Standardized lesson plans written too far ahead of time or by someone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Questions</th>
<th>Evidence Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does the student identify plot?</td>
<td>Parvana is labeled <em>Letter Reader</em>; Parvana sits among the items for sale and reads the soldier’s letter</td>
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<tr>
<td>What design choices does the student make?</td>
<td>The soldier faces the viewer and is drawn in detail; a rain cloud is used to frame the soldier’s tears; Parvana is small and her back is to the viewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the student display understanding of the reading?</td>
<td>Salient feature is soldier and he is center of confusion; framing crystallizes location of confusion—bad vs. good; detailed drawing of soldier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does anything in the response identify misunderstanding?</td>
<td>Possible confusion about if a Talib soldier can be both bad and good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I like about this image as an assessor?</td>
<td>Framing the soldier’s tears draws attention to them; the detailed drawing of the gun across his chest in relationship to the “cloud” of tears; Parvana (protagonist) is smaller than the soldier (minor character)</td>
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*Figure 3.* Brian’s response to *The Breadwinner*

*Figure 4.* Analysis of Brian’s response
other than the classroom teacher can never anticipate what unique and diverse student learners require.

This work highlights the importance of eliciting a variety of response modes in middle grade literature classrooms. Even though Adam and Brian misunderstood some important ideas about war, their images identified important ways they made meaning. At the same time, learning to analyze the illustrations in a systematic and timely manner helped this middle grade teacher provide feedback for individual students and richer instruction for the whole class. The students enjoyed responding to literature with a variety of artistic modes as their teacher became more and more comfortable assessing and evaluating their sketches, dramatic presentations, and even discussion. In this case, student sketches steeped in assessment led teachers and students to informed instruction and better understanding.

References


Children’s Literature


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