

Visual Tools for Visual Learners

Beth Olshansky



As the arts struggle to gain recognition as a viable tool for thinking and learning, *Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy through Art (Picturing Writing)* and *Image-Making within the Writing Process (Image-Making)* have made it easy for educators to understand the significant role that art can play in literacy learning. From the vast tundra of southwestern

Alaska to the balmy coast of Hawaii, from the shores of California to the seacoast of New Hampshire, classroom teachers across the country are discovering that art is an essential tool for literacy learning.

As educators and administrators become more and more focused on state standards and competitive test scores, *Picturing Writing* and *Image-Making* offer struggling students the tools they need to succeed. Beginning with the basic premise that our educational system is biased toward the verbal learner, these art-based approaches to literacy learning provide visual and kinesthetic tools to visual and kinesthetic learners. Their innovative methods level the playing field. In fact, a recent study of approximately 500 students documents that following a full year of *Picturing Writing* and *Image-Making*, the writing scores of at-risk students not only dramatically improved, but also kept pace with their classmates.

I designed *Picturing Writing* and *Image-Making* to support the literacy learning of children with diverse learning styles. These dynamic programs, developed at the University of New Hampshire, ensure that all students are given a variety of visual and kinesthetic tools to help them process and digest information, as well as think through and express their ideas both in art and in writing. Interwoven throughout this approach is the inclusion of quality picture books and ongoing art experiences. As a matter of principle, the art always precedes the writing. This reduces the bias from our educational system—the bias that enables our verbal learners to sail through our educational system with ease and continues to present continual challenges for our visual and kinesthetic learners.

Fostering Literacy through Art

Picturing Writing offers a progression of literature, art, and writing experi-



ences designed to teach students the basic elements of writing. Sense of setting, beginning, middle, end, mood, character development, plot development, and using words that paint pictures are all taught through visual means. Following an Artists/Writers Workshop format (see sidebar), daily mini-lessons are presented using quality picture books and simple crayon-resist art processes. This ensures that classroom lessons will be not only engaging to all students, but also easily digested by students with varying learning styles. The inclusion of visual and kinesthetic tools for thinking through and expressing ideas is instrumental to ensuring success for all learners. Through a progression of art and writing experiences that move from simple to complex, students gain skills in a facilitated, step-by-step manner. The simple crayon-resist process is easy for classroom teachers to manage and can be easily integrated into other content areas. For classroom teachers who struggle to find ways to engage some of their most reluctant readers and writers, *Picturing Writing* opens a new door to learning.

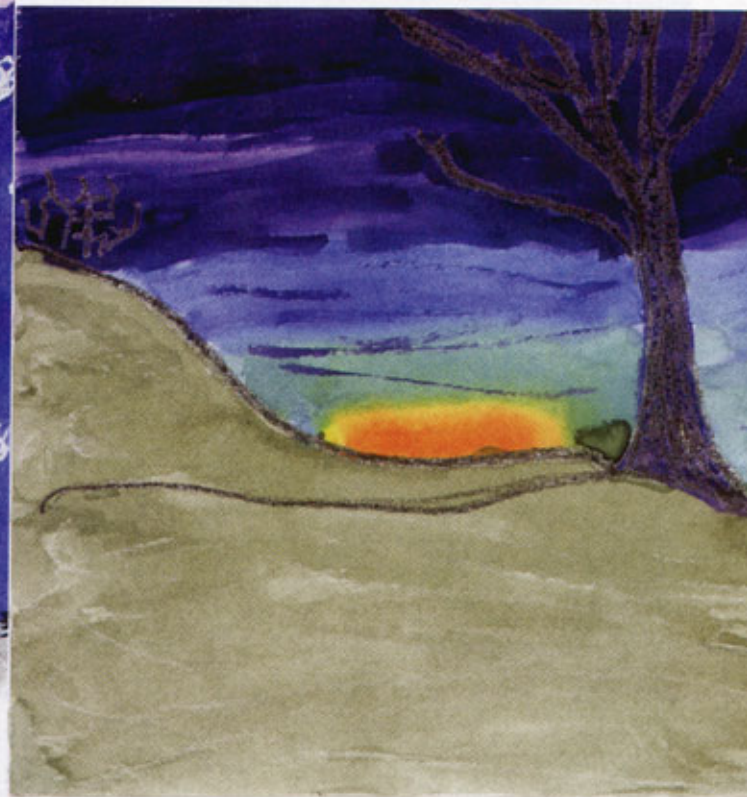
Image-Making within the Writing Process

Image-Making evolved out of exploration with collage made from hand-painted textured papers. It begins with students creating their own individual portfolios of beautiful, hand-painted, textured papers. Students immediately feel validated as artists as they pull colorful swirling designs from marbleizing trays or peel one-of-a-kind monoprints from painted sheets of Plexiglas. They also begin to discover stories hidden within their beautifully decorated papers. Once students have created their own portfolios of hand-painted papers, they engage in a lively and natural process of free association. As students read their papers for meaning, they often discover real and imagined settings and characters. Through a facilitated process, image-finding (discovering images) leads to image-weaving (weaving together found images), which naturally leads to the development of a story line. Elaborate stories begin to emerge without students ever having to face a blank piece of paper. Once a story idea has been hatched, each student's portfolio of hand-painted papers becomes the raw materials for literally giving shape to these stories through cutting and pasting collage images. Shapes, once freed from the

page, often take on a life of their own as students breathe movement, and sometimes sound, into them. This hands-on manipulation of cut and torn shapes gives visual and kinesthetic learners the opportunity to think through and develop story ideas in a very concrete fashion. Once their ideas take shape, they record them by fastening them down with a glue stick. Rehearsal, drafting, and revision all take place before a pencil is ever set to paper. For the reluctant writer or the struggling reader, this hands-on construction of ideas can mean the difference between success and failure.

Reversing the Process

For visual and kinesthetic learners, having a concrete visual record of their thoughts in full color right in front of them allows them to both hold onto their ideas (literally and figuratively), as well as to further embellish their story through extensive oral rehearsal. Reading the picture is an activity that comes naturally to most young children. As students read their colorful images, not only do they have the opportunity to rehearse their story line, but they also naturally access rich descriptive language. A marbled paper makes the water appear to ripple. A watercolor and salt crayon-



resist painting makes the ocean appear to glisten in the sunlight. By requiring that students create images first, *Picturing Writing* and *Image-Making* offer students the opportunity to use visual and kinesthetic tools to acquire essential literacy skills. Students no longer find themselves staring at a blank piece of lined paper wondering what to write. By the time they are ready for paper and pencil, they have already been through an elaborate rehearsal, drafting, and revision process which is supported by creating art, sequencing images, and reading pictures.

While *Picturing Writing* and *Image-Making* each offer something unique, their common thread is that their success relies on the art experience always preceding the writing and on art being used as a genuine tool for thinking and expressing ideas. Just as art was the human race's first written language, now *Picturing Writing* and *Image-Making* offer students access to their ancestral language. It's no surprise that pictures are a natural language for children. ❖

Beth Olshansky is the developer and director of Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy through Art and Image-Making within the Writing Process. For more information or research packets, contact eja@christa.unh.edu or call (603) 862-3691 at the University of New Hampshire.

Artists/Writers Workshop

Artists/Writers Workshop consists of four parts: Literature Share/Discussion, Modeling Session, Work Session, and Share/Group Share.

Literature Share/Discussion: Central to the Artists/Writers Workshop is the use of fine picture books in order to make quality literature accessible to the diverse learners in the classroom. From these quality picture books, not only do we expose students to quality writing, but we also expose them to pictures that inform. For students who are visual learners, this allows them to read the pictures using art as a language to help them gather information. For students who are verbal learners, attention to the language of art can serve to extend their thinking in new ways. Picture books are chosen to support the focus for the day, whether it be an art or a writing mini-lesson. A facilitated discussion follows each book share.

Modeling Session: Following a facilitated discussion, students are taken through a modeling process. Whatever students are expected to do on their own (whether it be in art or in writing) is modeled first with the

entire group. This whole-group modeling session offers students a dry run before they are asked to work on their own. For the art educator, this provides that essential demonstration time. During this time, new concepts, technique, and expectations are all made very clear.

Work Session: A work session follows the modeling session. During this time, students apply the skills or understanding they have acquired from the literature share and the modeling session. Relaxing music is often played during this time to create an ambiance conducive to work.

Share/Group Share: Artists/Writers Workshop ends with a group share. This provides an opportunity for a few students each day to be honored. Using a special artists frame and artists/writers seat of honor, the group share serves to build individual self-esteem and a learning community. During the group share, students also have the opportunity to develop critical analytic and communication skills. Art teachers can use the group share to reinforce basic skills introduced earlier and model ways of looking at and talking about art.