Drawing for the Reader: How Novice Illustrators Judge Success in a Linocut Children's Anthology

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Abstract

Theories of text-based illustration usually weigh an image against its source: how faithful it is to the text, and how far it may depart from the text in order to stand on its own in its medium. This article asks whether that axis explains how novice illustrators judge the success of their own work. The study in this article examines a children's story anthology illustrated in single-color linocut by visual communication design students, involving studio curation and writer feedback. Data were drawn from reflective interviews with thirteen illustrators, curation guidelines, and process records. Seven illustrators assessed success through readers' comprehension and emotional responses rather than image–text relationships, while none considered textual completeness a criterion of success. Three cases revealed tensions between reader orientation, studio selection criteria, and writers' expectations of textual fidelity and intended atmosphere. The article proposes reader orientation as a third dimension, alongside fidelity and felicity, for evaluating text-based illustration.

Keyword: Children's Book Illustration, Text–Image Relations, Fidelity, Linocut, Novice Illustrators, Illustration Specification.

Introduction

Every illustrator working from someone else's text faces the same question: how much of that text has to be drawn. Picturebook studies recognize a spectrum of word–picture relations, from symmetry to contradiction (Nikolajeva and Scott 2000), while Wartenberg (2023) proposes two norms: fidelity to the source and felicity to the visual medium.

Both frameworks prioritize image–text relations over illustrators' own measures of success. McAuley (2008) similarly identifies recurring failures in illustrations that focus on minor textual details or stray too far from the central theme.

This article examines fifteen children's stories illustrated in single-color linocut by visual communication design students for the independent publisher Semut Merah Kaizen. The production process brought together three competing measures: the writers' specifications and feedback, the studio's curation guide, and the students' own judgments.

The article addresses two research questions:

1. What measures of success do student illustrators use, and how do these relate to the source text?
2. Where do the students' measures, the studio's selection doctrine, and the writers' demand for fidelity meet or collide?

The article presents the conceptual framework, production context, methodology, and findings before discussing their implications for the theory and practice of text-based illustration.

Research Method

- **Research approach:** Practice-led research (Candy 2006), with the research team acting as supervisors and observers within the illustration production process.
- **Participants:** Thirteen student illustrators interviewed through semi-structured interviews.
- **Primary data:** 38 answer units from three reflective interview questions addressing changes in judgment after curation, measures of successful illustration, and the delivery of illustration briefs.
- **Supporting data:** Illustration specifications, studio curation guidelines, supervision notes, and writers' feedback.
- **Data analysis:** Two-stage coding, combining inductive open coding and deductive classification based on fidelity, felicity, and reader orientation.
- **Validation:** Coding decisions were documented and reviewed by the authors, with documentary evidence prioritized over conflicting self-reports. No independent second coder was involved.

Discussion & Result

Three Measures in One Production.
This project ran three measures of success at once. Writers judged by fidelity to the specification, the studio judged by selection and hierarchy which are a pedagogical form of felicity, and students by the effect on the reader. Cases uses in this study reveal how these measures converge or collide in illustration decisions.

Reader Orientation as a Third Dimension.
Beyond fidelity and felicity, novice illustrators judged success through readers' comprehension and emotional responses. This finding extends McAuley's (2008) observations and resonates with reader-centered picture book translation (Oittinen 2003).

Implications for Specification-Based Illustration

- Distinguish mandatory and flexible attributes. Specify which elements require fidelity and which allow creative interpretation.
- Strengthen the rationale for selection. Consider what the image contributes beyond the text, not merely its readability.
- Clarify the role of visual references. Indicate whether references are mandatory, illustrative examples, or guides to atmosphere.

Conclusion

This study found that novice illustrators judged success primarily by the effect on the reader rather than by fidelity or felicity. All informants rejected textual completeness as a measure of success, but most did so for the sake of the reader rather than the image–text relation. Collisions between the measures of writers, studio, and illustrators emerged in concrete illustration decisions. The article therefore proposes reader orientation as a third dimension, alongside fidelity and felicity, for evaluating text-based illustration. For illustration education and practice, agreement about what need not be drawn does not necessarily mean agreement about why. Making these measures explicit in specifications and curation can help all parties negotiate illustration decisions. Further research could examine this dimension with professional illustrators and child readers.

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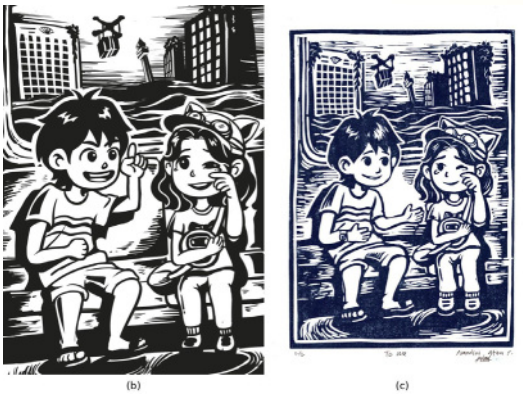
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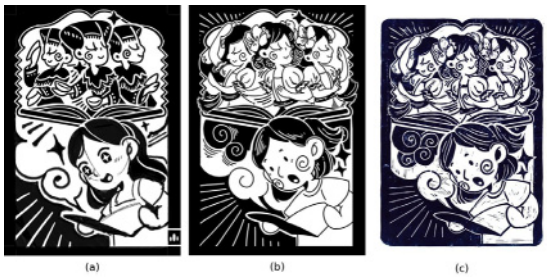
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Picture 1. Figure 2: Case C2, an Alternative Moving Away from the Reference, the Selected Sketch, and the Final Illustration



Picture 2. Case D1 Before and After the Writer's Costume Correction Note: (a) Curated sketch with traditional costume; (b) sketch after the writer's feedback, with white kebaya and the lower area blackened; (c) final print.



Picture 3. Case C3, Sketch Alternatives and the Selected Composition Note: (a) and (b) Alternative sketches; (c) selected composition; (d) final print.