

	<p style="text-align: right;">Date : 08/06/2007</p> <p>Creating a Loans Collection of Books with Tactile Illustrations for Young Children with a Visual Impairment</p> <p>Marion Ripley ClearVision Project London, UK</p>
<p>Meeting:</p>	<p>156 Libraries for the Blind with Libraries for Children and Young Adults</p>
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<p style="text-align: center;">WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 73RD IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL 19-23 August 2007, Durban, South Africa http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla73/index.htm</p>	

Abstract

Books with tactile illustrations can open up a world of new information, new concepts, and new vocabulary for a child with visual impairment. They encourage the development of tactile skills and provide the motivation to learn to read. They are also great fun.

Over the last six years the ClearVision postal library has built up a loans collection of over a thousand tactile books. Most of these have been hand-made by volunteers with no experience of visual impairment or braille. The collection was set up with a very small budget and with no high-tech equipment.

These books are now greatly enjoyed by visually-impaired children all over the UK.

Introduction

Sighted children see images everywhere they look, from the day they are born. Much of their knowledge of the world comes from what they see by looking around them. What they don't see in real life (Superman, dinosaurs, celebrities, the inside of a rabbit's burrow) they see on the television or in the pages of books and magazines. As well as providing information, these images are a constant source of entertainment and stimulation. Story books for the youngest sighted children have more pictures than text and it is usual to find some illustrations even in books for older children. It would be unthinkable to produce a non-fiction book for children which did not have pictures.

For children with little or no sight the situation is very different. Not only are they deprived of the everyday sights that most children take for granted; they are also generally expected to learn to read using books with no illustrations. Not for them the

excitement of turning the page to find the next entertaining, informative, frightening or amusing illustration! Children's books with tactile illustrations are few and far between; the majority are made by parents and teachers desperate to produce something their children can enjoy and learn from. These busy adults have no particular craft skills or training, but they manage to produce appropriate tactile books which are greatly enjoyed by just one or two children. These books are usually made in a hurry and they quickly fall apart.

We can never hope to produce enough tactile books to satisfy the needs and desires of every child with no sight, but we can try to provide them with a good selection of entertaining and stimulating tactile books. Visually-impaired children will need help in understanding what they are exploring with their fingers, but these tactile illustrations can open up a world of new concepts and vocabulary, as well as helping to develop tactile skills and providing the motivation to learn to read.

This is why, in the year 2000, ClearVision decided to set up a tactile book library in the UK.

Background

ClearVision is a national postal lending library of over 13,000 mainstream children's books with the text added in braille on clear plastic sheets. The books can all be shared by print and braille readers, whether these are children learning to read braille with the help of sighted family and classmates, or blind parents reading to sighted children.

These books give young visually-impaired children access to the books their sighted friends are reading, but they do not contain tactile illustrations. The tactile book collection is therefore a new and quite different resource.

Before starting on the project I visited the Celia tactile book library in Helsinki, Finland, and looked at lots of their books. This provided an invaluable opportunity to discuss the various aspects of running a tactile book library with people who have been doing it successfully for many years.

First of all we produced a budget for this new project. The ClearVision library already had premises (one large room), staff (two people), a small amount of storage space and an existing cataloguing and loans scheme. The main items to consider, therefore, were additional staff time, the cost of buying tactile books or the materials to make them, and the cost of publicising the new service. Our aim was to acquire one thousand tactile books in three years; our estimated budget for the whole project was £31,000 (approximately one and a half times the average UK annual salary at that time). It took us a year and a half of fundraising to reach our target.

Our initial intention was to buy as many tactile books as possible from sources in the UK and worldwide but it soon became apparent that there were very few suitable books available commercially - in any country. Our new library collection would therefore have to consist largely of books hand-made by volunteers. This meant that less money than expected was spent on buying ready-made books, but very much more time and money

was spent on meeting and training volunteers and providing factsheets and samples. Largely thanks to the efforts of hundreds of volunteers working from their own homes all over the UK we now have a wonderful and varied collection of over a thousand hand-made tactile books.

What are the Books Like?

Seven hundred of the books in our new collection are made of fabric, with textures, shapes and objects sewn onto the pages. These are the easiest for volunteers to make satisfactorily and many people already have all the equipment and materials they need to make this kind of book. Fabric books feel good in the hands and they can be the most durable and safe for young children. Objects can be more securely sewn than glued onto a page, and the pages will not get torn. We also have collage books, with items stuck onto the pages. Some of our books have vacuum forms of real objects stuck onto the pages as illustrations.

We also have some books with raised line illustrations. These were screen-printed by a commercial producer, using resin instead of ink to produce raised lines. One or two of our books have illustrations made from swell paper. This is a special type of paper incorporating microcapsules of alcohol. When exposed to heat, these microcapsules burst under any black areas of the page, making the surface of the paper swell up in that area only. Generally speaking, raised line and swell paper illustrations do not provide enough tactile interest for very young children.

Most of the books were produced in the UK but we have a few from Germany, Norway, Finland, France, Czech Republic and Belgium. Some of these were originally produced in another language but in our copies the text is in English.

All the books contain tactile illustrations but some also have sounds (bells, sound buttons, etc) or smells (lavender, spices, etc. in fabric bags sewn to the page). Topics include nursery rhymes and traditional tales, original stories, numbers, individual letters of the alphabet, early learning, and everyday life. Most of the books were especially created as tactile books for blind children; a few are published mainstream books with added tactile illustrations. Most of the books have braille text as well as large print.

Who will use them?

Clearly these books are invaluable for young children with little or no sight. They are also appreciated by older children for whom tactile illustrations are still a rare treat.

A considerable number of visually-impaired children have additional learning difficulties which means that simple tactile books will be appropriate for them at a later stage than for other children. Even visually-impaired children without additional disabilities are likely to suffer from some developmental delay in their early years. We can therefore expect these books to be enjoyed by children within quite a wide range of ages.

The books are enjoyed by children with low vision as well as totally blind children. Strong colour contrasts, large print text and the use of light reflective materials will make tactile books especially enjoyable for children with some sight.

Hand-made books are not usually safe for babies and very young children who could choke on small items. All children will need to be closely supervised when using these books.

What makes a good tactile illustration?

Making a tactile illustration is rarely just a question of raising the print illustration. It is important to think about what will be a meaningful tactile illustration for a blind child. A whole café can be represented by a chip carton; a piece of towelling or a ceramic tile can represent the whole bathroom. A country lane can be represented by a single snaking pathway across the page. A bunch of bananas can be represented with the fruits splayed out like fingers so that they can be felt separately. The illustrator will need to consider what the child is to focus on in the illustration, and eliminate any other clutter. A lot of information on the design and production of simple tactile books for young children can be found on the Internet, in various publications and in other presentations at this conference.

The most important aspect of a tactile illustration is that children should enjoy exploring it with their fingers. An adult should help the children to interpret what they are feeling and to understand why it is there. There should be no suggestion that identifying what they are feeling is some kind of test a child will pass or fail. When creating a tactile illustration every effort should be made to make it as simple and as easy as possible to understand.

Some simple rules apply to all tactile books for young children. These books should be:

Safe - it is very important that everything should be securely attached to the page, whether sewn or glued. Avoid small objects and loose fibres, which could cause choking. Avoid any toxic glues or other materials and anything sharp.

Simple - for young children no book can be too simple. Many are too complicated.

Small - the pages should be small so that children's small hands can easily scan the illustration without too much effort. If the page is too big they are likely to miss parts of the illustration.

Short - exploring each illustration will take time. If there are too many pages the child will tire of the book, or forget how it started, before the last page. Just a few pages will be quite enough for young children.

Sturdy - children will try to remove items from the pages, and may also chew, throw or sit on the books. The more robust the book, the longer it will last. Where possible ensure that the pages can be sponged clean.

Stimulating - use varied textures, rough, smooth, hard, soft, warm and cold. Introduce smells and sounds. Use bold colour contrasts and reflective, sparkly materials to stimulate low vision.

Where do the books come from?

A very few of our books are commercially-produced, mainstream fabric books, designed for sighted babies and toddlers. Most books of this kind have very little in the way of meaningful tactile illustrations but occasionally one is published which could be described as a tactile book. One of the first books in our collection was a mainstream book on getting dressed, with zips, buttons, press studs, etc.

ClearVision designed some tactile books using thermoformed illustrations. There are economies of scale in printing hundreds of pages rather than tens and the same applies to professionally-produced thermoforms. We reached an agreement with The Royal National Institute of the Blind whereby they paid for the production of two hundred copies of six books designed by ClearVision; we bought twenty copies of each and they sold the rest to schools, families, etc. Clearly in a library of one thousand books it would not have made sense for us to have two hundred copies of the same book.

Some of our books have been bought from overseas. There are very few tactile books available for sale in any country. We bought some books with simple raised-line illustrations from a firm in Canada. ClearVision is a member of Tactus, the European organisation of tactile book producers. Each year the Tactus organisation holds a competition and the winning books are produced for distribution in the participating countries. Clearvision has bought several copies of all the Tactus prize-winning tactile books.

Some of our books are collage books made by a small group of volunteers who base most of their work on popular mainstream titles. The text of the published story is printed and brailled on the left-hand page; a simple tactile illustration, inspired by the print picture, is glued to the right hand page.

Most of our books are fabric books sewn by volunteers. Most of the people who make these fabric books, free of charge, are older women who belong to craft groups, women's groups, or church groups. Many older women have good sewing skills, experience of young children and the things that interest them, and time to spend on sewing a book. I have been surprised by the enthusiasm with which this new project has been welcomed by people looking for a new craft activity. In some cases several women have worked together to make a book. Sewing a tactile book does not need expensive materials or equipment.

Students at a University Department of Textiles and Fashion have also sewn lovely, imaginative books as part of their course. They received marks towards their final qualification and all the books were donated to ClearVision. It would be good to get more of these creative young people involved in the project.

Over a hundred fabric tactile books have been made by women in prison. Many prisons in the UK have sewing workshops where prisoners make clothing for use by prison staff and inmates. Three of these workshops have also taken on work for ClearVision, copying fabric books designed by other people. In this way we can turn a lovely book donated to our library into ten, twenty or even thirty lovely books - all made to the same design (but sometimes with slight differences which are not a problem). ClearVision supplies the materials and the prisons make no charge for the work involved. The books are made to a high standard, under the supervision of the workshop managers, and the prisoners find the work rewarding, whilst developing useful sewing skills. This activity, of course, relies on the prison authorities having a sympathetic attitude to prisoner rehabilitation.

Tactile books are intricate and time-consuming to make and we only need a few of each design. The high labour costs in the UK would make it prohibitively expensive for us to pay someone to make books to our designs, but this may be an option for other libraries.

Training volunteers

A lot of time has been spent speaking to groups and preparing and distributing guidelines for producing books. In the beginning I underestimated how much guidance people would need: we sent them a short leaflet and hoped they would make books. Many people were keen to make a book but needed much more help than this. We now have a leaflet with pictures of some tactile pages, an A4 pamphlet of guidance notes on making a fabric tactile book, and a sample half-made page which we lend to people, along with a completed book. Many people feel they need to handle some actual books to give them an idea of what is required. This is not surprising as the whole concept of tactile books is quite new to most people.

We ask volunteers to design and make a book from their own ideas. We suggest that they base their book on one of the following:

a nursery rhyme or simple poem;

a traditional tale from any culture;

an early learning topic such as counting, shapes, growth, or a letter of the alphabet;

everyday life (for example getting dressed, visiting a friend).

a simple story they have written themselves.

Whenever possible I speak to groups of interested people and take a display of tactile books to inspire and inform them. If a small group asks me to visit I urge them to invite other local groups to make the audience as big as possible - and my trip more worthwhile. The more information volunteers have before they start to design and make a book, the better the end result.

It is sometimes suggested that there should be more rules for tactile illustrations and that books which fail to observe these rules should be discarded. I think that there is such a desperate shortage of tactile books - and children are generally so thrilled to find anything tactile in a book - that it would be a great shame to discourage any volunteers by issuing too long a list of strict rules. Of course, some of the books people make are much better than others, but the vast majority are quite acceptable and some are absolutely wonderful. If someone makes and donates a book which is not suitable for our library, we find a good home for it in a local school.

Lending the books

Ours is a postal lending library, covering the whole of the UK. The books are sent by post with Articles for the Blind labels, so there is no postage to pay when we send them out or when they are posted back to us. Borrowers are sent up to five tactile books which they can keep for up to four months.

Borrowers are asked for details of the children who will use the books, including age, ability, special needs and interests, and how careful they will be when handling the books. We then choose appropriate books from our stock.

The safety aspect of lending hand-made books to young children is a major concern for us. We are mainly worried that a child might pull something off the page and choke on it. For many years this consideration discouraged us from starting up a tactile book library but the need for tactile books is so great that we decided we must do something to help.

As a postal library we are in quite a different position to a library where members visit the premises to choose books and are known to the librarian. In this situation the librarian would perhaps be in a position to assess whether a child is likely to try and dismantle a book and would also have a better idea of the kind of supervision offered by the parents.

We have taken four steps to try and ensure that our books can be safely used and enjoyed.

- Everyone making a book is told about this issue and asked to do their utmost to ensure that the book is made to high safety standards.
- Every book has a label on the back warning of a possible choking hazard and stating that the book is not suitable for children under the age of 3 and must be used under constant adult supervision.
- The books are only lent to schools and other educational establishments. The books can then be examined by a professional who knows the child and he or she can decide if the child will be safe using the book (and if the book will be safe with the child!). If they wish, they can allow parents to use the book at home with their child.

- Before they can borrow tactile books, the head of the establishment must sign a form to confirm that he or she takes responsibility for ensuring that the books are only used by children over the age of three, under close adult supervision.

Measures of success

This new collection has been warmly welcomed. We now lend to 120 schools and this number is increasing as more people hear about the new service.

Some schools have written to tell us how much they appreciate the books. A teacher told how, whilst she read the text aloud to a blind child, she saw her fingers creeping between the pages to find the next tactile illustration – a sure sign of eager anticipation.

Many visually-impaired children in the UK are integrated into mainstream schools; there might be just one blind child in a class of sighted children. Our tactile books are of great interest to sighted children; they are much more exciting and attractive than most normal books. This is good for the visually-impaired child's morale and encourages interaction with sighted classmates.

The future

We have recently reached our initial target of one thousand books but we now hope to expand the collection to meet particular needs. We have so far concentrated on young visually-impaired children and those with additional learning difficulties. It has become clear that older children would also appreciate books with tactile illustrations. Different formats and different kinds of illustrations may well be needed and we are looking into various possibilities. We would also like more books on non-fiction topics and more books of particular appeal to boys.

As ClearVision started as a braille library we are best known as a source of books for young braille readers. Now that we have tactile books suitable for children whose learning difficulties may well prevent them from becoming literate in any media, we need to do more to promote this new service to people who work with children with multiple disabilities. I am sure that there are many visually-impaired children with additional handicaps who could enjoy our tactile books but do not yet have access to them.

Many of the tactile books in our library are works of art. Whenever they are on display they are a source of great interest and admiration. They also serve the purpose of raising awareness of the needs of children with little or no sight. I would like to see some of them on temporary display at mainstream exhibitions, book fairs and art galleries where they can be admired by the general public.

These are wonderful books and we want everyone to know about them!