Of Paint and Poetry: Strengthening Literacy Through Art

A picture is worth a thousand words. That’s understood to be a universal truth. But after freeing herself of an ingrained bias toward print-only learning in English class, the author found a new truth: a picture can generate a thousand words of writing and discussion—at least.

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Van Gogh screwed up,” a student proclaimed. “He chose such bright colors and sharp angles so the painting seems full of energy. If he wanted to show his friends how relaxing and peaceful his house was so they’d come visit him, he should have used softer colors and more rounded edges.” Another student agreed, “Yeah, he should’ve done another draft.”

This dialogue did not take place in an art class. Instead these students critiqued Vincent van Gogh’s Bedroom at Arles in my English classroom. We had just begun a discussion on word choice in poetry. Too often my students use any word their thesaurus supplies or any that serves their rhyming need with little thought of intention. Though I have railed against this practice in the past, I made little headway. The poems created after this minilesson linked to art, however, are more successful. Coming at it from another perspective—a visual one—is key to this success. It is not how I ever thought I would teach reading and writing.

I teach eighth grade. Thus, in the past, I used to believe that pictures were meant as dressings—niceties that little kids tagged on their stories after “The End.” I wanted my kids to pay attention to their writing and not waste time fiddling with pretty stuff. There is so much to accomplish in so little time. I just wanted them to focus on fine-tuning their work. Heck, I wouldn’t even let them type up title pages. Looking back, however, it’s not easy to see why I was so single-minded.

Like many of my English teacher colleagues, I have always viewed life as story. This probably has something to do with the long line of storytellers in my family, including my grandfather who as a little boy regaled listeners perched atop barstools. My first memories are of words. I remember sitting on the crimson-carpeted stairs of our house reading of Christopher Robin and Pooh in the Hundred Acre Woods. I remember my mother printing letters for me to copy the summer I was four. As I sat on the cool wooden floor, I asked what they said. She said “Your name—Judith.” I remember, too, poring over one of my father’s high school English anthologies in my bedroom, my fingers searching for all the words I knew in the stories he read to us.

What I don’t remember is ever a time when the printed word wasn’t important to me. Psychologists might interpret my memories as being shaped by who I am today—that some filter has screened out making mud pies or something of the like to allow these verbal memories to come forth. I won’t argue with them. These memories are, nonetheless, the first experiences I remember. As I write this, I realize, however, that though I never went to an art museum as a child and although we had no art hanging in my parents’ home, except for a parody of Hopper’s Nighthawks, I somehow see story in art. While words are my first memories, I notice how images play into the memories. I can clearly see myself in these situations. I can almost feel the roughness of the carpet, the hardness of the wooden floor, the smoothness of the page. Intu-
itively, my heart knew how sensory images were connected to the reading and writing of stories even if my head didn’t.

At this point, you’re probably wondering what lure does art now hold over me? Here’s what. I once lamented to a friend that, as a proficient reader and writer, I had a hard time understanding my students who weren’t strong in these areas. Even more difficult to fathom are those who are “illiterate”—students who are able but choose not to participate with words. I still struggle to reach these kids. While I have certainly tried lots of strategies, most of them were verbal. Considering that at least 15 percent of all students are weak verbally (Olsen, 21), it’s no wonder these strategies weren’t successful. What I should have done is to have tapped into my students’ successes outside of my classroom—musically, kinesthetically, artistically. I needed to do something to shore up my visual learners’ weaknesses.

For the first ten years of my teaching career, I didn’t realize the potential the visual arts held for reading and writing. Consequently, I failed to make the connections between sensory images in both verbal and visual texts over and over again. But drastic times call for drastic measures, and I began experimenting. I now realize the power these approaches hold for each other. Several classroom experiences have convinced me that analyzing art is a valuable use of time for English teachers.

In preparation for a museum trip, I brought pieces of art into my classroom, among them Grant Wood’s American Gothic. Using an idea I stole from a teacher friend, I had students sketch what they saw for ten minutes to help them pay closer attention to detail. Next I asked them to note what they saw in the pictures in a column of “What I know is true,” e.g., there are two people in the picture. After a few minutes we shared these thoughts. Then I asked the students to list what might be true, e.g., the people in the painting might be married. This prompted a great deal of discussion about the physical content of the work as well as the artist’s intent. Just as in other classrooms that have used this approach, kids were jumping out of their seats to point to specific details in Wood’s painting to support their claims. It wasn’t hard to segue into how they needed to support their opinions about character motivation, etc., in the literature we read with the same kind of details. Of course, we also discussed how as authors they must include details in their stories or essays that allow us as readers to form opinions as well.

Another connection I found between sensory images in verbal and visual texts lies in a strategy using storyboards to understand plot. I had students draw storyboards for the short stories we were reading, such as Rita Garcia Williams’ “Food from the Outside.” When students used storyboards as a response to reading, we discussed which parts of a story were strongest visually for them. We examined how the author had created these verbal pictures and how they could replicate them in their own writing. As part of this genre study, students composed their own short stories or memoirs. They then had someone draw a storyboard for a draft of their own writing as the basis of a peer conference. Because of the nature of this visual response, they could easily see what parts readers had a hard time visualizing and thus add more details in those areas. Around the same time, I read an article in the *English Journal* called “Walking, Tinkertoys, and Legos: Using Movement and Manipulatives to Help Students Write” about the role of kinesthetics in language arts (Hecker). Using Legos to demonstrate the organization of an essay helped students to see where they needed more information and balance. My students were beginning to profit from visual entrances into the verbal world.

Similarly, examining literature using the vocabulary of both writing and art also allows students to see intentionality at work. Margaret Walker’s poem “Lineage,” for example, is rich in visual images. I read this poem aloud to students, who had their eyes closed. I then asked them to list the verbs and modifiers they remembered best from the work. Lines such as “They
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touched earth and grain grew” and “With veins rolling roughly over quick hands” among others were listed. We then looked at the synonyms for each content word and their connotations as we discussed Walker’s stylistic choices just as we had discussed van Gogh’s color choices in The Bedroom at Arles.

Organization is just as important in literature as in art. Because I constantly ask my students to read like writers, we also examined Walker’s organization in hopes of emulating it. The opening line of the poem “Lineage”—“My grandmothers were strong”—and its repetition in the middle and at the end of the poem frame the author’s purpose just as the Dutch Masters so often used shadows to define their subjects. The style of the poem heightens its organization. With each line, Walker has us tilling each furrow with her ancestors as they “followed plows and bent to toil” in the first half of the poem. The subject-verb construction pulls the reader along. The use of participles in the memories she lists evoke more visceral images in the last few lines. One is no longer doing the labor—one is the labor. The first draft of “Like the Ocean” (figure 1) shows how one of my students, Sandy, internalized these concepts. The repetition of the contrasts between what her character knows of the ocean and has actually experienced in the first three lines sets up the final pessimistic contrast, “And we are small sailors on a journey/ That never seems to end.”

But perhaps the most persuasive classroom experience I can share of the ways students experience the connection of sensory images to reading and writing is in their polished written and illustrated response to literature. I ask students to compose and illustrate picture books to close our study of the Holocaust. My only requirements are to center the story on a lingering personal issue from the study, such as forgiveness or personal responsibility; to complete a storyboard to plan the plot prior to drafting the images; to tell the story through a blend of pictures and text; and finally, to accomplish all of this in eight pages.

These are on whole the best work I have ever received. Why? Students are thoroughly engaged. Large numbers report they enjoyed the latitude I give them in handling their choices. They list, too, being able to draw what they can’t find the words to say and having fun in the process. Organizationally, having the eight-page structure both in storyboard and final draft form helps them to pace the action of the story so they don’t fall prey to what Barry Lane in After The End calls “Superhero Supercilious,” a disease afflicting student writers who run out of steam and end their stories by blowing everybody up.

In fact, the stories are very focused, far more so than the earlier short stories and memoirs they had written, which sometimes were epic in nature. Consequently, the content is especially well done. The marriage of the verbal and the visual is strong. Some of the visual images take my breath away, not for their artistic quality, but for the way the students internalize the shared qualities of the two arts.

For example, in Kevin’s story a white boy is confused when his new classmates do not automatically befriend him though they share the same skin color. Throughout his book Kevin uses a variety of visual techniques to show the boy’s loneliness and confusion, ranging from bird’s eye view to perspective. His use of proportion makes his text even clearer. Likewise, as seen in figure 2, Amanda’s drawing of a heated beaker was a blend of both intentionality and serendipity. Logically she needed an image to represent science class where her main characters discussed whether or not the Holocaust really took place. The gas coming off the beaker serves her text well. In retrospect, she also saw the fire of the Bunsen burner as the unchecked hate that caused the Holocaust. Had each of these students just written their stories, I’m not convinced that the details would be as rich nor would their understanding of the complexity of their own characters and plots be as complete.

The picture books were successful beyond the quality of writing as well. Another student, Ray, turned in his picture book more than a month later than his peers. His drawings were very carefully rendered and thus the source of great pride to him. The story of a bully getting his due was well thought out . . . but he had never written it down. Ray stayed after school the last day of the marking period to tell me the story of his pictures. Because of his painful shyness and compensation for a speech impediment, each word cost him dearly.

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When I originally designed the project, my objective was to strengthen my students’ commitment to battling intolerance with improving their reading and writing as secondary concerns. Even though Ray never wrote the text of the story, both these purposes were met. His artwork revealed improved focus and detail over work he had completed earlier in the year. Subsequent writing was stronger too. As for my primary concern about intolerance, Cynthia Rylant once said, “Writing stories has given me the power to change things I could not change as a child. I can make boys into doctors. I can make fathers stop drinking. I can make mothers stay.” In Ray’s case, creating his picture book changed his perspective from a victim of intolerance to a victor over it—at least temporarily.

Like so many teachers, I see five classes a day with their attendant preparation and endless grading. I, too, face standardized tests and their accompanying political baggage. Likewise, my state has handed down pie-in-the-sky regulations about the number of books every student must read, how many multimedia projects I must assign, and the like. I know the pressure we all feel to provide quality experiences with words for our students despite all this. An English teacher I know once remarked that it wasn’t his job to teach art. He had neither the time nor the background to do so. It’s the kind of thing I might have said myself ten years ago. I know now that developing the literate lives of my students is sometimes best achieved not by words alone.

References


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