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Breaking the rules [of summer]

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Breaking the Rules [of Summer]

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Abstract

Shaun Tan's picture book/app, *Rules of Summer*, challenges conceptions of literature and literacy for young people, placing visuals at the center of the narrative in dissonance with printed text. This article explores this nonlinear, yet complex text and reactions to it from preservice and practicing teachers. We explore possibilities for schools, particularly with considering intersections between art education and literacy. We believe teachers can use artful texts like *Rules of Summer* in interdisciplinary ways to challenge their students, and themselves, to break rules around instruction, literacy practices, art education, and the current testing culture. We find that this narrative invites discomfort and (not) knowing in ways that also challenge traditional ways of literacy teaching, while inviting all readers to question and even break the rules.

Keywords: Picture books, arts-based literacy instruction, literacy, teacher education, Shaun Tan, children's literature

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Breaking the Rules [of Summer]



Figure. 1. Reading confusion.

“Never break the rules. Especially if you don’t understand them” (Tan, 2013a, back jacket)

Art has a long history with rules, condemning those who disregard them, unless the rule-breaking becomes ground-breaking. Calling a urinal “art” is ridiculous, until it creates a conceptual shift (Duchamp, 1917). Language arts is similar, with longstanding rules around grammar, mechanics, and literary conventions, but William Faulkner’s and Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prizes result from shattering them. Increasingly, students need to develop skills and knowledge¹ to recognize and navigate these old rule systems while transitioning into today’s multi-disciplinary contexts for learning and literacies.

As learning and communicating become increasingly transdisciplinary, students need to acquire a flexible set of skills applicable to an ever-expanding array of media and messages. New Media Literacies (NMLs) is a set of eleven vital educational components: 1) play, 2) performance, 3) simulation, 4) appropriation, 5) multitasking, 6) distributed cognition, 7) collective intelligence, 8) judgment, 9) transmedia navigation, 10) networking, and 11) negotiation of meaning with complex multimedia, multimodal texts (Jenkins, 2006). These are also central within the arts, providing clear opportunities for using arts-based approaches and arts-based texts to support students’ multiliteracy skills (Alper, 2013).

Interdisciplinary scholarship on visual/verbal combinations in children’s picture books touts their synergistic support for preliteracy and literacy development (Albers, 2008; Kiefer 1994; Marantz & Marantz, 1995; Sipe, 1998; Jewett & Kress, 2003). As transdisciplinary learning becomes increasingly vital to all students (Rhoades, 2015), arts-based literacy education can support students’ abilities to think across multiple materials, modes, and media using inquiry-based approaches (Eisner, 2002).

¹ Figures 1 and 3 are inspired by real conversations and transcripts of pre-service teachers reading *Rules of Summer* in a Children’s Literature university course.

New Media Literacies break the ‘rules’ of traditional literacy. Like contemporary artmaking, they focus on processes and communication over product and correctness, underscoring the power and potential of exploring uncertainty, of ignoring the rules. Shaun Tan’s work echoes and amplifies this, breaking expectations and rules for traditional children’s books, serving as a model for exploring how art educators might embed such complex visual/verbal texts (and other forms) in art classrooms. Tan’s *The Rules of Summer* (2013a, 2013b) can serve as an example core text for doing transdisciplinary projects with teachers and students across ages, subjects, and demographic categories.

***The Rules of Summer* Breaks the Rules of Children’s Books**

Shaun Tan is not the average children’s book author, and *The Rules of Summer* is no average children’s book. With honors degrees in both Fine Arts and English Literature, Tan is a formally-trained interdisciplinary author/illustrator, producing exquisitely artistic texts, visually and verbally. Its wraparound cover showcases Tan’s fine arts credentials. The cover image features two brothers in a field, one wearing a huge eye-helmet over his head and shoulders, the other walking beside a giant teal mechanical windup toy T-Rex. A raven floats in the distance, punctuating the dynamic curved blue sky. A building releases steam or smoke in the background, flanked by a few tall trees. The colors echo Van Gogh’s “Café Terrace at Night,” the composition recalls Wyeth’s “Christina’s World,” with a futuristic update.

The remaining illustrations of *Rules* are twenty-six individual oil paintings, done in a similarly rich Renaissance palette, detailing “the surreal dreamlike events of one particular childhood summer...sequenced according to their titles, each of which is expressed as a rule” (Griffin, 2016, para. 2). Three main characters appear throughout: two brothers and a raven, with the younger brother serving as the main protagonist. Young Adult author Griffin notes that the

book's undefined narrative involves "the relationship of these two boys, played out against a landscape that defies categorisation—sometimes urban, industrial, sometimes reminiscent of a Middle Eastern warzone—always threatening" (para. 3). The words and images are often more cryptic than straightforward.

It's Good to Break the Rules

In this article, like Tan and his characters, we play with the concept of rules. We challenge the separation of "texts" into words and images and consider how breaking rules and disciplinary barriers might help educators recognize and cultivate more transdisciplinary literacies practices. We believe all teachers can use artful, multimedia texts like *Rules of Summer* to challenge their students, and themselves, to break assumptions and rules around disciplines, instruction, art/making, and literacy practices.

We also believe that teachers need preparation and support to teach this way and to support their own learners in this process. High-stakes standardized testing and accountability culture in the US currently drive the "rules" and expectations governing much of what teachers teach (content) and how they teach it (pedagogy). Many teachers struggle to spark student engagement under sustained systemic pressures to focus on specific isolated skills and bits of knowledge to raise test scores. Without support or time to authentically reflect on practices in dynamic and multiliterate ways, "traditional views of literacy are more likely to hold sway" (Homan et al., 2018, p. 44). Instead, many creative or challenging tasks are exchanged for test preparation. Consequently, many students lose interest and disengage.

Tan's *Rules of Summer*, with its ambiguity and wonder, provides an excellent counter-narrative to testing culture, an embrace of complexity and irresolution. As both a hard-bound book and an app, *Rules of Summer* challenges traditional conceptions of literature and literacies,

creating experiences where students are their own chaperones (Sanders, 2013). Such self-directed and meta-cognitive educational experiences with complex creative texts encourage excitement, critical-creative thinking, and self-reflective meaning-making that enhances current curricula and objectives. As educators are quickly realizing, “The possibilities of the digital picture book ... will keep challenging the ways we perceive young people’s literacy” (Hatfield & Sanders, 2017, p. 479).

To think about the realities of challenging common school “rules” on multiple levels, and to foster multimodal literacies we included both the print and digital versions of *Rules* in several undergraduate and graduate Children’s Literature courses taught by Ashley. These courses were part of the curriculum at a large, public, minority-serving institution in the Southwest United States. Students fell into different content area majors, some were already working in classrooms, and all students were part of the College of Education. In these Children’s Literature classes, students were required to read a range of children’s literature and related scholarship. All reading, discussion, and response work with *Rules of Summer* explored in this article occurred as part of regular course activities.

Pre-service and practicing teachers’ interests, discomforts, and fears around learning, questioning, creativity, and rule-breaking provided connection points for considering the challenges and benefits of including high-quality, arts-based texts in classrooms. This picturebook and work with teachers propelled us to ask: How can works like *Rules of Summer* support transgressing outdated rules and boundaries, invite discomfort and uncertainty into classrooms, and position students as active, intelligent, co-creators of dynamic, complex texts? What might be new rules for teaching and learning to develop students’ critical-creative skills and multiple literacies? How might art teachers apply, support, and extend these kinds of

transdisciplinary efforts? What resulted in our questions was a new set of rules embracing transdisciplinary literacy practices.

New Rule #1: Engage with Texts That Make You Uncomfortable

Tan crafts a surreally wondrous story, each rule seemingly incongruous with its accompanying illustration. In one spread, the brothers huddle within a fenced-in backyard, a solitary red sock swaying from a clothesline. The rule on the opposite page reads: “Never leave a red sock on the clothesline” (See Figure 2). A large, menacing rabbit lurks outside the fence, just behind the boys. Tan provides no clear causal outcomes for breaking the rules, forcing readers to decide potential consequences. This vagueness can make readers feel uncomfortable, even frustrated, when reading and viewing the art and text.

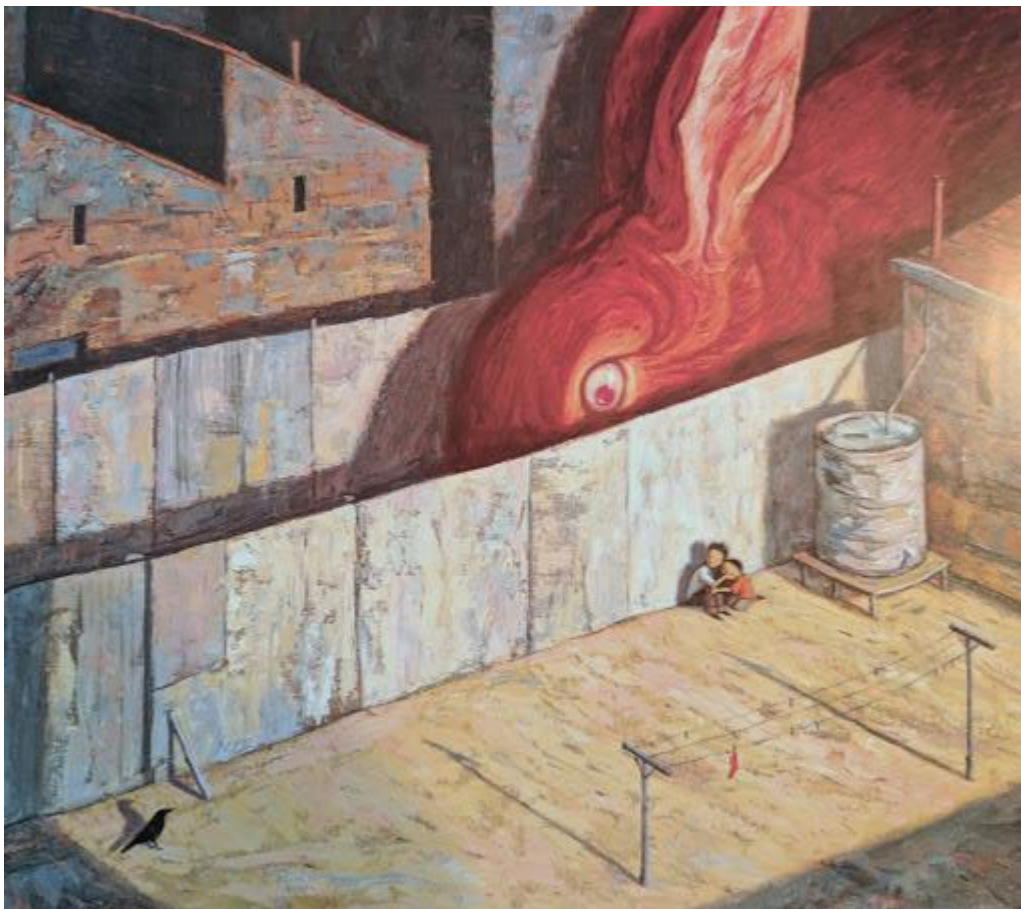


Figure 2. Image from Rules of Summer.

The rules themselves seem somewhat arbitrary, perhaps created by the eldest to control or harass his younger brother. The illustrations are fantastical, filled with growing iguanas, looming birds, various mechanical creatures, along with an omnipresent raven. Readers fill in gaps, creating meaning as the brothers seem to separate, fight, and reunite. And, there are opportunities for learning in this discomfort.

On one dark page, the tied-up younger brother witnesses a murder of crows presenting his elder brother with a crown, a subtle submarine tower crouched in the background. Across several following pages, the submarine prowls, a porthole eventually revealing the younger brother's face, highlighting the older brother's potential betrayal and the younger's subsequent isolation. But soon, a new rule, "Always know the way home," shows the brothers reunited and dancing through a display of giant cake. At the end, readers are left wondering. Is there a conclusion? A real plot? Is this a story about sibling relationships? A set of fable-like warnings? A bad dream? *The knowing is in the wondering and the questioning.*

The app version enhances the text through interactive functions. Rather than replicate the book, it augments the reading experience through features such as sound effects, and gives viewers choices for how to view, manipulate, and progress through the images. Through "sketch mode," viewers examine the artistry up close, exploring the illustrations at their most basic, providing another way of reading, seeing, and experiencing the book. This also allows for different, more intimate, holistic learning experiences. This glimpse into the artistic process emphasizes the questions raised by Tan's text. In "sketch mode" readers can appreciate the composition process more comprehensively. They can see the steps that show the value of composing and creating, not just a final polished product. This is beneficial for teachers and

students to consider, especially in an academic environment entrenched in timed tests and measured outcomes.

New Rule #2: Everyone, No Matter Their Age, Should Read Picture Books

Tan's dedication on the endpapers reads, "For the little and the big." This indicates a wide audience, unbridled possibility. Picture books "teach about content, about the world they represent, about form, about literature, and about language and how stories can be told," (Murphy, 2009, p. 20). They also offer many educational opportunities, including their shorter length (Wilkins et al., 2008), critical content (Richardson, 2000), and interactions between images and text (Sipe, 1998; Steiner, 1982). Upper-level classrooms can benefit from their inclusion, especially since 21st century readers are accustomed to visual modes—television, cell phones, and other forms of digital media (Neal & Moore, 1991).

Engaging with such an artful picture book/app within a school context can also help us to think about the emotional capacity of reader and text. We believe adolescent students have the cognitive and emotional ability to read and engage in more complicated ways than many younger readers, the assumed picture book audience. Interacting with art (like *Rules of Summer*) can support how adolescent readers reflect and learn about themselves and their worlds (Albers, 2008; Efland, 2002). Tan has noted that *Rules of Summer*, specifically, invites us, as readers, to "ask ourselves what we're feeling rather than what we're understanding" (Tan, 2013d, 00:02:47). Providing and allowing for emotional connections and ambiguity in student responses with such texts may encourage the higher-order thinking skills needed for testing, while also supporting them in being citizens of the world (Dallacqua et al., 2015).

New Rule #3: Engage Multiple Versions of the Same Text

Including multiple media in a learning environment supports learners' literacy practices in the classroom and in the world beyond, "foster[ing] critical enjoyment of literacy" (Redmond & Maya, 2014, p. 64). As art educators committed to inviting a variety of texts into classrooms, we are especially interested in narratives that take on multiple media forms (such as a novel that is also a film) and the opportunities they provide for transmedia navigation (Jenkins, 2006). However, in examining classroom practices and providing opportunities for students to "create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2013), we must be diligent in locating innovative, thoughtful resources.

In a past study focusing on Shaun Tan, Dallacqua et al. (2015) concluded "multiple media forms and their multimodality provide chances for critical comparison, contrast, and analysis of the author's choices and manipulation of elements and principles of visual and narrative communications and design" (p. 213). Working across media forms provides opportunities for readers to connect and deeply analyze multimodal texts in thoughtful, sophisticated, and critical ways (Blackburn et al., 2014). Tan's collection of multimedia work invites such engagement. We believe creating and analyzing multiple versions of texts such as *Rules of Summer* showcases innovation and creativity in composing texts.

The advent of additional digital tools such as accompanying apps to picture books have added an extra dimension to the reading process (Cope, 2001). Both apps and ebooks include animation, video, music, hyperlinks, and a multitude of other interactive functions. Yet, apps require more interactivity (Sargeant, 2015). Readers read ebooks, but *use* apps (Sargeant, 2015). *The Rules of Summer* app moves beyond stereotypical play-based experiences frequently attributed to apps and instead fuses the written text along with the author's artistic process,

inviting students into deeper reading that privileges the idea of narrative creating an intriguing whole of story, process, and question.

New Rule #4: The Arts and Media ARE Literacy.

[Dis]comfort in [Not] Knowing. Within the context of children's literature courses, preservice and practicing teachers read and engaged with both the digital and printed versions of *Rules of Summer*. Many students initially responded with dislike and confusion. Their frustrations align with current realities in schools where the focus is on single,

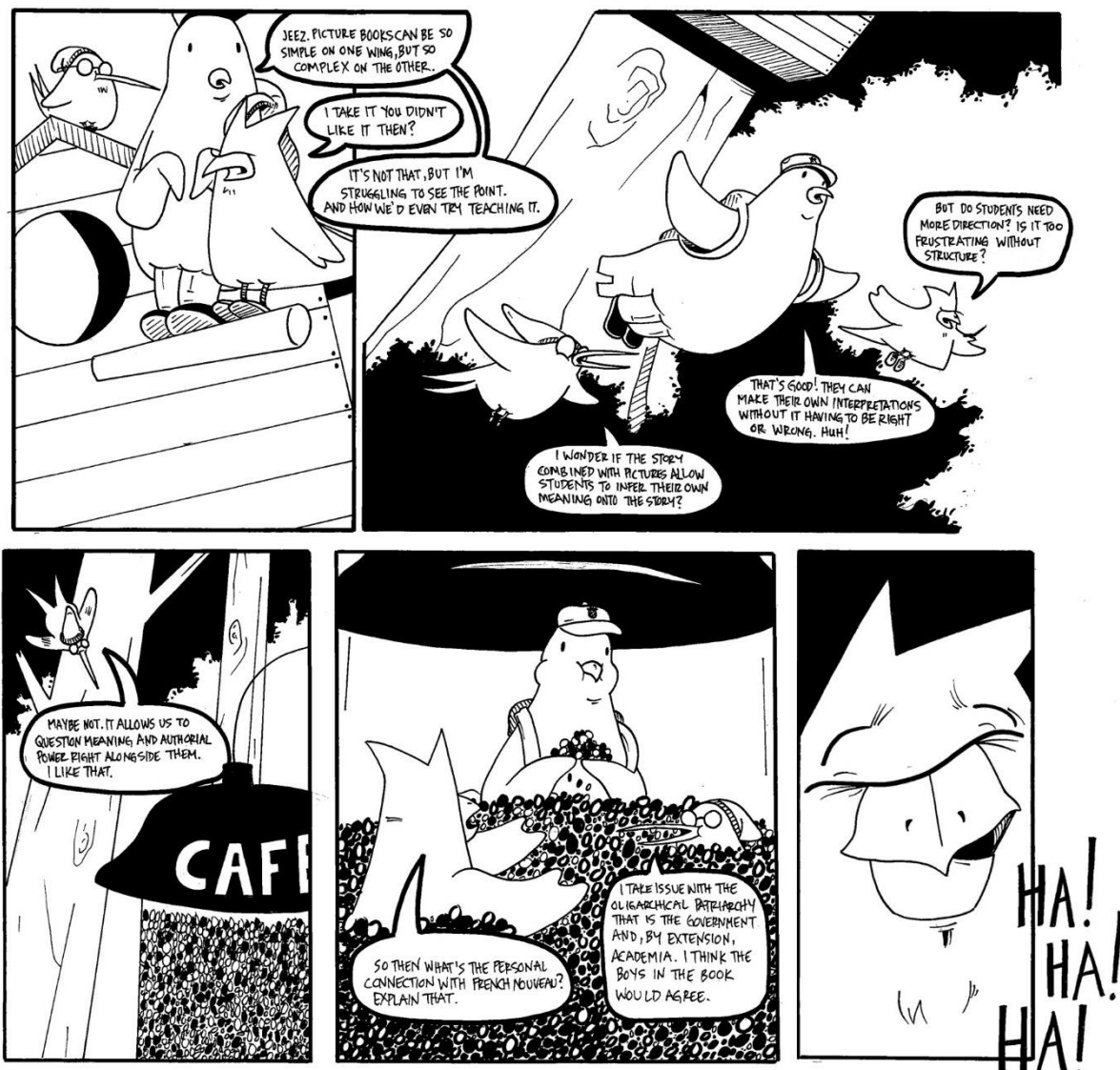


Figure 3. Questioning meaning.

simple understandings and correct answers. As the first comic *Reading Confusion* suggests, many of the preservice and practicing teachers felt they did not “get” the story. For them, enjoyment and potential in picture books stemmed from knowing. In order to address literacy learning, they felt we should be reading and working towards the “right” conclusion when reading. Yet, “purposeful consideration of practice requires teacher to call into question their actions and beliefs” (Homan et al., 2018, p. 44). Engaging with *Rules of Summer* facilitated this consideration.

Rules of Summer is deceptively complex. Preservice teachers, for example, returned to images like the red sock on the clothesline, wanting to know *What does the red sock mean?* “You leave a red sock on a line, and there’s a giant rabbit behind you?” one preservice teacher emphatically asked. In order to teach this book, she wondered, *Don’t I have to know what it is about?* However, Tan says of this image, “The whole situation is really quite mysterious. And that’s what I like about this image” (Tan, 2013d, 00:01:47). He positions the unknown in his art as invitations to engage and construct one’s own connections.

Other preservice and practicing teachers found enjoyment in *not* knowing. *Rules of Summer*, required flexibility, required that readers choose to make their own meaning (or not!). This agency in meaning-making offers autonomy in engagement with the narrative. “I just felt like there was something at the tip of my tongue, like that I need to understand...I felt like I was almost there...” one preservice teacher shared. *Rules of Summer*’s lack of a clear plot calls readers to make their own understandings of this and like texts. And sometimes this leaves readers, like the one above, somewhere in between “knowing” and not. Allowing for multiple ways to make meaning challenges traditional forms of instruction centered around ideas of one

right answer prevalent in testing culture. This way of reading and knowing through an art-centric text disrupts the ways literacy teaching and learning is traditionally taught.

This story made readers think, invoked imagination, and placed readers, not just inside the story, but in the shoes of young readers. Preservice teachers acknowledged these possibilities for adolescent readers: “I would love to use this book to really get my students thinking.” Preservice teachers proposed this as a narrative for students “with a wide imagination.” This seems to be part of Tan’s purpose. Tan noted that when engaging with this text, “You get a sense of what’s going on, but it’s not entirely clear. And your imagination is fairly free to construct the details” (Tan, 2013c, 00:02:32). One practicing teacher discussed how *Rules of Summer* inspired her to invite students to create their own whimsical illustrations. Their classroom schedule was typically structured and full of guided work, so an activity like creating illustrations was difficult due to the lack of clear direction and unfamiliarity in engaging with art. She acknowledged the powerful need for arts-based texts while expressing worry about a loss of imagination in school. This book, then, challenges the kinds of texts we use in schools, but also their purposes in supporting both literacy and imaginative practices.

Another practicing teacher reflected on reading this book with young readers. She shared how she invited her students to focus on what they noticed, rather than constructing a concrete narrative. She shared with her students that she “wasn’t sure what this book was about” as the class noticed and read together. Here, the practicing teacher vulnerably shared her not knowing, instead embracing community meaning-making and the beauty of not understanding with her students. As the instructor, it was important for Ashley to highlight and support these practicing teachers in their experimentation, questioning, and not knowing publicly, in our educational space. *Rules of Summer* encouraged the collective intelligence and negotiation of meaning that

are part of New Media Literacies and arts-based practices, therein challenging how literacy is practiced in this space (Jenkins, 2006).

Process[ing]. Reading, discussing, and [not] figuring out these texts can also encourage an acknowledgment of process. Readers must actively engage with the multiple modes of this text and draw their own conclusions. In that, there is a flexibility in reading. Readers gain autonomy in their engagement with the narrative.

The *Rules of Summer* app adds to this experience. First, it provides options for a significantly different reading experience. Preservice teachers noticed the app invites the readers to focus just on the text, the images, or both. Tan has explained that one could open his text to any page and spend a short amount of time or a whole hour viewing just that page (Tan, 2013c). There is no right way to engage with *Rules of Summer*. When readers selected the image option, the ability to zoom in and out “allowed [readers] to focus on aspects of the book [they] missed,” as one student/reader described. Preservice and practicing teachers noticed details, brush strokes, and the repetition of the raven while navigating between the printed text and app. The narrative changed as the medium changed. But this nonlinear reading and learning needed to be modeled and encouraged by the instructor, and some readers never felt comfortable with it in the short amount of time we had to engage. Yet many of the preservice and practicing teachers became the experts and critics of the story, drawing connections across words, image, and text form. They began to envision the same opportunities for their future students.

[Re]writing the rules. The murky process of [not] knowing in *Rules of Summer* invites readers to create the stories. Preservice teachers thought about making-meaning (and being makers) by challenging rules in their own lives. Responding to this arts-based text, preservice teachers, as part of a class activity, literally rewrote the rules. This rewriting stemmed from

personal connections and acted as a means for taking action and breaking rules in their classroom practices. One preservice teacher constructed a rule about not wearing matching socks, framed around the idea of “never be[ing] afraid to try something new.” While mismatched socks may be a minor example, this group used it to think about taking small steps towards big change.

These future educators also wrote rules about taking risks, even when scary. Making changes in classrooms and confronting rules around conventional literacy practices is not easy, especially with the overarching stresses and structures within schools. But students talked about seizing educational moments, or as one rule stated: *Always eat the cake*. This preservice teacher explained, “I just really liked how [Tan] had his own meaning behind it [that] we don’t quite get. But they probably make perfect sense to him. I put a random pineapple here. And you guys don’t know why. But I do,” (See Figure 4). This student embraced seizing the moment, trying something new, without having, or providing the answers. As an instructor, it was important Ashley supported the unknown in the work that was submitted. Like Tan, this student author leaves readers “with a bit of a puzzle with what is actually happening” (Tan, 2013c, 00:02:20). But he reminds us this is a purposeful move on his part, drawing on his private backstory for the boys in the story. Leaving some of it unknown invites more readers and viewers to incorporate their personal experiences into the narrative (Tan 2013a, 2013b).

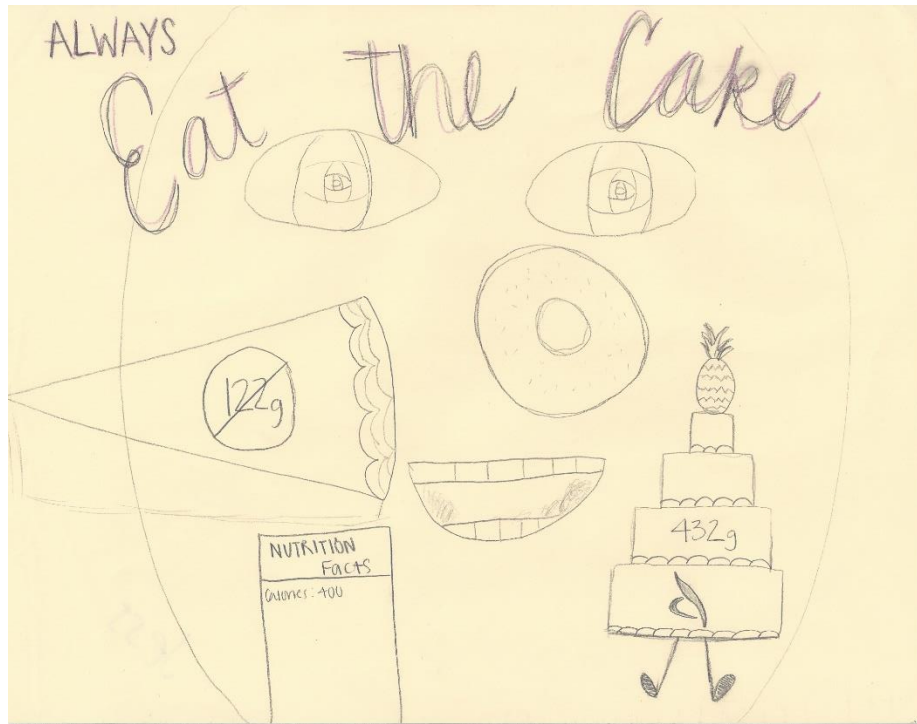


Figure 4. Example of Student Response.

Building and sharing their own stories around rules made preservice and practicing teachers think differently about *Rules of Summer* as readers and as educators. Reading and responding to it became inspiration for their ways of being—in classrooms and worlds. They became artistic, creative storytellers in the process of understanding a story. Isn't that what we wish for students? To embrace and make their *own* understandings? Could this be a way to counter the testing that rules our classrooms? As the teacher above shared, we need more texts like *Rules of Summer* in our classrooms and more opportunities for students to exercise their imagination. Now is the time! Seize the moment! *Eat the cake!*

Conclusion

Many teachers feel overly constrained by external rules and expectations. But there are ways to respect those rules while creating inquiry-based and art-based classrooms that disrupt and challenge the very same rules. As an instructor, Ashley, with the help of her coauthors, took

an art education lens to this work, in order to consider students' frustration, as well as creativity. In particular, we were struck by the time preservice and practicing teachers wanted (and wanted more of) to dig into to this uncomfortable and intriguing text. We were reminded of the need for process, not just final products, as art education supports. Students were not ready to move on from Tan's work when class ended. In this, we were all encouraged to continue to consider the external rules, at our university level, for time to read, respond, and deeply engage. What's more, during the time provided, it was vital to publicly model and embrace nonlinear reading, thinking, and unknowns. Doing so reinforced the departure from conventional rules and literacy practices that these students and teachers operate in constantly.

Educators can challenge and invigorate schools stuck in the confines of rules by incorporating dynamic picture books in their curriculum and supporting other teachers in different disciplines to do the same. Creating collaborative spaces across disciplines only strengthens the transdisciplinary literacy practices we discuss here. Picture books that are ambiguous, open-ended, and arts-based, like *Rules of Summer*, are ideal for cultivating deeper understandings through extended exploration, making personal and intertextual connections, and using the text to meet other transdisciplinary curricular goals (Murphy, 2009). (See the link below for picture book suggestions and other ideas).

In our high-stakes testing culture, *Rules of Summer* shows how picture books can provide a perfect vehicle for breaking school rules, encouraging students of all interests and abilities to interact meaningfully with blends of text, art, characters, and story. The art in *Rules of Summer* invites rich analysis and interpretation, and the interaction between the text and illustrations creates an ideal environment for students to explore questions and ideas about the text, about

reading, about themselves. This can place students in new positions of knowing and gives them new options for engaging with texts.²

Ultimately, students are learning there are many ways for meaning to be constructed, pushed, and repositioned, which then encourages them to challenge old perspectives, take on new ones, and grow (Leland & Harste, 2014). Allowing for this type of freedom may mean straying away from a traditional plan or path or being comfortable with not having all the answers. But isn't that what breaking the rules is all about?

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We are very grateful to all of the artists in our lives, especially Ryan Parrish, who created the comics seen here and Joe Dallacqua, who built our webpage (see link below) that collected our big ideas from this work.

² Please reference our webpage for more book ideas, digital resources, and instructional strategies that invite and encourage imaginative learning at <https://breakingtherulesofsummer.com/>.

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Mindi Rhoades is an Associate Professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the Ohio State University. Her research explores interdisciplinary arts-based research, teaching, learning, and activism. Specifically, she addresses issues of educational equity and diversity with regards to arts, visual culture, literacies, and multimodal meaning-making. She is interested in creative, playful, challenging, and engaging educational opportunities for *all* students. Contact her at rhoades.89@osu.edu.