Creation as a Method of Inquiry

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Abstract

While practice-based research is a relatively new area of research in the UK, it is growing rapidly. The theoretical frameworks that underpin practice-based research are broad, which can result in anxiety or confusion in students who undertake it. This article explores frameworks for practice-based research and considers some applications of these frameworks to a research project in children's picturebook illustration.

One challenge of practice-based research is a perceived gap between creation and interpretation. Chris Rust's findings for the AHRC report on practice-based research, for example, highlight tensions between the discourses of the practitioner and the theorist. While there is a significant body of literature on children's picturebooks, academic work by illustrators and artists that focuses on the processes rather than on the finished picturebook is currently underrepresented.

The research described here aims to build on existing literature to offer insights from a picturebook maker's perspective into the often undisclosed thought processes underlying his or her work. It demonstrates the possibility for the practitioner of taking an interdisciplinary approach to practice-based research in picturebooks and offers an accessible framework to explore and discuss practical work.

Key words: practice-based research; children's picturebooks; illustration; interdisciplinary research; children's literature

Introduction

In the Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC's) report on practice-led research published in 2007, Chris Rust, Judith Mottram and Jeremy Till observe that gaps between practice and theoretical work remain, and suggest, among other points, that the practitioner can find the language of the theorist disconcerting, while conversely the theorist can find the language of the practitioner lacking in critical perspective (Rust, Mottram and Till, 2007).

Similar observations have been made on practice-based research by, for example, Estelle Barrett, who describes the professional artist as potentially being seen as 'reticent' (Barrett and Bolt, 2010). The unwillingness of artists to verbally articulate their work is also described in the commentaries of Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, who suggest that:

> Creative practitioners have sometimes argued that theorisation or documentation of the creative process risks subduing the creative fire or reducing the range of responses to their work. But such arguments reinforce the mystification of the

> creative artist and romantic ideas about the spontaneity of the creative process. (Smith & Dean, 2009:25)

Academic research on children's picturebooks tends to be dominated by work in literature and education: theoretical analysis focuses on the finished picturebook, rather than work in progress. This article seeks to explore the relationship between theory and practice by applying the language of the theorist combined with the insights of the practitioner to the construction of a character for a children's picturebook

Context

Academic discussions about images are often situated in an interdisciplinary context (Herbert, 1995; Mitchell, 1995). W.J.T. Mitchell describes how 'Linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, and various models of 'textuality' have become the lingua franca for critical reflections on the arts, the media, and the cultural forms' (Mitchell, 1994:11). Regarding picturebooks, David Lewis (2001) has argued that a semiotic approach is the most developed attempt at verbally describing visuals in picturebooks, an approach that can be seen, for example, in the work of Perry Nodelman (1990), and Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott (2006), who examine the ways in which picturebook images can be interpreted or read. In the literature on picturebooks, a language or 'grammar' of visuals has to some extent been developed in order to describe and discuss the images of picturebooks. In his *Introduction to Picturebook Codes*, William Moebius provides a comprehensive framework for the formalist construction of images, examining line, colour, size, framing and the disposition of objects on the page (Moebius, 1990). Drawing on Perry Nodelman's (1990) semiotic approach and also Rudolf Arnheim's (1974) studies on visual perception, Jane Doonan (1992) offers a further series of case studies on how to read picturebooks. However, these studies focus on the finished picturebook rather than the process of creation.

The integration of reflection with practice-based work provides a possible approach to closing the gap between theory and practice pointed out by Rust, Mottram and Till. The integration of theory and practice is challenging (Boyle, 2015), John Hockey (2007), who bases his research on a number of interviews with students and supervisors, and suggests that students' anxieties are based on a fear of compromising the artists' visual practice and on an unfamiliarity with writing in depth about it.

Artists' sketches and work in progress offer a view into their thought processes, yet this insight often comes without a coherent structure or map. Ideas develop organically and it can be difficult for the outsider to access the development of these ideas. If there are too many ambiguous characteristics in an image, this can create tension in the viewer's mind (Pratt, 2012:518). Examples of this tension can be seen in Jean Fisher's writing, which documents his frustrations with unfinished drawings from the perspective of the viewer. He mentions the idea of a 'secret that the artist is maliciously withholding' in their unfinished work (Fisher, 2003:219). However, Ben Shahn suggests that as creators, professional artists are proficient at visual articulation, but notes that they are rarely required to formally or consciously verbally articulate the experiential knowledge that

forms their practice. While naturally there are exceptions, interpretations of art are most likely to be written by scholars or critics (Shahn, 1990).

Interdisciplinary approaches are not uncommon in practice-based research projects, where practitioners draw on a number of frameworks in their research (Rust, Mottram and Till, 2007). However, while the diverse and interdisciplinary nature of practice-based research can offer alternative interpretations and insights, the interdisciplinary traits can make it hard to fit practice-based research into a traditional research context (Barrett and Bolt, 2010). Looking at the tensions created when art schools began to be amalgamated with universities in the 1950s, Ben Shahn describes the differences between scholars and artists in this context as:

> … the scholars speak of art in terms of class and category, and under headings of which the artist may never have heard. … [that] he [the artist] has absorbed visually, not verbally (Shahn, 1990:18).

Speaking as practitioners, Molly Bang (2001) and Scott McCloud (1994) have developed methods of visual expression to demonstrate ways in which an image can be constructed to give a particular effect. In the preface of *Picture This: How Pictures Work*, Bang describes her investigation of how simple geometric shapes can be used to depict emotion. Her approach derives from the realisation that while a reading of the emotive aspects of an image happens quite intuitively, she was unsure, as a practitioner, of the analytical reasoning behind her visual depiction of emotions. In a series of visuals, she attempts different approaches to using shapes, colours and their positioning on the page to construct alternative emotive readings to a visual retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood*. For example, a triangular wolf is scarier than one that is constructed using round shapes. Bang draws on Arnheim's theories of visual perception (Arnheim, 1974) in her analysis of her images. In her book, she appends to her images reflections. Alternative images appear on subsequent pages; for example, a background colour might be changed. The relationship between practical work and reflection on it becomes clear through the layout of the final analysis.

A similar approach can be seen in Alan Bartram's book on book design (1999). Each page that Bartram discusses is printed in the middle of a larger double page spread. The gutter remains the same, so that there is a margin of white space around the original double page spread. Bartram uses this space to annotate the double page spreads under discussion. Using frames in a similar way, Scott McCloud uses the creation of a comic to inform and articulate his ideas about how the images and text in comics work together/are related, and many of the points he makes are equally applicable to picturebooks.

My early attempts to follow a similar model were unsuccessful. Drawing on visually engaging presentations of images contextualised by pockets of commentary, I initially attempted to utilise visual design as part of the presentation of this paper (see Figure 1).

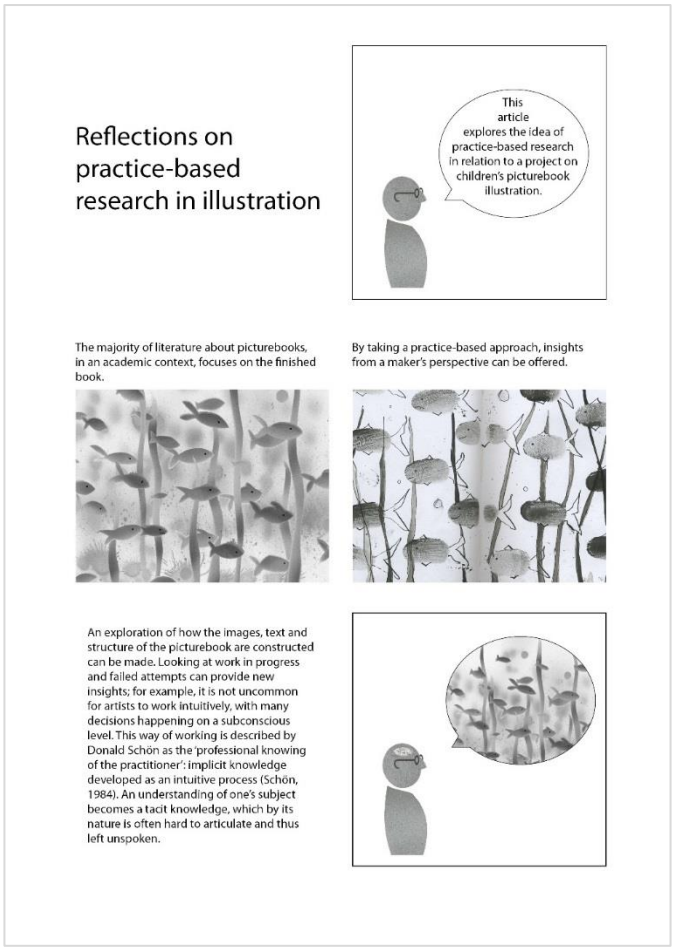

Figure 1

The presentation comprises a spread which integrates images and text within a comic-like format. There were two fundamental problems with this approach. The focus on the design and layout of the double page spread in my commentary document had a detrimental impact on the content: the commentary became engrossed with description, which felt redundant when the image was on the same page. Secondly, the focus was too heavily biased towards discussing finished artwork. While successful attempts such as those by McCloud (1994) or more recently Nick Sousanis (2015) to use comic forms as a way of presenting practice-based research have been made, comics do not form part of my practice and as such my attempt to work with this form met with limited success. I began to explore alternative approaches. Rather than focus on presentation, the case study below looks at some work-in-progress drawings and speculates and reflects on the impressions that these images create.

Case Study: Magnus the Cat

Magnus the Cat is a whimsical story of a large, black cat called Magnus. Magnus is quintessentially cat-like in personality. He enjoys sleeping, dreaming of catching mice and becomes disgruntled when he is put outside. When creating *Magnus the Cat*, I wanted to examine the role in which shape could be used to capture this personality. The backgrounds are minimal and the palette is limited to simple

black shapes that create a sense of character. While black and white picturebooks are less common than colour picturebooks, in this book I wanted to explore the extent to which shapes alone could be used as a visual device to capture nuances of character and personality. Colour has strong emotive associations (red as danger, for example), which would have added another layer of meaning to the images. While black cats have symbolic associations of being bringers of good or ill fortune, this story does not intentionally draw on these references. The images primarily explore the use of round shapes, angular shapes and the combination of the two.

I began to experiment with sketches of cats by turning them into silhouettes, for example, Figure . This image was created by manipulating shapes in Adobe Photoshop.

Figure 2

While this image has an enigmatic quality, it did not capture any strong sense of personality. I began to create less 'clean' images, introducing imperfections by using paper stencils filled in with an airbrush. The resultant images provided a combination of clean lines and hazy explosions of ink forming around the edges of the image. Using silhouettes presents certain challenges in creating a feasible character. Facial expressions are not depicted; the character's personality and emotions are shown by posture and positioning on the page. However, small details are sufficient to capture emotion; for example, asymmetrical ears can create the impression of a quizzical (Figure), or in some cases disparaging (Figure), cat.

Figure 3 Quizzical cat

Figure 4 Disparaging cat

Using stencils enabled me to simplify the image. Ernst Gombrich has observed the role the reader can play in creating an image: the artist may rely on the reader to be complicit in creating meaning and filling in gaps within an image (Gombrich, 2002). From an artist's point of view, this offers considerable creative freedom in choosing how to depict characters and scenes visually. Magnus is based on sketches of a number of different cats: he is intended to contain enough visual information to look 'cat-like' without directly resembling a particular cat. For example, in the image of the sleeping cat below (Figure), Magnus' body and tail are formed of a series of delicate curves. His tail has a tentative quality. This gentle curve could represent timidity, however here it is used to capture a sense of relaxation. This image is not directly figurative, but captures the sense of Magnus sleeping in a comfortable pose, which is reflected in the written story, that describes Magnus sleeping peacefully.

Figure 5 Magnus sleeping

These images of Magus sleeping are contrasted with more angular poses of him walking and stretching (Figure). The shapes and directions of Magnus' tail and legs in these images are more angular, creating tension in the image. This combination of curved and spiky shapes offers energy to the image, creating tension through contrast (Nodelman, 1990:73).

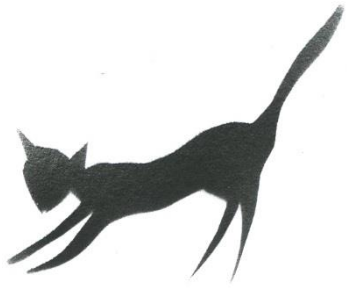

Figure 6

Analysis

Shapes are described as having certain emotive associations (see Bruno Munari (1966; 1965), W.J.T. Mitchell (1984), E.H. Gombrich (2002), Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996) to name a few). Referring to picturebooks, Perry Nodelman suggests that the rigidity of squares offers strength and structure while the softer, rounded shape of circles is seen as gentler and more accommodating (Nodelman, 1990). Molly Bang has explored shapes visually as an artist, creating different images and analysing the results. Echoes of gestalt theory and visual perception can be seen in her visual investigation of the effect of different shapes, sizes, colours and positioning on the page in her abstract version of *Little Red Riding Hood*. Different arrangements of shape on the page, for example, a series of triangles placed on the diagonal, create a dynamically charged image (Bang, 2001). The images she chooses contain a pictorial element that provides sufficient information for the reader / viewer to fill in the gaps and read the narrative coherently. Her use of shapes extends to backgrounds as well as character design. She depicts the forest, for example, as a static series of parallel vertical lines when Little Red Riding Hood first enters it. The character is positioned as a small red triangle at the bottom of the page, creating the impression of the forest as an imposing space. On the page that introduces the wolf into the forest, Bang places the trees at harsh angles that create tension within the image and suggest an intense and disquieting initial meeting with a menacing character. The use of semi-abstract, geometric shapes is highly effective even though they are not pictorial.

Scott McCloud echoes Gombrich's comment about using the reader to fill in gaps in an image when he describes the artist as 'aided and abetted by a silent accomplice', the reader (McCloud, 1994). In *Dottoko Zoo*, Norio Nakamura (2012) experiments with abstract shapes, demonstrating how few pixels are needed to allow a possible identification of a number of animals in a book described by the judges at the Bologna Ragazzi as a 'highly sophisticated graphic puzzle, a tour de force of composition and minimalism designed to stretch the mind and the eye.'[1] Suggestions that withholding information from the reader or viewer can aid engagement by offering a puzzle have been made, for example, by Richard Pratt (2012:518).

In concurrence with Bang's theories on shapes, Nodelman outlines how curved shapes are more accommodating than spiky, angular shapes. , The shapes that the character of Magnus is constructed from in Figure 1 are soft, circular shapes. Arnheim, in his examination of form in relation to shape, describes:

> ... the visual qualities of [a shape's] roundness or sharpness, strength or frailty, harmony or discord. (Arnheim, 1974:97)

Nodelman suggests that the combination of curved and angular shapes can offer dynamism to an image (Nodelman, 1990:73). This can be seen in the image of the

[1] http://www.bookfair.bolognafiere.it/en/bologna-ragazzi-award/winners-2014/non-fiction/2227.html [Accessed August 25, 2014]

stretching cat (Figure 6). If another image of a cat is added to this picture, a different impression is created (Figure 7).

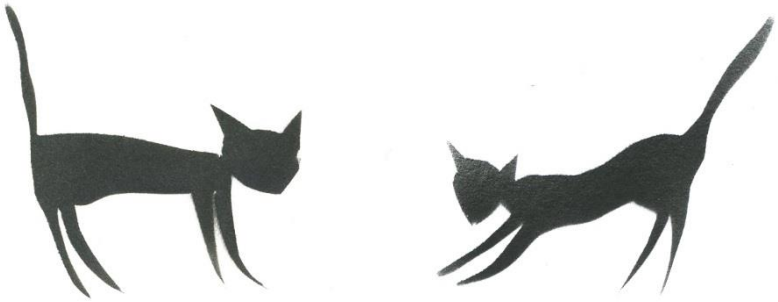

Figure 7

When these two images are viewed independently, they have a sense of serenity, however, the placing of them next to each other creates an impression of hostility between two cats. In formalist picturebook theory the size of images and where those images are placed on the page is significant (Moebius, 1990). How images interact with one another and their positioning on a page can change the overall effect. Bang also investigates size and positioning on the page, concluding that the emotive qualities of an image can alter, based on subtle differences. The impression of the relationship between the two cats in Figure 7 will change, for example, if one cat is made smaller (Figure 8).

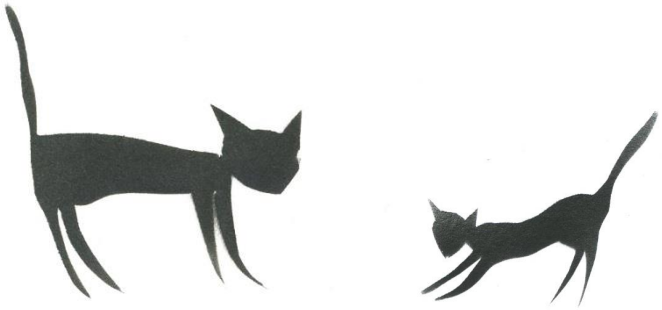

Figure 8

Arnheim describes in a section on 'Psychological and Physical Balance' how people see balance in images intuitively, for example if a frame is moved around a picture. The balance of the picture will change depending on what is revealed and shown within the frame. The sense of balance of the image in Figure 8 has changed with the scale of one cat.

Conclusions

In practice-based research, a tension between theory and practice has been observed. it is suggested that this tension is based on the theorist's ascribing a lack of critical perspective to practitioners while practitioners find the discourse of theorists disconcerting. This article attempts to apply the discourse of the theorist from a practitioner's perspective. To revert to Molly Bang's introduction,

in which she describes how she is unsure of *why* she makes visual decisions, this can equally be applied to my early drawing of Magnus. I was dissatisfied with this image, but was not clear as to why. Applying theory of shapes and how shapes are used in picturebooks to my drawings potentially changed the way in which they could be read or interpreted. By making my drawings less figurative, the impression they created progressed from the mimetic to the symbolic, a progression that became more apparent when a theoretical interpretation was presented alongside the images. This approach offers a way of combining theory and practice in practice-based research and offering insight into images from a practice-based perspective, which drawing on picturebook theory.

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