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

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

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 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 transmedia 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

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

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

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 expired me to make a better picture within myself.

—Jared, 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

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
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

References


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.