Picture This:

A Multimodal Approach to the Common Core that Engages All Learners

BY BETH OLSHANSKY

Figure 1: Fourth grader creates Picturing Writing crayon resist painting for a landforms unit

T alk to teachers in almost every state across the nation and they will tell you that adopting the Common Core feels like yet another huge hurdle. Those who weathered the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), pressures to teach to the test, and daily classroom schedules that attempted to cram way too much into each school day now face yet another challenge. They must teach their students how to think—a truly worthy goal indeed, yet one that comes with a whole new set of challenges and pressures. Many teachers wonder how they will find the time to plan for, let alone implement, our new, more rigorous standards. Woven throughout the Common Core is the call for higher-order thinking skills and the use of 21st-century skills: critical thinking, creative problem solving, collaboration, and communication. There is also talk about engaging students in more sustained, inquiry-based, project-based learning (going deep rather than broad)—the kind of learning that fell by the wayside during the era of NCLB because there simply wasn't time. And, of course, there will be a new, more rigorous national assessment. No wonder teachers are feeling overwhelmed.

While the drafters of the Common Core have provided a clear, well-organized set of standards for each grade level K–12, in their wisdom they have left much unsaid. What is not proscribed is almost as important as what is. For instance, while much of the English Language Arts Common Core State Standards (ELACCSS) focuses on verbal skills, such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and language (as they should), the drafters have left room for teachers to teach these standards in a way that works for their diverse community of learners. "[T]he Standards do not mandate such things as a particular writing process or the full range of metacognitive strategies that students may need to monitor and direct their thinking and learning. Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & the Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010, p. 4). Furthermore, "the Standards set grade-specific standards but do not define the intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations" (p. 6). Also acknowledged: "It is beyond the scope of the Standards to define the full range of supports appropriate for English language learners and for students with special needs" (p. 6). While statements such as these leave the door open for more effective teaching and learning, if we are to truly leave no child behind, we must acknowledge and address an underlying, often unrecognized bias within our educational system that for decades has created challenges for those who think differently.

Hidden Verbal Bias

West (1991) conducted an extensive study into the educational lives and accomplishments of some of history's greatest innovators: Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, and others. He found that those individuals who were among the greatest contributors to scientific or cultural advancement were indeed miserable failures in school. Albert Einstein was told that "he would never amount to anything" in school. Thomas Edison "alternated between letting his mind travel to distant places and putting his body in perpetual motion in his seat" (West, 1991, pp. 119 and 138). West shares story after story of individuals who, despite their failures within traditional school settings, were ultimately given the opportunity to follow their own individual thought processes. For each, it was by some fluke that their unique intelligence was encouraged, which ultimately paved the way for their becoming great innovators and contributors to society. If not for some chance happenstance, they likely would have followed the path of thousands of other students who do not function well within

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a traditional school setting. Students who "think differently" often struggle in school. They are likely to develop low self-esteem and become discouraged; they become disengaged. Many go on to lead lives in which their unique potential is never recognized or realized.

West is among a growing number of educators who believe there exists a hidden bias within our schools that favors the verbal learner (Eisner, 1992; Leland & Harste, 1994; Olshansky, 2008; Olson, 1992; Robertson, 2010; Williams, 1983). Students who are born verbal learners (i.e., those for whom words are a natural medium for thinking and expressing ideas) generally perform well in school because instruction is delivered in the way they learn. However, students who are born with other strengths (other than verbal) face many challenges throughout their education because instruction is not tailored to the way they learn. Many teachers have observed that their "lowest-performing students" love to draw. These students, "the doodlers" or "class artists," are by their very actions telling us how they learn, yet we are often so busy assuming that they are not paying attention or are wasting precious class time that we do not consider that they are telling us something very important—i.e., how they think. Administrators may not have the opportunity to witness this behavior in the classroom, but they do see these students—often in their offices for misbehaving. Students who learn differently (other than through straight verbal means) can become "problems" in the classroom because traditional classroom instruction does not meet their learning needs. Maureen McLaughlin, president of the International Reading Association, reminds us that "by tapping into multiple modalities, we also encourage students to use their strengths as they learn" (2013, p. 20).

While the goals of the Common Core are indeed laudable, in order for every student to achieve these goals it is critical that we eliminate the hidden verbal bias within our schools. This will entail a major paradigm shift, one that will level the play-

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ing field for those who learn differently. Without making this paradigm shift, we will continue to see students fall victim to an educational system that inadvertently is designed to leave many behind—even with our new, more rigorous standards in place.

Golden Opportunity

During the last decade, with NCLB having focused almost exclusively on reading and math, virtually ignoring writing (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012), writing instruction often fell by the wayside as teachers worked tirelessly to ensure their students passed the standardized reading assessments. Now facing a much broader set of language arts standards that includes reading, writing, listening, speaking, and language, many schools are in the process of adopting writing programs. At this crossroads, there lies a golden opportunity for schools and districts across New Hampshire to make a bold decision—to commit to eradicating the verbal bias within our schools in order to truly meet the needs of our diverse learners. Establishing a more democratic classroom community can be initiated simply by adopting an uncommon approach to teaching writing, one that offers more than one modality for thinking and expressing ideas. McLaughlin recommends that we not only incorporate multimodal text into our teaching, but also provide opportunities for our students to create multimodal texts of their own. "When we use multimodal text, we broaden the spectrum of student learning" (2013, p. 20).

An Uncommon Approach

Recognizing the hidden verbal bias within our educational system, Artists/Writers Workshop (Olshansky, 2008) broadens the definition of literacy learning to include visual, as well as verbal, means of making meaning. Why the inclusion of the visual modality? Keep in mind that pictures are a universal language and a natural language for thinking, expressing, and recording ideas. Consider the earliest cave paintings—humankind's first recorded language. Likewise, consider preschoolers who naturally progress through the developmental stages of drawing as if these stages are hardwired within the brain. Finally, consider the many fine picture books that utilize the complementary languages of pictures and words to more fully convey their story. In picture books, we see how pictures can tell a story and how words can paint pictures. Processed together, these two "languages" create a deeper, fuller meaning.

Expanding Writing Workshop (Calkins, 2006) to include a strong visual component, Artists/Writers Workshop treats words and pictures as parallel, complementary, and equal languages for learning. Artists/Writers Workshop follows a simple four-step format:

- literature share/discussion
- modeling
- work session
- group share

While this format closely parallels Writing Workshop, what is distinctly different is that Artists/Writers Workshop is facilitated in two complementary strands: an art strand, which focuses on the language of pictures, and a writing strand, which focuses on the language of words. In contrast to Writing Workshop, within Artists/Writers Workshop, picture making always precedes the writing, and for good reason. Asking students to create pictures first not only engages a wider range of learners (including struggling readers and reluctant writers), but also facilitates deeper thinking by encouraging students to develop their ideas through the process of creating concrete, visual images. To be clear, it is not just a matter of allowing students to make quick pencil or marker sketches before they write. Within Artists/Writers Workshop, equal focus is placed on making meaning in pictures and in words. Giving students the opportunity to analyze and discuss the work of professional illustrators, studying their craft, and offering them a wider range of art materials to make meaning not only enhances student engagement and deepens their thinking, it also produces richer, more nuanced representations. Then, when it is time for students to read their pictures to access detail and description, they find they have more to write about. Descriptive language is literally at their fingertips.

Through the phenomenon of transmediation, the act of recasting or translating meaning from one sign system to another (Siegel, 1995), students who participate in Artists/Writers Workshop make new connections, generate new ideas, and gain access to a richer vocabulary (Olshansky, 2008; Siegel, 1995) as they translate meaning from pictures into words. Within Artists/Writers Workshop, specially designed brainstorming sheets ensure students systematically read their pictures for meaning and translate that meaning into rich, descriptive language. For those teachers who experience anxiety at the thought of giving students access to art materials beyond the typical colored pencils, markers, or crayons during Writing Workshop, two simple art- and literature-based approaches to writing keep the art manageable yet engaging.

Two Models

Picturing Writing: Fostering Literacy Through Art and Image-Making Within The Writing Process are two art- and literature-based approaches to literacy learning that are facilitated within Artists/Writers Workshop. They have been field-tested, refined, and researched for over two decades. Picturing Writing utilizes simple crayon resist art processes (crayon drawings that are washed with watercolors to create a pleasing, more nuanced effect [Figure 1]). Image-Making is known for its colorful col-

lage images that utilize hand-painted textured papers made by each student (Figure 2). Each process offers distinct learning opportunities. While the Picturing Writing process offers students visual tools at each and every stage of the writing process, Image-Making offers visual *and tactile* tools as students move cut-and-torn shapes across each page. Often, teachers begin the school year implementing the simpler Picturing Writing crayon resist art-based writing process and then culminate the year with the more dynamic Image-Making process. Both models are easily integrated into the social studies and science curricula, offering project-based, inquiry-based units of study aligned with the ELACCSS. Additionally, each approach offers a wide range of scaffolding to support diverse learners. Storyboards (Figure 3), accordion folders (Figure 4), and specially designed brainstorming sheets that help students access detail and description from their pictures (Figure 5) are just a few of the many tools available to maximize the success of all learners.

Aligned with ELACCSS

For teachers who are feeling overwhelmed by having to reinvent the wheel in order to provide their students with a "well-developed, content-rich curriculum consistent with the expectations" of the ELACCSS (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 6), the Picturing Writing and Image-Making models have already done that work, providing teachers with research-based units of study that have been fine-tuned over decades and proven effective for a wide range of learners over multiple independent studies. (Findings may be viewed at www.picturingwriting.org/effectiveness.html.) These dynamic cross-curricular units offer teachers not only a range of metacognitive strategies, but also a proven interdisciplinary approach to literacy as recommended by the ELACCSS. Picturing Writing and Image-Making integrated curriculum

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units of study foster deep, sustained thinking and learning across the content areas as students research curriculum topics and then create their own carefully crafted picture books using a variety of genres. Not only does this visual approach to literacy learning serve to eliminate the verbal bias within our schools that causes additional challenges for our at-risk learners, it also is aligned with the Common Core.

Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking

Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are seamlessly woven throughout Artists/Writers Workshop in what the drafters of the CCSS would refer to as "an integrated model of literacy" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4). Students read and discuss informational texts (and images) to gain knowledge about a topic or understanding of nonfiction writers' craft; they read and analyze narrative texts and images (as well as those of other genres) to study writers' craft. They compose images, then read and discuss them during group share as a prewriting activity. During the writing process, students read their pictures as they write; they review their rough drafts, read them to their peers, receive feedback, and revise their writing before sharing it more formally with the class during the group share. During the group

Figure 2: Third grader creates Image-Making collage as he reconstructs his ancestors' immigration story

Figure 3: Fifth-grade ELL student shares storyboard describing her family's recent immigration experience

Figure 4: Fifth grade ELL student displays accordion folder containing paintings for his research-based animal story

Figure 5: Second grader brainstorms before writing a fact-based poem for her tree through-the-seasons book

share, classmates practice listening and speaking skills; they learn how to offer positive comments and ask thoughtful questions that often lead to discussions about how the words and pictures interface. Once students' books are published, students practice reading them with fluency so they can share them with classmates, book buddies, and family members. Because students' published books often become favorite reading material, they remain in the classroom library until the end of the school year (Figure 6). Artists/Writers Workshop naturally lends itself not only to reading, writing, listening, and speaking, but also to the language development, which claims its own focus within the ELACCSS.

Language Development

Within the Picturing Writing and Image-Making processes, reading the pictures serves as a natural bridge between the visual image and the written word. Specially designed brainstorming sheets require students to read their pictures for meaning and then brainstorm rich descriptive language to capture that meaning. Before students do this on their own, the class practices brainstorming as a whole group, thus creating extensive community word banks that include both descriptive and academic language.

Following the whole group brainstorming process, students create their own word banks that describe what is happening in their picture. As students prepare to write to their own image(s), they must select the words from their individual word banks to craft their sentences. Here word choice is key as students work to understand the nuances of the words they have written on their own brainstorming sheets. Their goal: select the words that do the very best job painting a picture of the image they wish

to describe. Students learn that the use of sensory description can actually serve to draw the reader into their picture and that using strong active verbs will make their picture appear to come alive!

Media Literacy

Recognizing the many multimodal forms of communication students confront in today's world, several standards support the use of multimodal text in our teaching (McLaughlin, 2013). Within Artists/Writers Workshop, because pictures and words are treated as equal languages for learning, addressing the standards around media literacy naturally occurs. Students analyze and create multimodal texts throughout the year. Through their study of quality picture books, students learn how to read and make meaning in pictures as well as in words. This allows those students who are not strong verbal learners to engage deeply with picture books and practice their meaning-making skills. Through their engagement in reading pictures, students are also drawn into the study of the parallel and complementary language of words.

Close Reading and Drawing Inferences

Reading Anchor 1 states, "Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text" (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 10). When working with young students or those who struggle with words, this standard can be first practiced by broadening the definition of "text" to include visual compositions.

While I suspect the drafters of the ELACCSS intended this standard to be addressed by teaching students how to draw

Figure 6: First graders read a Picturing Writing winter story created by one of the students

inferences from written texts alone, it is also possible (even quite natural) to teach inference through the use of pictures. Keep in mind that most children's early reading experiences involve reading the pictures in picture books. Asking students to describe what is happening in the picture naturally engages them in reading the pictures for meaning; when they do this, they are drawing inferences. As students read a picture for meaning, teachers can follow up with a simple question: "How do they know that?" This will invite students to cite the evidence that led to each inference. This simple questioning process will draw students into the practice of close reading, drawing inferences, and citing evidence as they engage with pictures. Following this activity, the parallel practice of close reading, drawing inferences, and citing evidence within the written text comes naturally as does drawing inferences from the marriage of text and image.

Balance of Genres

The ELACCSS require a balance of reading and writing informational, narrative, and persuasive pieces. Picturing Writing and Image-Making research-based story units incorporate reading informational texts (to gather information) and narrative texts (to analyze story structure); students then write informational pieces using narrative form. Writing fact-based stories demands greater use of higher-order thinking skills than does composing straight informational or narrative pieces, as students must weave facts from their research into their pictorial and written narratives. These research-based story units also offer opportunities to include opinion and/or persuasive pieces as students synthesize and reflect upon what they have learned and why it is important. Thus, in one book project, it is possible to address all three types of writing required by the Common Core.

Research Findings

In 1993, Image-Making Within The Writing Process was validated by the US Department of Education as "an innovative and effective literacy program" based on research submitted to the Department of Education's Program Effectiveness Panel (PEP). In 1998, findings from an independent evaluation of a yearlong art- and literature-based approach (implementing both Picturing Writing and Image-Making) resulted in documenting statistically significant gains in writing, far greater than those originally submitted to the PEP. In both studies, at-risk students (Title I and special education students) made the greatest gains (Olshansky, Cunningham, & Frankel, 1998).

From 2000 to the present, Main Street School in Exeter, NH, has implemented Picturing Writing and Image-Making school-wide. After only two years of implementation, Title I and special education students outscored regular education students across the nation in reading on the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests (Table 1). Title I students also outscored their regular education peers across the state in writing on the NHEIAP statewide writing assessment (Table 2). Over a decade of standardized test data from Main Street School reveal impressive scores, particularly for students in at-risk subgroups: Title I, special education, and

Table 1. Gates-MacGinitie Reading Comprehension
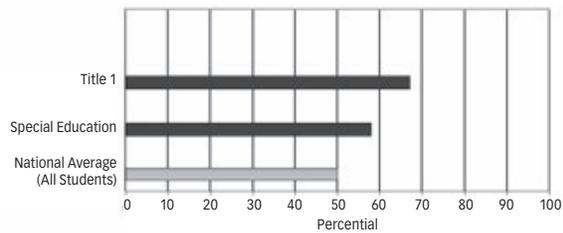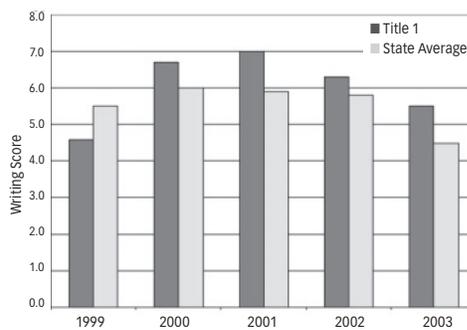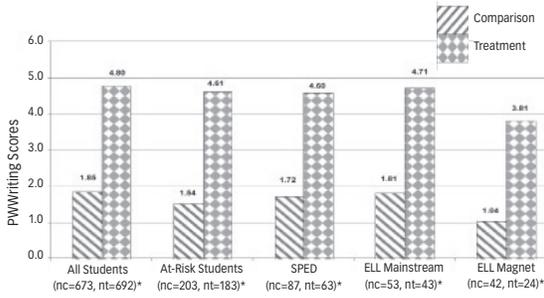
At-Risk 2nd Grade Scores, Spring 2001, Exeter, NH

Table 2. NHEIAP Grade Three Writing Scores

Title 1 Exeter Students Compared to State Average for All Students

Table 3. PW Writing Scores, Treatment vs. Comparison

* The difference between comparison and treatment groups is statisically significant.

Table 4. NECAP Writing 2010–11

Percentage Scoring Proficient and Above: Grade 5

Table 4. NECAP 2010–11 Disaggregated Gender Data

Percentage Scoring Proficient and Above in Writing
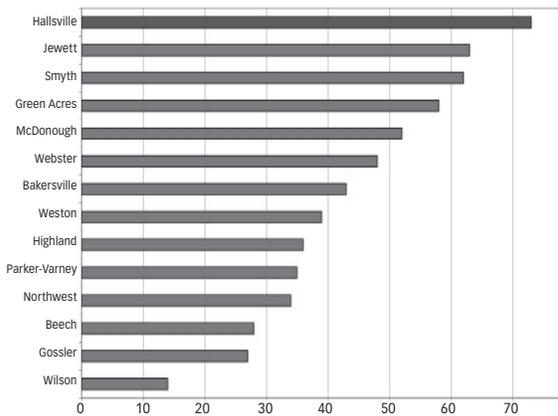
economically disadvantaged (O'Connor, 2010). Given what we now know about physiological brain differences between boys and girls (with boys tending to exhibit strength as visual, spatial learners [Gurian & Stevens, 2004]), it is not surprising that boys at Main Street School outscored boys across the state on the NECAP Writing Assessment every year. Interestingly, Main Street boys even outscored girls across the state in four out of the five years that their scores were tracked (O'Connor, 2010). Given the national trend for boys to lag a year and a half behind girls in reading and writing (Perie & Moran, 2005; Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003; Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008), one wonders if this structured visual approach to writing could serve to close the longstanding achievement gap between girls and boys.

In a three-year, federally funded, independent evaluation conducted in Manchester, NH, from 2007 to 2010, Picturing Writing and Image-Making were evaluated within the context of Manchester's very diverse student population. In an independent study of 1,500 students (grades 1–4 and ELL magnet grades 1–5), at-risk treatment students ("below benchmark readers," SPED, ELL mainstream, and ELL magnet) made statistically significant gains in writing and visual literacy as compared to demographically matched comparison groups within the district (Table 3). On the NECAP Writing Assessment, the highest fidelity treatment school (due to consistent administrative support) came in first in the district, with 8 of the remaining 13 elementary schools having far fewer students participating in free or reduced lunch (F&R) (Table 4). The same high-fidelity school documented impressive gains in writing for Title I and economically disadvantaged students compared to their peers in the comparison school, the district, and the state. Boys in the high-fidelity treatment school scored equally as well as girls, outscoring boys *and* girls in their demographically matched comparison school, the district, and the state (Table 5). At 57 percent F&R, this same school scored second in the district in reading, second only to a school that had 15 percent F&R (Frankel, 2011).

Time to Reflect

Two decades of findings documenting impressive gains made by low-performing students when given structured visual tools for thinking and expressing their ideas should cause us to pause and ponder whether we are unintentionally creating a population of at-risk learners by our narrowly focused literacy practices. Given the wide range of learners who populate today's classrooms, the many multimodal forms of communication that our students confront in today's world, and our new, more rigorous standards (several of which support the use of multimodal texts in our classrooms), maybe it is time to broaden our literacy practices. In doing so, we could eliminate the bias within our schools that handicaps a significant segment of our student population. Given two decades of compelling evidence, perhaps now is the time for a deeper conversation. Are we willing to make a paradigm shift that would allow more students to succeed? If not, why not?

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