

TEACHING READING

Picturing story: An irresistible pathway into literacy

Beth Olshansky

Unlike traditional approaches to literacy learning, Image-Making Within the Writing Process, an interactive program created at the University of New Hampshire, begins with the irresistible invitation to "mess with paints." The U.S. Department of Education has called the literacy program innovative and effective; the colorful art-based literacy program is designed to entice even the most discouraged of learners.

Image-Making begins with a series of process-oriented art explorations. The first step, creating individual portfolios of hand-painted, textured papers, never fails to captivate all those involved. As children fill paper after paper with bright colors and unusual textures, they delight in their beautiful paintings. The only instructions the teacher gives are to "fill each page with color and texture" and to avoid making representational images; every child experiences immediate success as an artist.

After this initial flurry of excitement over the paper-texturing experience, the children are given time to admire their hand-painted, textured papers, share them with one another, and discover images in their creations. As children engage in this process of discovery through free association, their abstract paintings serve as the inspiration for story ideas. As stories begin to surface, the beautiful, textured papers become the raw materials for cutting and pasting collage images.

Angeline, a third-grade student and second-language learner, wrote about her process, "I looked at the images in my prints. I saw so many flowers. Then I said, I will name my story 'The Beautiful Garden and the Rain.' I cut some pictures out, and I just glued and

glued until it was so beautiful." After creating collage images, Angeline went on to orally rehearse and then finally write out her text. Angeline confessed, "And I even hated to read before." With pride, she added, "Now I love reading and making stories!"

Concrete tools

Image-Making offers children concrete tools for thinking through and designing stories. As children discover stories in their beautiful, textured papers and then cut and paste colorful collage images, they are literally giving shape to their ideas. While the children delight in the stunning visuals they create, they use visual and kinesthetic modes of thinking as they create a story. Children who struggle with straight verbal methods have an opportunity to work from their strengths. For some, this can mean the difference between success and failure in literacy learning.

David, a discouraged second grader, is one of those students. After refusing to write for the first 2 months of school, David explained to his teacher, "I hate to write. The words fly out of my head before I can get them down on paper." But things changed for David when he discovered that as he gave shape to his ideas through cutting and pasting, his story ideas were literally glued to the page. His thoughts no longer escaped him. With his concrete story map in hand, David was free to rehearse and develop his text, repeating it over and over again until at last he memorized his story line. From there, it was simple to put his colorful ideas into writing.

This hands-on story design and oral rehearsal of text offer children who struggle with straight verbal methods a way to succeed. Today, David is a professionally published author/illustrator. His second-grade story, *The Horrified Tornado*, is one of many stories that



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have been published in order to share this rich process with others.

A universal approach

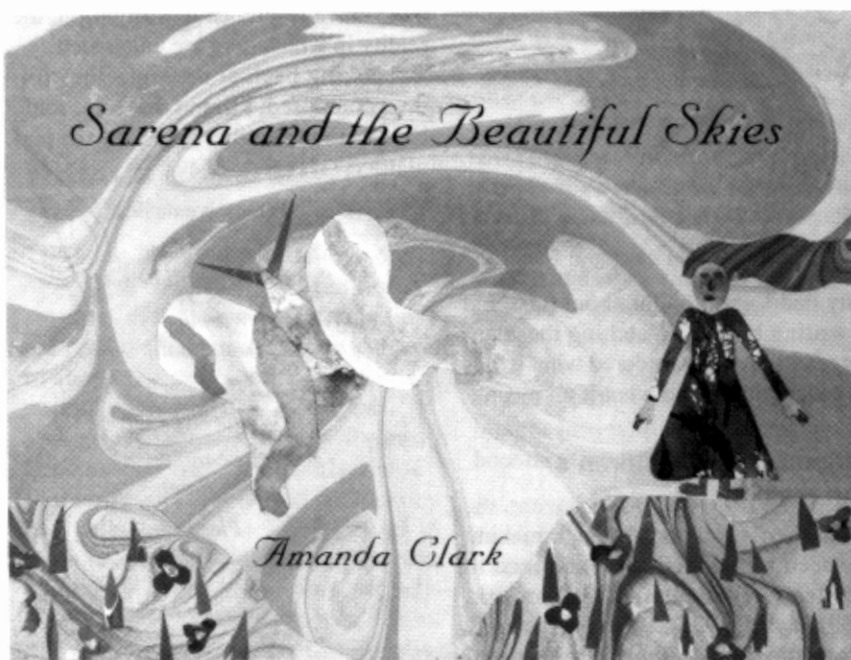
Picturing a story using collages made from hand-painted, textured papers paves the way for children to interact with print in a highly personal, meaningful, and engaging way. As an alternative to verbal means of teaching reading and writing, Image-Making provides an enticing pathway into literacy for children with a wide range of learning needs. For children, never before has writing been made so easy and so much fun. No longer do they have to stare at a blank piece of lined paper and wonder what to write about or have to write on assigned topics that hold little interest. Through the process of free association, cutting, pasting, and manipulating paper, personal stories pour forth from the children in vivid color.

As educators learn more about the importance of honoring learning styles, tapping into multiple intelligences, using whole-brain thinking, and structuring tasks that are developmentally appropriate, Image-Making is an approach to literacy learning that makes sense for children everywhere. Not only does it capture the fancy of young writers and provide them with new tools for thinking, it also offers children a universal means of expression. For second-language learners as well as for other children who struggle with written language, Image-Making provides an irresistible pathway into literacy.

Author's note

The Horrified Tornado and six other titles written and illustrated by children are available by writing to Image-Making Within the Writing Process, Laboratory for Interactive Learning, University of New Hampshire, Thompson Hall, 105 Main Street, Durham, NH 03824, USA.

Olshansky is the original developer and current program director of Image-Making Within the Writing Process at the University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, USA.



"Now I love reading and making stories!"

Surprise me: The poetry of wet paint

David M. Salyer

Long sheets of clean plastic lined the edges of the hallway outside of our classroom. As part of a larger inquiry on motion, first and second graders spent several weeks designing and building gravity-powered vehicles out of cereal boxes, jar lids, rubber bands, and other materials. Now the axles were in place, the wheels were finally turning, and the bodies were taped and glued. Painting the last bright stokes of color, the children carefully placed their wet vehicles on the plastic to dry. As more children completed their painting and parked their vehicles next to the others, they voiced concerns about the other classrooms. Recess was coming. Soon other children would be rushing past our room to the playground. Would they leave our vehicles alone? Could we be sure that our vehicles would not be stepped on or touched?

"We could vote for someone to go and tell them to be careful."

"Yeah, but what if they forget?"

"Hey, someone could just stand in the hall and tell them!"

"But then they would miss recess."

"Besides, we couldn't stay in the hall all the time and tell everybody!"

Still wondering what to do, the group of worried children moved back into the room to clean up, except for Zach and Kyle.

"Can we make a sign?"

Since other children were still working, I agreed, thinking a new project would keep the early finishers occupied. But very quickly the boys' sign making began to echo around the room. Watching others abandon cleanup to join in, I suddenly realized that I had given little thought to this kind of text making. Students' energy was high as signs were written, colored, and posted in our hallway. I looked over their shoulders with interest as individuals and small groups created signs that read:

*Do not touch
Be wary or you'll be sorry*

*Caution
Toxic Paint*

*Warning
Wet Paint*

Wet Paint
 Do not touch
 Warning wet paint
 Be careful
 Wet Paint
 Please
 Do not touch!!!
 Do not touch

Why had I not thought about this kind of writing before? Watching these engaged children, I wondered what it was they were doing and what it all meant.

Understanding children's sign making

Children's spontaneous sign making has been mentioned and examined in the literature (Bissex, 1980; Newkirk, 1989; Taylor, 1983). What is especially noteworthy is the children's preoccupation with either the process of making signs or with sign writing as an "intermediary form" (Newkirk, 1989, p. 7) that children work in as they acquire competence in forms or modes that are different than stories. How do we classify the kind of writing that children engage in when they compose a sign? It certainly is not narrative, the kind of writing found typically in the classroom. Newkirk (1989) concludes that in sign writing, children engage in either persuasive or regulatory discourse.

Signs that are composed to control or influence the behavior of others are written in the regulatory mode. This is writing that holds power and can change the behavior of those who read the sign in certain contexts (e.g., *Do not touch*). Those signs that couple a demand with a reason shift to the persuasive mode (e.g., *Be careful Wet Paint*).

In the persuasive mode, the writer cannot take for granted that the behavior of the reader will change. The signs require more message to influence others. Further, the signs that children compose in either the regulatory or persuasive modes are not simply autonomous texts (texts that are free standing and unrelated to anything else) but are determined by the situational context in which they occur and by the larger cultural context that shapes both the situation and the form of writing (Kinneavy, 1971; Vygotsky, 1978).

They have reference to a situation, the reality in which they are embedded.

Looking back at the signs the children composed, I found that they could be classified as either persuasive or regulatory:

Persuasive mode
 Do not touch
 Be wary or you'll be sorry
 Warning
 Wet Paint
 Do not touch
 Warning wet paint
 Be careful
 Wet Paint
 Please
 Do not touch!!!
 Regulatory mode
 Do not touch
 Wet Paint

Most of the signs were written in the persuasive mode, which includes additional language intended to convince the reader to leave the freshly painted vehicles alone. Looking again at the signs the children made, I was disturbed by one of the persuasive pieces. It seemed that it was more than a sign intended simply to persuade a reader to engage in a particular course of action. This sign was clearly more distant from the immediate reality of wet paint. This sign referred to a fictional world.

Caution
 Toxic Paint

Though the message seems small, it says big things about the writing of children and what they control. What this sign refers to clearly does not exist. The common water-based school paint is not toxic, and the two children who wrote it (and also many of the children and adults who read it) knew that.

In this literacy event, the "edges" of the discourse became "unpredictable" (Barthes, 1975, p. 36) and shifted or turned a corner. Here language, rather than calling attention to something else, was in fact calling attention to itself. And we call that kind of text *literature* (Kinneavy, 1971). The sign *Caution Toxic Paint* has done away with its own genre (Barthes, 1975); the text moved

while it was saying something about the world and became poetry.

Sign making modes of engagement and surprise

In schools and in daily life people frequently engage in written texts in five distinguishable ways or modes: performative, functional, informational, recreational, and the epistemic (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). The children's sign writing and reading moved among at least three of these modes of engagement: the performative (encoding the sign), the functional (the sign as a means to an end), and the informational (the sign as a source of information). With the shift from the prose of wet paint to the poetry of toxic paint, we can include two more ways some of the children were engaged with their texts: the recreational (the sign as an enjoyable end in itself) and the epistemic (the sign as transactional). An epistemic engagement with *Caution Toxic Paint* invites the writer/reader into a dialogue "with the text to interpret its meaning" (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992, p. 140). Those children and their readers who were involved with the signs in recreational epistemic ways were more fully exploring the power of written language.

Successful communication usually requires that we post a tacit *No Surprises Allowed*. Readers and writers need the predictable meanings implied in a situation to help make meaning (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). But *Caution Toxic Paint* invites surprise. The sign is more than a warning, and we read it differently. It takes us elsewhere, inviting us into the pleasures of poetry. And I nearly missed it!

As teachers, we need to assume a particular stance in our classrooms, and that stance must read *Surprise Me!* For it's only our "act[s] of recognition" (Fish, 1980, p. 326) that will allow us to interpret the rich surprises offered by children.

"Can we make a sign?"

Yes!

Previously a first- and second-grade teacher, Salyer now teaches courses in children's literature and language arts

at McKendree College in Lebanon, Illinois, USA.

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What's in a name?

Sandy K. Biles

The book *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros is written in short vignettes of a young girl growing up in the Latino section of Chicago. Several of these short essays make excellent writing prompts for older students.

A good writing selection for early September is the chapter "My Name." In this vignette, Esperanza shares what her name means in English and in Spanish, explains how the name was chosen for her by her parents, and tells how much trouble everyone at school has pronouncing *Esperanza*. She discusses her desire to change her name: "I would like to baptize myself under a

new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees." Many students can identify with her wish for a different name.

After reading this piece, students ask their parents about their own names—where they came from, how they were chosen, what they mean—and then write about their discoveries. The students tell what names they would choose, if they could choose new names, and why.

This exercise provides a good beginning writing experience for the year, which goes into the portfolio, and gives insight into who my students are and how they see themselves.

Biles teaches language arts and choir at Lomax Junior High School in LaPorte, Texas, USA.

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