



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

'Homing' in with Stories

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Abstract: Children's literature often uses illustrations to make abstract thought comprehensible. It contributes to the development of a child's intellectual ability and further motivates reading habits. An image is polysemic and therefore subject to multiple interpretations. This may either interfere with a child's learning or it may allow for the development of imagination, creativity and confidence. Through this paper we suggest that the polysemy of images can be used constructively and effectively to let children invent their own stories. To illustrate this point we present a case study based upon the inclusive *Kaavad* storytelling tradition of Rajasthan. Informed and inspired by this study, an illustrated expository book 'Home', was created for children where images acted as triggers for children to construct their own multiple narratives and express their worldview around the themes of home and identity. In conclusion, we suggest how the polysemy of images can be used stimulate narratives on other themes.

Key words: Children as storytellers, polysemy of images, Kaavad tradition, children's worldview.

1.0 Introduction

Image and text are ubiquitous to children's literature and it is hard to imagine a book without pictures for an age group of three to seven year olds. Words and images together contribute to learning where an image may serve any of the functions of decoration, representation, organization or interpretation (Carney, 2002). An image is 'polysemic' and therefore subject to multiple interpretations. This has sometimes been seen as a cause for concern as it is perceived to interfere with learning. For example, in an earlier study it was observed that children who were taught with images could answer questions which were accompanied by images but the moment the images were removed it was the children who had been taught sans the images who performed better (Samuels, 1970). This

study was probably limited to examining the effects images have on learning where learning was defined as something that could be recalled or memorized. Learning with pictures may be not limited to memorizing or comprehending concepts alone; pictures also stimulate imagination and the art of reading between the lines. Other studies suggest that 'pictures do more good than harm' (Arlin, Mary, & Webster, 1978-79). They aid memory; they encourage curiosity and creativity, particularize situations, provide temporal links and extend the text (Carney, 2002). Expository picture books encourage dialogue between child and adult to 'jointly create meaning' (Price, Kleeck, & Huberty, 2009).

That pictures or images help to focus on what is being said or written is evident from the fact that many oral traditions use images to communicate with their audiences. The painted narrative scrolls (*pats*) from Bengal and Rajasthan or the *Chitrakathis* from Maharashtra may be cited as a few examples (Jain, 1998). The images become focal points and often give credence to what the teller is trying to say. Much can be learnt about the way image, text and language are used to communicate and tell stories from traditions that have existed for many generations. One such example we have studied is the *Kaavad* storytelling phenomenon of Rajasthan. During the study that spanned over three years we interacted with the *Kaavad* makers and travelled with the storytellers in Rajasthan to their patrons' places where they recite the stories and their genealogies. The recitation cannot take place in the absence of the *Kaavad* or its images even with the best of narrators.

2.0 The *Kaavad* tradition

The *Kaavad* is a portable wooden shrine that is painted with images on all sides. The images are arranged in a grid against a red background. The *Kaavad* has multiple doors that unfold to the surprise and pleasure of its viewers. The storyteller enjoys a patronage that he inherits from his father and is obliged to visit his patron at least once a year. Similarly the patron is obliged to make a donation towards the recitation. Both telling and listening are considered sacred and cannot exist one without the other (Sabnani, 2007). The storyteller points at the images with his peacock feather and narrates many stories from the epics or local legends and also recites the genealogy of his patron.



Fig 1: Storyteller Papuram with his patrons.

What is significant here is that the image does not hold too much information. Some figures may be recognized as specific personas but the attributes are also highly emblematic. It relies on prior knowledge of its viewers. All characters, except Gods look similar and the only way they are distinguished is through the narration.



Fig 2: Details of a Kaavad panel.

The storyteller names the characters or the patrons and thus endorses their identity. Contrary to other practices where the image particularizes the word, here the word or text particularizes the image. The storyteller uses the same polysemic image to identify patrons from various villages. This makes the *Kaavad* highly inclusive because it allows several persons to be a part of a narrative or shrine and gives them a sense of identity. Other aspects that contribute to its inclusivity is that it comes to the devotee, it is accessible to all castes and communities and men and women are represented equally even if their roles may appear conventional. They are all acknowledged. Hence, the *Kaavad* is a site for multiple identities.

The *Kaavad* structure allows for the images to be revealed gradually and therefore elicits curiosity. Its symmetry houses binary pairs like left and right, open and closed, revealed and concealed, crime and punishment, lack and its fulfillment. The storyteller becomes the mediator through which the opposites are reconciled. This empowers the teller and he in turn empowers his patrons when they 'recognize' themselves in the *Kaavad*. It is these characteristics of inclusivity and multiple narratives that led to the idea of a children's illustrated book. The shrine-like structure also evokes a house. So the notion of what is home gave form to a book 'HOME' that presents polysemic images on the themes of home and identity, designed to invoke multiple stories.



Fig 3: Grade 3 students with HOME

3.0 Method

The book is constructed to open on both sides which allows for the images to be printed on both sides of the page. There is no formal sequence in which to view the images that could connote a story by itself or represent a part of a known story. The images are placed thematically on a page but their reading does not enforce a sequence. The multiple panels converge onto a central part that has a cut-out window. This window invites the child to perhaps look out at the world through a frame and converse with a friend on the other side. The approach is inclusive as the images portray several families and homes that

children could identify with. In our complex society today a family could be a large joint family or a single parent unit or a gay couple. Often illustrations depict a family unit consisting of father, mother and two children. Such depictions may alienate those that do not belong to such a family. Illustrated houses may also portray a normative image of a built house and therefore exclude children living in other homes or/and do not adequately recognize all habitat. A multi-cultural society needs to be acknowledged in all its dimensions. The relationship of humans to each other and the environment which constitutes the largest home forms an implicit part of the book. The structure is such that the stories can begin anywhere. The images encourage children to tell their own stories. The image becomes the trigger. The image could mean different things to different children. Some may identify with the images, others may recall various tales. It is assumed that if children learn to look at the possibility of multiple perspectives at an early age, then perhaps they will grow up to be more tolerant. Home then, could mean one's own home or the whole world and family could also mean one's own family or the family of all living beings including animals and birds as well. Children make sense of the world and their own experiences through stories. Even if they are not able to comprehend complex plots and subplots they use the story form to articulate what they see and understand.

Much as they like to hear stories they are also eager to share their own stories. And if they are in the company of peers they may also do role play and invent characters(Cassell, 2001). In the last decade several studies have centered on the integration of technology (Mayer, 1999) and children's learning to make the experience more interactive and to let children make their own decisions (Druin, Stewart, Proft, Bederson, & Hollan, 1997). Predictions have also been made about the growth of nonfiction or nonlinear tales that will encourage discussions and 'critical thinking about controversial issues' (Martinez & McGee, 2000). The notion of encouraging a discussion amongst children themselves and between children and adults is embedded in the 'Home' book with images depicting contrasting situations. We presumed it would elicit some discussion and storytelling.

4.0 Discussion

The book was first presented to parents, teachers as well as children without any instructions or suggestions. The first response from the readers was to the structure of the book and children asked how it could stand on its own. Once they began to open it they realized the book could be opened in several ways. Parents used it to ask their children if they could recognize the images. Teachers used it to talk about animals and their habitat. Children kept turning the panels inside out.

This was followed up by a discussion with the teachers and we suggested how the book could be used to elicit stories from children. We demonstrated by first telling a story using one image from the book. Then a child was invited to tell another story using the same image. At first the child told a known story and he was prompted by other children as he went about adding his own details. When the child was encouraged he continued to make up stories around other images. Then several other children also wanted to come and tell their own versions to the same story.

In another situation a four year old boy invented a story after he was told a story using two images. He began by giving a title to his story around an image of three dolphins. He called his story 'Dolphin-Holphin'. In his story the four dolphins went around asking all the characters depicted in the book if they could live with them. All the animals turned them down so finally the dolphins went to the water and asked the animals there and were accepted by the water kingdom and lived there happily ever after (Fig 2).

What is of interest in this narrative is that the image had only three dolphins but in his story he had four dolphins that went about looking for a place to live in. Such information could be very telling about a child's worldview and the notion of community, sharing and generosity.

In another occasion the story of Dolphin-Holphin was repeated to another group of children of the same age and they all said in unison that it were the penguins who let the dolphins live with them. The penguins were the only species on the page that live near water so the connections being made by the group were also based on rationality.

5.0 Conclusion

Children's way of organizing experience is through stories, and here images help in providing the triggers to narrate those experiences. The *Kaavad* images are emblematic compared to the images in the 'Home' book, and yet 'Home' also invokes multiple stories and discussions. This is due to the polysemic nature of images per se that elicits multiple stories and varied point of views. Rather than being representations of objects and people that may confuse a learner, the images act as a trigger for its viewers to voice their opinions. Besides communicating what they experience or aspire, children also exercise their imagination and creativity in constructing the narratives to tell it their way. Finally, by 'Homing' in with stories they may also experience a sense of self-esteem and confidence?

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