

# MAKING WRITING A WORK OF ART: IMAGE-MAKING WITHIN THE WRITING PROCESS

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*Integrating art with writing has powerful effects on children's compositions.*

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I wish I could say that the pictures come first or the words come first. But no, it is not that simple. It is the *idea* which comes first in pictures and in words.

—Eric Carle (Carle & Danckert, 1992)

As an art educator and long-time believer in the writing process, I had often felt dismayed at the lack of attention given to the illustration of student-published books. Frequently, I had heard teachers comment that children's "rehearsal drawings" were a lot richer in detail and more lively than were their final illustrations. I had observed that many students lost interest in illustrating their published books, which resulted in quick marker sketches or unillustrated pages. I had also noticed that although drawing was encouraged as a form of rehearsal in many primary writing process classrooms, this practice began to fade as early as second grade. Children of the upper grades seemed to experience very little connection to their visual imagery.

My deep respect for the writing process still withstanding, I yearned to find a way to validate children not only as authors but also as artists and illustrators. I was itching to bring *real art materials* into the

writing workshop. I suspected that within the writing process there lay a great missed opportunity.

The research of Howard Gardner (1983) and Vera John-Steiner (1985) has documented the vast multiplicity of human intelligence. Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, coupled with John-Steiner's investigation into the "full interplay of internal and external thought processes" (p. 9), underscore the importance of nurturing the development of multiple interactive language systems, particularly during the childhood years. Ruth Hubbard (1987) addresses this issue as it pertains to the teaching of writing:

Even in classrooms that emphasize teaching writing as a process, drawings are considered just a rehearsal. But they are much more. Children's drawings are visual tools for problem-solving. Through them children make sense of the world, and impart their visions. Teachers who channel children narrowly toward verbal solutions may be denying them the opportunity to share the full power of their images. (p. 60)

In 1990, I received a grant from the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts to develop an "illustration component" to the writing process to explore this long-burning issue. My vision at the time was admittedly narrow. I wanted to validate children as authors *and* illustrators, and I wanted to integrate art into the daily classroom curriculum. I had little idea of what awaited me in the classroom.

Four years, 12 grants, and 20 classrooms later, I only now begin to fathom the importance of the door I accidentally cracked open on that day in September 1990 when I unsuspectingly walked into Barbara Rynerson's Grade 1/2 combination classroom, paint boxes in hand. What ironically began as a tiny seed of an idea, a vision of children as author/illustrators, evolved into something much greater. It was the children; their richness of process; their total engagement; and their outstanding, published picturebooks

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that opened my eyes to greater visions. Today, "Image-Making within the Writing Process," as this program has come to be known, has won national recognition as an innovative effective literacy program. It continues to demonstrate its ability to awaken the imaginations and creativity of young

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author/illustrators. Repeatedly, it has taught me that when art becomes truly integrated throughout every stage of the writing process, both children's creative processes and their finished products share a quality of richness previously unequaled.

**Image-Making within the Writing Process:  
What Is It?**

Inspired by the colorful collage illustrations of author/illustrators such as Eric Carle, Leo Lionni, and Ezra Jack Keats, Image-Making within the Writing Process has evolved into a specific method for integrating children's visual imagery throughout their writing process. To begin, each child creates a portfolio of hand-painted, textured papers through a series of process-oriented explorations. Paper texturing techniques range from bubble painting, sponge painting, and painting on Plexiglas to watercolor on wet paper, salt on watercolor, and marbling. Once these portfolios are complete, children use their textured papers to awaken their imaginations. Discovered creatures and settings become rich resources for story ideas.

The textured papers next become the raw materials for building colorful collage images. As children weave story images in pictures and words, stories develop through a lively interactive process of physical manipulation, visual imagery, oral language, and written words.

Once their collage images are complete, children learn to "read" their own images, often drawing rich, descriptive language from the colors, textures, rhythms, and shapes appearing within their own images. Children use "image-reading" again at the time

of revision to add further detail and descriptive language to their text.

In order to prepare stories for publication, children carefully match and number pictures and words. Texts are typed and then glued to the back of appropriate collage illustrations. Collage books are typically spiral bound with a clear plastic front and back pages or laminated and then bound. Each newly published author/illustrator is honored at an author/illustrator's celebration.

Because this program respects all children as authors and illustrators, regardless of writing ability or so-called "artistic talent," it is structured to support visual as well as verbal forms of expression. This means providing children with art materials capable of producing a fine product. It means holding discussions on the work of professional author/illustrators in order to better understand their craft. Most important, it means giving children the license to create their stories in the ways that make sense to them. They may choose to make all their pictures first, write all their words first, or weave back and forth between the two. Whatever the case, words and pictures are treated with equal respect.

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learning styles. Because visual imagery, kinesthetic experience, and oral and written language are equally valued and supported, the program gives children the freedom to follow their unique creative processes as they discover and weave stories in picture and word images.

After observing the unique storymaking processes of over 400 young author/illustrators in Grades 1-6, I have grown to respect the many ways this method supports diverse learners. I have also come to recognize specific points in the process where the intersection of visual, kinesthetic, and verbal modes of thinking greatly enriches children's writing process. It is at these junction points that I believe the most



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dynamic and interesting forms of generative thinking take place. Although I have redefined the stages of writing to reflect more accurately their strong visual component, in reality these stages do not always remain distinct but often overlap one another.

### Prewriting: Image-Finding

In contrast to the prewriting stage in a typical writing process classroom, prewriting for children of The Image-Making Process is full of lush explorations with *real art materials*. The texturing techniques are simple and accessible to all children, regardless of age or artistic background. Children take delight in each unique art process as well as in each finished product. And without the burden of needing to create representational images, their minds are free to *discover images* and *make meaning* out of their own abstract creations. Their ideas are imaginative and their language in discussing them is unusually descriptive.

Children often “see things” in their textured papers while they are still in the midst of creating. And these discoveries often reappear later in their story-making process. Chris, a second grader, leans over the marbleizing tray, slowly combing the green-colored paints that float on top of his marbleizing solution. He seems mesmerized, lost in the ever-changing, swirling design he is creating. Suddenly his eyes grow wider, and his face draws closer to the tray. “Look,” he calls out to his pal, who stands beside him equally engrossed, “I see a great big dragon with long wings and sharp talons. [Pause.] Oh, wow! Look at this. If you look closely, you can see him moving across the sky!” Chris has the foresight to know that he can actually capture his discovered dragon on paper if he quickly drops a piece of paper flat onto the tray. He does this. Later, Chris’s captured dragon becomes the focus of his story.

Many of the texturing processes are not just highly visual, but highly kinesthetic as well. As is the case with this fourth-grade classroom, many of the explorations during paper texturing are accompanied by movement, rhythm, or a song. Paint sponges in hand, 9-year-old Brian and his best friend, Shawn, energetically dab away at their colorful sponge paintings to the rhythm of a Bach concerto. As the music comes to a crescendo, they dab their sponges frenetically and in complete unison, as if part of a choreographed piece. Across from them, at the splatter table, four boys fully embody the experience of splatter paint. As their bodies reverberate each time they splatter paint onto their papers, they accompany

themselves with a variety of explosive sound effects. Several tables down, Andrea smears brightly colored watercolors on her Plexiglas sheet, her head tipping from side to side as she eyes her painting. Sometimes the movements of her brush are slow, smooth, and thoughtful; at other times, totally impulsive and percussive. With her brush, she dances a painting on top of the smooth, shiny surface. Out of these movement experiences, images often arise, like visions of volcanic eruptions that grew out of Blake’s experience of splatter painting.

Sometimes spontaneous meaning making occurs later in the prewriting process when children are admiring their finished works. This process can be encouraged by presenting whole-group mini-lessons on free association. Showing the class a variety of textured papers, one at a time, children are given the opportunity to describe what they see. Descriptions range from simple phrases such as “dark clouds before a thunderstorm” and “a beautiful sunset” to lengthy passages that take children deep into story. (“I see the waves crashing against the rocks and stuff. I see a big storm out at sea and a ship about to get shipwrecked.”)

Following this whole-group activity, children are asked to spread out their textured papers on the floor and find the stories hidden within their own textured papers. With this irresistible invitation, children’s fertile imaginations are set in motion. Through a natural process of free association, children often discover creatures and settings within their colorful, decorated papers. As they take great delight in each discovery, they spontaneously begin to weave a story.

Ross, a first grader, demonstrates the essential role that visual imagery can play in children’s ability to create and give shape to story ideas. On the first day of Image-Making, after Ross has done some initial looking at his textured papers, he hangs on the back of his chair, looking lost and forelorn. Having difficulty creating a bridge between his ideas and the blank piece of paper before him, Ross watches other children plunge into their storymaking process. When asked to share his story idea, his eyes light up. He picks up a blue marbled paper. “I think I found something,” he says, bringing the paper just inches away from his face, “a thing with two eyes and a mouth.” After staring into the goading face of his discovered creature, Ross grins. “I know what my story is called: *Do you know what an animal is?*” He elaborates: “I’m gonna try to find all kinds of strange things to be animals. The animals that *do ex-*

*ist, don't exist.* I want to say that the strange animals are the *real* ones."

As Ross shares his ideas, he casually picks a plastic wrap print and begins cutting around a second discovered creature. "It's a Frost Cacklelor. He's ferocious. He doesn't like being disturbed while he's making his ice. He spits out ice from his mouth after he swishes water inside his mouth. Inside his mouth is very, very cold." Then, picking up a textured paper created by blowing paint through a straw, Ross points to a few spidery shapes. "Here's some Spider Walkers right here. They come in different shapes and sizes." Grappling with their unique postures as he turns the page at all different angles, he announces, "They can walk, fly or swim. . . . And here's a Paint Plucker [pointing to a splatter painting]. It spits out paint. It's a kind of animal artist. It likes splattering paint, and it uses its tail to form the paint into pictures. Sometimes it paints on animals to camouflage them, and it can turn itself into different colors by squirting paint all over itself." Ross continues, "At the end, I'm gonna have the Paint Plucker camouflage all the strange animals so no one can see them." His eyes twinkle, "People will only see regular animals!" Ross looks up from the page with a big grin. He boasts, "I have a *big* imagination. I can even change *real* people to look like all kinds of things."

Through observing Ross, it is easy to see how image-finding readily becomes image-weaving.

### Rehearsal: Image-Weaving

Rehearsal during The Image-Making Process takes on a variety of forms. As children are given the task of discovering the stories hidden within their own abstract creations, they often naturally begin to weave together story threads as Ross did. Although this image-weaving process usually requires deep thought, it doesn't stay silent for long because this activity generates a great deal of excitement among the children. Children eagerly share their ideas with their peers and thus have the opportunity to rehearse their story orally several times through. Before children begin cutting and pasting, they are required to verbalize their ideas to their teacher. This provides another opportunity for story rehearsal.

Doug, a second grader, kneels before a vast spread of textured papers he has created. Although he claims that he does not have any story ideas, he immediately begins to pull papers from the spread. Found images and settings soon are woven together to form a single story thread:

This one [a golden watercolor on wet paper] reminds me of a golden sunset. This one [a golden-and-pink watercolor sprinkled with salt] reminds me of when a sunset turns all colors and [referring to the crystal-like texture created by the salt] the sky sparkles. This green marbled paper reminds me of a swirling whirlpool deep down in the ocean. I think there's gonna be a shiny spaceship full of pirates that flies out of the sunset. It flies through all different kinds of skies. They're gonna be looking for gems and stuff at the end of the rainbow. See my rainbow page? [Doug picks up a colorful watercolor wash.] But before they find the rainbow, the spaceship gets sucked down into this slimy whirlpool in the ocean. The spaceship gets pulled deep underwater. Here it is on this page underwater. See all the seaweed?

Doug points to the green fronds which resulted from not combing his marbleizing solution. He pauses to think. "I think I have a pretty good story idea. I'm gonna number each of my papers so I won't forget the order of my story."

While not all stories come together as easily as Doug's, his process of finding meaning in his textured paper and then weaving together those story threads is typical of many children participating in The Image-Making Process.

### Drafting: Image-Making

During actual image-making, children cut and paste their textured papers to create collage images. Although I consider image-making a legitimate form of story drafting, it can also be an elaborate vehicle for text rehearsal. As Stefanie, a second grader and second-year student of The Image-Making Process, reflects on her process, it becomes clear that the time she spends cutting and pasting is, for her, very much a time of story rehearsal. Stefanie describes her process:

My idea for this story came from what I saw in my papers. I saw this beautiful pink hair in my pink marbled paper, and I decided to write a story about a girl who had the most beautiful hair in the world. Then I saw this straw painting, and it reminded me of witch's hair, all scraggly and stuff. I thought I could do a story about a mean old witch and some spells on the beautiful girl. I began with my first picture first, this one of the girl looking in the mirror. Isn't her hair beautiful? [Pausing to admire her picture] Then when I finished my picture, I wrote my words down so I wouldn't forget them. Then I made my next picture. I always write my words down after, so I don't forget.

When asked if she knows what is going to happen next in her story, Stefanie responds as if it were a foolish question, "I won't know that until I make my next picture!"



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In contrast to Stefanie, whose pictures lead her storyline, Kevin, at least some of the time, finds his words leading the way. This 6-year-old author/illustrator sums up his experience as follows: "While I write, pictures are just drawn in my mind; and I just take them out of my mind and look at them and put them down on a piece of paper, just as I saw them in my mind." At times, however, Kevin's visual images take the lead: "While I was doing the pictures first, words just started to grow, and I got more and more ideas to write, and I just write and write and write until it was a finished book. . . ." Kevin's description of his process demonstrates that he uses both written language and visual imagery to generate ideas and that he can easily translate one form into the other.

Although some children, like Stefanie and Kevin, weave back and forth between pictures and words, it is not uncommon for children to choose to create *all* their images first. Eight-year-old Doug is one of those children. After carefully numbering his discovered "setting pages," he lays them out in a row, mapping out his story plot one more time. He picks up the first of these textured papers to work on. He proceeds to cut out story details, securing them with glue onto his background paper. Doug systematically creates image after image, using each of his "setting papers" as background for each of his collage images. He spends hours adding tiny detail to his images in both collage and fine-tipped black marker. He dresses his pirates in ragged clothes and gives each of them a black patch and a flag with crossbones and skull. At the part in his story when the spaceship gets sucked down into the whirlpool, Doug cuts out only half of the ship and sets it straight up and down on the page to create the effect of a ship plunging into the ocean. "You can't see the other half," Doug explains, "because it's already underwater." By the time Doug has completed his series of collage images, his story details are securely fastened to the page. All he needs to do is go back to the beginning and "read" his pictures in order to create his text.

### Drafting: Image-Reading

The term "image-reading" refers to the practice of looking at completed collage images and "reading" (verbalizing) what is already "written down" in the picture. This activity has come to be a vital tool for helping children translate their thoughts into written language. It may be practiced both as a whole-group exercise and during individual conferences. If a child has chosen to make images first, having the

story details literally glued to the page in pictorial fashion can make the process of drafting the text much more tangible for young writers. Through the practice of "reading" their own collage images, children are often able to verbalize the rich visual detail already existing within their own art work. Image-reading tends to elicit a greater use of descriptive language even in the youngest of writers. After looking at the light blue marbled sky on his collage image, Peter, a first grader, writes: "As we drove on further, the clouds looked very different. They were swirling and curling. It looked like a typhoon. Some of the clouds looked like white cotton lily pads."

Children's language often takes on a more sensory quality, demonstrating some children's ability to "climb" into their own colorful images, experiencing their story "as if they were there." The first few sentences of Jonathan's winter adventure story reflect this quality of "being there." Seven-year-old Jonathan writes: "It was a very cold day and I was going outside. The snow was up to my waist. I could barely walk. I pulled the sled along. I struggled up the hill. I went flying down on my sled. The wind was blowing in my face. I was scared. My sled hit a bump, and I flew through the air. When I landed, I was buried up to my head. I could not even move my arms."

Hannah, a third grader and second-year student of the process, already understands image-reading and is able to explain the choices she has made in her own storymaking process: "I always do my pictures

*"I always do my pictures first because then I can get some looks 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."*

first because then I can get some looks 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."

### Revision: Image-Reading

If rich language does not find its way into a child's first draft writing (which is often the case), it is easy to retrieve it during the revision process. The prac-

tice of image-reading has become an excellent tool for revision because it offers students of all ages a tangible method for recapturing their original story detail. As each collage image serves as a concrete record of each student's ideas, young author/illustrators are able not only to recall their original thoughts but also to use their colorful collage images to elicit rich detail and description. With their collage images in front of them, not only do students seem unusually amenable to revising their stories, but also their revision can take many varied forms: (1) They sometimes add words or pictures, (2) they sometimes take away words or pictures, and (3) they sometimes rearrange words or pictures. This is as true in the first grade as it is in the sixth.

Using their own collage images as a springboard for revision finally makes this process very accessible to young writers. Following a revision conference, Greg, a second grader, reads his revised story to his classmates. When asked to share with fellow author/illustrators what the revision process was like for him, Greg smiles, then quickly turns to his first page:

My story used to say, "One day a man went scuba diving." That's all. Then I changed it to: "One *sunny* day a man went scuba diving to the *bottom* of the *dark blue* ocean. It was very *sandy*. He saw lots of *salmon* and *blue fish* and *squiggly* plants down there."

Proudly, Greg comments, "I added *lots* of describing words." Quickly he turns to his second page of writing.

All I had on this page was: "He saw lots of jellyfish." Now it says: "He saw lots of jellyfish. They were big and round, bumpy and slimy. They had big purple dots in the middle. They were squirting purple ink into the bottom of the ocean. When the scuba diver looked up, he saw the sunlight shining down through the water."

When asked by his teacher how he was able to add so much more descriptive language to his writing, Greg says simply: "I saw it in my pictures."

### Preparation for Publication: Image-Matching

Beyond the normal editing that needs to occur in order to prepare a story for publication, within The Image-Making Process student author/illustrators must face the task of matching pictures and words. This provides them with yet another concrete format for checking their story for content, organization, or sequencing. Matching pictures and words can become a catalyst for yet further revision of either words or pictures. This is the case for Stefanie, as she pre-

pares her story for publication. She carefully reads through her story, matching her text and illustrations. As she clips together corresponding words and pictures, she discovers a picture missing at the end of her story. Stefanie pauses, her freckled face wrinkling. "This picture doesn't go with these words," she says in a dismayed voice. Stefanie has a problem to solve. After reading through her text several times, she opts to create one final collage image in order to give her story a strong visual ending.

### Conclusion

Through the integration of children's visual imagery throughout the various stages of writing, Image-Making within the Writing Process provides an enticing alternative pathway into writing for children with diverse learning styles. Surrounding young author/illustrators with a lush array of colors and textures, the process awakens their imaginations and offers them new options for discovering/creating story. Adding a rich visual and kinesthetic component to the writing process not only dramatically alters children's story-making process, but it also greatly enhances their finished pieces.

A 2-year research study, conducted by the Laboratory for Interactive Learning at the University of New Hampshire, supports these observations. Findings, based on the blind scoring of first- and second-grade "before and after" writing samples, document that students who participate in Image-Making Within the Writing Process demonstrate dramatic improvement in their writing abilities and gain fuller power of expression as compared to a control group of demographically matched, nonparticipating students. Research evidence supports the following conclusions: Children participating in The Image-Making Process tend to move away from straight personal narrative writing and to write more fiction. Writing topics become much more varied and imaginative. Even stories that begin as personal narrative often take a dramatic leap into fiction as children can no longer hold back their active imaginations. Story plots are not only more imaginative but also more fully developed. Stories have a stronger sense of beginning, middle, and ending. They are better crafted, often having a more literary quality. Rich descriptive language is prevalent, even in the stories of emerging first-grade writers.

A second study, which looked at the relationship between children's text and illustrations, documents that the visual images of participating children provide a fuller expression of ideas and contribute



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greatly to their sense of story. The elements of color, space, shape, and texture, as well as use of detail and shift in physical perspective, are used by children to enhance the meaning of the text. Their visual images not only convey important aspects of the text but, at times, are also vital in carrying the story *beyond* the text.

As young author/illustrators experience Image-Making within the Writing Process, they come to understand the ways in which it supports them both as writers and illustrators. Serena, a sixth grader, sums up her experience this way: "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."

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