

NAME: _____

CLASS: _____

DECODING SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE: FROM ICON TO UNDERSTANDING

This Learning Experience Organizer (LEO) was developed for Mindblue.com by Ryan R. Goble & Nicole L. Trackman using the artwork of Xu Bing v1.0 10.9.09

The following text is part of artist Xu Bing's novel *Book from the Ground*. Bing has written the text in a "language of icons" that he has collected. In his artist's statement Bing says, "regardless of cultural background, one should be able understand the text as long as one is thoroughly entangled in modern life."

✈️ → ✈️, ✈️ (4). 🚶🚶🚶 (🚫... 🚫... 🚶... 🚶... 🚶... 🚶... 🚶...), 🚶🚶🚶🚶...
🚶🚶🚶🚶... (?) 🚶🚶🚶🚶... ✈️ 🗣️): "✈️ → ✈️, 人 → 4, 人 ✖️ 人."... 🚶🚶🚶.
(?) 🚶🚶: "😊, ✈️ + 人 = 😞? 🚶 (✈️ → ✈️)? 人 ✖️ 😞! 人 { 人 → 🌐 × 1,000,000 }! ✖️ ✖️!"
🚶🚶, 🚶🚶🚶. 🚶🚶: "人 ✖️ 😞, 🚶🚶 → 🚶 (💡)!"
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✈️ 🗣️): "😊 🚶 #35, 🚶 → ✈️, ✈️, 🚶, 人 ✖️ 人..." ✈️ → ✈️. < 人 🗣️ 人 → .
人 🗣️ { ✈️ } (✈️). 人 🗣️! 人 → ✈️. 人 人 人 人 人 人 人 人.
(💡) 🚶 → 🚶 (⚠️).
人 🗣️ 🚶: "... .."
人 🗣️ 🚶: "... .."

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Mr. Black and Mr. Grey sat next to each other in an airplane as it took off. Mr. Black watched Mr. Grey as he read from the airline safety card that had many, many symbols on it. Mr. Black watched as Mr. Grey read on and on...

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2. Meet up with a partner and pair share translations. Make at least three notes below about things that you learned, found interesting or had disagreements about.

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-
-

You and your partner can join with another pair in class. As a group of four, please answer the following questions in the space below OR on chart paper.

3. Make a chat with six symbols your group is POSITIVE they know the meaning of using these three columns. NOTE: Symbols cannot come from the first line of text.

SYMBOL	MEANING	KNOWLEDGE/STRATEGY THAT ALLOWED YOU TO DECODE MEANING

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4. What "reading" strategies did you use to decode the symbols above and the story as a whole? How did you make meanings? List at least five strategies your group used below.

-
-
-
-
-

5. Make a list of four things from the story that your group still collectively has questions about.

QUESTIONS	READING STRATEGIES YOU MIGHT USE TO DISCOVER THE ANSWER






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(?)   { “  ,  +  =  ?  ( → ) ?  =  !  {  →  × 1,000,000 } !   ! ”

He asked Mr. Grey, “Hey, aren’t you worried about the turbulence causing a crash? Don’t be! I have flown a million times and the plane has never burst into flames or crashed into the ocean.”

(?)  : " ) = ? "   →  ,
Mr. Black, seeming somewhat confused, asked "What idea?" Mr. Grey handed him a pack of gum.

Mr. Grey said, "Your breath is fine. Look at the package." He pointed to the symbols on the pack of gum, but Mr. Black was still confused. Mr. Grey pointed to weather forecast symbols in a newspaper.




Then he pointed up to symbols in the airplane... He pointed to the symbol "very spicy" in a menu... He pointed to the symbols on a cell phone... He pointed to laundering instructions in a T-shirt...




He pointed to icons on an MP3 player, on a laptop, and so on . . .

Then the intercom said, "United flight #35 is landing, fasten your safety belts and do not leave your seats to go to the bathroom." The flight landed. The two men shook hands and parted.

Mr. Black looked at the departure time on his airline ticket and then at his watch. He began running, only to slip and fall.

(💡) 👁️ → 🗑️ — [⚠️].
He saw the symbol on the warning sign and understood.

   “ ”

   “ ”

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6. List three things that surprised / interested you about the translation. Be sure to explain the reason for your choices.

TRANSLATION OF INTEREST/SURPRISE	REASON YOU FOUND THIS INTERESTING/SUPRISING

7. How do you think Bing gathered the icons to create this symbolic language? Explain your answer below in three to five sentences.

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8. Based on your knowledge and experience, how is “Book From The Ground” similar to traditional stories and how is it different? List two similarities, and two differences below:

REASONS SIMILAR TO TRADITIONAL STORIES	REASONS DIFFERENT TO TRADITIONAL STORIES

9. What do you think Bing's “icon language” tells us about modern culture? Make sure you explain your answer in 3-5 sentences.

10. What do you think Bing was trying to say/communicate beyond the literal story?

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As you read the passage below consider making notes, underlining things you find interesting or have questions about. Here is an excerpt from Xu Bing's artist's statement:

This project first began with my collecting safety manuals from a number of airlines. In the past decade, I have spent countless hours in airports and aboard airplanes. The design of airport signs and airline safety manuals is based upon image recognition. Diagrams there are employed as the primary means of communication in an attempt to explain relatively complex matters with a minimum of words. It was this that truly fascinated me. Since about 1999, I have collected over one hundred safety cards, but until recently I had no clear goal in so doing. Then, in 2003, I noticed three small images on a pack of gum (they translate into please use your wrapper to dispose of the gum in a trashcan), and came to realize that in so far as icons alone can explain something simple, they can also be used to narrate a longer story. From that point on, through various channels, I began to collect and organize logos, icons, and insignia from across the globe, and I also began to research the symbols of expression employed by the specialized fields of mathematics, chemistry, physics, drafting, musical composition, choreography, and corporate branding, among others. In recent years, the expanding speed of the Internet and the widespread emergence of a language of computer icons have greatly increased the scale and complexity of this project. But the more this becomes the case, the more I am able to sense the significance of this work, about which I have had the following thoughts:

In 1627, the French thinker Jean Douet, in an essay titled "Proposal to the King for a Universal Script, with Admirable Results, Very Useful to Everyone on Earth," first suggested that Chinese was a potential model for an international language. The word "model" is important here because Douet does not limit this "universal script" to the form of Chinese characters per se. He instead focuses on the universal potential of the system of recognition upon which the Chinese language is based. Today, nearly four hundred years later, human communication has indeed evolved in the direction predicted by Douet. We have come to sense that traditional spoken forms are no longer the most appropriate method for communication. And, in response, great human effort has been concentrated on developing ways to replace traditional written languages with icons and images. For this reason, among others, humankind has entered the age of reading images.

Most languages take shape among a small group of people (a tribe or a village) sharing a similar set of vocalized expressions. As the scope of the group's activities expands, its language also develops into a regional mode of expression. The people's geographic expansion across multiple localities and political boundaries is also the millennia-long process of its language's growth. Today, spurred by a trend of internationalization, the world is contracting, creating the sense of a "global village." However, this huge "village" is distinct from the early villages out of which language first took shape: as citizens of the global village, we use a rich and varied range of dialects and often employ mutually incomprehensible systems of symbols to express information in written form. We must, however, live and work together (in the sense that we share information on a global scale). As a result, the inconvenience of language and miscommunication has become a significant burden in many of our lives. Our existing languages are based on geography, ethnicity, and culture (including all-powerful English), and all fall short. Written languages now face an entirely unprecedented challenge. Today, the age-old human desire for a "single script" has become a tangible need. This predicament requires a new form of communication better adapted to the circumstances of globalization. Only today can the implications of the Tower of Babel truly be revived.

Mr. Bing's full statement can be found at http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2007/automatic_update/subs_wrapper.php?section=xubing_interview.html

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11. Please answer the following prompts using passages from Mr. Bing's artist's statement...

One passage I had a question about was...	The reason/s I had a question about this passage...
One passage that really connected to my knowledge and experience was...	The reason/s this passage connected to my knowledge and experience was...
One passage I really disagreed with was...	The reason/s I disagreed with this passage was

12. How might the process of reading and translating "Book from the Ground" story help you decode other symbolic systems, like a science text book, math equation, a painting or the signs in a foreign culture?

13. If you could suggest to Mr. Bing one new icon to add to his collection what would that icon be and why.

DRAW YOUR ICON IN THE SPACE BELOW	MEANING OF ICON	REASON YOU WOULD ADD THIS ICON

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