PARCC Preparing for Commercial Media Arts and Publishing Careers- Picture Book Perfect

How the accessible picture genre immerses students in multiple career and college literacy skills for life

Today many teachers, particularly those who teach middle grades and beyond, are correctly focused on not only teaching their subject content skills, but also explicitly connecting those skills to college, jobs, careers and adult pursuits with earning potential. Ironically, while the study of picture books, may at first listen, seem too “childlike” for such serious college and career preparation; actually the infinitely burgeoning commercial to the media fields of illustration, design, graphic arts, paper engineering, animation, digital media, game design, and beyond options validate why picture book study counts for college, commercial and community success. But how can the secondary teacher focused on using young adult and adult texts to engage the student in grade appropriate age and social issues, use the “babyish” younger peer focused picture books with these newly “sophisticated” young adults?

First being realistic and wanting to captivate students from the get go, start with potential money to be made by a picture book writer. If that is not a short cut for student engagement what is? Shel Silverstein’s familiar The Giving Tree and Light in the Attic collections along with other works, continue to feed income to his estate which was over twenty million dollars as of 2019. Dr. Seuss, whose own originally authored 43 works are part of so many children’s literary DNA, has an estate that keeps growing valued at 75 million. Contemporary middle school students who attended any preschool or kindergarten program in the United States and other countries, are familiar with Eric Carle whose 1969 The Very Hungry Caterpillar (translated into 62 languages) has sold over 50 million copies. When he died at age 91 in 2022, his estate was worth 80 million dollars.

Once these potential big bucks rewards have been authenticated, challenge the students based on their own experiences as younger children and those of their current younger siblings to explain what the defining characteristics of the picture book genre-page count, number of illustrations, purpose, style and topics-are. This activity can be tremendously enhanced by breaking students into groups, providing these groups with an experiential chart and asking these groups to record the consensus of picture book characteristics they believe there are. If possible, at least one picture book per group should be available to them as they ponder this challenge. Once they have taken the time to come up with their genre defining characteristics, have them share and interact with one another. Then provide them with the basics of picture book genre characteristics: 32 pages long, illustrations every page or on one page of every pair of facing pages. Categories of picture books include biographies, wordless picture books, and classic picture books (those popular over more than a single generation). Students can also have access to online videos where picture book authors discuss what goes into picture book creation.

Next challenge students to go to the library, their younger siblings’ current collection or their own childhood kept treasures and select one picture book they loved. Ask them to explain in words or through their own graphic narrative why that book is still one they cherish or has meaning/allure to them even at their current age. As an added commercial real world challenge, tell them that certain picture book stories such as Aladdin, Cinderella, Seuss’s works, and others have had many media transformations and iterations, because smart media and theatrical companies have seen how these stories can go from the print page to the stage to film to board to online video game and beyond. Ask as they share the picture book that contains to count for something to them, they also brainstorm how this picture book story can be rolled out in another media format to expand its audience beyond the target picture book age reader. Encourage the students after they share their reaction to this challenge, to post their suggestions for the next favorite picture books iteration on their school website and share them with say Disney Media via the teacher’s submission- WDI.Imaginations@disney.com. Explain that if this challenge motivated them to consider how many of their favorite books might be excellent candidates for working at media companies scouting potential printed works for productions.

Now, that they have started in brainstorming ideas for commercially viable iterations of proven cherished picture books, share with students that one successful and commercial iteration for picture book stories are the re-publishing of these stories with illustrations by another illustrator. Provide students with the typed version (word doc) of the entire/excerpted text of a picture book and challenge them to create hand drawn illustrations for that text, import and download public domain graphics, or use online software programs. Emphasize the fact that since each student is approaching this iteration as an individual, the final end projects for this task should all be different. If desired or if the students are ESL learners or Special needs learners, an audio recording of the text of the picture book can be shared with the entire class and made available for them as they each tackle the assignment. For example, students can listen to an audio clip from Good Night, Sister by Katherine Schwarzenegger (2023) <https://www.overdrive.com/media/8988385/good-night-sister>.

After students prepare their illustration or graphic responses to the texts, they can actually share and display them as visual responses in the class plus have them photographed or filmed for uploading to the school website. The local public library might also welcome an exhibit of these student visual text only responses. Emphasize that students who excel at this task or find it stimulating may have a potential commercial publishing and design career ahead.

Even more challenging, show students a wordless picture book such as say “The Lion and the Mouse” Jerry Pinkney (2010) or “A Day, a Dog” by Gabrielle Vincent (1982). Using just the illustrations of these books whose chief allure is that each reader constructs an individual story from the pictures, engages the students in many of the media tasks of narrating animations or the sequencing of a game or even a purely visual narrative with underscoring special effects and music. Whatever the spectrum of stories, these wordless visuals evoke, one of the lessons that needs to be explicitly stated is that any media studio specific jobs include providing narrations, captions, voice-over scripts, scoring and sound effects for images/visuals that “tell” a story through images. Again this “alerts” the current middle school student that there is a potential field in which this type of “story-telling” can play out as a satisfying, well-paying and creative job.

Another way of approaching picture books which also highlights an upcoming career, college and commercial pathway for students, is to focus on how middle school acclaimed and well selling books are often then presented a few years later as children’s picture books. Often these middle school books often in a picture book format with a less detailed narrative and fewer themes, go on to be picture successes in their own right. An excellent example of that would be R. J. Palacio’s middle school targeted - Wonder (2012) which she herself later adapted in 2017 into the bestselling picture book, We’re all Wonders. Malala Yousafzai co-wrote with Christina Lamb, I am Malala (2013) a non-fiction account of her youth education advocacy through her teens, but then focused on the single lesson of the power of books and education transforming lives in Malala’s Magic Pencil (2017). Katherine Applegate (2012) won the Newbery Medal for the One and Only Ivan, a story from a caged silverback gorilla’s perspective. Just two years later in 2014, she teamed with illustrator G. Brian Karas to produce Ivan: the Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla for young children from ages 5 and up. If desired, the students can get a sense of how the original middle school stories are approached by the authors eager to expand the readership of the original work and the publisher with an eye to what aspect of the original complex beyond a 100 page text can be distilled for delighted reading by a much younger audience needing an image driven narrative. Use the online books’ trailer videos and descriptions plus sample pages to give the students’ as young media publishers in training a sense of the changes that would need to be made as an established tween or teen favorite is restyled into picture book format.

 Ask the students which books, they as readers have studied in the middle grades or books targeted at teen readers they feel would make excellent picture books. Lead a discussion with them about what aspects of the books they are currently studying as whole class reads or reading on their own, have components, characters, themes or emotions that their younger siblings could relate with or strong visual settings and characters. Emphasize to them, that they already through their own past memories and interactions with their younger siblings or even close family younger peers already have insights into characters, emotions and scenarios that interest younger children. Given the samples of popular tween and teen books adapted for picture book format, ask them to suggest one they are familiar with and to list using printed text or online sample/video aspects of that text that would adapt to picture book format. Request that they present a Picture Book Proposal- “Pitch” for at least one favorite book they have. Ask them to include at least three separate arguments for its themes, characters, setting and emotions being appropriate for a picture book audience. What needs to be emphasized here is that this pitch functional document project is exactly the ways authors, their agents or publishing company acquisition agents “pitch” picture book adaptions of young adult or juvenile literature. This is not “just” another assignment or “project” to teach persuasive writing. This is an introduction at the middle school level into a commercial role which may suit a creative imaginative reader or a visual artist eager to have an opportunity to be part of a creative team, plus make a living or start a business with this focus.

Is picture book study a “for younger children,” target picture books readers only audience, or is it an easily accessible introductory commercial to the hilt opportunity for young talented tweens and teens to begin to tap talents and interests they have, without knowing them? Can students learn through studying the picture book genre about myriad numbers of jobs, roles and opportunities in digital media and publishing? As can be seen from picture book genre literacy-reading, writing, talking and listening activities- picture book media industry tasks such as acquisitions, market audience analysis, media treatment proposals, media format pitches, company idea shares, developing alternate illustrator perspectives or adapting young adult books to picture book format, are all integral to ongoing viable careers in media and in publishing. Using accessible picture books which middle school students have experienced themselves as readers and see their younger peers experiencing, offers a readily available canon of print text which can be used to introduce middle school age students to a world of jobs, the majority of them do not realize exist. Plus these jobs arise from printed texts authored and illustrated by others, which with close analysis, visualization, brainstorming, envisioning, research, pitching and discussion can shine the college and career path to meaningful financially viable work for students without their needing to have the creative from scratch idea talents of picture book authors. Taking time to authenticate reading, research, discussion, collaboration, conversation and creative brainstorming, using picture book texts immediately accesses all students- including ESL, Special Needs and Visual learners to a future of enjoyable and economically viable jobs, communities and businesses. Viewed from this perspectives, the picture book genre is picture perfect for career, college and community education, starting here and now in middle school.

The 10 Richest Children’s Authors

<https://www.therichest.com/rich-powerful/rchest-childrens-authors-ranked/>

A Day, A Dog: Vincent, Gabriellle

<https://www.amazon.com/Day-Dog-Gabrielle-Vincent/dp/1886910510>

Ivan: The Remarkable True Story of the Shopping Mall Gorilla

<https://www.amazon.com/Ivan-Remarkable-Story-Shopping-Gorilla/dp/0544252306>

<https://a.co/d/36XP758>

Kids Books Read Aloud “Good Night, Sister” by Katherine Schwarzenegger

<https://youtube/com/watch?v=qKzqEYb6_TA&feature=share>

What is Eric Carle’s net worth?

<https://www.hitc.com/en-gb/2021/05/27/eric-carle-net-worth/>

Malala’s Magic Pencil

<https://g.co/kgs/xhWfbK>

Planning Your Children’s Book

<https://youtu.be/knA9All3R8g>

Teachers Find Many Reasons to Use Picture Books with Middle and High School Students

<https://www.slj.com/teachers-find-many-reasons-to-use-picture-books-with-middle-and-high-school-students>

We’re All Wonders

<https://a.co/d/fHCwZxg>

What is a Picture Book?

[https://wwwthoughtco.com/what-is-a picture-book-626980](https://wwwthoughtco.com/what-is-a%20picture-book-626980)