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Teaching the Art of Writing

Beth Olshansky

An arts-based approach to writing captivates reluctant writers.

"It's time to put the arts back into language arts." — Elliot Eisner (2003)

When Matthew joined Penny Clare's 3rd grade classroom midyear, Summer 2006 the students were in the midst of crafting collage stories, inspired by the hand-painted papers they had created during an artists/writers workshop. Each student donated one hand-painted paper to Matthew and explained to him how to create his own collage story. The students then got into a heated debate. Alexander told Matthew that you could either make your pictures first, write your words first, or go back and forth between the two. Hannah, a two-year veteran of artists/writers workshop, disagreed:

I always make my pictures first because then I can look at my pictures to help me with my describing words. If I wrote my words first, I wouldn't be able to see my describing words in my pictures.

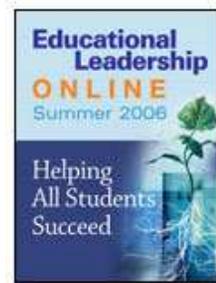
In a 2nd grade classroom that embraces the artists/writers workshop approach, Kelsey, a beginning reader, held up her published book of crayon resist paintings and text as she reflected on her experience:

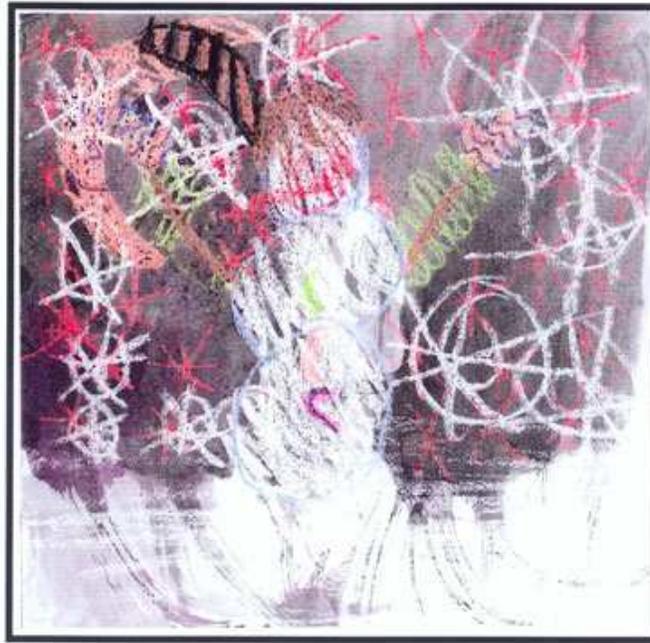
The pictures gave me all the right ideas to put in the sentence. It gave it a little bit more pizzazz.

Jared, a 2nd grader, shared his experience:

When I was reading my story to the class, the pictures came out of my mind, they came to life, and they acted out what I was reading.

These are the impassioned, confident voices of emergent readers and writers who participated in artists/writers workshops and discovered that when you bring words and pictures together, something magical happens. Although Marjorie Siegel (1995) explains the power of this process as the result of "transmediation," or the recasting of meaning from one sign system to another, 1st grader Christopher described his experience painting and then writing *One Quiet and Silent Night* (See below) more simply: "All sorts of good stuff just pops into my head."





One Quiet and Silent Night

One quiet and silent night a raccoon sat on my snowman's head. A white owl hooted in a whisper. The moon smiled. The snowflakes fell more quietly than ever before. Drooom went the clock. The clock struck midnight and the stars sprinkled away.

- Chris, grade 1

Amanda, a 5th grader, explained her experience creating *Sarena and the Beautiful Skies* (See below):

Making my collages gave me more ideas for my story. Then I looked at each of my pictures and wrote what came to mind. As I kept writing, the words just flowed together to make unique descriptions.



Sarena lived in the green grassy fields of Ireland that fluttered in the wind like butterfly wings. When the wind swirled over the hilltops, the green grass swayed like waves rolling into the bay.

When Words Are Not the Pathway

With the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) weighing on teachers and administrators, today's educators experience pressure to ensure that all students are judged "proficient." Our lowest-performing students have become the focus of much scrutiny as administrators across the United States search the education landscape for "programs that work." Many of the verbally based literacy programs that have not worked for at-risk students in the past are still being implemented, but now with even more rigor.

Ironically, in the scramble for methods to support the literacy learning of all students, we too often remain deaf to the voices of the students themselves, who could tell us how they learn best. And as schools cut art programs so that teachers can spend more time preparing students for standardized tests, educators are missing out on a crucial opportunity to support literacy learning through building on the strengths of at-risk learners. Verbal instruction is only one of the many pathways to literacy for our diverse learners. In *Envisioning Writing*, Janet Olson (1992) reminds us that

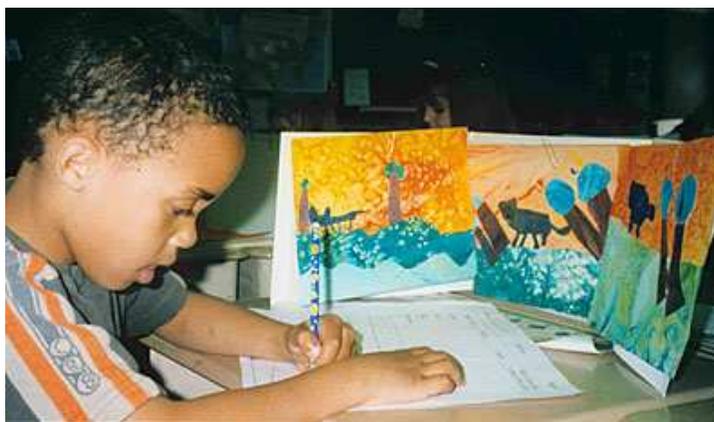
Many children have problems with language. Is it because they are "learning disabled" or "reluctant writers"? Or is it because they aren't being taught in the way they need to be taught? Children who think and learn visually process information through images instead of through words, and these children often have great difficulties succeeding in school....The critical question, then, is to what extent are visual learners being adequately served by general educational practice? (p. 1)

Seventeen years ago, when my daughter struggled with reading and writing, I faced a challenge similar to the challenge facing our schools: how to support the literacy learning of those who have little natural affinity for words. I immersed my 9-year-old daughter in activities she loved, simply to shore up her diminishing self-esteem. One day I made a simple observation: When my daughter had a paintbrush in hand, she gained access to imaginative ideas and rich descriptive language that she simply could not access when staring at a blank piece of lined paper. This observation sparked a 17-year, ongoing inquiry into the powerful relationship between pictures and words. And the art-based methods that I developed to help my daughter (who graduated from college with honors) have become the foundation for two nationally validated art- and literature-based literacy models: Image-Making Within the Writing Process and Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art. These models have proven effective in raising the writing and

reading skills of all students, but particularly of those students who face steep learning challenges.

Beyond Verbal Modes

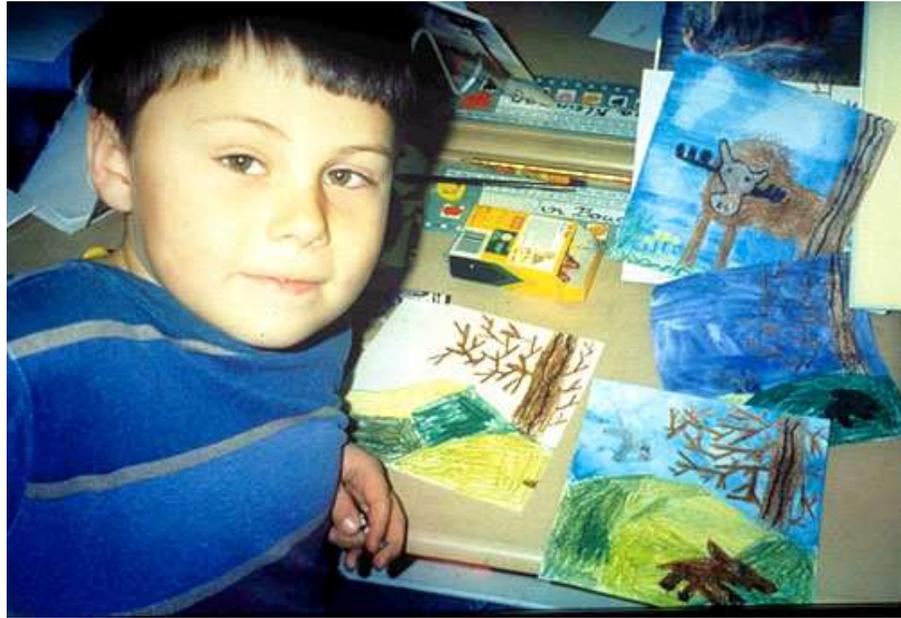
Image-Making Within the Writing Process, developed in 1990, begins with students creating their own portfolios of hand-painted textured papers. Students discover stories hidden within these abstract images that they have created and then write collage stories using their papers as raw materials. Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art, developed in 1996, teaches key literary elements through simple art processes and the use of quality literature. Although both processes are easily integrated into the curriculum, the Picturing Writing process provides a simpler, more foundational art and writing experience: Using crayon-resist art techniques, students create representational images thematically linked to content that they are studying, such as weather or biomes. Students create their pictures before they write. Both instructional models are carried out within an artists/writers workshop framework.



A boy uses his original art to support story writing.

Photo courtesy of Beth Olshansky

Particularly beneficial for visual or kinesthetic learners, these innovative methods offer students tools to develop and record their ideas *before* they tackle the written word. These art-based approaches to literacy learning invite students to enter the writing/reading process from a position of personal strength and enthusiasm. Research informs us that motivation and engagement are key to meaningful, sustained learning (Caine & Caine, 1994), and the opportunity to make art can be a great motivator. But using art to successfully lure students into the writing process is not the only reason that Image-Making and Picturing Writing have gained a reputation in the United States for increasing student achievement. Just as important is the fact that they remove the bias in favor of verbal strengths that permeates literacy education. Expanding on the solid literacy practices established by Donald Graves (1983), Image-Making and Picturing Writing offer all students visual and kinesthetic—as well as verbal—modes of thinking at every stage of the writing process. They place art at the core of thinking.



Drawing helps many students better tap into imagination.

Photo courtesy of Beth Olshansky

How Images Instruct

The methods followed in artists/writers workshops build on the growing practice of supporting students' writing process through using quality picture books as models or "mentor texts" (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004). Students not only create art and stories, but they also experience a progression of literature-based mini-lessons. Teachers teach the key elements of story (setting, character, problem, solution, and ending) through reading and discussing excerpts from quality literature. They also explain how to analyze and apply the tools that illustrators use to address these same elements through the language of pictures. By analyzing mentor texts and illustrations, both teachers and students come to understand how to use the parallel languages of pictures and words to create their own literary works.

In a traditional writing workshop, a teacher might guide students in analyzing the key components of a quality introduction by reading and discussing several strong leads. During artists/writers workshop, students and teacher also analyze the visual components of the first picture within a picture book. What are the key elements conveyed by the illustrator in the lead picture? What visual tools—color, texture, or perspective—establish the mood and convey pertinent setting information? Which visual elements draw the reader into the picture? Students may observe that the lead picture includes information about the setting. Some lead pictures introduce the main character as well.

For a visual learner, seeing, discussing, and creating images and words together is much more meaningful and effective than learning about the elements of a strong lead sentence through words alone. Sometimes students may notice that illustrators even create a "visual hook." This clever visual device is apparent in the introductory picture sequence created by Connor, a 2nd grader (See below). His picture of the setting (below and to the left) tells us about the time of day, the weather, the season, and the place. It also includes a visual hook: the pitch-black hole in one of the trees. Notice how Connor uses his visual hook to grab the readers' attention and whet our curiosity. In his second picture (below and to the right), he uses changes in perspective, a visual tool frequently used by illustrators and videographers to draw the viewer in. As he zooms into the hole in the tree, Connor draws us into his story and introduces us to the baby owl, his main character. Imagine the experience of turning from page one to page two of Connor's story.



Facilitators of artists/writers workshops may teach other key literary elements by discussing visual techniques. Studying quality picture books, teachers may analyze how a story builds suspense, not only through well-crafted language, but also through the use of visual elements. The drawings below show how 2nd-grader Jared painted a close-up to depict the problem on page two of his three-page animal story. Not only did Jared bring the reader face-to-face with a starving coyote, but he also darkened the sky to make his "problem picture" scarier. After creating his pictures, Jared chose language specific to the purpose of each page of his story. To accompany his problem picture, he wrote

Suddenly, he came out to an open field, where there was a coyote that was hungrily staring at the pup with his golden eyes. The starving coyote was ready to charge at the young pup.



Jared purposefully chose words and phrases like *suddenly*, *hungrily staring*, *golden eyes*, *starving*, and *charge* to make his story scarier; from studying literature, he understood that exciting words heighten the drama and suspense on his problem page.

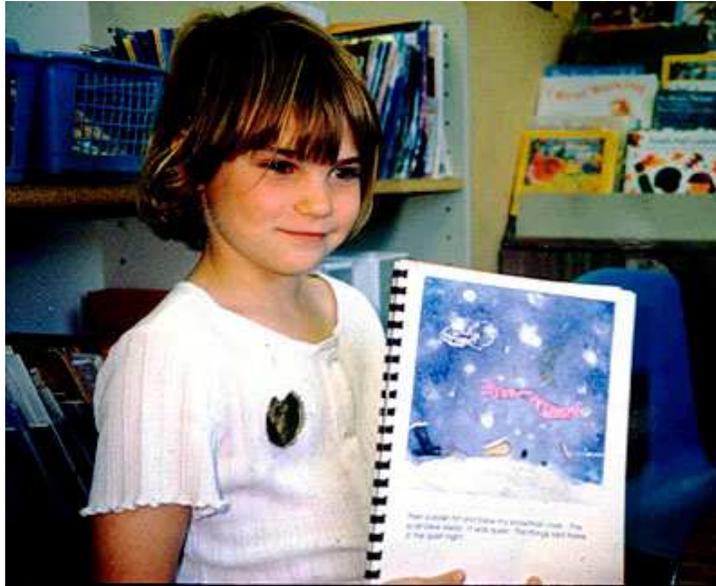
Jared's *Fox Pup's Rescue* is one of 21 books published in Linda Ball's 2nd-grade classroom in which students demonstrated their understanding of the parallel and complementary languages of pictures and words. In doing so, they became stronger, more effective story crafters. Jared explains, "You look at books and it expires [sic] you to try to make the same as the artist that made them." Similarly, on her "About the Artist/Writer" page, Chelsea writes

It was fun painting my pictures because it took me into my story, and I could imagine it. My story inspired me with all of my hard work and my dream came true. It was almost done! I think my story is magnificent because I worked so hard.

A universal and democratic approach to writing, the student-centered process followed within

artists/writers workshop supports the literacy learning of students of all ages, abilities, languages, and cultures. Serena, a 6th-grader, shares her experience:

The pictures paint the words on paper for you, so your words are much better. The words are more descriptive. Sometimes you can't describe the pictures because they are so beautiful.



A student displays her illustrated book.

Photo courtesy of Beth Olshansky

Seeing the Results

In 1993, Image-Making Within the Writing Process was validated by the U.S. Department of Education as an innovative and effective literacy program and was awarded federal funds for national dissemination. In the academic year 1997-1998, the University of New Hampshire conducted an evaluation of a yearlong instructional model that combined both Picturing Writing and Image-Making, which was then being used in 39 states. The results, focusing on students in New Hampshire, Texas, and Hawaii, documented significant gains in the writing skills of students who were taught consistently through this model, compared with a demographically matched comparison group.

In 1999, funded by a Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the Main Street School in Exeter, New Hampshire, adopted Picturing Writing and Image-Making schoolwide and integrated this visual approach into its language arts and science curriculum. Main Street has continued implementing the model, which has resulted in impressive standardized test score data over time.¹

The data show the power of this model for improving the language arts achievement of students overall and in particular of those subgroups targeted by NCLB as needing assistance. Since 2000, both Main Street Title 1 students and those receiving special education services have consistently scored higher on standardized language arts assessments than the state average for students receiving such services. For example, in 2004, 86 percent of Main Street's 3rd graders receiving Title 1-funded services scored at "basic or above" on the state's language arts assessment; only 51 percent of Title 1 3rd graders statewide scored at this level.

In terms of the state's standardized writing assessment, since 2000 Main Street's 3rd grade Title 1 students have scored above the state average of all 3rd grade students.

Susan O'Connor, Director of Instruction for Language Arts and Science at Main Street School, asserts that

Adopting Picturing Writing and Image-Making schoolwide has given our teachers the tools they need to move our lowest-performing students forward. In my 30-year career as an educator, I have never seen an approach as effective in improving the reading and writing skills and standardized tests scores of our lowest-performing students. Best of all, the students are enthralled with the process and so proud of their published books.

By giving students access to visual as well as verbal modes of thinking and alternative pathways to learning, Picturing Writing and Image-Making can clearly help low-performing students move forward in terms of both mastering literacy skills and defining their own voices.

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Endnote

¹ To view video clips of Main Street students sharing their art and writing and reflecting on their experiences in artists/writers workshop (and to see data on the approach's effectiveness), visit www.picturingwriting.org.

[Respond to this Article](#)

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