

Artists/Writers Workshop: Focusing in on the ART of Writing

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Artists/Writers Workshop

Children explore meaning-making in the language of pictures and the language of words.

Beth Olshansky

When I first introduced “real artists materials” into a writing workshop over 16 years ago, I noticed that it was those students who struggled with words who instantly became invigorated. Peter, age 8 and in the first grade, no longer refused to read or write. When given the opportunity to draft his story in collage images created out of his own beautiful hand-painted textured papers, he became an active, engaged crafter of story. These irresistible materials lured him into literally constructing story as he fashioned collage image after image using his hand-painted papers to make meaning. As his nimble fingers worked confidently to fasten his imaginative ideas to each page with a glue stick, he could not resist telling his story over and over again. Words came to him. His words. As his investment grew with the making and reading of each new image, Peter decided that he wanted to learn how to record the words that had become so meaningful to him. Once he had recorded his story using invented spelling, his collage story was “professionally published.” Peter decided that he wanted to learn how to read his story so he could share it at the Author/Illustrator’s Tea. Peter read his story at the tea and then went on to craft many more stories, pictures first.

This is not just Peter’s story. David, an active second-grader, reported, “I hate to write. The words just fly out of my head before I can get them down on paper.” David discovered that during Artists/Writers Workshop, he was able to secure his ideas to each page using a glue stick. Beaming with pride at his first published book, he shared, “Writing used to be hard, but now it is easy. All I have to do is look at each picture and describe some things I see. I listen to my words to see if they match with my story and they always do.” Words no longer flew out of David’s head. He pronounced writing his favorite time of day.

These experiences with struggling readers and reluctant writers becoming enthusiastic readers and writers planted the seeds for what has become an ongoing investigation into the “art” of writing (Olshansky, 1994). Rooted in writing workshop as described by Graves (1983) and Calkins (1986) and supported by Ernst’s artists workshop (1993), Artists/Writers Workshop is designed to create a democratic classroom community in which words and pictures are treated as equal and complementary languages for learning. Quality picture books are used as mentor texts to teach the language of words as

well as the language of pictures (Ray, 2004; Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998). Removing the verbocentric bias from traditional language arts instructional practices (Leland & Harste, 1994; Eisner, 2003), this workshop consists of a four-step process that gives equal weight to the complementary languages of pictures and words—Literature Share/Discussion, Modeling, Work Session, and Group Share.

During Artists/Writers Workshop, students are encouraged to make pictures first, thus creating multiple opportunities to move back and forth between pictures and words. As students move fluidly between these two languages, they experience transmediation or the recasting of meaning from one sign system to another. They discover pathways to new and stronger voices (Berghoff, Borgmann, & Parr, 2003; Siegel, 1995). The following photo-essay captures some of these voices. The images of children portrayed in this montage were chosen to reflect the voices of young artists/writers at work and do not depict the actual student who is being quoted. Color examples of students’ art and writing and a video clip of students reading and reflecting on their work can be seen at www.picturingwriting.org.

CHILDREN REFLECT ON . . . WHAT HAPPENS IN ARTISTS/WRITERS WORKSHOP



I just don't know what happens. Whenever I go to Artists/Writers Workshop, all sorts of good stuff just pops into my head.

—Chris, grade 1



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.

—Serena, grade 6

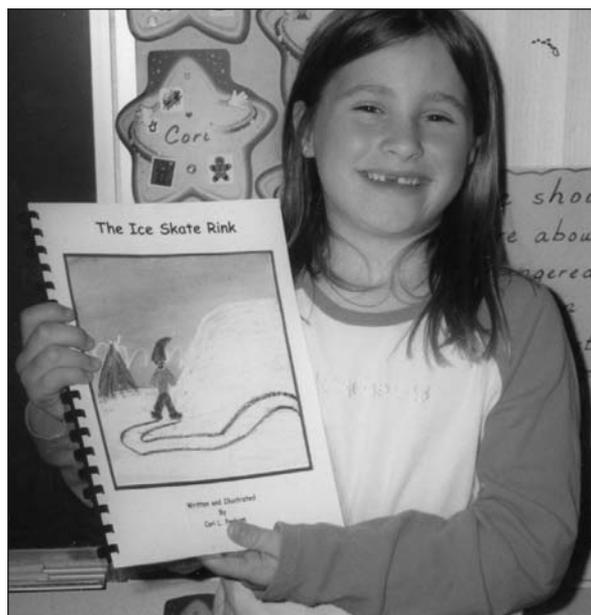
In Artists/Writers Workshop, we paint pictures with real artists' paints and make books full of silver dollar words.

—Nicole, grade 2



My story inspired me with all of my hard work and my dream came true. It was almost done! I think my book is magnificent because I worked hard!

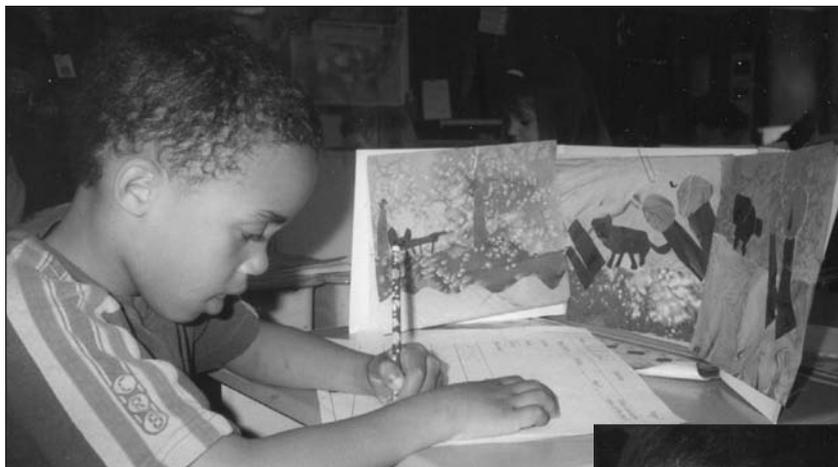
—Chelsea, grade 2



CHILDREN REFLECT ON . . . THEIR PROCESS AS ARTISTS AND WRITERS

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Artists/Writers Workshop



While I was doing the pictures first, words just started to grow and I got more and more ideas to write and I just writ and writ and writ until it was a finished book.

—Kevin, grade 1



When I was making my pictures, I looked at a book and it exspired me to make a better picture within myself.

—Jared, grade 2



I always make my pictures first because then I can get 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.

—Hannah, grade 2



I think of the first word, and then I look at the picture to get the rest of my words.

—Shayla, grade 1



Writing used to be hard for me, but now it is easy. All I have to do is look at each picture and describe some things I see. I listen to my words to see if they match with my story and they always do. Now writing is my favorite part of school.

—David, grade 2

Making the collages gave me more ideas for my story. Then I just 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.

—Amanda, grade 5



Look at the picture for a long time and you kind of get into the picture and feel stuff, like if there is a breeze or something.

—Cooper, grade 3

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Author Biography

Beth Olshansky is the originator of two art-and-literature-based approaches to literacy learning—Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy through Art and Image-Making within the Writing Process—at the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy, University of New Hampshire.