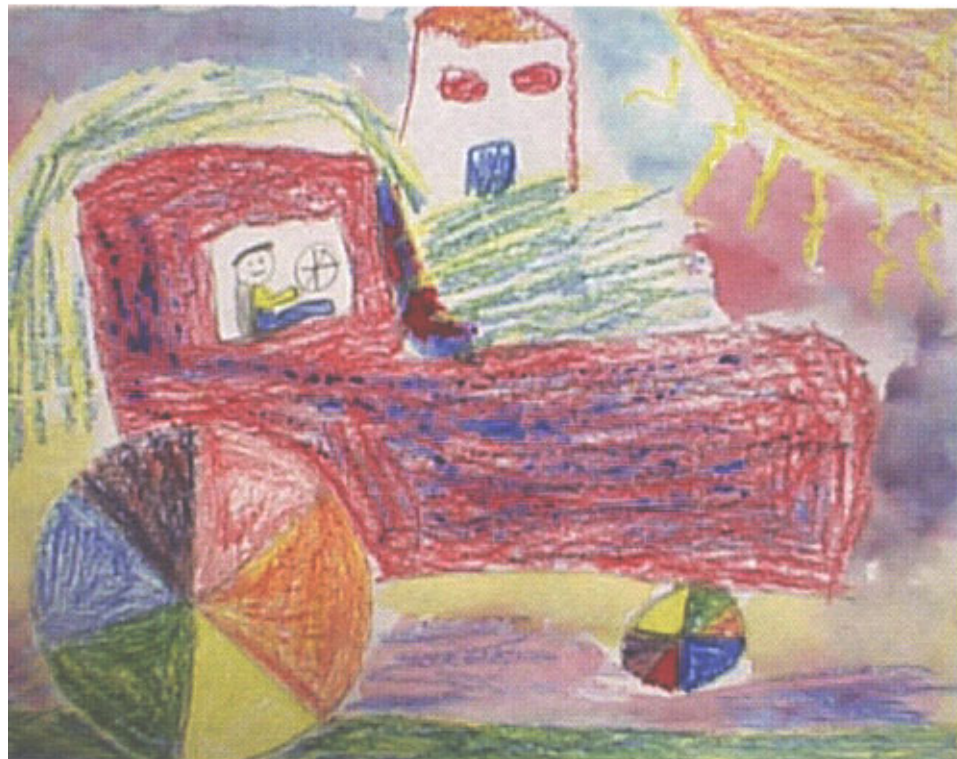


# Unlocking the Imagination

Brian Merrill



At the dawn of the 21st century, the visual arts still hold a position largely separate from the mainstream of American public education. Yet the very nature of human creativity revolves around a unity of image and word. Indeed, the two are akin to planets in parallel orbits, gravitationally dependent upon one another for stability.

The pressures on an increasingly information-based global community are forcing us to rethink our entire educational philosophy. In recent years, public education has improved the visibility of visual arts in many schools, but in large measure, from a technological standpoint only. The seductive nature of computers, with their glitzy graphics and flashy interactive tools, makes them a natural adjunct to the traditional art studio. Yet technology alone cannot define a program

of integrated literacy. Promoting visual art to its rightful status as an equal and complementary discipline cannot be underestimated.

## An Approach to Literacy

*Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy through Art*, a dynamic new approach to literacy learning, offers an opportunity to link visual and language arts in a natural, demonstratively effective manner which teaches the key elements of writing. In order to reach the varied learning styles of today's media hyper-sensitized youth, an integrated visual language arts approach to writing is essential.

Howard Gardner, in his groundbreaking book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, suggests that we learn to see, to write, to conceptualize, and to express ourselves through many lenses. Some students are more spa-

tially acute; others verbally, musically, or emotionally; still others spiritually.

Students at all experiential and academic levels are being asked to decipher and absorb more information in less class time than ever before. Even more daunting for educators is the task of making wise choices about what enduring concepts are essential for students to master. What is abundantly clear is that fundamental communication skills—reading comprehension, writing, and visual discrimination—continue to be the linchpin of a holistically sound education. Teaching these skills requires strong models at an early age. *Picturing Writing* is such a model because it lays the foundation for further study between what children see, read, and ultimately, what they write.

## Trusting Imagination

Since the invention of *Picture Writing*, or cuneiform, universal images have been used to introduce and reinforce broad-based literal concepts in the real world. Why





shouldn't visual art and writing be on the same footing in public education today? As an arts educator, I believe that my contribution to developing young minds goes far beyond meeting national arts standards. To breathe life into the mind's canvas of creative youngsters

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requires an element of risk that carries my lessons past pen and paper, brush and paint; past all the tools of the trade and into the vast arena of imagination.

The greatest developments in the arts and sciences have always been a reflection of culture. A thriving culture is one in which image and word become one. Technology can never replace this fundamental concept. But it can confuse and confound our understanding of what is important. Through applying methods learned in *Picturing Writing*, my students learn to trust their inherent creative gifts and push back the fear of being different in the way they see, respond to, and write about the world. They also experience the natural marriage between pictures and words.

Perhaps I can instill the courage of *Frederick*, the mouse, in Leo Lionni's pivotal book by the same name. In the story, a family of mice toils throughout the year stockpiling enough food to survive the cruel winter months. Frederick, the dreamer, does little to contribute materially to their food supply. But when the food runs low and the hopes of the family are dwindling, Frederick provides the spiritual nourishment they need. He shares the poetry he has gathered and stored for the long, hard days of winter. He recites words that paint pictures, creating images of better days to come. The lesson learned:



hungering imaginations, fed through inspired words and imagery, can be renewed to bring hope for a better world.

#### **Weaving Images and Words**

Clearly, in this day and age, we must nurture the imaginations of our students. *Picturing Writing* does just that. *Picturing Writing* insists that students sharpen their visual-thinking skills as they paint pictures, not only on paper, but also within the canvases of their minds. Children also discover that images, created or imagined, naturally give rise to descriptive language. This rich palette of descriptive language, one far more colorful than before, offers students new tools for expressing their ideas, not only in pictures but also in words. *Picturing Writing* offers young minds the

capacity to express themselves fluently in two languages as they struggle to make sense of the world around them.

Leonardo da Vinci found himself through his art, literature, science, music, and mathematics. We refer to him as "Renaissance Man." Shouldn't all young minds be exposed to the same breadth of knowledge and flexibility of thought through ongoing opportunities to weave image and word? ♦

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#### **NATIONAL STANDARD**

*Students identify connections between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum.*