

Telling Stories Through Art

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Stories interest children and help them enter the world of the characters effortlessly. When art is chosen as the medium for telling stories, it can deepen this process and leave imprints that help children stay with the story for a longer time, since the inputs given via art are tactile and sensory. There are several ways in which children can be engaged in this process of telling stories through art.

When the child uses art to tell a story

In *figure 1*, the child is trying to tell a story via her drawing. This 'five-mouthed' (the student's term for it) pencil is visible in her drawing. Her explanation was that since this was her pencil 'tree', if one point broke, another would grow in its place – is made possible by language. The written story around this artwork now opens a door for a deeper understanding of the girl's world. It is her story, made from *her* experience of using a pencil, but

she gives it a twist by using her imagination. Along with that, the different colours used in the artwork here consolidate this imagination, bringing out her emotions and tone on paper, making this a more tangible product of her imagination.

When the teacher uses artwork to help children build on a story

When children express their stories via art, they begin thinking of words, phrases and concepts to define the story. This can be supplemented by the teacher who does storytelling in the classroom using an existing artwork. When the teacher shows a piece of art, she can ask children to talk about what they see or perceive with prompts such as: What is happening here? What are the people doing? How are they feeling? Do the colours tell you something?

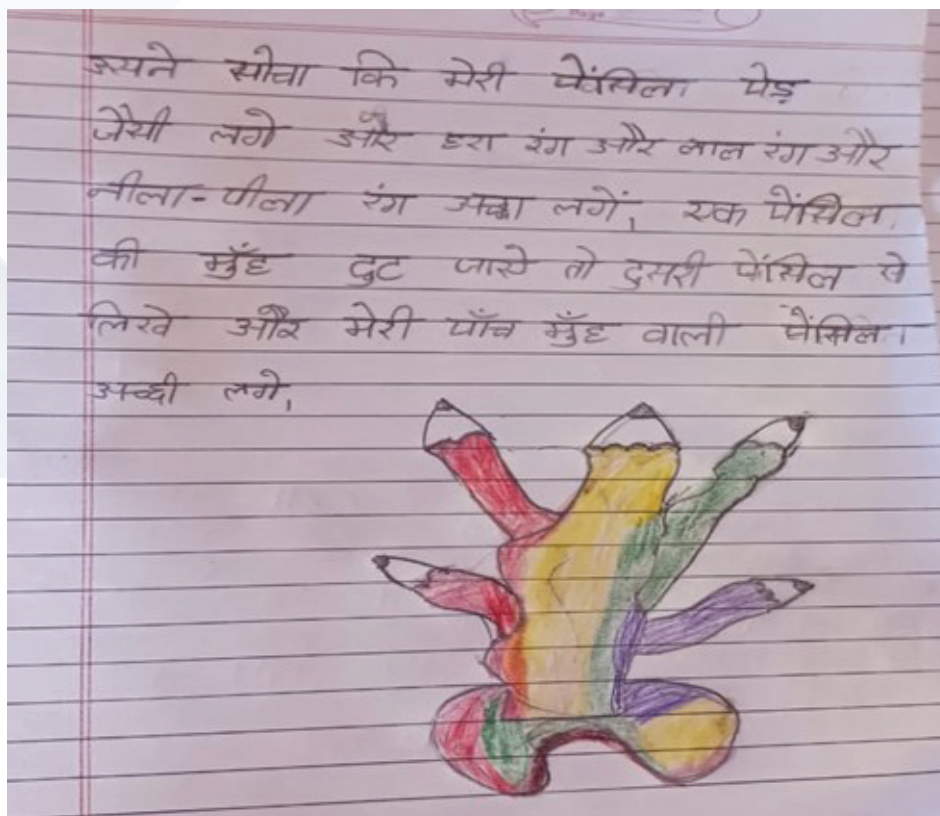


Figure 1. A student imagines a unique pencil.

Children start thinking about various possibilities when these questions are asked. There is room to build logic in the story they create, and this logic comes from these directional questions which point to the mood, sequence, timeline, etc. Moreover, this art is subject to multiple interpretations. No one is right or wrong; answers fit into a wide spectrum of possibilities, fitting into different rationales. The teacher also gives their view in this process and hence, becomes a participant in the process as well. Figures 2, 3 and 4 are students' responses to a painting with an aeroplane shown in class. The painting also had a large tree, several people, animals and birds.

Stories help us look at things from different angles. When we use an artwork to put across a story and when points of view are introduced in the story, multiple ways of using our imagination can unfold. In figure 1, we see that the child has taken a different point of view by imagining oneself as a tree. This personification makes the story more personal. In figure 2, the child mentions the feelings of the tree when the aeroplane is on the tree. The artwork by being the defaulter of interpretations here gives rise to this prospect, that is, in exploring it through multiple perspectives, several avenues for thinking creatively are unlocked.

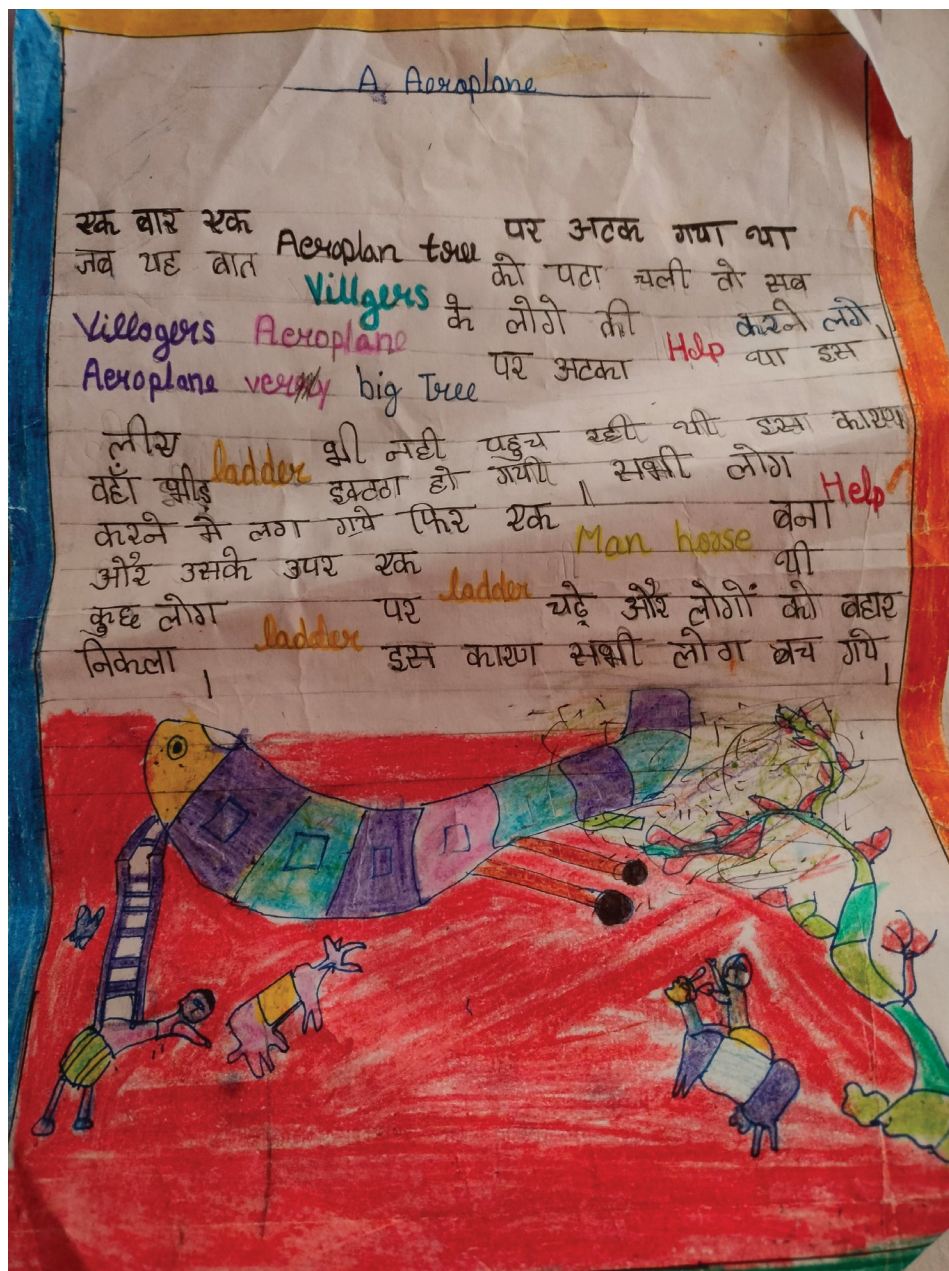


Figure 2. A student's interpretation of the 'aeroplane' painting.

These interpretations by children suggest that they are building logic in their story. *Figure 2* brings out the importance of a man-horse seen in the artwork which helped save everyone. The story shown in *figure 3* adds another character to the story, the hero, completely altering the story angle. Another element of observation noted in *figure 3*, focuses on the small elements around the picture which can modify the mood of the story. The attention to the tiny detail about the dog and the cow is mentioned which brings an element of suspense in the story. This serves as an example of the child drawing on a line of possibility around the tiniest detail. When all characters are studied at the same depth, it can open up different avenues for modifying the story and emphasise finding other possibilities for the story.

When children use art to layer a story with cultural knowledge

Children were shown the painting of a tiger, a *pattachitra* from West Bengal, in which the tiger is shown to have two bodies but one head. In *figure 5*, a child has interpreted the picture and, weaving a story around it, they have personified the tiger and brought out its struggle when it realises that it is fighting with its own reflection. Some children looked at the picture and thought that the tiger's face was made of sunflower dots, or the tongue was a lizard's tongue. These are applications of their own cultural learning.

The child's drawing (*figure 5*) brings the focus from the big tiger image to the goats. It alters the character importance visible in the artwork and the child brings their own angle here. The tendency of the tiger to eat goats is highlighted and brought in after a dramatic realisation. The title of the story reflects the importance given by the child to these characters in the story. Art, therefore, provides a possibility for recalling and applying previous cultural knowledge to form a story.

Benefits of storytelling

- When art is used as a medium, children have to rely strongly on logical thinking to construct their stories and this enhances the skill of sequencing which is a desired learning outcome.
- Art can help children look at characters or the scenario with more imaginative thinking as there is abundant scope for possibilities within that piece. This can interest the children as well as help them remember the story.
- When a child expresses their story via an artwork, the use of language becomes complementary in trying to give it a perspective. This makes it meaningful and even more interesting.
- The skill for prediction becomes more robust considering they use the indicators of the artwork – colour, technique, expression to build on the mood, tone, sequence and context of the story.

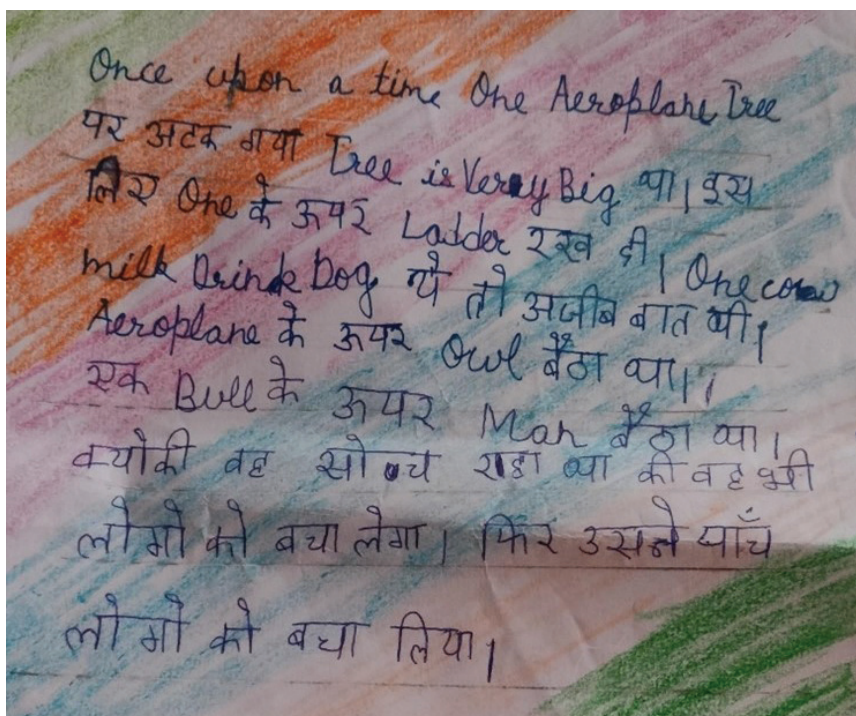


Figure 3. Another student builds a story on the 'aeroplane' painting.

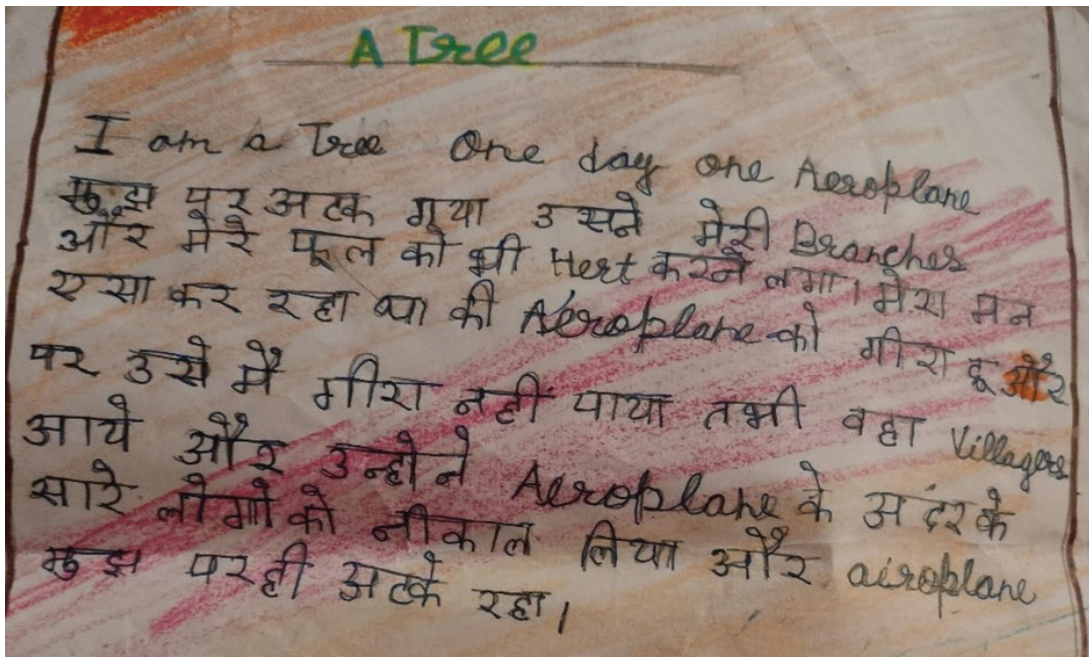


Figure 4. One more example of a student's imagination around the 'aeroplane' painting.

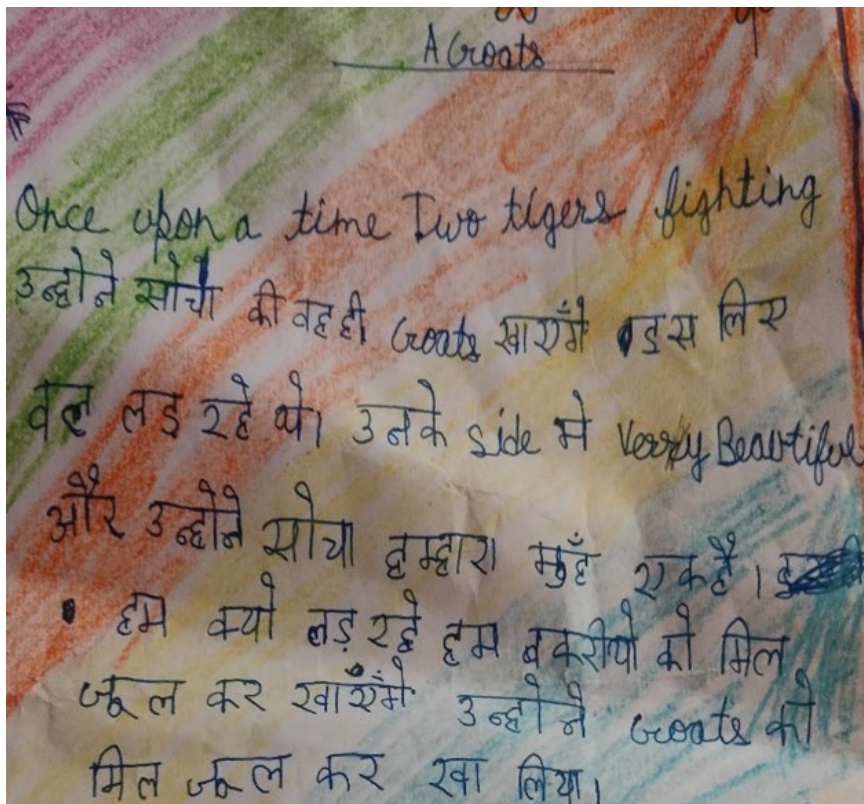


Figure 5. A student's story on the 'tiger' painting shown in class.

Using artwork in the classroom

Teachers could keep these objectives in mind:

- a. When using an artwork, children can develop on the different elements of the story – logic, setup, culture, perspectives, characters, and storyline.
- b. Interpretation of an artwork can generate a need for language.

Teaching a story via an artwork opens up wide possibilities for prediction. When children look at a painting, they can build logic by examining the various elements seen in the artwork. Some possibilities can be presented, and their logical explanations discussed. The possibilities are endless when the class begins to study the story of an artwork.

The next step could be children developing their own story using the artwork as a prompt. They need to have the vocabulary for this story, that is, names, colours, etc. From the objective of language learning, sentence patterns can be introduced into this, for example, 'There was a _____'.

Moving to the next stage, they can be given a framework to write the story on the artwork by answering questions such as the following:

- a. What is the mood of the story?

- b. What is the timeline?
- c. How many characters are there? Do they have names? Do they have characteristics?
- d. Where is the story taking place?
- e. Is there a conflict in the story? How is it resolved?

Next, they can be asked to represent the story in the form of a drawing after they have written about it. The artistic choices they make will define the elements they are trying to bring up. For example, if they show an angry turtle, they will represent the expression that way. Similarly, the colours they choose will add to the tone they have written about in the story.

In conclusion

All in all, when we use art for storytelling, it leaves a strong imprint on the minds of children, especially learners who learn better with a representation of the oral story. Using art not only provides a huge scope for possibilities but also makes space for building unconventional logic to support the ideas. Since art is a representation of a culture, children learn about pluralism and apply their own cultural interpretations to the artwork.

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