

Teacher as Action Researcher

Susan O'Byrne

Like any good teacher, I have continually searched for ways to improve my teaching and learn more about learning in order to best meet the diverse needs of my students. In 1993, after teaching nearly 20 years in K-5 public school classrooms, I began a journey that has enriched me, personally and professionally. I was introduced to Beth Olshansky's art-and-literature-based instructional models: *Image-Making Within the Writing Process*, and later, *Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art*. Using these models has been the single most important thing I have done for my teaching and for my students.

During the 1997-98 school year, my class participated in a yearlong research project to determine the impact of implementing *Picturing Writing* and *Image-Making* as a full year intervention, with stunning results. I continued to attend workshops and trainings and in the summer of 2000, I became a certified trainer. Since that time, I have taught many workshops and have shared these successful literacy models with other educators, in grades K-12 and at the college level.

While I continued to refine my skills teaching *Picturing Writing and Image-Making*, I also worked as a cooperating teacher with interns who were supervised by Dr. Tom Schram from the University of New Hampshire. Dr. Schram had begun teaching a new course, *Analysis of Teaching*, designed to help educators research an aspect of their teaching. This "action research" project was an opportunity for me to take a deeper look into my own practice and to evaluate my own effectiveness using these art-based approaches that had become so important to my literacy program.

In the spring of 2002, I took the course with Dr. Schram. Our text, *The Art of Classroom Inquiry, A Handbook for Teacher- Researchers*, was written by Ruth Shagoury Hubbard and Brenda Miller Power. Some of the surrounding questions that surfaced at the beginning stages of my inquiry included questions about how I had facilitated these models in my classroom and how I might carry this over into other areas of my literacy program. I used various strategies and techniques outlined in the handbook to observe, interview, and assess my students and evaluate my teaching. Dr. Schram helped facilitate the processes that eventually lead me to my "action research" question: *How does the learner's experience with Picturing Writing carry over into other literacy learning?*

Within the context of this presentation for the AREA, I will share and discuss my observations from this action research. In addition, I will share examples of several *Picturing Writing* projects I designed with teachers in grades 1-5 in my district during a two year period that I spent as the K-5 District Mentor.

My action research question, "*How does the learner's experience with Picturing Writing carry over into other literacy learning?*" allowed me to identify many areas of literacy impacted by *Picturing Writing*. In particular I looked at the ways students talked about their own and each other's work during the Group Share. During author/ illustrator studies and whole class modeling sessions, my second and third graders studied each other's pictures and listened to their

peer's writing. They identified the skills and concepts we were learning about from the work of professional artists and writers. As they shared their own work, the students identified the use of descriptive language, including examples of similes and personification. They suggested revisions to each other. They recognized when someone described a strong "setting" or used strong "lead sentences" that included a "hook" to grab the reader. They commented on character development, plot development, and whether the author brought his or her story to closure. They noticed the use of varying perspectives in the artwork, and how these techniques work with the words to tell the story.

Evan told David that he should use more descriptive language because the colors he used in his paintings were so beautiful. Hannah liked the upside-down perspective of the polar bear in the water. Sven suggested that Justin could revise one of his pictures by adding more details. When Brett listened to Cody's story, she suggested that he mention more about the sky on his setting page. Catherine remarked that Ned's snowman's eyes were "as black as Oreo Cookies".

Inspired by these astute comments from my second and third graders, I made a more conscious effort to ask my students to identify these elements in the stories that we read aloud. We focused not only on the text, but also on the illustrations. We discussed not only how the words paint pictures, but also how the pictures can tell the story.

I decided to interview my students and developed five questions:

- what is *Picturing Writing*?
- do you like it? If yes, why? If no, why not?
- how do you get your ideas for your writing?
- what makes a good story?
- what is revision? How do you revise?

I found that all the students I interviewed could describe the steps involved in *Picturing Writing*: creating the pictures first, using the graphic organizer to brainstorm words and phrases for each painting, writing lead sentences for the setting page, etc.

Students noted that they liked *Picturing Writing* for the following reasons:

- doing the art- it's fun to draw and paint first
- it's easy to get the words from the pictures
- enjoy listening to others' stories and seeing the artwork
- able to get ideas from the painting.

Students were able to recall all the elements that "make a good story" and were able to talk about revision. They defined revision as "a way to make the story better by adding or taking away words," or "changing words to be more specific or more descriptive." One student described revision as "changing the order of your pictures so your story will make more sense."

Observing my students engaged in literacy discussions and reflecting on their understanding of literacy practices within the context of *Picturing Writing*, deepened my understanding of how profound this process can be. This, in turn,

enriched my own understanding of the *Picturing Writing* process and energized my own classroom practices. As a teacher of *Picturing Writing*, I continue to explore ways to best facilitate the process in order to benefit my students.

Additionally, I observed first-hand how this concrete visual approach to writing allowed all of my students, with all of their diverse needs and learning styles, to succeed. There is such tremendous value in having students learn literacy skills through these art-infused approaches to literacy learning. To quote Beth Olshansky, engaging in art before writing helps to “level the playing field” for students who struggle with language skills.

A year later, in 2002, my teaching assignment changed. Our district created a new position designed to give veteran teachers an opportunity to leave their classrooms for a period of time and mentor their colleagues. As District Mentor, K-5, I was responsible for mentoring teachers in their first, second or third years of teaching. A second level of the mentorship allowed me to pursue my area of expertise- *Picturing Writing and Image-Making*. During the next two years, from 2003-05, I worked in our two K-4 schools and with 5th grade teachers at our middle school. The teachers and I collaborated on two dozen different curriculum-related, art-and-literature-based projects. The students produced an outstanding array of art, poetry and research-based narrative writing.

The second year of my mentorship culminated with an exciting arts-integrated community project and event. A UNH music professor, Mr. Christopher Kies, composed a piece of music using our students’ poetry. A children’s choral group, The Sandpipers, and an adult choral group, Amare Cantare, performed the music jointly. In addition to the musical pieces, several students’ poems were recited throughout the performance and the children’s art and poetry projects were displayed in the lobby. The performances were moving and memorable. It was a wonderful way to celebrate the success of our students as artists and writers.

In 2005, I returned to the classroom as a third grade teacher and partnered with a colleague who also uses *Picturing Writing*. That year, the school-wide theme was “Life Through the Eyes of an Artist”. Together we carried out five different curriculum-related *Picturing Writing* projects and several additional art-and-literacy-based projects. Our students used fiction and nonfiction picture books throughout the year, using both “visual research” (studying the pictures to glean information) as well as their reading skills to become experts about everything from trees, birds and weather (creating art and writing poetry), to biographies of famous people (with life-size cutouts and narrative writing) and a *Picturing Writing* research-based animal story. Currently, my teaching partner and I continue to integrate art and use *Picturing Writing* with our third graders.

My action research continues with an ever-increasing focus on how the use of *Picturing Writing*, with its art-and-literature-based approaches, helps students internalize their literacy learning in child-centered, concrete, visual ways. It is a pleasure to be able to join other educators and researchers as we share our work at the annual meeting of the AERA.