Innovative Practices

Photography for Teacher Preparation in Literacy: Innovations in Instruction

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My new graduate students in Curriculum and Instruction at San Diego State University reacted with surprise when they discovered that the syllabus indicated no requisite textbook. Instead, access to a camera was required. "Any camera will do: disposable, film, or digital." I recommended several texts to the students, including Wendy Elwald and Alexandra Lightfoot's *I Wanna Take Me a Picture: Teaching Photography and Writing to Children*, but none of these texts were necessary to be successful in the course. This was during one summer semester when I had the opportunity to teach a course entitled "Innovations in Instruction." My broad goals for the course focused on experienced-based and student-centered learning. These unusual course requirements unnerved some students and motivated others, engaging all that first afternoon.

This cohort of 26 teachers was enrolled in their final semester at the university, many of them already at work on their master's projects. All were credentialed teachers with varying years of classroom experience. Many of them taught in elementary schools across San Diego and Riverside Counties, others worked in high schools. One teacher worked in a California state-run program for juvenile offenders, and another taught abroad during the school years, returning home only for the summer. This cohort worked with children from diverse linguistic, ethnic, and

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economic backgrounds. The teachers represented a similar diversity in socioeconomic background, including those who learned English as their second language in school while speaking Spanish, Tagalog, and Farsi at home.

The curriculum of this class was unusual for me, too. My typical teaching load includes courses in literacy methods and assessment. However, I did bring two important characteristics to the experience: (1) my belief in constructivist principles for teaching and learning, and (2) my background in photography.

At the core of my personal learning theory is the belief that we are all active learners who use our own prior knowledge to make sense of new information, also known as constructivism. These ideas led me to explore the potential of experience-based learning where instruction is student-centered. Elements of constructivism and other social-epistemic theories are evident throughout my research in literacy. My background in photography includes a Bachelor of Fine Arts from a noted school of photography (Rochester Institute of Technology), several years managing photo libraries for advertising agencies, and recent research projects exploring the potential of photography for inquiry in education (Cappello, 2005, 2006; Cappello & Hollingsworth, 2008).

This article describes the students' experiences and my practice around one major course assignment, *The Neighborhood Alphabet Book*, developed to effectively demonstrate course objectives. This project emerged naturally and opportunistically from the crossroads where my background and interest in photography intersect with my involvement in teacher education in literacy.

Innovations in Instruction

This course encourages teachers to explore instructional practices, with an emphasis on innovative teaching strategies. I focused the curriculum on experience-based learning, a model that integrates theory and practice and promotes student-centered learning within a strong context of creative and critical thinking (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). Photography workshops in the curriculum encouraged creative thinking and served as a tool for expressing critical ideas and understandings. Indeed visual literacy—knowledge of and experience with visual conventions—was a significant component of the course because it is an interpretation-based process. Visual literacy "emanate[s] from a nonverbal core, it becomes the basic literacy in the thought processes of comprehending and composing" (Sinatra 1986, p. 4). Experience with visual media "is not just a route to better visual comprehension but

also may lead to a general enhancement of cognitive abilities" (Messaris, 1994, p. 3).

The course syllabus included teaching and learning objectives that focused on understanding effective instructional strategies designed to meet the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students, and to engage learners in making critical decisions about content, structure, and assessment in elementary school classrooms. One main objective was to find new ways to integrate theory into practice. My role as the professor in the learning process was one of a facilitator, consultant, guide, co-learner and an assessor.

The Role(s) of Photography

Like many teacher educators, I look for ways to model theoretically sound practices that can be integrated into teachers' own classrooms. I demonstrate effective, dynamic, student-centered, and inquiry-based lessons that build on grade level content standards. *The Neighborhood Alphabet Book* was designed to accomplish these goals. Specifically, this assignment had three main objectives: (1) to provide opportunity for creativity as a key element for critical thinking, (2) to model an alternate tool for expression that might benefit their young learners, and (3) for teachers to discover and experience their school communities.

My goals for this project were focused in visual literacy for many reasons. Certainly the shifts in communication in contemporary societies influenced the ways I understand literacy and being literate (Jewitt, 2008). Images are now ubiquitous and make it impossible to understand literacy as an exclusively linguistic engagement (Kress, 2003). It seemed to me that the pervasive use of visuals and technology students face every day in popular culture should be employed for education. Further, I understand that "students need a variety of ways to explore the deeper meaning of the words they hear, read, and are asked to write" (McDonald & Fisher, 2006, p. 38). I wanted my classroom to provide a range of written and visual texts for students to use in meaning making. This multimodality was important because, like Short & Kauffman (2000), I believe "students need to have many ways of thinking and sharing available to them in order to engage more fully in pursuing questions within the classroom that are significant in their own lives" (p. 43). I hoped that modeling some of the ways print and visual texts work together would inspire teachers to see the potential for teaching literacy to their own students.

Photography is used in teacher education because of its "multi-layered benefits" including "bolstering students' self-confidence in their abilities and modeling the use of technology for students' own work with children"

(Wursta, Brown-DuPaul & Segatti, 2004, p. 790). Indeed, photography has the potential to "enhance what is possible by amplifying what teachers are able to do …[and] by extending what students are able to produce as a result of their investigations" (Schiller & Tillet, 2004, p. 401). I used photography as a way to provide meaningful experiences for my students and challenge them in ways so they too become learners. I believed using photography would improve learning outcomes by creating new opportunities for students to display their knowledge. In fact, photography has the potential to help "change the ways in which students learn" (Schiller & Tillet, 2004, p. 401). "There is little doubt that photography can enhance students'—and teachers'—responses to the demands of learning" (Ewald & Lightfoot, 2001, p.119).

I also included photography as a tool for meeting another important goal of this project, namely for teachers to physically discover and experience their school communities. Many teachers were only familiar with the immediate surroundings of the school buildings where they work. These drive-in, drive-out teachers may have been nervous about venturing into an unfamiliar part of the city where the culture and language are different from their own. Nevertheless, the teachers capitalized on this opportunity to discover the world outside their classroom windows, expand their understandings about what their own students see as important, and potentially improve school community involvement beyond parent-teacher conferences and other mainstay demonstrations of the home-school-community connections so often advocated by districts and teacher preparations programs.

There are studies in education documenting the ways cameras have been used to learn more about what children see as important (Allen, Fabregas, Hankins, Hull, Labbo, Lawson, Michalove, Piazza, Piha, Sprague, Townsend, & Urdanivia-English, 2002; Orellana & Hernandez, 1999). Orellana and Hernandez (1999) offered still cameras to very young (predominantly first grade) students during neighborhood literacy walks that focused on environmental print. Students used the cameras to "read" their world and compose images that captured places of significance to them. Later, these photographs were used in the classroom to generate new literacy events through writing and dictation. Allen et al. (2002) also found that photography was an effective way to "learn what was important to children in their out-of-school lives" (p. 313). Like Allen et al., I hoped *The Neighborhood Alphabet Book* project would serve as a tool for me to see student's perceptions of their school world "through his or her eyes, as captured in photographs and detailed in narratives about the pictures" (p. 313). Further, I anticipated my students would experience new ways that

photographs can be used to express ideas and that this would transfer into their own classrooms.

Similar to Wursta et al. (2004), I saw the potential for photography in teacher education. I included photography in the curriculum because I believed it would allow my students an avenue to explore their school communities, and demonstrate a powerful expressive tool for creative and critical thinking. In this article, I outline the project context and procedures, describe the learning outcomes, and reflect with the students on the transferability of the educational task.

Introducing the Project

The Neighborhood Alphabet Book assignment was influenced by several photographic projects Wendy Ewald developed at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, including *The Alphabet Project* that she photographed on a large format Polaroid camera. Correspondingly, her students created photographic essays under the umbrella of "Assignment: Community."

We started with the assignment description in the course syllabus:

> Students will use photography to create an alphabet book of their school neighborhood. The book will include an exploration of community, contain images and text for every letter of the alphabet and include a brief narrative about the locality being presented through their book. Books will be bound and ready for display on the last day of class when we will celebrate our art in gallery style.

The teachers brought varying abilities and comfort levels to using photography and the assorted creative processes and technologies required of them. However, the scope and sequence of the curriculum included several workshops designed to help build the necessary skills needed to create effective projects that could become models for their own students. Indeed, the course provided teachers with a scaffold for success.

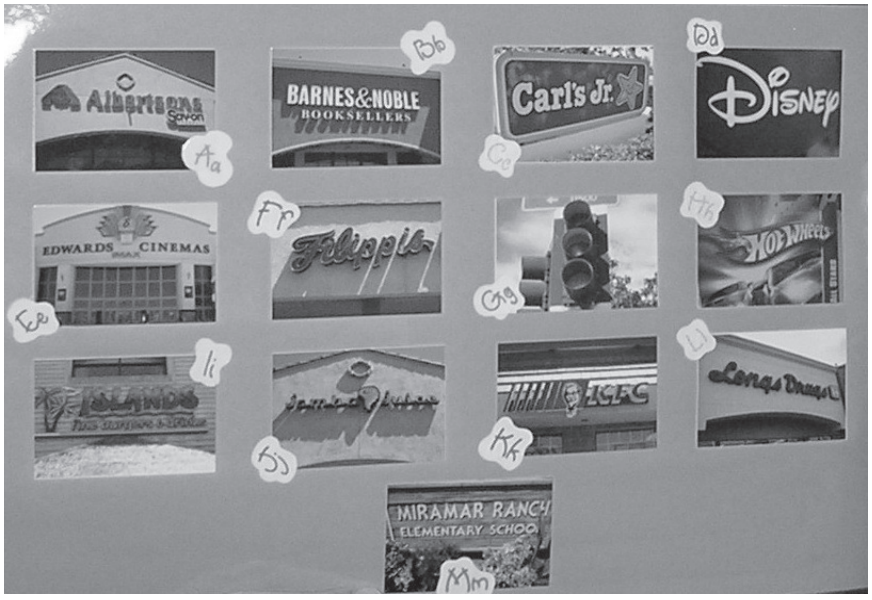
After reviewing the syllabus description, teachers were grouped into teams of two or three, based on school and district partnerships when possible. Each team was given a different commercially available alphabet book and asked to complete two tasks: create a "book talk" for their text over viewing content and engaging their audience, and identify specific text features of their book. Teachers were given a wide range of texts to review (See Appendix A). We noticed that some books had all the words at the bottom of page and others found the words integrated into the pictures; some books had themes such as sports, occupations or animals; many used linguistic elements like hidden letter items to discover riddles, or alliteration. All responses were recorded for students

to see the large range of possibilities for their own texts (See Appendix B). During this same class meeting, we decided which specific criteria to include in the alphabet book assignment. Minimum requirements were to produce a bound alphabet book with a cover, title page, an introduction to the school community, and 26 alphabet pages.

Planning sessions included an examination of the California State Content Standards in literacy, science, or social science at their grade level and ways to incorporate these standards in their *Neighborhood Alphabet Books*. Teachers brainstormed ideas about their community as if they "were writing to someone on the other side of the world." I asked the teachers to consider the images they visualized as they were writing. For homework, they created an alphabetical list of important people, places, and things in their school neighborhoods.

During the semester my students and I participated in many workshops designed to promote success with assignments. Together, we learned about visual thinking and photography including lessons on the way a camera works, composition, and Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) (Housen, 2002), a method for reading images. The teachers and I visited the Museum of Photographic Arts, in San Diego's Balboa Park, where docents explained and demonstrated opportunities for my teachers' young students. We also revisited VTS procedures as we viewed

Figure 1



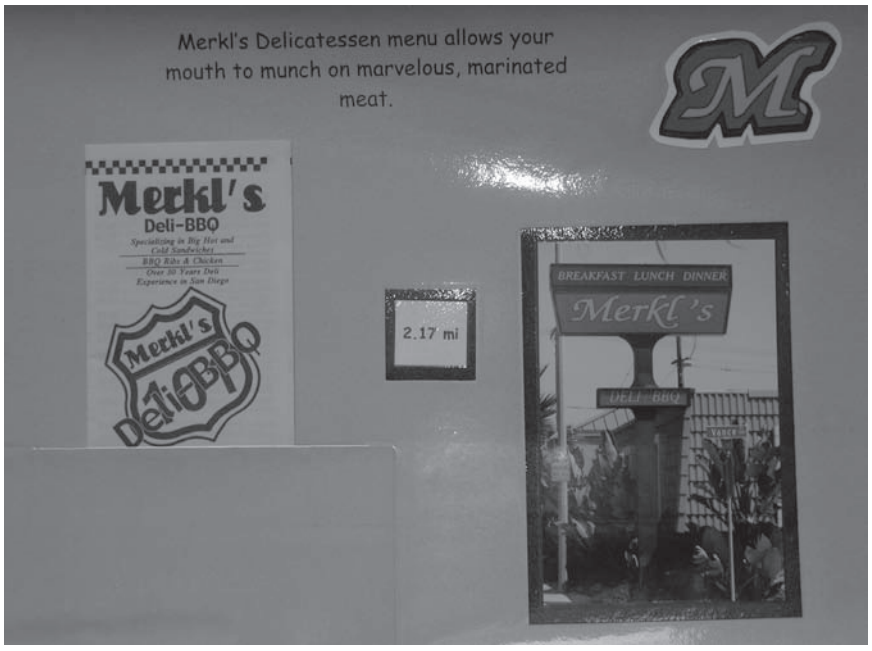
the exhibitions in the galleries. Back at the university, we conducted workshops in bookmaking and learned binding techniques. The teachers tried out these creative processes and technologies in a place where they were safe to take risks and where they had my support and the support of their classmates, before sharing their new knowledge with their students.

On the last day of the semester—and for their program—we transformed our university classroom into a gallery where we could exhibit and share our *Neighborhood Alphabet Books* with our classmates (See Figures 1 & 2). The gallery presentation was designed as an opportunity for the teachers to celebrate their work. Like Wursta et al. (1994, p. 791), I also believed that by viewing others' "exemplary work, student teachers may become more reflective about the work they do in children's classrooms."

Reflections

As I reflected on the effectiveness of the *Neighborhood Alphabet Book* assignment, I considered anecdotal evidence (including informal reporting and observations), an analysis of the photo books, and follow–up surveys

Figure 2



completed by the teachers several months after the course ended. As I analyzed these data, I looked for the ways the *Neighborhood Alphabet Book* met my specific assignment objectives: to provide opportunity for creativity as a key element for critical thinking, to model an alternate tool for expression that might benefit their young learners, and for teachers to discover and experience their school communities.

Creative and Critical Thinking

When given the opportunity, these teachers challenged themselves to problem solve and create alphabet books that met grade level standards and that would engage a wide range of learners. We were all surprised to find such a broad range of solutions at the gallery showing. The room was filled with books that demonstrated alliteration, rhyme, or other linguistic elements. Some had interactive components (such as flip pages), or were created using technology and inserted into power point presentations. One teacher remembered how a classmate catered to an older audience by creating "close up shots as a type of guessing spin on the book."

I agree with the teacher who thought "the end result was impressive—so many great interpretations and ideas" (S. Casillas, personal communication, March 4, 2006). Indeed, the framing of the project helped facilitate creative thinking. I provided a structure for the work and supported the experience through a series of well-designed workshops. The teachers did not receive a template or a strict set of rules to follow, however, global expectations were clearly articulated and developed by class members at the beginning of the project. As one teacher put it, "the assignment of creating an alphabet book gave us a focus while allowing us to be creative" (S. Casillas, personal communication, March 4, 2006).

Alternate Tool

The photo book project created opportunities for teachers to practice inquiry-based, student-centered learning first hand, and experienced how "a change in the learning process occurs" (Schiller & Tillet, 2004, p. 410) when you take an experienced-based approach to teaching and learning. It was exciting to hear teachers report that they learned about the use of photography to convey a message. The project modeled ways to support the use of unusual routes to develop literacy skills while helping teachers identify "new ways of thinking about children's views" (Schiller & Tillet, 2004, p. 412). This alternate and visual language provided my students a way to literally show what they mean to express. For example, many teachers incorporated bilingual signs and other elements

demonstrating value to home languages and culture while reinforcing home-school-community connections.

I was surprised by the many ways this assignment supplied teachers with alternative means for meeting the California Content Standards at their grade level. One student found the project was especially easy to "correlate with social studies standards for second grade community" (C. Packer, personal communication, March 6, 2006). There were other creative ways to use the *Neighborhood Alphabet Book* to address the standards. Another student, who lives and works in a desert community, created a book for his 5th graders that focused on botany by photographing plant life and labeling the images alphabetically. In another teacher's district, students annually participate in a district wide Young Writer's Conference. This teacher's 5th graders will use the alphabet book project to "do research and fill in the writing standard" (N. Blanket, personal communication, March 1, 2006).

Many teachers found the project provided them with ways to differentiate instruction. As in our university classroom, the project can be easily adaptable to meet the varying needs of learners. One teacher felt photography was a valuable tool for her students who "are also immigrants, some living in Mexico as well as the United States. Most children I work with are Spanish speakers learning English as a second language" and thought she would "start with the three GATE (gifted and talented education) students…" in her classroom before trying it with a wider audience (M.Monzono, personal communication, March 13, 2006).

Community

The teachers were candid about the many ways the *Neighborhood Alphabet Book* project impacted the way they understood their school communities. One student noted that the assignment "really helped me identify with my school community better" (S. Pally, personal communication, March 6, 2006). Another teacher thought "it was nice to finally see the places the students talk about" (C. Packer, personal communication, March 6, 2006). Still another teacher revealed that she "learned that [her]student's community has a lot of diversity and culture that [she] was not aware of and doubt they were much aware of before." One student seemed to value this learning outcome above the others:

> I learned about places in the neighborhood that were important to my students, that I otherwise would not have been aware of. As my class helped me decide what places to use for each letter of the alphabet there was a lot of talk about the school and the neighborhood-something they

> knew a lot about and were proud of. They enjoyed talking about the places in their community-this was a common bond that hadn't been directly tapped into my classroom. These discussions also added to our classroom community. My awareness and appreciation for my school community was also strengthened. (S. Casillas, personal communication, March 4, 2006)

Ms. Casillas also reported that she is currently working with her student teacher on a:

> Diversity lesson where the kids are going to create a book about how to be a good friend. The kids are going to do the writing and decide how they want to be photographed to demonstrate their idea (e.g., helping friends if they get hurt, etc.). (personal communication, March 4, 2006)

Creating the *Neighborhood Alphabet Book* provided new ideas and clarified misconceptions teachers may have had about the communities in which they work. The planning sessions encouraged teachers to explore their school communities in new ways and photography helped teachers communicate what they wanted to say about their school and their school community.

Discussion

Once the teachers had the tools, they became an important source for project development. Every new workshop prompted questions from the teachers that I had not anticipated. We all benefited from the discussions when they shared their challenges and experiences and considered effective resolutions. This also impacted colleagues at their school sites who, after viewing and discussing these hand-made texts, used photography (and/or bookmaking processes) with their own students. Excited by the possibilities we explored over the summer, one student fully integrated her new knowledge into her second grade classroom:

> Last year I received a classroom grant, and decided to use some of this money to buy a digital camera for my classroom. In the fall I had a parent volunteer come and speak to my class about photography-photography is his hobby. We also read books that used real photographs to help tell stories. Since then, my class has been documenting our school year with the camera. We have a "photographer of the day" who takes pictures of things or activities they feel are important. My goal is to create a CD for each student with all the pictures they've taken throughout the year. I'm thinking we'll have an end of the year viewing party with the parents…. Taking pictures on a regular basis has helped "bond" my students. Being a photographer of the day makes them feel special, gets them more deeply involved in and aware of others and

> classroom activities, and it's something they all can do. (S. Casillas, personal communication, March 4, 2006)

This project began as a way for me to create opportunities for teachers to learn from experience-based lessons as I continued to investigate the potential of photography for education. The success of the project resides within the following important instructional elements: (1) Students worked within a broad assignment framework, not a rigid template; (2) Support was provided throughout the semester in the form of workshops hosted in and out of the university classroom; and (3) The project created reasons for individual problem solving. My role was intended as the coach, not the "transmitter of knowledge" (Schiller & Tillet, 2004, p. 411). Including these instructional characteristics in instruction is important to be effective in promoting creative and critical thinking, applying an alternative tool for demonstrating knowledge, and generating deeper understandings about student's school communities.

Limitations

Ewald and Lightfoot (2001) state that "photography is democratic. The entire process, from using a camera to developing and printing is easy to learn and accessible to almost anyone" (p. 79). However, this hasn't been my experience with teachers so far. As reported by the teachers, the overwhelming obstacle in the way of integrating their new learning was cost. One teacher commented that, "cost is always an issue" (K. Bay, personal communication, March 14, 2006). Another teacher shared that "this would be much easier to implement if [she] had a digital camera. The expense and lack of time [she has] to figure it all out makes it more difficult" (S. Pally, personal communication, March 6, 2006). As technology continues to develop, I believe cost will be a diminishing factor for access to photography.

There were other barriers preventing project implementation in teachers' own classrooms, most often connected to the limits of a rigid curriculum, such as:

> Time and pressure from the administration to adhere strictly to [reading text book series] and math standards to bring up standardized test scores. We have walk-throughs and extensive meetings on what we are doing every minute of the day and forms to fill out on what we are teaching. Pressure, pressure, pressure. (M.Monzono, personal communication, March 13, 2006)

Another recently transferred teacher sadly stated, "my new school principal requires that every teacher at a specific grade level do the exact same thing" (N. Blanket, personal communication, March 1, 2006). However,

these limitations weren't insurmountable for many teachers (described above) who saw this as another opportunity to problem solve and find ways to use photography as a tool to help students meet the grade level standards. Indeed, even with these limitations in mind, photography has great potential as an effective tool for teacher education—and for classroom pedagogy.

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Appendix A

A Sample of Alphabet Books for Introducing the Project:

Ada, A. F. (1997). *Gathering the sun: An A B C in Spanish and English*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books.

Bourke, L. (1981). *Handmade ABC: A manual alphabet*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Demarest, C. L. (2000). *Firefighters A to Z*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry.

de Paola, T. (1975). *This is the ambulance leaving the zoo*. New York: Dutton Children's Books.

Dragonwagon, C. (1987). *Alligator arrived with apples: A potluck alphabet feast*. New York: Macmillan.

Ehlert, L. (1989). *Eating the alphabet: Fruits and vegetables from A to Z*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Geisert, A. (1986). *Pigs from A to Z*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Johnson, S. T. (1995). *Alphabet city*. New York: Viking.

Krull, K. (2003). *M is for music*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.

Lobel, L. *On market street*. New York: Greenwillow Books.

Lowery, L. (2000). *Trick or treat, it's Halloween!* New York: Random House.

Martin, B. & Archambault, J. (1989). *Chicka chicka boom boom*. New York, NY: Simon &
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Mayers, F. C. (1996). Basketball ABC: The NBA alphabet. New York: H. N. Abrams.

McKenzie, E. K. (1994). *The perfectly orderly house*. New York: Holt.

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Moncure, J. B. (1984). *My sound parade*. Mankato, MN: The Child's World.

Musgrove, M. (1976). *Ashanti to Zulu: African traditions*. New York: Dial Press.

Neumeier, M., & Glaser, B. (1985). *Action alphabet*. New York: Greenwillow Books.

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Appendix B

KWL Chart Created with Teachers—Alphabet Books:

What do we KNOW?	*What do we WANT to know?*	*What did we LEARN?*
•At least 26 pgs	•Does the picture match sound or name?	•Capitals •Rich vocabulary •Multicultural •Different age audiences •Matches pictures • Simple or complex
•Title page	•Who is your audience?	•Riddles •Diagrams for explanations •Inferences •Author's note
•Every letter	•Are letters on their own?	•Predictive •Gender •Interactive •Contains a story
•In sequence	•Are there common features?	•Fact page •Photographs •Blurb-clarifying info •Illustration style
•Provide vocabulary	•Do they use upper or lower case?	•Games •Verbs •Theater-acts •Alliteration
•Theme		•Integrated or letter isolated •Text placement
•Picture/text		•Font/cursive/bold •Setting variations
•Picture/text reliability		•Themes-animals, cultures, occupations, holidays