

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Teach Them to Read and They'll Teach You

By

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Introduction

My senior exhibition for my Bachelors of Fine Arts degree centers on childhood literacy and illustration. The exhibition is titled *Teach Them to Read and They'll Teach You*. I am majoring in Art and Design, and I am minoring in Art Education and Dance.

Illustration has a rich history and is an invaluable tool for encouraging elementary school age readers to develop their literacy skills. I have wanted to be an illustrator for as long as I can remember but found that illustration is sometimes viewed critically in the fine art world for not being serious or conceptual enough. To argue my passion for illustration, I began to research its importance in history and in the modern day classroom. In my education classes I am learning more about the American Education system and my place in it as a future art teacher. My role as a teacher will be to encourage children to find and follow their own passions. Improving literacy skills is one of the best ways a teacher can encourage their students' natural curiosity and inquisitive nature.

Socio-Political Importance of Literacy

I believe that literacy is a universal right. "The rationale for recognizing literacy as a right is the set of benefits it confers on individuals, families, communities, and nations. Indeed, it is widely reckoned that, in modern societies, 'literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, personal empowerment, active and passive participation in the local and global social community'" (Literacy Statistics). Literacy boosts self-esteem. With the accessibility of modern day technology, literacy gives people the power to learn just about anything at a moment's notice. "The relationship between education and political participation is well established.

Educated people are to some extent more likely to vote and voice more tolerant attitudes and democratic values” (Hannum and Buchmann, 2003, p. 19).

Literacy and education on average are determinants for personal income and financial welfare. 90% of welfare recipients are high school dropouts (Literacy Statistics). These students might have fallen behind in school at a young age, leaving them to feel overwhelmed by their high school curriculum. With a little extra care and attention from their parents and teachers, their future financial struggles might have been prevented.

There is an overwhelming connection between illiteracy and crime. “The Department of Justice states, “The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure. Over 70% of inmates in America's prisons cannot read above a fourth-grade level”(Literacy Statistics). A lack of literacy skills make it even harder for convicts to succeed in jobs after they have been released back into society.

If parents and educators fail to teach childhood literacy, entire communities suffer. I believe it is my job as a future educator to do everything in my power to promote literacy. As a maker, I utilize illustration to further promote literacy to elementary age students.

My Personal Connection to Illustration

My personal love for illustration came at a very young age. My parents both grew up with disabilities that hindered their ability to read and taught them how essential reading skills are to overall learning. From infancy on, they would read to me constantly. I loved our time spent reading together as a family. It was my favorite pastime. The stories they read to me were often fantastical and funny and the illustrations were colorful and exciting. Like many children,

this experience of reading picture books so often with my parents gave me my first exposure to art. I was absolutely enthralled by the beautiful illustrations that were in my book collection.

There are so many illustrators I could list as early influences of my illustrative practice. Sandra Boynton creates simple illustrations of animals who are brimming with emotion. I appreciate her use of flat bright colors. Sheila McGraw's heartwarming illustrations in *Love you Forever* were inspiring to me because the characters in her illustrations emote as much as the story does (1986). I appreciate the way she draws the figure with biological accuracy while maintaining whimsy in her colors and compositions. I find Eric Carle's many illustrated books inspiring for their bold use of color, texture, and collage.

How Do Children Learn To Read

My early love for illustration has only grown since I have learned about the impact illustration has on overall childhood literacy. Before I can defend the value of illustration however, I first must explain how children become literate. The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of the word literate reads:

1. a: Educated, Cultured
 b: Able to read and write

2. a: versed in literature or creative writing
 b: Lucid, Polished
 c: having knowledge or competence

According to Karen Tankersley, Author of *The Threads of Reading: Strategies for Literacy Development* (2003), modern day educators believe that readers go through five distinct steps when becoming literate.

1. Phonemic Awareness

Tankersly writes, “Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate phonemes, which are the smallest part of a spoken language. Phonemes are the element of language that allows discrimination and makes a difference in the meaning of a specific word” (2003). Babies learn differentiate basic sounds before they learn to speak full words and sentences. Children then must understand that when someone is reading to them from a book, the words that they see on the page correlate to the sounds that they hear. The process of becoming phonemically aware typically occurs in children between six months and six years of age.

2. Phonics and Decoding

After gaining phonemic awareness, young readers enter into the stage of phonic decoding. The act of decoding means that the reader is able to pick up on visual, syntactic, or semantic cues to generate meaning from words and sentences. Chapter two of *The Threads of Reading* explained,

“Visual cues are how the word looks, the letters themselves, and the letter combinations or groupings and their associated sounds. Syntactic cues are how the sentences are structured and how the words are ordered. Semantic cues are how the word fits into the context of the sentence as in the part of speech, the association with pictures, or the meaning cues in the sentence” (Tankersly, 2003).

This decoding stage typically occurs between the ages of six and seven. It is at this point when readers are able to begin slowly sounding out words in order to build their vocabulary. Once children are able to sound out words, they are able to build up their vocabulary. This gives them a deeper understanding of texts.

3. Vocabulary

Learners will continue building vocabulary throughout their lives, but it is essential for young readers to build up a collection of vocabulary words that they are able to recognize at a glance without having to stop and sound them out. Modern educators often call these sight words. “The sight words are both common, frequently used words and foundational words that a child can use to build a vocabulary (Sight Words). Combining sight words with phonics instruction increases a child’s speed and fluency in reading.

4. Fluency

Fluency is the process in which children learn to read with speed and accuracy. This can only be achieved after the student has studied a large collection of sight words and is able to assess the context of the words they are reading. Fluency typically occurs between seven and eight-year-olds.

5. Comprehension

Once a reader can recognize vocabulary and read with fluency, they start to understand the meaning of the sentences they are reading. Tankersley wrote, “We don’t comprehend unless

we make connections and are able to process the words that we read at the thinking level (2003).” Comprehension is essential to overall literacy.

The order of steps that children go through when learning to read is important because they get children to a place of literary understanding. Students have worked through the steps of learning to read and are now able to use reading as a tool for learning more about the world around them.

Connections between Literacy and Illustration

In addition to being able to read the words on a page, young readers must learn to become visually literate. In 1969, John Debes coined the term visual literacy and explained,

“Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others” (What is Visual Literacy?).

Illustrated picture books are one of the main tools used to develop children’s visual literacy skills. The main function of illustration is to tell a story. Readers who are struggling with fluency can tether themselves to the illustration to get back on track after struggling to sound out new vocabulary words. With the help of color, line, and shapes, children are better able to understand the emotional elements of the text that they might have otherwise missed. Images allow children to think critically. They can help a child activate prior knowledge and give children a tool to organize the information found within the story. But they also make reading fun. Eric Carle said in a 2002 interview, “All children, first of all, are artists and are creative, and

[books] for young children start with pictures only, and then gradually words are added to it. So the picture is the first thing of a book, and I think it stays with children for a long time, those early pictures" (J. Brown). Illustrations make picture books impactful. They help encourage children to go back to read their favorite books again and again which is a wonderful practice in building overall literacy skills.

Brief History of Illustration

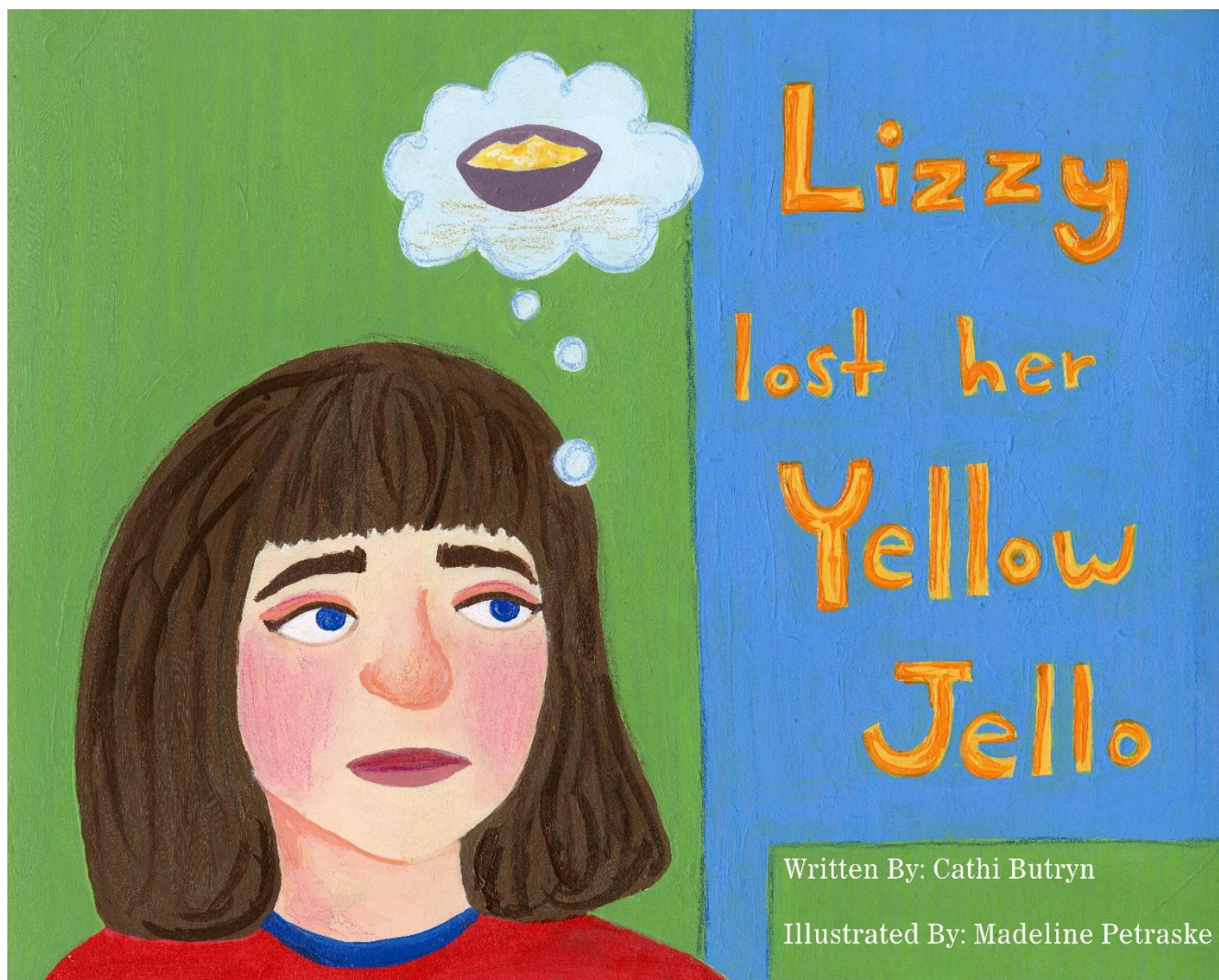
I find illustration compelling because it has such a rich history and connection to literacy. The earliest record of narrative illustrations appear in the cave paintings created in Lascaux, France, ca. 15,000 B.C. In the middle ages, illuminated manuscripts were created to aid in memory of Christian religious stories. In both of these cases, the illustrated images were used to convey a narrative. Illustration became an even more popular mode of working after Johannes Gutenberg developed the first mechanical printing press in 1452 because they could be quickly produced and distributed. With the further development of technology in the industrial revolution in the mid-1700s, illustration became a commodity in everyday life. This was especially noticeable in newspaper engravings. It was at this time when English artist Thomas Bewick established a studio for the creation and printing of commercial illustration that was used for many purposes, including works for children, educational materials for schools, natural history plates, and title-page art for books"(History). Bewick had redeveloped the process of creating woodblock carvings, which led to an increase in popularity of that illustration style. Publishers began to realize that images made magazines more compelling to buyers and increased advertising revenue. Art became an irreplaceable tool in marketing and design. In many of these

examples of illustration throughout history, images were being used to boost literacy, interest, comprehension and even sales of texts.

The 19th and 20th centuries brought a new development in the role of illustration in society. Animator Walt Disney began using illustration as a tool to create animated cartoons. Over time, these cartoons developed into full-length films (History). The popularity of these films led to increased national funding in animation and digital media, which led to the type of high budget animated films and video games that we see in the media today. Although these types of films do not typically rely on text, I would still argue that they boost visual literacy.

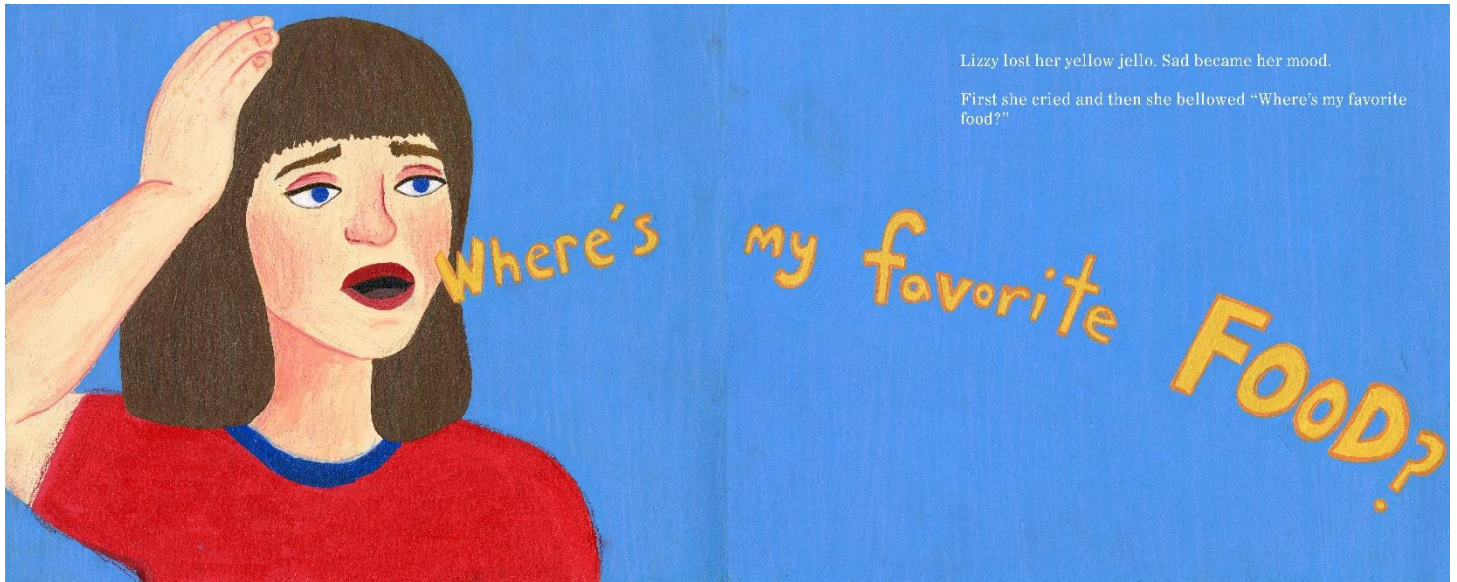
Even by watching animated movies, children learn to pick up on visual cues to understand the movie conflict.

My Artistic Process as an Illustrator



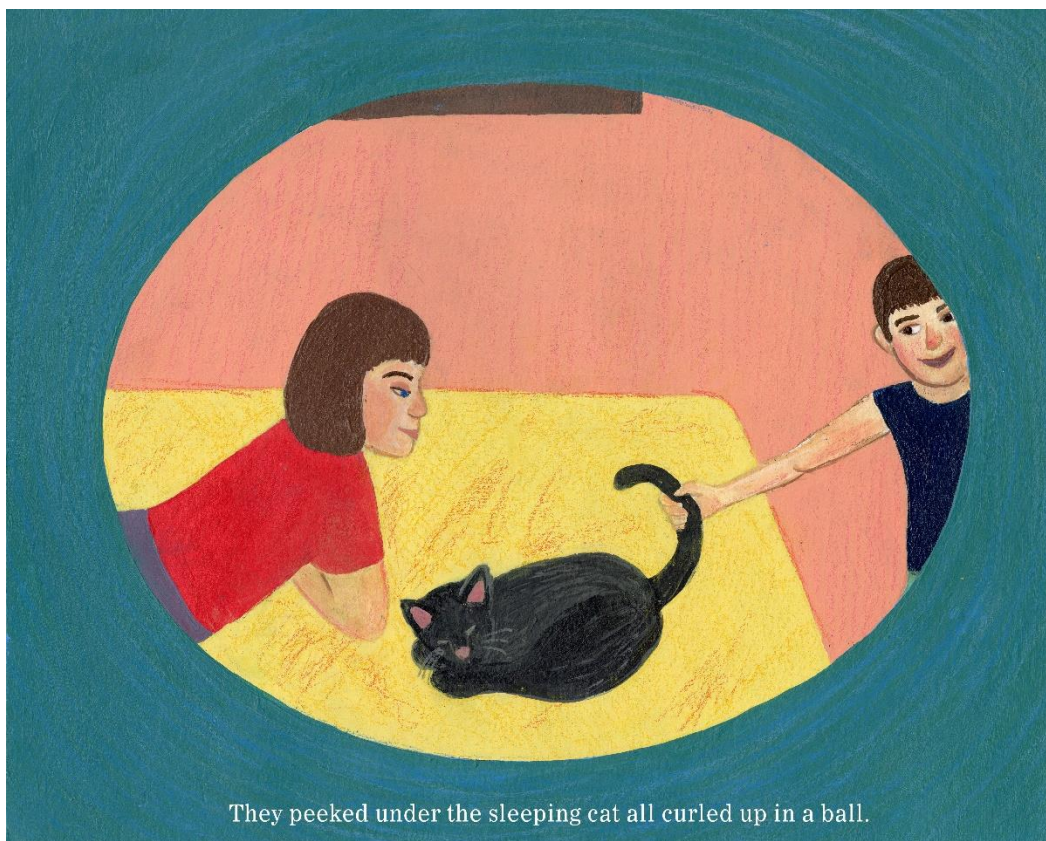
For my senior thesis show, I collaborated with a family friend and first-time author Cathi Butryn to illustrate a children's picture book. Our book is titled *Lizzy Lost Her Yellow Jello*. It is about a little girl who left the table to go play, resulting in her misplacing her yellow jello. Lizzy and her little brother Zed spend the rest of the book looking in ridiculous places for the jello, only to discover that their father had put it back in the refrigerator. Cathi sent me the story in stanzas like a poem so I started with a clear vision of how the story would be broken down into pages. I was then able to brainstorm images that would best depict the narrative.

I hand painted each of the book pages with acrylic paint. I have a strong affinity for traditional painting rather than creating digital illustrations. At this stage of my practice, I feel that physically manipulating the paint allows me to have more control over the overall mood of my paintings. I found acrylic to be ideal for my illustration style because it dries quickly and allows me to build up layers. After laying down opaque colors, I began layering with watercolor paint which added movement in brush strokes and allowed me to brighten colors that I wanted to place more visual emphasis on. The final step of my illustration process is where I layer colored pencil over my painting. I love the texture that the colored pencil adds, making the colors and shapes in the composition really pop.

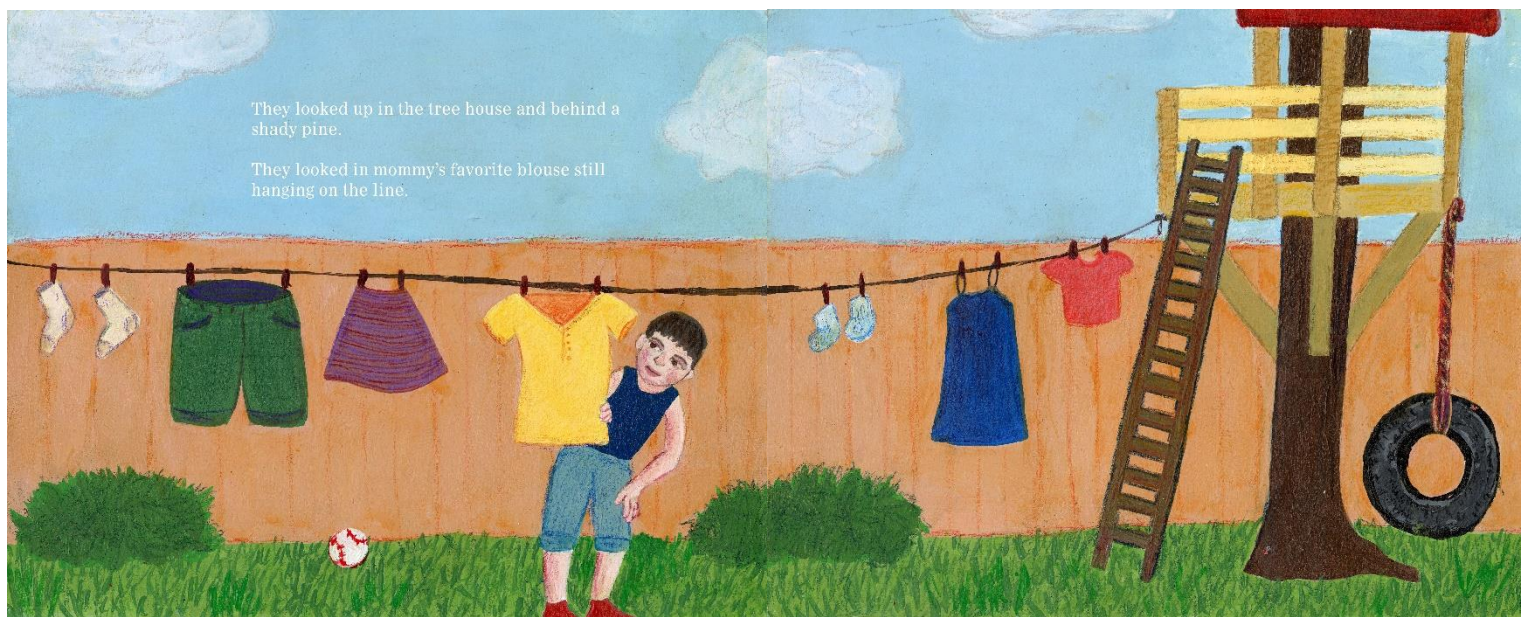


Promoting Literacy through my Illustration

Throughout the process of illustrating *Lizzy Lost Her Yellow Jello*, it was important for me to keep in mind that my reason for illustrating a book was to take part in promoting childhood literacy. This helped me to focus in on various illustration tricks that boost comprehension. The target age range for *Lizzy Lost Her Yellow Jello* is birth to age eight, as that is the timeframe when children are most interested in picture books. Therefore I designed Lizzy and Zed to both fall into that age range so that children would find them relatable. I kept the children's colors and facial features consistent so a young reader would be able to identify the characters from one page to another as they flipped through the book.



I decided to make all of the illustrations in this book two-page spreads so that the left and right pages come together to make one wide image. Doing this allowed me to pay closer attention to where I placed the focal point in each spread. Organizing the pages into specific focal points helped me to clarify the main events of the story that I wanted readers to latch onto. In many pages, I placed the focal point on the left page of the spread. I believe that this is a good way for young readers to practice scanning a book from left to right, as they would text.



My illustrative style for this book utilizes brightly colored cartoony depictions of Lizzy and Zed. I designed the background scene around the children and depicted compositionally busy settings. Being a naturally detail-oriented maker, I packed small details of common home objects into the illustration. These details make the interior spaces that I depicted more engaging.



I utilized foreshadowing in my illustrations to help readers anticipate events that would happen further along in the story.



This spread in particular shows the kitchen table with Lizzy's bowl of yellow jello. Lizzy is not in the frame, and her chair is pushed out from the table. This illustration could help a young reader realize that Lizzy must have left her jello at the table.

Book Reading Case Study

On May 8th, 2019, I performed the first book reading of *Lizzy Lost Her Yellow Jello* to the public. I was invited to host story time at the Alfred Montessori School. I read my book in front of twelve students under the age of four. At that age, I don't think I would have gotten a very critical response on any book, but the students did seem enthusiastic to hear me read it. They maintained focus throughout the reading, so I am led to believe that the story and illustrations are compelling for a preschool group. It was a wonderful experience to finally be able to present my work to its target audience and I look forward to seeing what responses I get with different age groups.

Teach Them to Read and They'll Teach You

In addition to *Lizzy Lost Her Yellow Jello*, I've sewed and embroidered an all fabric book to include in my exhibition. This book does not rely on text, but rather on texture. The contents of this book surround the physical texture found in various fabrics within the book. The target audience for this book is infants under a year old. Touch and feel books are popular among that age because they allow babies to grow accustomed to holding a book and flipping pages. They also encourage babies to practice using their developing motor skills such as reaching, grabbing, pointing and even biting. This texture book is also a way for me to begin exploring tactile

illustration books for children with visual impairments, which is a field I'm interested in getting involved with in the future.

Instead of show cards, I have created a zine that my viewers can take home. The zine is small enough to fit in the palm of my hand, and functions as a brochure of fast facts on childhood literacy. I created the zine in order to stress the importance of childhood literacy to the adult viewers entering my exhibition space. The back of my zine is my contact info, so it doubles as my business card. I believe the zine is a clever way to continue educating the public in another book format.

Lastly, I have made a series of illustrations that will hang on the wall in my senior exhibition space as stand-alone images. These illustrations are as brightly colored and fun as the ones in *Lizzy Lost Her Yellow Jello*, and are a good way for me to explore characters and scenes that I'm interested in depicting in my future work as an illustrator. The actions in these illustrations include moments like walking a dog or fishing on a dock. They are cheerful and fun, and the actions are relatable to many children. This series pushed me to be as direct as possible in my narrative within a single image rather than relying on a sequence of illustrations.

Conclusion and Future Work

Teach Them to Read and They'll Teach You is located on the first floor of Harder Hall and will be on view May 11th -May 16th, 2019. I have created an intimate living room style space. On one side of the space there is a chalkboard table and three colorful wooden chairs where viewers can sit and read my books. On the other side there is a sofa chair and a floor lamp to make for a cozy reading space. My illustrations adorn the walls and create a colorful, child friendly atmosphere.

I have thoroughly enjoyed working on traditional hand-painted illustrations this year, but in the future, I am excited to explore various forms of technology to create and display my illustrations. Children growing up today have an increasing interest in technology, and I believe that education and illustration are constantly redeveloping as the generations evolve with the times. In a 1966 interview with *Publishers Weekly* famous illustrator Clement G. Hurd said that children's book illustration

“‘is related to painting and graphics, but is specialized in that the artist must keep the ultimate audience more firmly in mind than the “pure” painter who primarily tries to satisfy himself.’ This audience, he added, ‘an ever new and wide-eyed group, responds freely to what interests it, and turns away from what does not.’”

I anticipate my future work to utilize technology more than I did with *Lizzy Lost Her Yellow Jello*. Children today are excited to use technology. Smartphones and tablets have become such a commodity that children almost always know how to use one before they can read or write. Parents can play a video for their children on YouTube of people reading picture books aloud. Eric Carle has made his books into apps that engage children to read play learning games. Mobile apps, merge illustration with animation to create a fun and exciting learning experience for young readers. I believe that in order to get today's children excited to learn, educators need to find a way to use smartphones and tablets to promote reading and literacy. Mobile phones must be revolutionized to become portals into reading material. I want to explore how I can utilize technology to make illustrative work that will promote literacy skills for young readers.

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