

Making Magic: Bringing Words and Pictures Together

Beth Olshansky

Merrilee Thissell's first-graders gather on the rug to share their stories-in-progress. On Monday, during artists/writers workshop, they had looked at "lead pictures" in favorite picture books and discussed the purpose of the lead picture (which runs parallel to the purpose of the lead sentence). They decided that most often the lead picture tells about the place, the time of day, the weather, and sometimes the season. Sometimes the lead picture introduces the character; sometimes it does not. Then, they carefully crafted their own lead pictures using crayon resist-based art techniques they have been practicing for months. (Their story ideas had already been anchored by the storyboards they completed last week.)

Earlier this morning, Wednesday, during artists/writers workshop, the students listened to several lead sentences and discussed what makes a strong lead. They noticed that the lead sentences often provide the same information as the lead picture—in fact, lead sentences usually tell about the picture. They noted that the best leads make you want to turn the page. Then, with their "setting pictures" carefully placed in desktop easel stands, they brainstormed "describing words" on a special sheet designed for that purpose and wrote about their paintings, purposefully, in order to set the stage for their story and "make you want to turn the page."

Now it is time to share. Madeline carefully places her crayon resist painting, her lead picture, in an "artist's frame" designed to showcase the students' paintings and then takes her seat of honor in the artist's/writer's chair which has been placed opposite the artist's frame. All eyes are fixed on her painting of a winter setting (Figure 1). Madeline reads, "One icy winter night, snow drifted across the inky sky. All of a sudden, a howl came out of nowhere . . ."

Before she has time to take a breath, Tyrell and Lucus chant in unison, "Turn the page, turn the page!" This is their way of telling Madeline that she has succeeded in creating a strong lead with a hook. They can't wait to find out what will happen next.

On another area of the rug, Katelyn can't contain her excitement, "I saw the magic! I saw the magic! I saw the snow falling!" Other classmates call out, "Me, too! Me, too!" Madeline's legs swing back and forth underneath the artist's/writer's chair as a big grin spreads across her face. Indeed, with her picture and her words, she has made magic.

These budding young artists and writers are learning about the power of pictures and the magic that



Figure 1. Madeline's setting picture.

happens when words and pictures work together to make their picture “come alive.” This deepening of understanding about the relationship between words and pictures, and particularly about the power of strong verbs to make their picture appear to come to life, is part of the magic of artists/writers workshop. It is also the talk of Merrilee’s inner city first-grade class. These young artists and writers are learning with their very own eyes and ears about the crafts of writing and art. They are eager to enter the inner circle and make magic of their own. When questioned about what he likes best about artists/writers workshop, Tyrell’s eyes light up. He boasts, “My words make my pictures real.”

What Tyrell and his classmates do not realize is that they have tapped into a phenomenon few teachers and administrators understand—the power of transmediation. Transmediation is defined by Marjorie Siegel (1995) as the recasting of meaning from one sign system to another, in this case from pictures to words. Siegel, along with others in the field, claims that transmediation deepens students’ thinking and increases their generative and reflective abilities (Leland & Harste, 1994; Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, & Hoonan, 2000; Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000). This is one of the very reasons why artists/writers workshop creates such a dynamic learning experience in the classroom. Katelyn explains, “It’s easier for me to come up with describing words after I paint.” Haillee chimes in, “I like to write this way because I get to paint first. Then I look at my painting and think of silver dollar words to tell about it. [Then] I stare at my painting and my words make magic.” Katelyn nods in agreement: “Sometimes the picture comes to life.”

These young artists and writers at Hallsville Elementary file into their turn-of-the-century neighborhood school building each morning eager to continue working on their stories. Merrilee grins as they greet her with, “Are we going to work on our stories today?” A teacher for 38 years, Merrilee has never seen her students so enthusiastic about writing—or reading for that matter.

I have taught writing workshop before. Never have I seen my students so engaged in the writing process and so attuned to quality picture books. They are constantly identifying “silver dollar words” as I read to them. They are noticing art techniques used in picture book illustrations that I had never noticed before. The same picture books I have had sitting on my shelves for years have become wonderful treasure chests filled with art-

ists’ and writers’ craft. By participating in artists/writers workshop, my first graders have come to believe in themselves as artists and writers—all my students, not just those who are already strong writers. They have taken on the job of crafting their own picture books with care and purpose.

Eager to learn from professionals in the field, Merrilee’s students have learned to *read as writers* and *see as artists*.

Picture books have become highly valued mentor texts—not just for learning about how authors craft strong lead sentences and build drama and suspense with their words, but for learning what kinds of visual information illustrators include in their “lead pictures” or how artists make their “problem picture” look more scary. Students search through picture books to identify story elements, conveyed *in pictures and in words*, and then infuse their new understandings into their own carefully crafted picture books.

Case in point: Katelyn caused quite a stir when she used a close-up perspective discovered in *Owl Moon* (Yolen, 1987) to make her “problem picture look more scary” (Figure 2). To write to her close-up problem painting, she intentionally chose words and phrases to enhance the drama of the picture: “Suddenly, she heard noises out of nowhere.”

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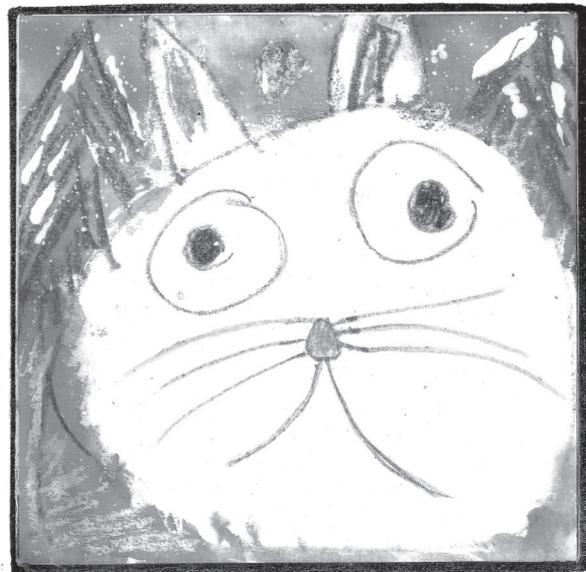


Figure 2. Katelyn’s problem picture.

Bunny Goosebumps! Thump, thump! Her heart pumping, she leaps!” Her class had already discussed the kinds of words that make the reader sit up and listen (such as *suddenly*, *all of a sudden*, *just then*, and *out of nowhere*). From Jonathan London’s *Baby Whale’s Journey*, Katelyn and her classmates had also learned that short sentences can serve to quicken the pace and thus heighten the drama in a story. She decided to try this technique in her own writing and discovered it worked! On her About the Artist/Writer page, Katelyn wrote,

My favorite is my problem picture. It is a close-up of my bunny. It really shows how scared she is. My words make you feel scared too, like bunny goosebumps, heart pumping. It’s nice that I made a happy ending.

Notice the sense of purpose and audience with which this first grader crafts both her pictures and her words.

Across the city at Webster Elementary, Kristen Beakey and Donna Papanikolau have adopted artists/writers workshop for their self-contained classroom of immigrant and refugee children, grades 3–5. Because Manchester, New Hampshire, serves as a National Refugee Relocation Center, Donna’s and Kristen’s students literally come from all over the world and with vastly different educational backgrounds. Immersed in crafting their own research-based stories in pictures and in words (in this case, about animals from around the world), their students pour over carefully selected mentor texts, gleaning information from the detailed illustrations. For these English-language learners, this visual approach to literacy learning makes particular sense. Students are able to become immediately engaged and productive members of the classroom community through their shared and universal language of pictures. Drawn into creating stories initially through explorations in enticing art techniques, these native speakers of other languages gain skills as artists and are eager to record their ideas in detailed pictures. They are then highly motivated to learn the English words to tell their stories. Ultimately, they want to write to their carefully crafted paintings in order to “publish” their stories. Their motivation is high as they create their very own picture books to share with their classmates and their families. Their pride in their beautiful published books is palpable. Donna and Kristen talk about their experiences:

This carefully designed “pictures first” approach to literacy learning has been a godsend for us. It gives all our

immigrant and refugee students a voice despite their varying backgrounds. We have never seen our extremely diverse community of learners acquire speaking, reading and writing skills so quickly. And they are so proud of the beautiful books they create!

Next door, Vanessa Rashid’s ELL second graders just finished writing their About the Artist/Writer pages to appear at the back of their published books. Gani, a student from Uzbekistan, wrote, “I think it is nice to make the book because I can show people of the world this book. I can read this book to them.” Gani’s good friend Ubaldo from Puerto Rico wrote,

I like to paint and learn and read and write. I like to make this book because I like to learn. I learn about polar bears. I learn to draw the bear. I was thinking so much, very hard, to this learn book. I practice so much. My book can be very beautiful.

Within the Manchester School District, these three classrooms are not unique. Three elementary schools across the city have volunteered to participate in a four-year federally funded Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination (AEMDD) research study which is investigating the impact of this integrated art-and-literature-based approach to literacy learning on the reading and writing skills of Manchester’s very diverse student population. The study is also evaluating students’ use of visual elements to communicate their ideas. A total of 1,500 students in grades 1–4, half in the treatment group and half in demographi-



First grader Angel reads his published book to Gbibari.

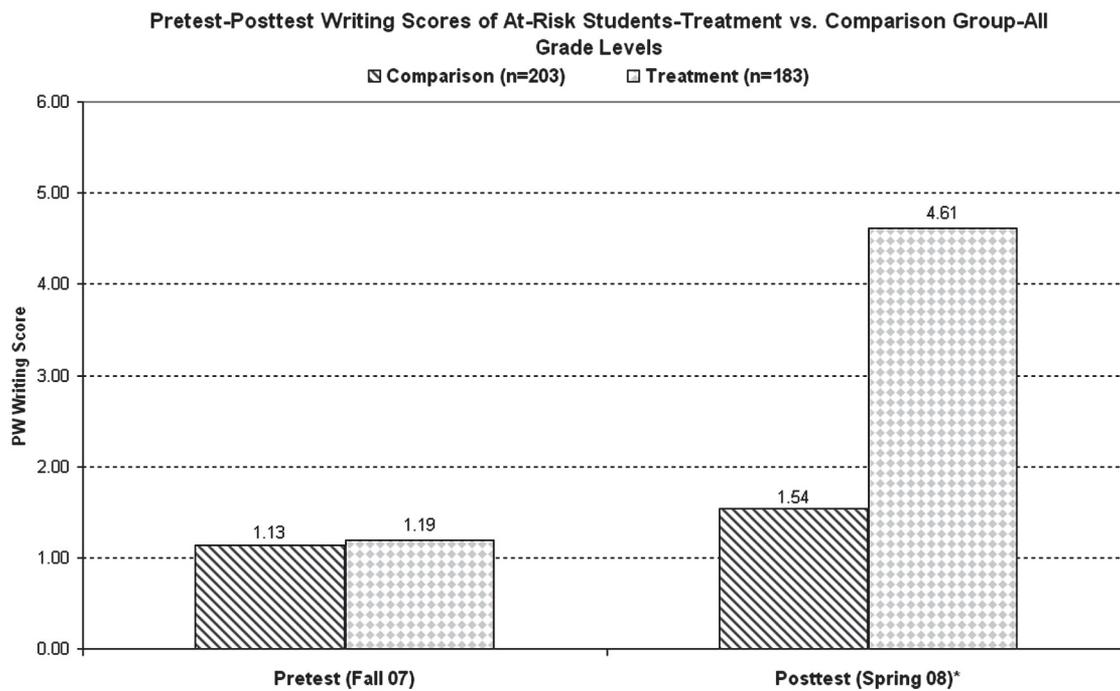
cally matched comparison groups, are participating in this study. Particular attention will be paid to the impact of this art-based approach on “below benchmark” students, special education students, and English-language learners. Findings from the first year of data reveal significant gains in writing from “below benchmark” students in the treatment group as compared to a demographically matched “below benchmark” comparison group who were not participating in the Picturing Writing process (Table 1). Additional findings are available at www.picturingwriting.org/effectiveness.html.

Manchester is not alone in its interest in these alternative art-based literacy methods. Schools across the U.S. and Canada, from the balmy shores of Honolulu to the arid desert of Albuquerque to the frozen tundra of the Canadian Arctic, have adopted the artists/writers workshop model. They are discovering that this visual approach to literacy learning not only engages their struggling readers and reluctant writers, but is also surprisingly effective. Why? Simply put, the universal language of pictures is also the “first language” of all children, no matter where they live. Whether children struggle with learning to read and write



Second-grade ELL student Migdalis writes to her wolf painting.

their first language or a second language, from a very early age on, most children can pick up a picture book and read the pictures for meaning. So too can they pick up a crayon or a marker and create a picture that tells a story. (Whether



*The difference between treatment and comparison groups is statistically significant.

Table 1. Comparison of writing gains made by at-risk students in treatment and comparison groups, grades 1–4.



Second grader Connor fills out his brainstorming sheet.

or not we adults can “read” it, it is meaningful to the child who created it.) While they are a natural language for meaning-making, for thinking, developing, expressing, and even recording ideas, pictures have become a second-class citizen in today’s classroom. With the emphasis on making AYP (Adequate Yearly Process) and the threat of becoming a DINI (District in Need of Improvement) under NCLB, today’s teachers and administrators are under great pressure to drill, drill, drill basic skills—especially with those students who do not take well to these traditional verbally based methods. Ironically, we forget that these students have proven time and again that this is not an effective way for them to learn, thus their poor test scores. We often overlook the fact that those who traditionally bring down our school’s AYP often have strengths as visual and kinesthetic learners. If we want these students to succeed, we need to meet them at least halfway, and that often means using visual and kinesthetic tools for teaching essential literacy skills.

As arts programs are being cut across the country to make room for more teaching to the test, we are forgetting something so very basic: the ability to visualize is

the key to comprehension. We need to picture what we are reading in order to understand it. The ability to visualize is also the key to writing. We need to picture what we want to write before we can find words to describe it. This ability to visualize is essential to our students’ success as readers and writers. Ironically, these skills are strengthened by the everyday work of the artist—who keenly observes the world around him or her, takes mental snapshots for later use, and calls up those mental images when needed. To adopt the habits of mind of an artist is to strengthen those very skills required to become a strong reader and writer. And in the process, engaging in the daily work of the artist often supports the self-esteem and self-efficacy of those who struggle with verbal learning. As policymakers pressure educators to go “back to basics,” artists/writers workshop invites us to rethink what we mean by “the basics.” Remember the 3 Rs? It’s time we recognize the powerful relationship between Reading, Writing, and ART. ●

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Beth Olshansky is director of the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy at the University of New Hampshire. Her new book, *The Power of Pictures: Creating Pathways to Literacy through Art*, was published by Jossey-Bass in April 2008. For more information about her visual approach to literacy learning, visit www.picturingwriting.org.