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**Art Infused Literacy: Scaffolding the Writing Process with Visual Strategies**

Kimberly L. Traue, MA

Roger A. Stewart, PhD

## Abstract

*This paper shares the design and outcomes of a teacher-based inquiry project initiated by a K-12 visual arts teacher. Employed at a rural Title I school while pursuing graduate studies in literacy, I noted and became intrigued by the similarities between the steps taken to create visual art and those used in the writing process.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, I developed curricula and a plan to incorporate visual arts strategies in my 2<sup>nd</sup> grade art classroom to scaffold the writing process. The resulting set of lesson plans became the Art Infused Literacy Project and was based on the theory of transmediation, the “process of translating meanings from one sign system (such as language) into another (such as pictorial representation)” (Siegel, 1995, p. 456). Transmediation captured my interest when I realized that it could serve as a framework for bridging art and literacy – providing organic support for reading and writing in the art classroom. This idea, along with the connections noted between the writing process and creating visual artwork, inspired the following inquiry questions: (a) When concepts of the writing process are taught and practiced through exploration of parallel concepts in the visual arts, does the foundation of visual arts concepts provide scaffolding for students to transfer the concepts to the writing process? and (b) What visual strategies can be effectively employed to assist students in learning complex writing skills, with the objective of translating visual concepts into written language and thus achieving transmediation? I designed, implemented, and evaluated a seven-week interdisciplinary unit that revealed synergies between visual arts and the writing process and resulted in positive student outcomes.*

*Keywords: transmediation, Visual Thinking Skills (VTS), mentor texts, Heart Maps, bookmaking as a learning tool, Six Writing Traits, word choice, sentence length, visual literacy, writing/reading engagement*

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<sup>1</sup> “I” refers throughout to the first author who designed and conducted this teacher inquiry project and collected and analyzed all data. The second author consulted on project and evaluation design and co-authored this paper.

## **Art Infused Literacy: Scaffolding the Writing Process with Visual Strategies**

Kimberly L. Traue, MA  
Roger A. Stewart, PhD

### **Introduction: The Intersection of Visual Arts and Writing**

*“If teachers show children how an illustrator’s decisions about pictures are a lot like a writer’s decisions about words, they form a bridge of understanding that nurtures children as writers.” **Katie Wood Ray***

The opening quote encapsulates the goal of the classroom-based teacher inquiry project described herein. The project was conceived and undertaken by me, the first author, while a graduate student in literacy and teaching K-12 visual art in a rural Title I school. In an attempt to integrate and expand pedagogies, commonalities and synergies between the procedures used to create visual art and those used in the writing process were noted. Specifically, both disciplines follow a similar course of deciding purpose or audience, brainstorming, getting ideas down on paper with thumbnail sketches or outlines, creating a prototype or rough draft, refining and revising the piece, and then publishing or sharing the work. This observation combined with the theoretical vehicle of transmediation —“the process of translating meanings from one sign system (such as language) into another (such as pictorial representation)” (Siegel, 1995, p 456)—led to the following inquiry questions: (a) When concepts of the writing process are taught and practiced through the exploration of parallel concepts in the visual arts, does the foundation of visual arts concepts provide scaffolding for students to transfer the concepts to the writing process? and (b) What visual strategies can be effectively employed to assist students in learning complex writing skills with the objective of translating visual concepts into written language and thus achieving transmediation? To explore the answers to these questions, I set out to develop a unit of study for my art classroom which fused high-quality art instruction with equally high-quality writing instruction. The two disciplines would be taught in parallel with an end goal of creating a bridge to facilitate the transfer of visual concepts into written language. The bridge was constructed using a 7-week unit that brought to the surface of classroom discourse the similarities between the language of visual art and the written language of texts. Doing so offered students an opportunity to gain greater understanding of both modalities while transmediating between the two.

According to Hadjoannou and Hutchinson (2014), “Transmediation can be a powerful tool in literacy education as it can open up the interpretive possibilities of written texts. . . . and use texts as thinking devices” (p 3). In this inquiry project, works of art were used as “texts” to assist 2<sup>nd</sup> graders in

understanding writing; and, in turn, writing texts were used to assist the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders in understanding works of art. Such connections make both intuitive and practical sense given that the processes of creating visual art and written text both start with brainstorming ideas and then capturing those ideas in sketches, notes, or a rough draft. Furthermore, and importantly, both involve carefully choosing the correct media or text structure to convey the intended message. And finally, the artwork or writing is refined and presented to viewers or readers. My experience bridging art and literacy in the classroom is one of a number of examples revealing the power of making connections between visual arts and writing to scaffold the writing process (e.g., Gilrain, 2015; Wood Ray, 2010). Educators have been aware of these connections for some time and have developed a variety of strategies to take advantage of them. The following is a brief overview of some of this past work and how it influenced the curriculum, instruction, activities, and strategies used in this inquiry project.

### **Literature Review**

The discovery of Beth Olshansky's art-based literacy model (2008) was a primary resource for this project. Her work goes beyond a verbocentric approach and treats written language and visual images as parallel languages that work together to make literacy concepts more accessible to all learners. In her book *The Power of Pictures: Creating Pathways to Literacy Through Art* (2008), Olshansky describes two research-based models: (a) Picturing Writing and (b) Image-Making Within the Writing Process. Both of these models use visual art as a prominent focus to scaffold and inform the writing process by creating artwork first, then the writing – the opposite of what is usually done in school settings. The results were impressive. Data showed significant improvements over the course of a school year using both art-based writing models. Writing abilities nearly doubled in the areas of story development, descriptive language, and use of visual elements to communicate ideas. Students in the study also showed impressive increases on standardized and state-mandated assessments. Importantly, the sample of students included at-risk and English Learners (EL), and “Title I and Special Education students outscored national and state averages on standardized reading and writing assessments after participating in art-based literacy practices over time” (p 206). Olshansky's art-based literacy model, centered in the idea of transmediation, succeeded with students who struggled with more traditional literacy strategies and provided support for using art projects as a way to support literacy skills.

Hadjoannou and Hutchinson (2014) favor practices that focus on multimodal ways of knowing and see transmediation as a learning tool that can help diverse student populations with making meaning. In today's multicultural and multilingual classrooms, content focused heavily on reading and writing skills without additional support can be problematic: “Literacy development in many schools is often presented as autonomous skills of knowing how to encode meaning in linear ways through printed text. Although valuable, this approach

relies heavily on proficiencies often foreign to contemporary diverse student populations” (p 2). It was thus the intent of the Art Infused Literacy Project to approach literacy from a different vantage point, one that utilized the visual arts as the foundation and visual strategies as the activities that would be beneficial and accessible to all learners. The visual arts and strategies together would be used to create a bridge to writing and other literacy skills, such as reading, listening, and speaking.

The work of Janet Olsen (1992) also made connections between visual art and writing. By using drawing as a means to aid the writing process, Olsen advocated that since both pictures and words can be used to tell stories, students should be able to use both as they write. In *Envisioning Writing* (1992) she explains,

Pictures can provide additional information to words for the visual learner, and words can provide additional information to pictures for the verbal learner. One informs the other. When children are educated with both the visual and the verbal modes of learning, they can move back and forth between these domains without effort. When the verbal mode is no longer able to provide information and insight, the child moves naturally and comfortably to the visual mode for new insight and information (p 51).

Olsen says that drawing is an important skill that should be encouraged at all grade levels. Instead of thinking of drawing as a waste of time, she encourages educators to see drawing as a “way of thinking, a way of knowing, and a valuable tool for the cultivation of verbal skills” (p 96). Following Olsen’s model, students were encouraged throughout the Art Infused Literacy Project to move freely between visual and verbal modes as they worked on their art and writing.

Another early example of using art in writing instruction is found in *Literacy con Carino* (1998). Hayes, Bahruth, and Kessler infused art and bookmaking into the writing assignments of twenty-two 5<sup>th</sup> grade EL students who were struggling to read and write at grade level. The illustrated dialogue journals created by the students increased engagement and enthusiasm as they explored other content areas, personal experiences, and topics of interest. These students created illustrated classroom books of shared ideas. The combination of reading and drawing greatly improved the literacy skills of these students. “As they discovered the value of talking, reading and writing together in an atmosphere of support and encouragement, the children gained control over their learning. Their world widened and expanded” (p 146). The personal nature of these student-made books contributed to their success as a means to improve both written and verbal communication skills. When designing Art Infused Literacy, I realized that student choice would need to be an integral attribute throughout.

Of note within my model is bookmaking, a technique that Hayes et. al. employed. Bookmaking is highlighted because the culminating activity of the Art Infused Literacy unit was for each 2<sup>nd</sup> grader to create an illustrated book. The books served as a means of authentic engagement for students and a means of evaluating student learning. Bookmaking as a teaching tool has been employed

for decades (Burman, 2020; Johnson, 1993; Pope, Jacobs, Rosner, 2019; Strauch-Nelson, 2011). Johnson (1993) emphasized the importance of bookmaking as a learning tool, asserting that “when children plan and design a book of their own, integrate handwriting, lettering, illustration, layout, and binding as a vehicle for the communication of ideas, a superior kind of mental activity comes into play” (p 14). Creating a four-page illustrated book as the finished product at the conclusion of the Art Infused Literacy unit provided a natural way for students to showcase their newly acquired writing and art skills. The books also brought together two communications systems, which was the primary goal of this unit—to immerse the students in activities that required transmediation. Johnson (1997) succinctly summarized this goal when he said, “an illustrated book integrates the written word and still pictures. Both forms of communication are dynamic modes of defining and understanding” (p 3).

And finally, an equally important reason for focusing on writing is the role it plays in the overall learning process both within and outside the art classroom. According to Graham, MacArthur and Fitzgerald (2012), “writing is an indispensable tool for learning and communication” (p 5). Even so, considerably less time is spent on writing instruction than reading, and there is a “general lack of improving writing instruction nationwide” (p 3). Having said this, however, I want to emphasize that in Art Infused Literacy, visual arts learning is not subservient to writing or vice versa. I believe, and the literature supports my belief, that visual arts learning is as powerful a learning tool for students as writing, thus neither should take primacy over the other, so the Art Infused Literacy unit was deliberately constructed with balance in mind.

In the remainder of this paper, I describe the classroom unit that was developed based on the theoretical and empirical base provided by the literature and discuss the results of its implementation in my classroom. A summary of lesson progression, assessment methods, data comparing the final product to baseline writing samples, and observations regarding student engagement are included. In the process, empirical support is provided for strategically structuring curriculum and instruction aligned to targeted standards with the goal of creating opportunities for students to experience transmediation. Through combining visual art-based strategies such as Visual Thinking Skills (VTS) with mentor texts, using student artwork to inform the writing process, learning new art techniques, and refining artwork and writing, students were supported through the process of creating individualized student-authored and illustrated books.

### **Strategies for Building Bridges Between Visual Arts and Writing: Visual Thinking Strategies, Mentor Texts, and The Six Writing Traits**

In order for visual arts to be effectively integrated with teaching writing skills, classroom instruction must forge a connection between visual literacy and the language arts. The cluster of literacy skills—including reading, writing,

listening, and speaking— lend themselves to activities centered around visual arts. Visual Thinking Strategies or VTS (Housen, 1999) is one strategy that can be used to build such a bridge. VTS has been used in museums, schools, and universities to develop visual literacy. Teachers facilitate a discussion while viewing a piece of artwork. Three main questions are used during the classroom discussion: What's going on in this picture? What makes you say that? What more can you find? As students respond, the teacher paraphrases to promote verbal understanding and encourages all to participate with there being no right or wrong answers (Housen, 1999). Since it promotes better communication, observation, and listening skills, VTS can have positive impacts on student learning. Jane Phinney, principal at Ripton Elementary School in Vermont, describes the impact of implementing VTS in classrooms: "The program has strengthened teachers' ability to listen, paraphrase, expand vocabulary, and lead enriched discussion about art. At the same time, students have gained skills in all areas of communication . . . we have also noticed that VTS quickly became an area of strength for students with lower academic abilities" (DeSantis, 2008, p.2). In addition to improved verbal communication skills, teachers at Ripton also reported a transfer of critical thinking skills developed by VTS to student writing. Reasoning, speculating, and elaborating were successfully used in written form after practicing these skills verbally (DeSantis, 2008, p. 18). This indicates that students were transmediating as a consequence of VTS by taking meaning from one communication system and transferring it to another.

For the purposes of this inquiry project, VTS, a primarily visual strategy, was used to introduce students to works of art centered around sensory detail, zooming in on a subject, and personal meaning. After students had experience with these terms and concepts in a visual format, mentor texts were used to teach the same concepts in a written form. The aim here was to support the same concept in both visual and written formats, promoting transmediation through both seeing and reading. A mentor text (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007) is a piece of literature that models a certain strength or aspect of writing that teachers want to convey to students. Using texts as models for writing is a powerful way of linking reading and writing instruction because they help students incorporate aspects of the model into their own writing (Graham, MacArthur & Fitzgerald, 2013). Crawford, Sobolak & Foster (2017) advocate the use of mentor texts with young students to teach elements of genre, traits of writing, mechanics, perspective, sensory details, and other specific writing features. "Young writers are strongly supported in the composition process when they are steeped in print-rich environments and have deep exposure to mentor texts that provide models of engaging, high-quality writing across a variety of genres" (p 82). High-quality children's books were built into the Art Infused Literacy unit as mentor texts. Each text went hand-in-hand with visual activities and artwork centered around a concept intended to scaffold writing skills. Providing students with multiple ways of seeing the same concept (through viewing artwork, creating artwork, and seeing/hearing text)



gave them multiple opportunities to make connections and transmediate their learning across multiple modalities.

When teachers have the objective of improving student writing, it helps to have clear guidelines for a process that can be quite subjective for teachers and confusing for students. In *Creating Writers* (2013), Spandel advocates the use of *The Six Writing Traits* to make this process easier for both teachers and students. These traits include Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions/Presentation. Spandel says, "The traits offer a common language for talking about writing in meaningful, productive ways . . . The traits have been around as long as writing itself and are an inherent part of what makes writing work" (p 2). Teaching students to focus on and improve specific writing traits one at a time can be an effective way of simplifying the writing process, especially for younger students. Spandel provides an abundance of writing samples illustrating the traits, student activities/exercises, and lists of literature to use as mentor texts for teaching the traits. Rubrics/writing guides are also included to help teachers and students work together to analyze the quality of the traits in a piece of writing.

For the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students involved in Art Infused Literacy, specific writing traits were introduced and explained using both verbal and visual modes of learning as advocated by Olsen (1992). For example, the writing trait of *word choice* refers to choosing specific, strong words that will best convey the writer's meaning. Olshansky called these "silver dollar words" because they are special and rare, not something we see or use every day. For example, *house* is an everyday word, whereas *mansion* would be a "silver dollar word" because it is more specific, not used as frequently, and conveys a clear picture in the reader's mind. To explain the idea of *word choice* to the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, both visual and verbal explanations were given to the students. For example, a visual art lesson on "zooming in," or observing things closely, used Georgia O'Keefe's "up close" paintings of flowers as an example of what we see when we carefully look at details. Then a comparison was made to using specific, strong, "silver dollar words" when we write to convey clear meaning to readers.

### **Description of Art Infused Literacy: Bringing it all Together in the Classroom**

To explore the effects of visual strategies on student writing outcomes, a group of fourteen 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students were given a series of 10 lessons over the course of seven weeks during art class. These lessons were structured around transmediation and the strategies outlined above. Each lesson built on one another with the culminating activity being students creating four-page, illustrated books about a subject of their choice during visual arts class time. These finished books, along with visual art and writing exercises completed during the lessons, provided artifacts needed to evaluate the inquiry. The Art Infused Literacy unit was based on the following standards:

- 1.) W.2.3 – write narratives which recount a well elaborated event or short sequence of events; include details, actions, thoughts and feeling; use temporal words to signal event order and provide a sense of closure.
- 2.) Visual Arts Anchor Standard 10—synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experience to make art.
- 3.) VA: cn10.1.2a – Create works of art about events in home, school or community life.

It is important to note that both visual arts and writing standards were included, illustrating an instance where two sets of content area standards that are sometimes seen at odds with one another in today's high-intensity, standards-focused classrooms can work seamlessly together (McNabb & Hipp, 2016).

At the school where this inquiry project was undertaken, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students attended art class two times per week for thirty minutes each time. For this unit, learning objectives and components were divided over ten lessons which contained both visual/art components and writing/mentor text components. This lesson sequence was exclusive to the art room with students continuing regular language arts and reading units with their classroom teacher. The use of both visual and written resources provided an opportunity for students to gain understanding in a visual system and transfer that understanding to the challenging task of writing. Students were given the opportunity to gain understanding through observation, modeling, and hands-on techniques to explore the components of the lessons. Both objectives and lessons were designed to provide a springboard for learning and reinforcing writing concepts such as longer sentence length, stronger word choice, and use of personal narrative. Exciting art techniques, quality art supplies, and beautifully illustrated children's literature were used to increase student engagement throughout.

To begin, students wrote a sentence or two about a favorite activity they did during the summer, then created an illustration to go along with it. This represented the way art and writing are typically used together in classrooms (with art being informed by the writing). These sentences served as a baseline sample to compare to student writing completed during the sequence of lessons. Table 1 shows the sequence of the objectives and content of the lessons and illustrates how visual strategies and their companion writing strategies were systematically incorporated to encourage students to transmediate between communication systems. The lessons roughly follow three phases of instruction. During phase 1, lessons 1-3 introduced sensory details and built bridges between visual art sensory details and sensory details in the students' baseline writing sample about their summer memory. During phase 2, lessons 4-6 extended this foundation and increased students' sophistication concerning sensory details. Zooming in and resist painting techniques were the primary vehicles for this. And then lessons 7-10 (i.e., phase 3) transitioned to developing the students' narrative stories including learning about story structure and how to make a book.

A few lessons from the table will be described in greater detail to illustrate how visual arts and mentor texts were employed. Lessons 1-3 were centered

around sensory detail and explained how sensory details are visually portrayed (colors, objects, sounds, movement, etc. as seen in Seurat’s famous pointillist painting, *Sunday on la Grande Jatte*) and in written/verbal form with Alikì’s *My Five Senses* book. After exploring both visual and written representations of what sensory detail means, students were instructed to add written sensory details to their original summer memory sentences.

Lessons 7 & 8 helped students develop a story idea for their personal narratives.

This was an important component of the lessons since some of the children struggled with choosing an idea and developing it sequentially. Brainstorming ideas for stories with personal meaning was introduced with *My Gems*, a painting by William Harnett depicting his favorite items in a still-life format. *The Best Story Ever* by Eileen Spanelli was used as a mentor text to reinforce the importance of personal meaning in a verbal context. Students then created Heart Maps (Heard, 2016), an artistic representation of things important and valued in their lives. Their Heart Maps became the inspiration for their book ideas. Heart Maps are considered a graphic organizer tool to help students record on paper thoughts and feelings that are personally important to them. Both the text and illustrations in *Fireflies* by Julie Brinckloe were then used to help students understand the concept of beginning, middle, and end in stories. This was followed with the students developing a graphic organizer to help them organize their story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. At this point, what was relatively unstructured in the Heart Maps had become more structured and linear in the graphic organizers. All of the lessons in Table 1 followed a similar format. They employed parallel visual and verbal strategies to teach writing.

Table 1: Lesson sequence including Student Learning Outcomes (SLO), Visual Art Components (VAC), Writing Activities (WA), and Mentor Texts (MT).

<b>Lesson</b>	<b>Description</b>
1- 3 SLO	Visual sensory details; written sensory details; add to baseline writing samples
VAC	VTS with <i>Sunday on la Grande Jatte</i> ; explore color mixing—OK Go video, color mixing with paddles; experiment with pointillism
MT/WA	<i>My Five Senses</i> (Alikì); <i>Sense Suspense: A Guessing Game for the Five Senses</i> ; graphic organizer—help students with sensory details to add to summer writing
4- 6 SLO	Zooming in (looking closely); start with artwork first to inform writing
VAC	Georgia O’Keefe— <i>Blue Morning Glories, 1935</i> ; <i>Red Hill &amp; White Shell</i> ; watercolor/crayon resist technique
MT/WA	<i>Zoom!</i> By Istvan Banyai, to reinforce zooming in visually; <i>Rocket Writes a Story</i> by Tad Hills—zooming in with words; silver dollar words

7 SLO	Story ideas; What makes a good story; ideas from YOU, not others
VAC	<i>My Gems</i> by William Harnett; create Heart Maps
MT/WA	<i>The Best Story Ever</i> by Eileen Spinelli
8 SLO	Understand that stories have a beginning, middle and end
VAC	Heart Maps to generate story ideas
MT/WA	<i>Fireflies!</i> by Julie Brinckloe; graphic organizer to sequence story
9,10 SLO	Create an accordion fold book; create first illustration; complete 4-page book with illustrations and writing on each page; create cover & title
VAC	Choice of illustration materials: watercolor resist, pointillism, markers, colored pencil, salted watercolor (different techniques OK on each page)
MT/WA	Review of sensory details, zooming in with words and silver dollar words; use graphic organizer planning sheet as guide; write title neatly on cover

### Evaluation Methods

With only one 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom in the school where the project was conducted, there was no opportunity for a control group. Data collection was quantitative, qualitative, and observational resulting in a descriptive evaluation of the intervention and its effects. I designed and implemented all aspects of the unit, including all data collection and analysis, with permission from my school administration. Signed permission forms were collected from parents or guardians for the children pictured herein. The second author was, at the time, a university professor who consulted on unit design and how to evaluate outcomes. He also helped with authoring this paper. He did not participate in data collection, classroom observations, or data analysis.

Quantitative data was gathered by examining and comparing sentence length and word choice between the initial student writing samples (the initial sentence about a summer memory followed by a drawing that illustrated the memory/event) and subsequent student writing produced after the implementation of lessons. Observational data was used to assess student engagement. *6+1 Trait Writing Rubrics* published by Education Northwest were used to evaluate the students' final four-page book. These rubrics have both qualitative and quantitative aspects to them. While they do supply numeric data that can be useful for evaluating student work samples, they also rely on teacher judgement and opinion that can be somewhat subjective. For example, the Traits Rubric for Word Choice: K-2 requires the teacher/evaluator to differentiate between "slang, safe or simple words" (which puts the student in the *Developing* category) and "basic and common words" that puts the student

in the *Capable* category on the rubric. Thus, differences of opinion between these choices may account for slightly different evaluations between various teachers or practitioners.

## Findings

Comparisons were made between the original sentences written by the students about a summer memory and their revisions of those sentences incorporating sensory details after Lessons 1-3 (phase 1). Table 2 provides a few representative samples of how student writing changed.

Table 2: Baseline sensory details compared to revisions after phase 1

<b>Student</b>	<b>Initial Summer Sentence</b>	<b>Sensory Detail Revision</b>
1	What I did chalk on the walk	I did chalk on the walk. The chalk felt weird
2	I went to the beach	I went to the beach. I smelled the flowers. I went to camp. I saw a squirrel.
3	I am picking raspberries	I am picking raspberries. They looked juicy

The children's writing showed increasing competence at including more information about their summer memory. Sentence length also increased from an average of 5.7 words per sentence (SD=2.4; range 3-10 words) to an average of 10.9 words (SD=3.6; range 6-17 words). Even though excellent gains were achieved, this level of writing competency was not sufficient for the students to be able to construct a complete personal narrative. In order to achieve that, phase 2 lessons were implemented.

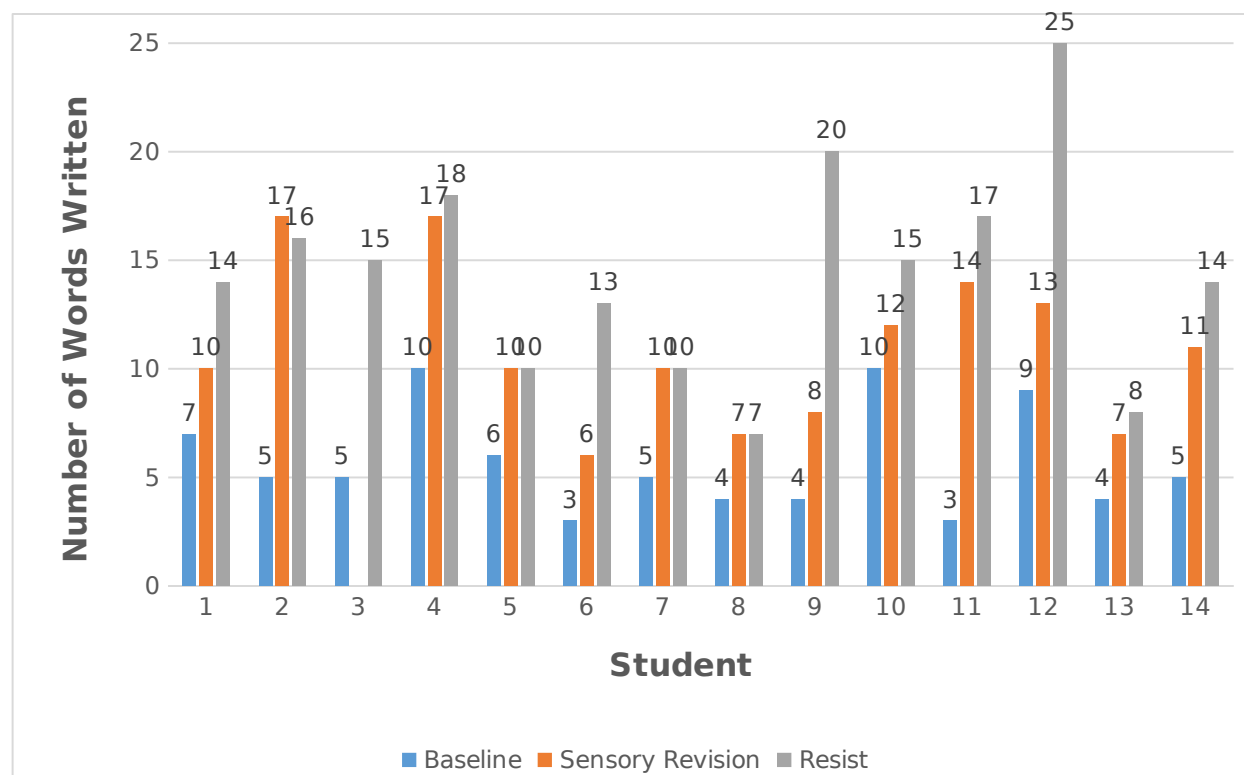
During phase 2, lessons 4-6, the complexity of the visual art and writing activities was increased in preparation for the children to write and illustrate their personal narratives. Students were introduced to the idea of zooming in visually and verbally then asked to create a resist painting of a "zoomed in," up close subject. Learners were given the choice of zooming in on their summer subject or coming up with a new subject for this artwork. Most chose to come up with a new subject. The resist painting technique (drawing with crayon then painting over the drawing with watercolor—

waxy crayon resists the paint so the drawing still shows vividly) was chosen because of previous experience with this age group exhibiting strong engagement with this particular activity.

Writing done following the resist painting focused on good word choice. In preparation for this, students were introduced to the concept of "silver dollar words" to create more vivid, accurate descriptions of their paintings. They were then asked to add sensory details to their original summer memory sentences or to generate an entirely new composition based on their resist painting. These

descriptions were significantly longer than the initial summer-themed sentences and exhibited solid growth in the students' ability to include sensory details. When compared to the revised summer-themed sentences, sentence length increased from an average of 10.9 words (SD=3.6; range 6-17 words) to an average of 14.4 words (SD=4.8; range 7-25 words). In addition to being longer, the resist painting inspired writing samples contained more "silver dollar" descriptive words and were more interesting and creative. When asked about how they thought of the unique details for their writing, four students made the same interesting comment: "I saw it in my painting," which was encouraging. An example of this came from a student who originally wrote about friendship, but changed her story to be about picking blueberries when she saw mountains in her second painting. Figure 1 shows word counts by student from baseline through phase 2. For most of the students, the graph shows steady growth in word counts.

Figure 1: Number of words written at baseline and after sensory revision and resist lessons



In addition to word count increases in the children's writing during phases 1 and 2, improvement was also seen in the level of word choice sophistication and quality. We now turn to an examination of this.

Table 3 provides representative examples showing how the sophistication and quality of the students' writing improved. The table shows initial summer-themed sentences (lesson 1), revision of the initial

sentence adding sensory details (lesson 2-3), and the resist painting assignment that inspired writing using “silver dollar” descriptive words (lessons 4-6). Sentence length is in parentheses after each sentence. Sensory details and silver dollar words are highlighted in yellow.

Table 3: Three students’ writing progression from baseline to the resist painting project

Initial Summer Sentence	Sensory Detail Revision	Writing Inspired by Resist Painting Project
I went to horseback riding in Boise with my sister (10 words)	I went horseback riding in Boise. My sister went too. I <b>saw lavender</b> flowers and <b>hear neighing</b> (17 words)	A bird. It is no <b>ordinary</b> bird, it is a <b>moon</b> bird that makes it night and day (18 words)
I saw my mom (4 words)	I saw my mom. I <b>held the reins</b> (8 words)	My puppies were born June 26 <sup>th</sup> . There are 7 pups. My dog let me pick one up. <b>It was soft</b> (20 words)
I will watch the eclipse (5 words)	I will watch the eclipse. I <b>saw it get very dark</b> (11 words)	The <b>circle of life</b> is <b>magical</b> because it is the <b>chosen lion guard</b> (14 words)

The use of visual strategies had a significant effect on the length and quality of student writing. When comparing original and revision sentence word counts, all students showed an increase ranging from 20% (an increase of two words) to 366% (an increase of eleven words). At least one sensory detail was added to every sentence by students in attendance for lessons 2 and 3. Even greater increases were seen when comparing the baseline sentence word count with the resist painting inspired “zoomed in” writing (lessons 4-6). The average sentence length was fourteen words, an increase of nine words or 180%, with increases ranging from 66%-466%. Ten students had at least twice as many words after the resist painting. Thirty-seven sensory details or “silver dollar” words were used, and all students included at least one example of descriptive

language. With these large increases in quality and length of student writing, the impact of the art infused lessons was clearly demonstrated.

The next goal for the visual art-based lessons was for students to write a story and create a four-page illustrated accordion-style book. In order to have a tool for brainstorming, Heart Maps were employed (Heard, 2016). Heart Maps were originally created as tools for students to use independently to inform their writing. The students were shown examples of Heart Maps, and then they were taught how to create their own using paper, colored pencils, and markers. A large heart outline was drawn then filled in with small drawings representing family members, pets, hobbies, school activities, home, travel memories, goals, and other things important to the students. Subsequently, while coming up with their book ideas and throughout their writing process, many students referred to their Heart Maps to clarify thoughts or look for new ideas. The subjects for their accordion books were truly unique and reflected ideas and themes personal to the students. To illustrate their books, students could choose any of the media we had explored during the art-infused literacy lessons (i.e., markers, colored pencils, resist painting, pointillism). Engagement was high as students were enthusiastic about choosing their art medium. The illustrations created were of high quality. Students took great pride in their work and were pleased with their final products.

The accordion books were evaluated using *Education Northwest Traits Rubrics for K-12*. For the purposes of this inquiry, the areas of Descriptive Language, Ideas (main idea and details/support), Word Choice (meaning, quality, usage) and Presentation (handwriting, spacing, drawing) were evaluated with the rubrics. Rubrics are scored on a 1-6 scale with 1-Beginning, 2-Emergence, 3-Developing, 4-Capable, 5-Experienced, and 6-Exceptional. Table 4 shows the average rubric scores for the four traits.

Table 4: Education Northwest Writing Traits Rubric with average rubric scores for all students for descriptive language, ideas, word choice, and presentation

Descriptive Language	Ideas		Word Choice			Presentation		
	Main Ideas	Details & Support	Meaning	Quality	Usage	Handwriting	Spacing	Drawing
2.7*	4.6	4.1	4.3	4.1	4.0	4.4	3.9	4.9



1.0**	1.1	.95	1.0	.73	.96	.93	.83	.95
1-5***	3-6	2-5	2-6	3-5	1-5	2-5	2-5	3-6

\* Row shows average rubric score by trait; \*\* Row shows standard deviation of rubric scores by trait; \*\*\* Row shows range of rubric scores by trait

Results show that with the exception of Words and Phrases and Spacing, all average scores were in the Capable category. In all but one case, students' individual scores were in the Emergence category or above. Only one student scored in the Beginning category. Unfortunately, a large focus of the Art Infused Literacy unit was on descriptive language, which improved during earlier lessons but did not carry over to the bookmaking project. Overall, however, these are positive results for these 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, who received ten art-infused writing lessons over seven weeks. Of course, these students were also receiving English Language Arts instruction in their regular classroom, so further research is needed to explore how much additional value was added to the children's writing skills and attitudes through the art infused writing focus.

### **Observations Regarding Engagement**

Students were very enthusiastic about creating their own books and engagement remained high throughout the project. Most classroom art projects take an average of one to three weeks to complete, yet none of these 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students complained or voiced a preference to do something different during our seven-week unit that culminated with bookmaking. As a final, public culminating activity, a specially decorated "Writer & Illustrator" chair was set up in the art classroom. Students came up one at a time to share their work by reading their book and showing their illustrations to classmates. This was to be our final activity with the books, but the class had other ideas: they wanted to continue sharing their books with others. A class discussion ensued regarding how, when, and where they could read their books again. An idea was presented by one of the female students; "Maybe we could read to our kindergarten reading buddies!" Reading Buddies is a research-based, paired reading strategy that promotes fluency, positive role modeling, and social/emotional skills (Wheeler, 2018). Giving students an additional opportunity to share their books sounded like a wonderful idea, so a time was arranged to discuss this possibility with the children's 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom teacher and the kindergarten teacher.

Typically, Reading Buddies are two paired students that take turns reading to one another. For this activity, teachers decided on an alternate plan. The kindergarten classroom would host the event, inviting 2<sup>nd</sup> graders to choose a spot in the room as a "station" to read their book. Kindergartners rotated through the stations and in this way, 2<sup>nd</sup> graders were able to read their book

multiple times, and kindergartners were able to hear all of the stories. Enthusiasm was high and both 2<sup>nd</sup> graders and kindergartners enjoyed the experience. An unplanned but added bonus of this activity was the benefit of repeated readings for the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders. All three teachers in attendance (i.e., me, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom teacher, and kindergarten teacher) observed this paired reading event and noted the enthusiasm students had for sharing their stories multiple times. Struggling readers in particular benefited from this repetition, and were much more confident reading their books near the end of the rotations. After all stories had been read to each kindergartner, students gathered in a circle to each share something they enjoyed about this special Reading Buddy experience. 2<sup>nd</sup> graders beamed as the younger students talked about the books, thanking their Reading Buddies for sharing such beautiful stories and illustrations with them.

### **Conclusions**

As parallel scaffolding activities to the writing process, students responded positively to the following: viewing artwork; using VTS, mentor texts, Heart Maps, and graphic organizers; creating illustrations; and bookmaking. It was evident that students gained skills as both artists and writers. Most of the strategies and activities employed during this unit could continue on a regular basis and play a role in strengthening literacy skills in the art room. Given the multi-strategy approach used in the lessons, however, it was difficult to determine the individual influence of these strategies on writing outcomes. Additional research looking more closely at these variables is needed. The most detailed, interesting student writing directly followed the resist painting activity in lessons 4-6. This was a strong indication of transmediation and the benefits of using visual art skills to scaffold the writing process. Overall, writing traits such as sentence length and descriptive word choice (sensory details and “silver dollar words”) improved after using visual art strategies in lessons 1-6.

Students also showed promise in using their Heart Maps as resources to develop ideas for their books. Given the parallel nature of brainstorming for writing and art, Heart Maps could definitely play a future role in assisting students with ideas for both independent art and writing projects. Illustration techniques were also strong, resulting in beautiful, detailed drawings that contributed greatly to the stories. Conversely, when students worked on writing their books, they did not remember to use descriptive language without prompting. This was reflected in the low descriptive language scores on the Education Northwest Writing Traits Rubric (Table 4), showing that learning to “zoom in with silver dollar words” did not transfer in a way that was lasting. Perhaps more repetition with visual strategies over a longer time period would result in stronger writing outcomes. This sustained effort would be more feasible if classroom teachers were made aware of the benefits gained through incorporating visual strategies into their ongoing language arts curriculums.

In *The Power of Pictures* (2008), Beth Olshansky says, “Don’t be surprised if this seemingly indirect path into literacy learning helps your students find new

and stronger voices and fosters a new excitement about reading and writing in your classroom” (p. xv). Based on the data gathered, the positive and sustained engagement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, and the end results achieved in writing, illustrating, and sharing their beautiful books, the Art Infused Literacy unit did indeed foster in these students new excitement about both art and literacy. It would be worthwhile to continue exploring the role visual art strategies and transmediation can play in scaffolding literacy skills as well as other content areas within our schools. Additionally, this inquiry project suggests an important role for art teachers: Increasing awareness that visual art strategies are vital tools for learning and engagement in all classrooms.

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## Photos of the Inquiry Project



Lesson 2: Students use color paddles to explore color mixing in preparation for Pointillism.



Lesson 7: Students create heart maps illustrating things that are



Lesson 8: Students use Heart Maps and graphic organizers to brainstorm and plan their final story.



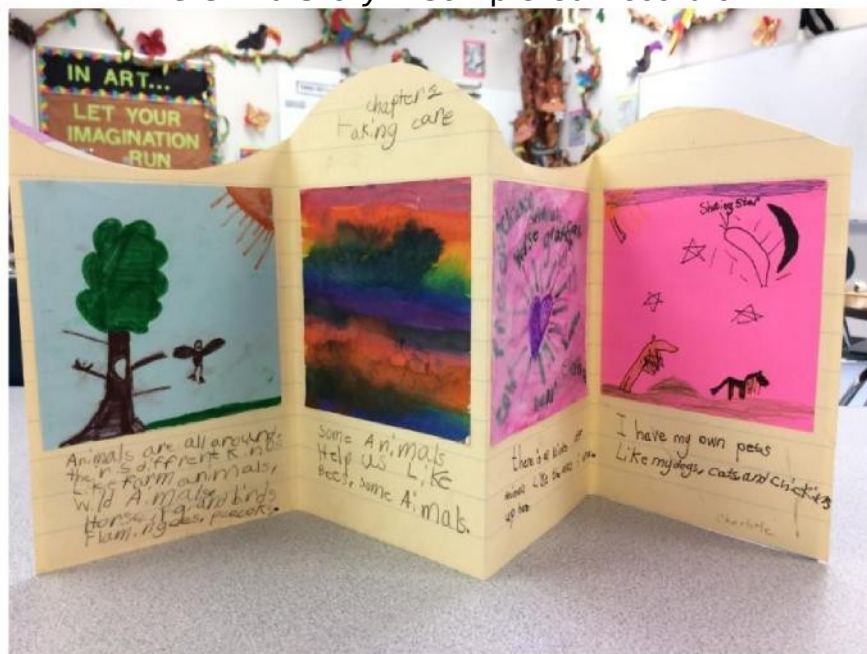
Two comparisons of writing done before and after art infusion. Samples on the left show a sentence and illustration based on a summer memory with writing done first (Lesson 1 & 2). Work on the right shows art infused sentences inspired by "Zoomed-in" artwork (Lesson 4 & 5). Note the longer sentence length and richer word choice of the art infused sentences.







The China Story - Completed Accordion



Animals - Completed Accordion Book



Our writer & Illustrator Chair for sharing stories



2<sup>nd</sup> graders share their books rotation style with Kindergarten