

Tactually Illustrated Picture Books For Children who are Blind or Visually Impaired for the Royal NZ Foundation of the Blind Homai Special Formats Library Display Stand

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Tactually illustrated picture books are aimed specifically at the pre- or emerging braille reader who is blind or has low vision.

Research shows that shared reading with parents, grandparents, peers or other significant people in their lives is crucial to the development of early literacy skills for any child.

The primary role of the RNZFB Tactile Picture Book collection is to enable shared reading for Vision impaired babies and toddlers at the earliest opportunity possible. It is recognised by the majority of those canvassed for the purpose of research that collage books are one of a number of important resources in the development of pre-reading skills, while also offering inclusion, interactive opportunities, language expansion and enjoyment.

Expose the child to braille and tactiles in the same way a sighted child is exposed to pictures and print and in so doing, develop important pre-braille tactile and early literacy skills before entering formal education.

The excitement that tactile books, with enhanced print, braille and illustrations engender, is an indication of the usefulness of these books.

I watched you all as you came through the library yesterday out at BLENNZ. And oh does my heart good to see professionals in the education of our littlies displaying the same enthusiasm and excitement that the mums and dads and their littlies do.

Research finds that those who used the collection feel that all blind and low vision children up to the age of about seven, and older students who are academically delayed, will benefit from these books, even adults, and that the collage books are a way of 'completing the picture'.

The conversations that come from sharing tactile picture books with a sighted reader help to develop language, broaden the scope of topics for discussion and enhance understanding of concepts that will be necessary when moving on to study diagrams in maths, science and/or geography.

When asked if it was appropriate to continue getting collage once the student was reading independently, the over-riding response was that it is still relevant and enjoyable to have tactile pictures even when able to read, in the same way print readers still receive picture books when they are also reading independently at the same age. They continue to provide interest and develop confidence and tactile skills.

Many children decide for themselves when they no longer want collage books but it has been suggested that the student may have younger siblings and want to share the books, while practising their oral reading skills.

It has been noted that there is a definite progression between the collage read in early childhood and the tactile maps and diagrams experienced at secondary school, and that students who are tactile learners seem to remain tactile learners and that one level was no more important than another.

Although increasingly recognised as another important tool with which to positively engage families and individuals in developing these skills, there are still the issues of accessibility, copyright and costs.

When you look at these books, I imagine that the first thing that comes to mind is 'We can't afford to do that!' And I totally agree. This has been a long journey and I only started on it fifteen years ago. I'd like to tell you a little of that journey so you can see that it wasn't just handed out on a plate.

I think you will all agree that parents of children with vision impairment have been making tactiles for their kids forever. I remember one mum made a book (six pages of light card, held together with a shoe lace, with the objects tied onto the pages) because her 4 yr old daughter kept raiding her dressing table and ruining her lipstick. This was a means to teaching her what things she could touch and what she couldn't.

At about this time the braille producers were beginning to notice how some books that they were transcribing would work really well if they just had a few collage pictures added. In between jobs they began to create tactile books and added them to the library collection. Then a group of volunteers was formed to produce the first of the collage collection.

Before very long there was a very real headache for the librarian. There just weren't enough collage books being produced. The books had a three month loan time but getting them back was the hardest bit. Both parents and RTVs just wouldn't/couldn't give them back until there was the promise of a replacement. Fortunately, the Librarian and the then Manager of Transcription Services saw it as a good problem and employed me on a limited contract to sort the problem.

Nearly sixteen years later, I'm still producing collage books and their popularity just grows and grows. From a collection of about two hundred books, we now have about a thousand. That's some two hundred and fifty titles that have been specifically chosen for this particular format and four copies are made of each title. This could not have been achieved without the help of twelve wonderful volunteers who come every week for three hours. Most have been doing so for as long as I have, some even longer.

Of course, our population size is a bonus. One Special Formats Library serves the entire country. So four books of each title allows a new title to be test run in one of the classrooms here at BLENNZ with each child having their own copy. This is a great way to find out how the book is going to be received, and whether there needs to be any modifications made. If a picture really isn't going to work, then we need to deal with it.

After that they go out to all corners of the country and I may not see them on the shelves again for a couple of years, by which time everyone who's going to read it for the first time has done so, or it's in need of a bit of loving care and attention.

Products such as glue, adhesives, materials and tools have significantly become more available and more user friendly. I rarely use wet glue such as PVA any longer. Instead we use double sided sellotape which I have slit to 100mm wide. That's about as wide as a child's hand. And that's a good size for a tactile. Yes, initially this is a relatively expensive product (\$70 a roll) but we can do several pages at a time, (you don't

have to wait 24 hrs for them to dry) it doesn't dry out in the container, it doesn't stain the pages and we can be really careful about using it all. No waste.

With the use of the computer to do the texts we can control the size and depth of contrast so much better. Also everything we produce we archive. So when a 'whoopsie' happens, as they do, we can pull up the text, the way its meant to be, prepare a new page, strip the illustration off, back it with some double sided tape, trim and apply. Voila! A perfect repair has made the book useable again.

We have books that are still in use, and loved, more than fifteen years down the track. They may have had a total remake, but the illustrations are still the ones that went into the original copies. That has got to say something about being cost effective.

But let's go back. The pictures, or the stories you decide to illustrate for a specific child/experience or incident, don't need to last for ever. So, random paper or light card for pages are fine, Items relevant to the activity, a pair of scissors, some D/S tape and a bit of imagination are all you need. The difference with this product is that our books are part of a library. It is a recreational reading collection that goes out to blind and low vision children throughout NZ. It must be robust. It must be colourful and it must grab the attention of the sighted reader. If we can do all that then we begin the journey for another little reader in the process.

As such it has no particular need to teach anything specific, like the shape of a dog or the feel of an orange. And I make no apologies

Other than the love of a good story, and the means to bring others into my sphere to share their enjoyment of the time we spend together reading the book, exploring the pictures, sharing a conversation about whatever we might be reading of and enjoying ourselves, what more do we need?

Along the way he will also be learning to sit and listen, he will turn the pages from left to right, he will learn that the raised dots he feels are telling a story, there are pictures that excite his sighted reader and he can get excited too. Yayyy, its all good stuff.

When the child is in formal education, then we will teach him how to read, either with large print, braille, or the shape of a dog. Until he is

ready for the next step, collage books have a huge role in developing pre literacy skills in the most unthreatening way I can imagine.

Oh, the other thing about collage picture books. What about the parents and grandparents who are blind. How engaging is a braille text without colour or pictures to a pre-schooler who is sighted. I think of the joy of a blind grandparent I know who's little sighted grandson loves to read with his nanna. He tells her about the pictures she is feeling and I bet he's going to remember her special picture books for the rest of his life

So, now, let's get to the actual purpose of why I'm here today.

The purpose of a Static Display and a 30 minute Taster Session at this conference is to connect with 'like' organisations to form a support network around the Pacific Rim, as exists in the northern hemisphere, with the intent of sharing information, and resources for tactile illustrations and diagrams that have already been successfully produced.

The Northern Hemisphere organisation, which is simply referred to as Tactus is now called Typhlo & Tactus, and there are, I think about 13 member countries.

In 2008 Tactus published a book called **The Typhlo & Tactus Guide to children's books ... with tactile illustrations** which has chapters from thirteen member countries, as well as an additional 6 countries from the southern hemisphere who were invited to provide additional chapters.

Australia's Louise Curtain and Robin Nation from NZ both have chapters in it.

Besides sharing information, resources and skills, Tactus members attend Conferences, and run International Workshops to up-skill workers and volunteers. Representatives meet periodically to develop protocols and closely monitor any issues that might arise. Tactus also runs a very successful Tactile Book Competition in conjunction with the massive Paris Book Fair, each year.

The purpose of this session is to begin the process of developing contacts, for sharing and gathering information and resources.

So, to kick it off the sharing, I currently have several CD copies of the publication produced in New Zealand 5 or 6 years ago with loads of

information about producing collage tactiles. It covers the full range of issues such as costs and how to lessen those, copyright, as it is in NZ, but that would need to explore that as it applies in your own country, and using volunteers to be your producers. There are also many tips and suggestions, as well as, downright rules about producing tactiles. The accompanying CD has about 400 line drawings of nearly everything you might need to illustrate. If you would like one of these, pick it up from me at the end, and if there aren't enough give me your business card or name and address and I shall get copies to you as soon as possible.

I would like to briefly open to the floor now with the following four questions, but firstly who are the countries or Australian States that are represented here today?

- 1 Are tactile illustrations and/or diagrams produced in other countries around the Pacific Ring?
- 2 Does your region use collage/tactile illustrated picture books as a literacy tool? Yes, how...? No, because...?
- 3 What might **you** be doing that could be shareable?
- 4 Do you have access to resources appropriate to your region or useful to others?

Now, I'd like to come to the nub of this part of the discussion and briefly introduce you to the idea of a Community of Practice.

Technology enables and encourages us to seek outside our local community and tap into the resources used throughout the world.

Communities of Practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour.

Such as: A tribe learning to survive, a group of engineers working on similar problems, or a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, The early Impressionists used to meet periodically in the cafes in Paris, but mostly worked independently.

In a nutshell:

Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

This definition allows for, but does not assume intentional outcomes: learning can be the reason the community comes together, or is an incidental outcome of members' interaction.

1. **The Domain:** A community of practice is not just a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It is an identity defined by a shared domain of interest, and membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain.
2. **The Community:** In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other.
A Website in itself is not a community of practise unless members interact and learn together.
3. **The Practice:** A community of practice is not merely a community of interest. Members of a Community of Practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This will take time and sustained interaction.

The suggestion has been made that now is the time to pool our information and share our collective knowledge.

With this in mind I have been encouraged to explore the possibility of developing a website aimed at the Pacific Rim with the purpose of sharing Knowledge, Skills and Resources, both physical and intellectual.

But to make this viable there would need to be a commitment by tactile producers and educators to be part of a wider interest group than their own local community.

In developing a site we could also collectively look at the needs of smaller communities throughout the region and share resource information, access to publishers, copyright issues which are currently in the limelight, access to suppliers of resources and whatever else comes up that denies our kids access to the education their sited peers claim by right.

To set this goal in motion, we need to know that there is a body of interest from tactile producers around the Pacific Rim.

The first task is to identify those countries and/states that already have tactile illustration and diagram producers, and who would be interested in using a resource such as has been suggested.

Once a small group of practitioners are in email contact, we can move on to developing a **Community of Practice** specific to our needs. There are people and organisations out there, with all the skills and resources we need, who are willing to help us.

All we need to do is trust our product and our commitment.

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