

Literacy Through the Arts: Communication using pictures, signs & symbols

A presentation by: Marcine Linder

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“Learning through the arts provides a vehicle for students to become actively engaged in the construction of their own learning” (Gamwell, 2005, p. 359).



“Semiotics positions students to inquire into and create texts that demonstrate their power, or lack thereof, in ordinary life settings such as family or school” (Cowan & Albers, 2006, p. 127).

Like language, art is a system of communication.

The arts provide students with opportunities to use semiotic systems beyond those based in words and text. Visual art can be a powerful tool for students to communicate, demonstrate knowledge, process information, and think abstractly.

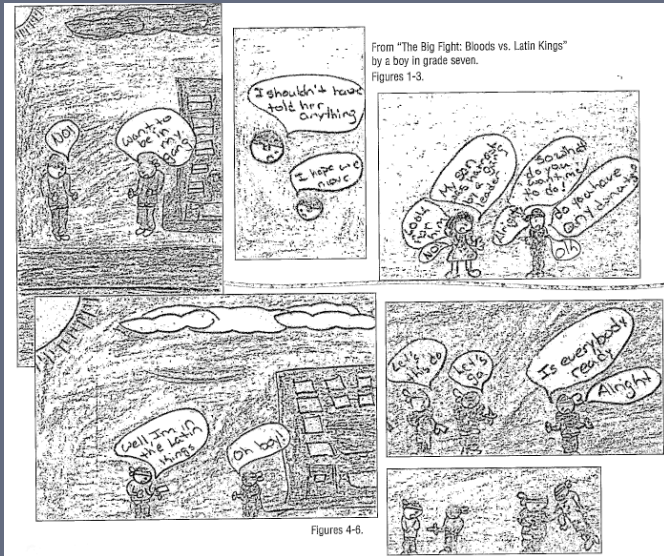
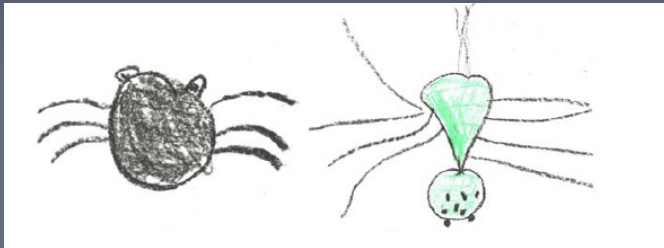
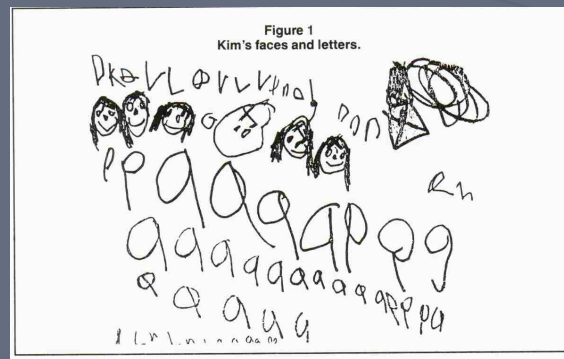
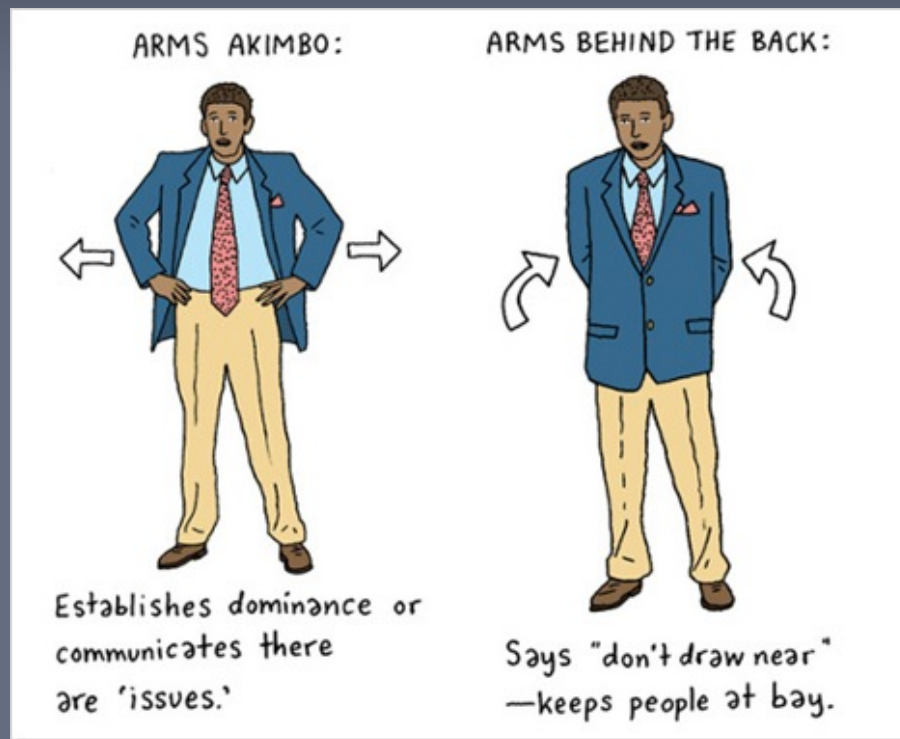


FIGURE 4
Warren's poem and pencil drawing, "Militant"

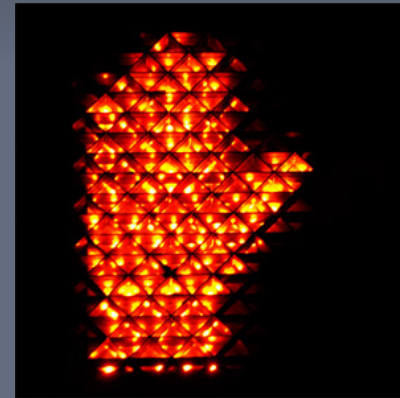
"Militant"
Militant lives
Inside the souls of men
Who are violent
Stiff,
And rigid....
When militant appears,
He is not kind,
He is not polite.
His bitter cry
Slashes through your soul
As he goes for the kill.



Cowan and Albers (2006) are “convinced that literacy must be viewed as a complex process that necessarily involves thinking across and within multiple sign systems” (p. 135)



body language sign systems



face



happy



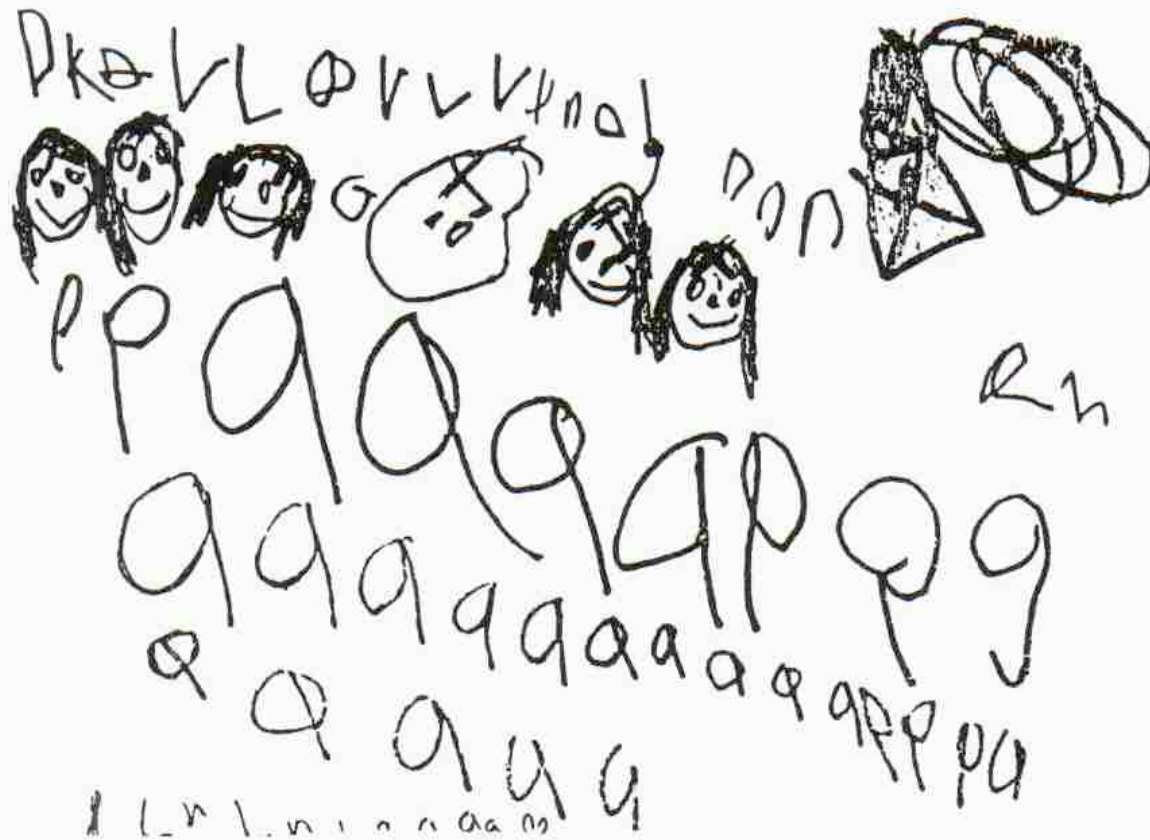
no smoking



money

Kim was asked to draw a picture of her family, but discovers similarities between 9's g's d's and q's. "How should teachers respond when children seem to have very different intentions than the teachers?" (Dyson, 1990 p. 202)

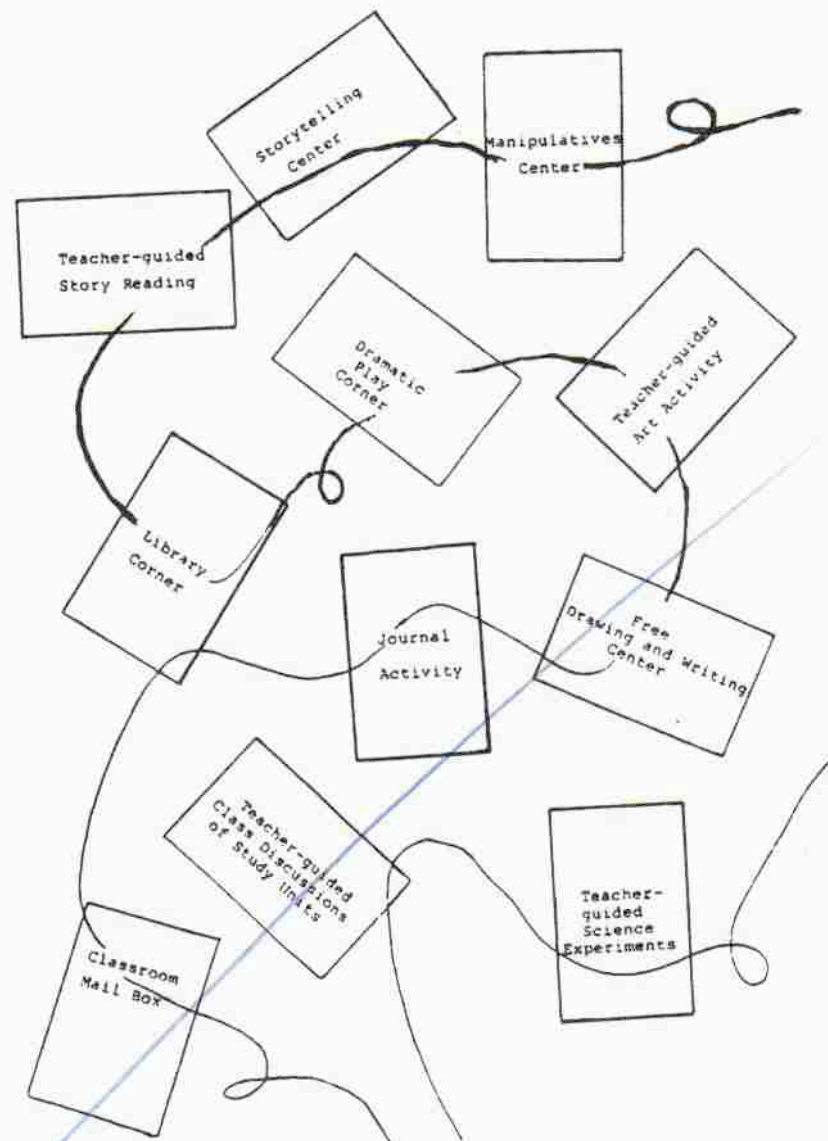
Figure 1
Kim's faces and letters.



When students learn, it is critical for them to decide “which skills to choose as most relevant to the immediate sense-making activity rather than the teacher deciding” (Handerhan, 1993, p. 247).

Kim's teacher begins to look beyond the activity box and to envision Kim's literacy as supported... by a sturdy, broad loom constructed from varied activities that allow for different kinds of intentions (Dyson, 1990 p. 205)

Figure 2
A classroom's learning spaces.



Drawings can communicate more about what a student knows or understands than language-based responses, particularly when their knowledge is full of difficult to clarify misconceptions (Paquette, Fello, & Jalonga, 2007)

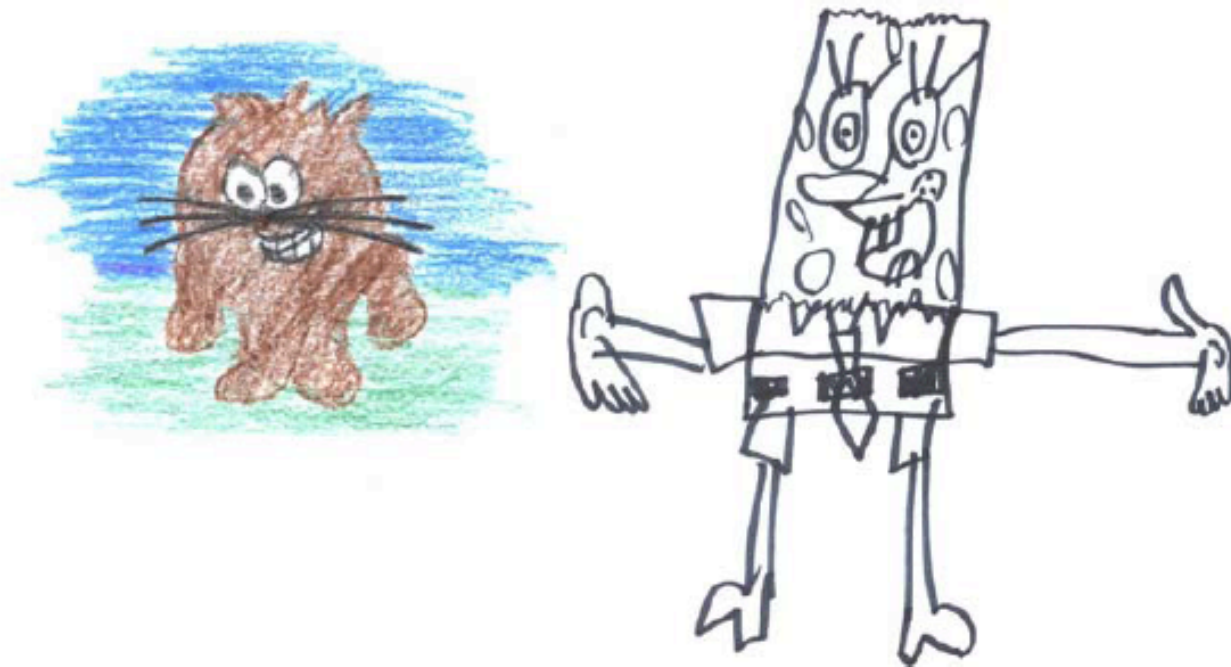


Fig. 1. Media Influenced, pre-learning drawings of a Tasmanian devil and a sea sponge

From (Paquette, Fello, & Jalonga, 2007 p. 67)

“Talking Drawings” are drawn before and after instruction. They are a visual way for students to communicate what they have learned

Pre-Learning Drawings



Post-Learning Drawings

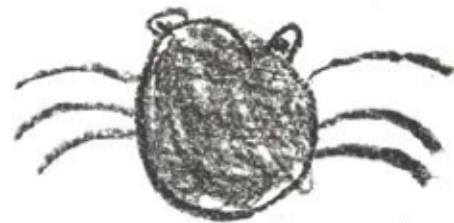


Fig. 2. Jensen's (kindergarten) pre- and post-learning drawings of a bat and Bailey's (First Grade) pre- and post-learning drawings of a spider

From (Paquette, Fello, & Jalonga, 2007 p. 68)



Oster's (1993) interdisciplinary unit on Sub-Saharan Africa's studio art component "allowed students to express their understanding of the academic material in art work that reflected their personal vision and creativity" (p. 28).

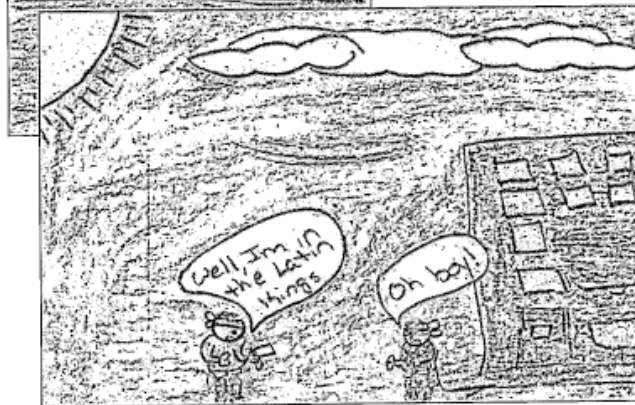
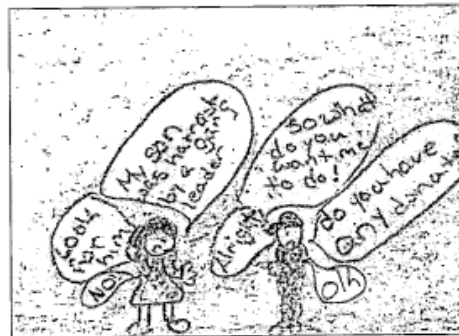


These images were created by pairs of ELL students who engaged in 20 minute non-verbal dialogues through finger painting that were used to help students write poems about the topic they were visually conversing about (images from from Reilly, 2008)

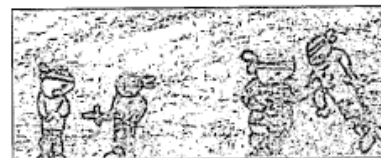
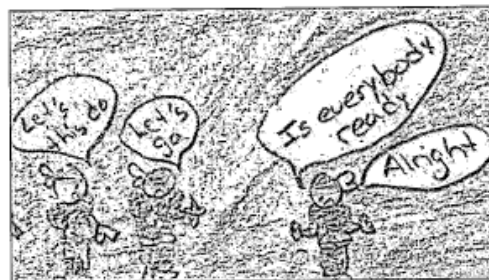
Comic books combine visuals and text to communicate ideas



From "The Big Fight: Bloods vs. Latin Kings"
by a boy in grade seven.
Figures 1-3.



Figures 4-6.



Figures 7-8.



The multiple semiotic systems used in comic books enabled the low-performing students in The Comic Book Project (Bitz, 2004) to create works that were significantly richer and deeper than what they would have produced had they been restricted to the single semiotic system of language in a traditional "write a paragraph about" assignment.

Students intuitively associated “angular lines with concepts such as anger, war, and violence, and curved lines with calm, peace, and order” (Cowan & Albers, 2006, pp 129-130).

FIGURE 4
Warren's poem and pencil drawing, "Militant"

"Militant"

Militant lives
Inside the souls of men
Who are violent
Stiff,
And rigid....
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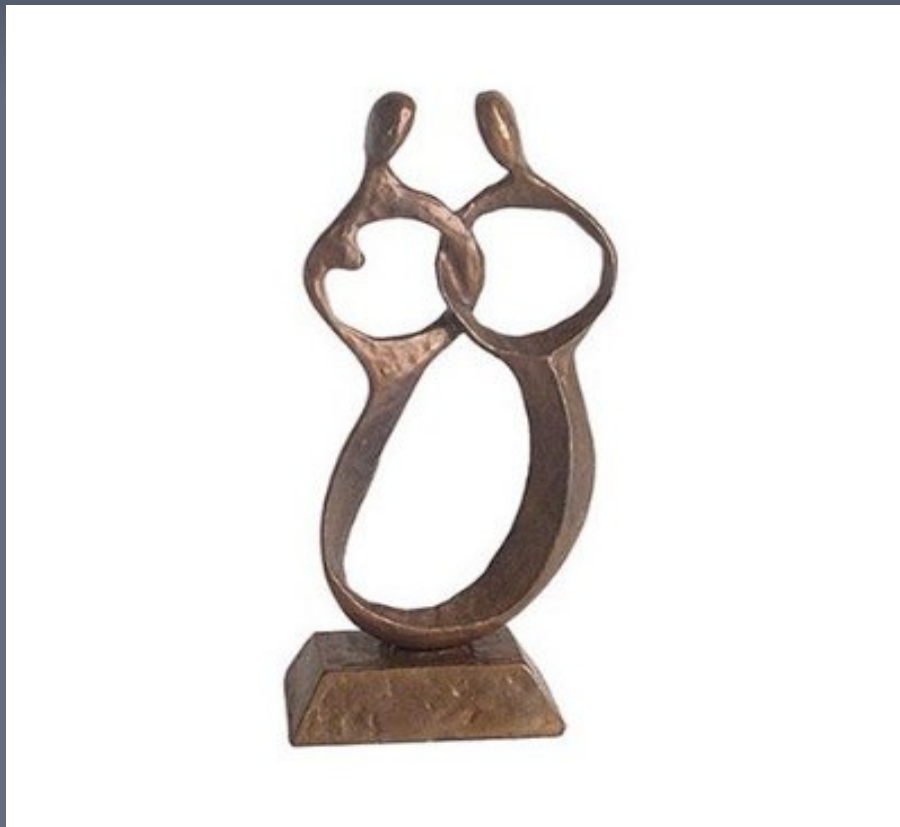


From Cowan & Albers, 2006, p. 130

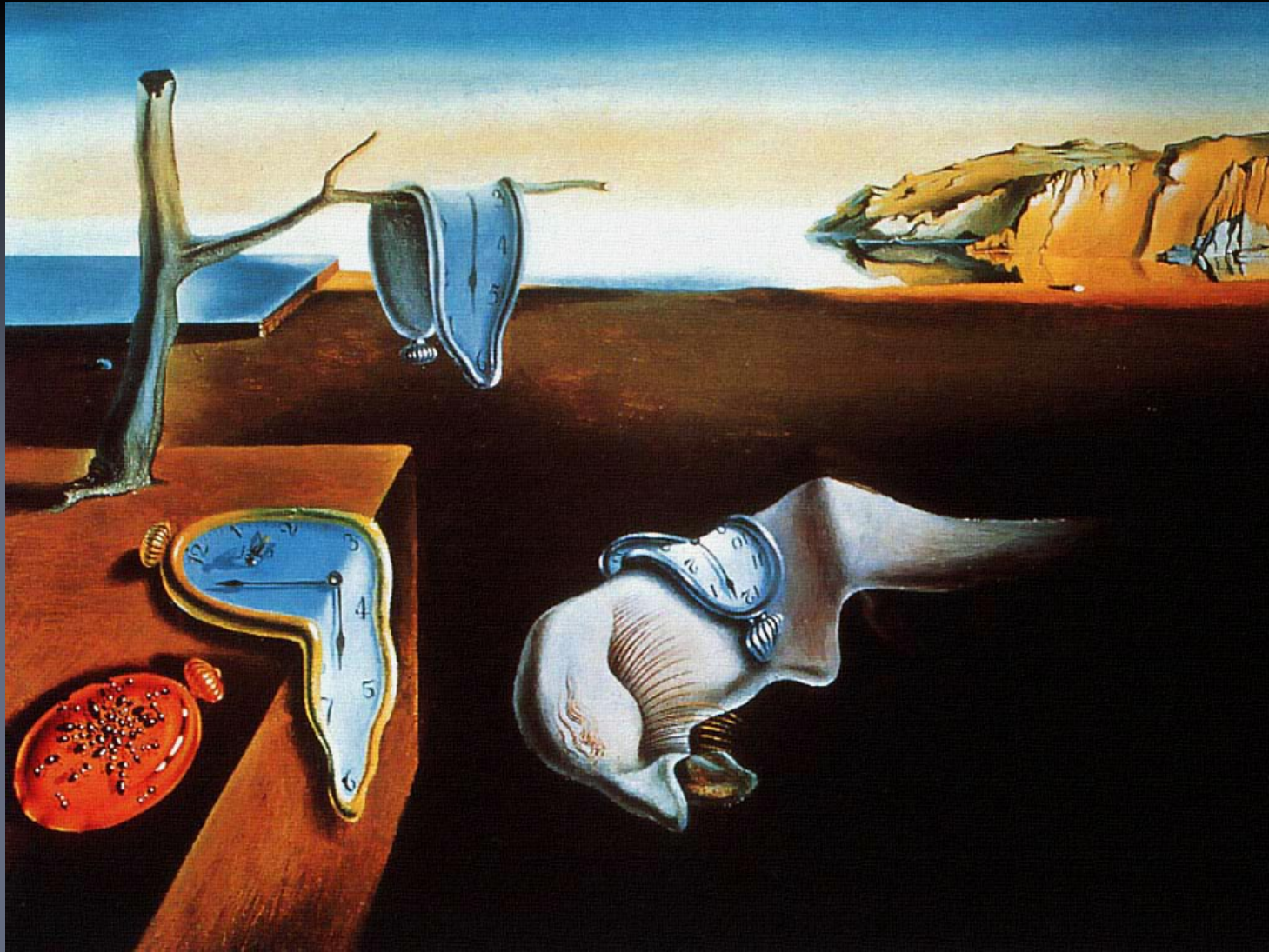


What visual clues (rooted in the elements of line and shape) can you find in these popular culture character drawings that indicate whether the character is good or evil, cool, or square?

Barton, Sawyer, and Swanson (2007) used abstract art to enhance third-grade students' abilities to comprehend written texts abstractly as "the profundity of a reader's interpretations is dependent in large part on the ability to focus on important information in a given text" (p. 126).



They used both modern and contemporary sculpture to allow students to have concrete, tangible experiences with abstractions. When abstract ideas are expressed visually, the strategies we use to think abstractly become more understandable" (p. 127).



Literacy is, at its core, always about the act of interpreting a field of reference. The field of reference should not be limited to a written text, but instead include visual, oral, audio, and kinesthetic texts.

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Images retrieved from

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