

“Waking up the Imagination through Image Making”

Michele Ebersole, Ph.D.
University of Hawaii at Hilo
200 W. Kawili Street
Hilo, HI 96720
Phone: (808) 933-0714
Home: (808) 959-0638
Email: mebersol@hawaii.edu

Susana Browne, Education Specialist
Maui Arts and Culture Center
Email: Susana@mauiarts.org

Paul Wood, Independent Writer

Image making reawakened their minds and freed children of set boundaries; it allowed them to dream of the impossible and explore other possibilities – Jane, third grade teacher

Children need to imagine. Their imaginative abilities must be cultivated and sensory systems refined to explore visions of possibility beyond their experiences (Eisner, 2002). Elliot Eisner (2002) writes, “The most complex or subtle forms of thinking take place when students have an opportunity either to work meaningfully on the creation of images . . . or to scrutinize them appreciatively (p.xii). In *Releasing the Imagination*, Maxine Greene eloquently argues for the fundamental role imagination can play, “as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world (p. 3).” Yet with our educational emphasis upon achievement and accountability, children in many of today’s schools are more familiar with a world of worksheets and writing prompts than building imaginative capacities.

It is no secret that as teachers we are inundated with endless demands. Resources are limited and funding is restricted to spending on programs which have proven direct improvement toward test scores. Increasingly the arts and imaginative experiences have been marginalized to the edges rather than placed at the core of the curriculum. It has become very difficult for schools and teachers to independently face the challenge of effectively teaching the arts. The Maui Arts & Culture Center (MACC), a non-profit organization established in 1994, includes the following as one of 5 institutional goals: “act as a catalyst for learning in, about, and through the arts in every school on Maui.” Since 1995, MACC has partnered with the Maui District Department of Education in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts program *Partners in Education*. With resources from the Kennedy Center, both financial and personnel, Susana Browne, the Education Director for the MACC, worked to provide teachers in the community with quality professional development experiences and create spaces for arts based learning in these challenging times. She gathered a team of enthusiastic and willing educators, teaching artists, teacher mentors, and researchers and set out to give teachers opportunities to conduct research which highlighted arts and literacy learning. In this particular project, Paul Wood, a professional writer and former teacher, led the teacher workshops and visited the classrooms to teach the children imaginative writing techniques, and Michele Ebersole joined the team as the university researcher.

When we began we knew that the teachers wanted to integrate the arts within their classrooms and many wanted to learn “how to” integrate the arts and writing. We realized this presented the challenge of integrating the arts and not-arts content where skills are taught in tandem and the content and methods of the disciplines reinforce each other (Stevens & Deasy, 2005). Jager’s (2000) research on units of study which integrates writing across the curriculum found children were able to see how learning in all areas are related, how it reinforces concepts that have been learned, and how it builds on their prior knowledge. Integrating the arts and writing across the curriculum allowed *all* children to experience success. Gallas’ (1994) work with children explores the potential of the art experience. Through drawing, painting, movement, dance, drama, poetry, music, and creative writing children thought about new knowledge in complex and meaningful ways by transforming their understanding of difficult concepts into metaphoric language and acts.

In this case, we considered the crafting of stories and poems as an art form and reflected upon how children use written language and visual arts to express ideas generated through image making. This story describes how an independent community group successfully established partnerships and provided outside resources and support to provide teachers with quality professional development experiences and children with spaces to exercise their imaginations and “reawaken minds.”

As representatives of the community group we wanted to be sure that we invited a school that supported arts education and that represented typical challenges characteristic of many schools within the state, such as serving a high percentage of children receiving free and reduced lunch rates and one with structured reading programs established. Having worked with schools with high socioeconomic base in the past, we were interested in seeing how arts based learning worked in a different setting. At this particular school the principal was supportive of arts initiatives and some of the teachers at the school attended previous summer institutes sponsored by MACC.

Over two years, eighteen elementary school teachers from one elementary school, grades K-5, participated in the project, nine the first year and twelve the second year. The elementary school is located in a growing community which is supported by a thriving tourist industry. Children represent a rich and diverse range of ethnic backgrounds. Teachers had several professional development opportunities: They attended a summer institute which focused on writing by using specific image making strategies along with visual arts. Paul presented image-making lessons – a sequence of imaginative writing exercises designed to draw students, step-by-step, into the process of creating original pieces - to the children while teachers observed and reflected. Visual arts mentor, Michael, also modeled lessons in each of the classes and gave teachers feedback. Paul conducted several 3 hour professional development workshops for teachers. Teachers created learning process portfolios which included arts lesson plans, reflections on their lessons, children’s work, a scoring rubric and the teacher’s evaluation of the work. Children and teachers were also interviewed and observed by researchers and teacher mentors.

Creating safe spaces to explore - *“You can’t go wrong . . . You just have to choose,” chants Paul. The children repeat the mantra after him – “You can’t go wrong . . . You just have to choose.”*

For the children the arts based lessons gave them permission to step outside the typical boundaries set during reading and writing lessons. In the first session Paul established certain agreements that allowed every child to feel safe and confident about participating. The key statements of this agreement:

- You can’t go wrong, but you have to choose.
- You can write without a pencil.
- The words you have are enough.

Teachers felt these “rules” facilitated participation and enhanced creativity, as they provided children with a safe learning environment to explore their ideas and imagination. An intermediate grades teacher stated, “In my classroom what is especially important is the safety issue, the kids felt safe that nobody was going to laugh at them and nobody was going to tease them, there wasn’t a wrong answer. Once students felt safe to freely participate, students began to actively think and share their own ideas.” Another

teacher shared, “Students told me that [in the past] they usually wrote to give the teacher what she wanted to hear but not their own words. They loved the idea that they could write and put what they had to say about things in their own words and there were no ‘wrong answers.’”

Children needed a safe space before they could feel comfortable to explore and imagine. It was critical to reestablish “rules” and create a context that encouraged children to express ideas. (Cite Graves and Calkins about creating a writing environment). In order for children to generate meaningful ideas it was necessary for children to feel part of a trusting and respectful community which encouraged social interaction and active engagement in learning (Short, 1990; Kauffman, 1996). Children had opportunities to make choices and in some cases, had to overcome the fear of being wrong. One teacher points out, “It is the spark of motivation some students crave and it gives my students permission to let go of the fear of being wrong allows them to stretch the boundaries of their minds eye.”

Paul got every child comfortable with the act of making images using simple props (colored cloths, a bell, a ball, a large stone, feathers) and the repeated question “What does it make you think of?” The children learned from experience that an image is a picture in the mind’s eye, a sound in the mind’s ear, a smell in the mind’s nose, a taste in the mind’s mouth, or a touch sensation on the mind’s skin. Using a variety of techniques, Paul elicited lists of images and worked them into “group poems.” Children learned how to “grow” images by sustaining focus and adding details.

Waking up the imagination

IMAGINARY FEATHER PLACE

*You are full of feather and might.
I bet you talk
on your flight
to places.*

*I travel far
but you travel farther.
You have so much beauty.*

*There is never going to be
a bird as mighty and free.*

*You must have been in a flock
of birds once or twice.
Have you ever been in the fantasy world?
Well, I have.*

*In my secret imaginary place,
you are a fluffy flights, feathery, feather.
Do you know Peter?
He inspired me
like you.*

Written by Kiana, grade 3

Children, like Kiana, traveled to “my secret imaginary place” and entered a

fantasy world, not typically experienced in their literacy lessons. In that world Kiana writes that she has been “inspired” and awakened. Greene (1995) states, “The role of imagination is . . . to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (pg. 28). By being encouraged to use their imaginations to draw images children were free to explore new ideas. Tyson, an enthusiastic first grader shares that he was surprised to learn, “You don’t have to write a story with a pencil or pen or something to write with. You can just make it in your brain first, then write it out.” In journal entries, third grader Talia writes that Mr. Paul taught her to, “Let your imagination jump out like a kangaroo jumping out of a cage.” Braydon shares that he learned to “create poems and stories and he [Mr. Paul] helped us picture in the mind's eye and imagine.” Ellie sums up Mr. Wood's style of image making and creative writing as “Use you imagination. Tell your picture in your mind's eye so your imagination can go out.” Malia quietly asserts, “We were taught to use our mind and to use our mind to create images.”

Children were able to tap into their imaginations, however; Eisner (2003) explains that remembered experiences do not have social utility except to those having those experiences. He further states,

For social value to occur, two processes are needed. First the recalled material needs to be treated imaginatively. That is, it needs to be more than a recollection; it needs to be something of an invention. . . To infuse our ideas and visions with imagination requires more than recall. But even when treated imaginatively, the social value of an image or idea does not secure importance unless something else happens – the second process, the transformation of what has been imagined into some public form. In short, the contents of consciousness need to be made public; they need to be *represented* (pg. 341 & 342).

Image Making helped children navigate through the first process and gave children the license to imagine. Paul assisted children with the transformation into the represented form, which in this case was writing. In this project we believe the children experienced the first process – they were able to successfully recall experiences and treat them imaginatively. When children tried to represent in another form – namely writing –, one teacher stated that there was an “imbalance between the flow of their ideas and their ability to get words down on paper. Thus, children needed another form such as visual arts to support or express their ideas and they were encouraged to use drawing and writing to generate meaning.



Returned reality fairy -
to her.

First grader Kathy describes the image making process she experienced in Figure 1. “We turned real into fairy tales.” Her drawing of the knight represents the fairy tales and imagined world. The gun in his/her hand could be a bit unsettling, but it may be real images that children see in video games and television today.

Teachers felt that learning imagination coaching techniques helped children get their ideas going. An intermediate grade teacher noted, “Getting started is hard for most of the kids . . . His [Paul’s] techniques really helped me get the imagination going and give them a place to start. It’s given me a way to help guide them without telling them what to think.” In the group interview a teacher states, “Everything Paul just kept saying about using your imagination was helpful ‘cause I just feel like everything we teach our kids is scripted . . . it really helped for me to open up and let the students do whatever came out of their mind, writing or art.” This experience to make images played an important role in helping to “waking up their imaginations” allowing children to generate meaningful ideas for their writing and cultivate creative thinking not typically experienced during their literacy lessons.

Building confidence, enjoyment and engagement – *Now I believe I can write and it’s fun!*
- Bryan, grade 3

With image making techniques children like Bryan began to raise their level of confidence and attitude towards writing. A fourth grade teacher shared, “I think the new strategies that my students learned impacted their learning in a positive way they demonstrated new confidence in their writing skills.” Some teachers felt that the image making techniques helped ELL children in particular. Oftentimes the arts can help children whose language, culture, and experience are different from the mainstream and expanded the boundaries of children whose modes of communication and expression do not fit the expected classroom discourse (Gallas, 1991; Stevens & Deasy, 2005). One teacher expressed, “The strategies have helped to free their minds and break through the writer’s block that often comes with limited English proficiency.”

Children’s attitude toward writing improved as a result of the arts lessons. Shyla, a fifth grader told Paul, “You showed me how to find the words in my head and how I have a lot to write . . . now I like to write.” One teacher commented, “They are able to stay engaged for an enormous amount of time and I was pleasantly rewarded with students who fell in love with writing.” Another teacher felt that, “Mr. Wood’s lessons have changed that mindset for my students. They have learned that using their imaginations takes a bit of effort, is a personal experience, and can be fun.”

Improving Writing - *“When my images are clear, my writing has more details”* – Briana, grade 3

Through the image making process children generated new ideas and refined their writing by adding detail and helping them to organize their ideas. A third grade teacher noted, “We tried to improve voice and sentence fluency; ideas were weak which caused all the rest to fall apart. Then we added the art component and it was the spark that

ignited the fire. It was absolutely astounding as to how doing a “turkey picture” could organize their story about what a turkey was doing.”

Paul’s work focused on aspects of the writing process that are often ignored and untaught in the classroom – specifically, the pre-writing and planning stages, also the final stage of publication (in the form of out-loud reading of original works). As part of the pre-writing and planning stage, Paul guided children through image making which sometimes included sketching. One teacher expressed that, “Visualization helps the student formulate ideas and see clear pictures before they begin to write. Students are not left wondering about what to write. The pencils flow quickly across the pages in my classroom.” According to Eisner, (2003), it is the vision that the writer begins with and ends with words. For the children the vision came with the image making as part of the pre-writing process. In Ernst’s (1994) artists/writers workshop, “pictures led to words . . . linking of the visual with the written gave students ways to express their uniqueness and their creative thought, thereby widening their abilities to say what they meant” (pg. 48). For Olshansky’s (2006) children in the artists/writers workshop made meaning through pictures and words.

In addition to this work with *image-making*, Paul emphasized two other areas that are essential to writing. First, he had the students practice careful word selection in order to create musical effects and compositional forms. To do this, he had the students make “sound walls” of words that “sound right” for a poem about a feather. Also, he used a model poem that each student adapted for his or her original variation. Second, he had the students strengthen the skills of “outburst” and “inburst” (Paul’s terms). Outburst involves vocal confidence and skillful delivery of the spoken word. Inburst is the opposite but equally important skill of silent, searching introspection.

Children also learned more about the writing process. One teacher stated, “Creating poetry and stories using the imagination as a group helped students understand the process of writing.” Paul set up the children’s first solo poems by means of a planning sheet. This “animal dream” poem had the children combine literary images with visual-art images taught by visual artist, Michael Takemoto. Paul guided the students in preparing the planning sheets; the teachers followed up by having the students write the poem according to their plan.

Paul’s “doodle page” process for guided the students in making original stories. This three-step process enables every student to map out a fairly sophisticated story (beginning-middle-end, detailed characters, richly described setting, cause-and-effect) using a combination of words and quick sketches.

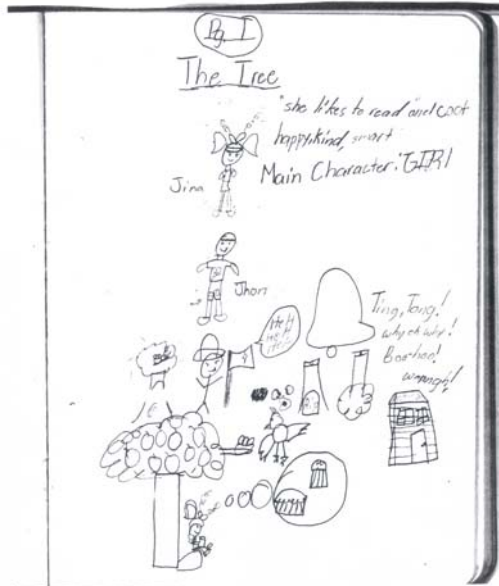
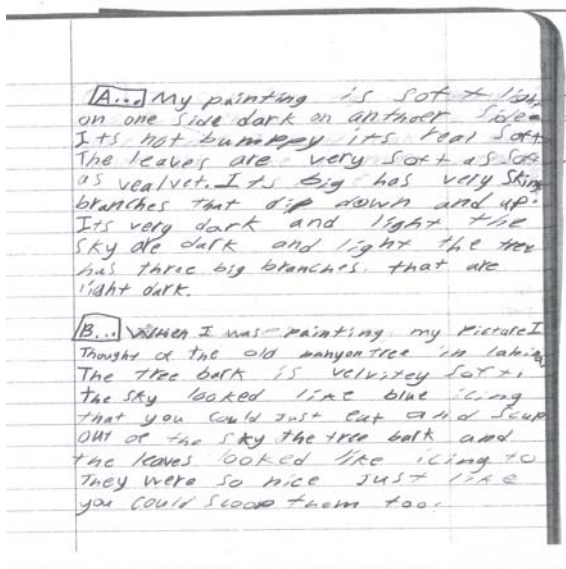


Figure 2 shows a sample drawing shows the first of Adriana’s doodling pages in her drawing tablet. She has drawn her characters, identified at least two of their qualities, and has given them names. She has also drawn a quick sketch of the four parts of her story and written a first draft. In her final story Adriana changed the problem from cutting the tree down to having a man come and take all the delicious peaches. Her ending is happy though, as after 4 weeks, the peach tree is full of peaches again main character Jina forgives the man and they share peach pie, peach, cake and peach bread together.



In Figure 3. Megan, a third grader reflects on her “Watercolor Tree Landscape” and begins to play with written language to describe her piece. This reflection show that she is using figurative language and descriptive details in her description. She explains that her “leaves are very soft as soft as velvet” and in her interpretation of why she selected

colors and how it makes her feel she writes, “the tree bark is velvitey soft. “The sky looked like blue iceing that you could just eat and scup out of the sky.”

I think that my writing has improved a lot this year because my ~~teacher~~ ^{teacher} teaches this ~~year~~ ^{year} has really taught me a lot about writing this year. I've learned many helpful things from her. This year we did several colorful timelines in history. We also drew oil pastel paintings based on images from a poem about the galaxy and paintings of many different land forms. My favorite was the oil pastel galaxy. It was fun to learn all of the different pastel techniques. Art lessons helped me gain a more creative outlook on writing. Visual arts helped my writing the most. By creating a piece of art I sometimes get ideas for stories or poems.

In his final reflection, shown in Figure 4. Bryson writes about his learning process and the relationship between art and writing. He felt that art “helped me gain a more creative outlook on writing.” For him images were used to think in different ways. In one sense he generated images for his art work based on his interpretation of a written text. In another sense, the act of creating a piece of artwork gave him ideas for writing stories or poems as part of the pre-writing or planning stage. In this example, Bryson’s imaginative capacities were released (Greene, 1995) and he learned to think about writing and art in new ways.

Thinking Imaginatively

Literacy is an art. The process of crafting writing is an art form and when we engage children in imaginative experiences new things happen – “the boundaries of their experiences expand” (Ehrenworth, pg. 43). Children were able to use the image making to envision and explore ideas. Paul helped them draw images in their minds before writing words on paper and he established an environment for children to use their imaginations and shared with them art of crafting images as part of the writing process. Children were actively engaged and experienced joy which led to greater confidence and positive attitudes toward writing. Writing was used as a tool for them to begin to express ideas and images generated through the image making process. Through this experience, children learned to “cultivate the capacity to think imaginatively” (Eisner, 2003, pg. 342).

In a recent Language Arts issue Siegal posed the question, “How are teachers making space for multiple sign systems in regressive times?” (2006, pg. 74) Due to the external pressures placed upon teachers in this educational climate, we believe in the potential of looking beyond the school system and establishing working partnerships with community based organizations that have expertise in their art form. Then we can work together to understand and place “images, gestures, music, movement, animation, and other representational modes on equal footing with language” (pg. 65). As our work continues we realize that in trying to “integrate the arts with writing” we still emphasize the conventional definition of literacy privileging language over other representational modes. It is through continued professional readings and further research that we hope to

expand our project to explore how we might examine how children make meaning through other representational modes (Siegal, 2006).

When I asked first grader Jason, what is an imagination he pauses, points to his head, and enthusiastically shares, “It is your mind thinking of something that is not real. You are making something up. You can create something new. It’s really kind of cool.” Children like Jason have experienced the wonders of the imagination and traveled to new worlds of possibility. As educators, we can build upon the imagination as a gateway through which children can explore new ideas and insight. It is through imaginative experiences and using image making techniques that we can help children empower themselves with new knowledge and understand the power of questioning, “What if?”

References

- Albers & Cohen (2006). Literacy on our minds: A student-inspired symposium. *Language arts*, 83 (6) 514 – 522.
- Jager, Mary (2000). Integrating Writing into the Arts, *Journal of School Improvement* Vol. 1, Issue 1, Spring 2000 <http://www.ncacasi.org/jsi/2000v1i1/arts>
- Ehrenworth, M. (2003). Literacy and the aesthetic experience: Engaging children with the visual arts in the teaching of writing. *Language arts*, 81(1), 43-51.
- Eisner, E. (2003). The Arts and the creation of mind. *Language Arts*, Vol. 80 No 5. May 2003, 340 – 344)
- Ernst, K. (1994). *Picturing learning: Artists and writers in the classroom*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Gallas, K. (1994). *The Languages of Learning: How children talk, write, dance, draw, and sing their understanding of the world*.
- Gallas, K. (1991) *Arts as Epistemology: enabling Children to Know What they Know*. *Harvard Educational review*, 61 (1) 40 – 50.
- Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination; Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
- Kauffman, G. (1996). *Creating a collaborative environment*. In K. Short, J. Harste, with C. Burke. *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*. Heinemann, Portsmouth.
- Maui Arts and Culture Center website: <http://www.mauiarts.org/mission.html>
Retrieved on June 27, 2007.
- Olshanski, B. (2006). Artists/Writers Workshop: focusing in on the ART of writing. *Language Arts*, 83 (6), 530 – 533.
- Siegal, M. (2006). Rereading the signs: Multimodal transformations in the field of literacy education. *Language Arts*, 84(1), 65-75.
- Short, K. (1990). *Creating a community of learners*. In *Talking about Books: Creating Literate Communities*. Edited by KG. Short and KM Pierce. Heinemann Portsmouth.
- Stevenson, L.M. & Deasy, R.J. (2005). *Third space: When learning matters*. Arts Education Partnership. Washington, DC.