



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Writing Connections

Curriculum Unit 11.01.04
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Introduction

Connections help us make meaning in our lives. We often say to each other, "That reminds me of the time...", and a narrative follows as the storyteller shares a memory that may or may not make sense to the listeners. Yet, through this memory, a connection has been made, allowing the storyteller to tie the past to the present. This network of thoughts and ideas, memories and experiences that each person has, provides a generous supply of material to use as a springboard for interesting and engaging writing. This eight-week writing unit for students in kindergarten through third grade uses visual literacy strategies to help them write about their own meaningful connections. The ability to use the connections experienced in our everyday lives makes writing richer and more fulfilling for both reader and writer.

As a student myself, I recall the advice from many Language Arts and English teachers to "write about what you know." That seemed rather boring from where I sat, but now as an educator, I find that I am repeating the same phrase or, rather, "What does this make you think of?" or "Do you have any connection to this story?" These prompts from the Developmental Reading Assessment, a tool administered to elementary students, encourage students to think beyond the text, connect the ideas of the story to their lives in some way. Using the strategy of connecting to enhance meaning is one I would like to build into our current district writing curriculum to further encourage our students to develop higher-order thinking skills. This ability to move beyond the literal view of the image or text demonstrates higher-order thinking skills within the student's writing. Imagine for example that a student observes a painting and sees a figure in that painting. This defines the literal view of the image. The student then begins to analyze the image, as in noticing the figure seems sad and developing a story around that inference; to synthesize, as in noticing the figure seems sad and writing a chapter of the figure's story; and to evaluate, noticing the figure seems sad and arguing for or against the artist's decision to portray the figure in this way.

Using various materials, such as painting and sculpture, objects from nature, art pieces they make themselves, the students have the opportunity to think past the obvious. Their thinking while observing or creating is a way into their writing - What does this picture or object make you think of? What were you thinking about while you were drawing? What is the story in your picture? What have you done or seen that gave you the idea for your picture? Setting expectations for writing and thinking encourages and empowers students to get their stories out. The goal of this unit is to provide a foundation to build confident, fluent, and

eager writers.

As a first-grade teacher in a self-contained classroom at Edgewood Magnet School in New Haven, I have a class of 25 six- and seven-year-olds. Our neighborhood/magnet school setting is a rewarding environment, with students coming to school each day from a range of home circumstances and differences in academic levels. These differences provide for a variety of life experiences and background knowledge. The school has an enrollment of about 450 students, with approximately 60% African-American, 12% Hispanic, and the remaining 28% Caucasian and Asian; we are proud of its high average daily attendance rate of 96%. Edgewood's mission supports an arts-integrated curriculum, an educational approach that embraces Dr. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory. Because children learn through many different modalities, art forms -- including music, visual art, theater, and dance -- are used to enrich other core subjects, including language arts, math, and reading. Visual literacy, the foundation of this unit, aligns quite naturally with the philosophy of the school but it is an approach that fits easily into writing instruction for students in most primary schools settings.

The diversity within our school itself provides a foundation for students to learn from each other as they each begin to write about their own life experiences. As we teach our young students in writer's workshop, "Everyone has a story to tell!" These stories, coming from different perspectives and experiences, are windows into our differences and, not surprisingly, similarities. So, the basis for good writing lies in what we know. I want these beginning authors to stretch their connections from the basic, literal, and obvious to a meaningful experience or episode in their own lives. Instead of just writing simply about an object or image in a painting, great stories come from thinking beyond that object -- a pear isn't just a fruit. Looking at it you think of the time you were eating pears at a picnic in the park with your grandparents. Now that is something to write about!

Rationale

Writing is a multi-faceted subject to teach. As stated by Sarah Helene Tooley in *The Art in Teaching Writing*, there is no "one-size fits all" curriculum. ¹ Developing writers requires time, something that is difficult to carve out of the assessment-driven environment in many of today's classrooms. Additionally, it requires that teachers address the needs of all students, as each writer has strengths and weaknesses and each benefits from individual and often immediate feedback. How can teachers possibly rise to this very high standard? Where can we begin this lofty goal of reaching each student where they are in their learning to be writers? My contention is that we reach them by engaging and validating their thinking, allowing their connections to emerge through visual experiences, and encouraging their writing to reflect those thoughts. From this format, students can grow individually responding to feedback that is specific, personal, and therefore, quite meaningful.

Lucy Calkins says, "Writing does not begin with desk work but with life work." ² We all have something to say as we all have life experiences. It is an illusion that writers lead more significant lives than non-writers; the truth is writers are just more in the habit of finding the significance that is there in their lives. If our lives don't feel significant, sometimes it's not our lives, but our response to our lives, which need to be richer.

The connection of words and images is, in reality, a large portion of the day-to-day thinking of the first graders

in my class. These young students are eagerly learning to connect words to the images, working to generate thoughts and ideas using fundamental vocabulary, and composing pieces, written and drawn, to share and explain their new knowledge. Visual experiences are an important sensorial component in the development of basic comprehension. Images are all around us and interpreting them in a meaningful way is an essential skill for learning, whether from an art object, a literary work, a historical event, or an electronic image. This unit extends the writer's workshop model to include a fully formed and formatted approach to visual literacy that will engage and encourage young thinkers and writers. The focus on connections to text (verbal or visual) -- in particular text to text, text to self, and text to world -- will guide students to develop strong writing skills. The unit approaches the teaching of writing and thinking with strategies such as drawing stories, making pictures to show meaning, reading pictures to develop understanding, and using drawing as part of the reading and writing process.

Writer's Workshop Model

Imagine an artist's studio or an active science laboratory. Various activities are going on simultaneously in the studio - one artist painting, another sculpting, someone else on a potter's wheel. A scientist at one end of the lab is wearing goggles and working with a Bunsen burner, a second may be using a microscope to find microorganisms, a third might be measuring and mixing. A level of energy reverberates in these environments with each participant working independently, but in a collaborative style, as they share their findings, seek advice, or celebrate successes. Now imagine a room such as these filled with writers participating in a studio or laboratory for writers.

Writer's Workshop is an instructional model that embraces writing as an ongoing process, with students following a set of procedures for planning, drafting, revising, editing, and ultimately, publishing their work. Students in one classroom are likely to be at various stages of this writing process at any one time. The collaboration with peers and teachers is an integral component of this model, with the writing focused primarily on what the children want to communicate as opposed to responding to prompts determined by the curriculum. Student choice is important.

In the primary classroom, Writer's Workshop has a certain look and feel. Students are generally in small groups around the room, possibly conferencing with a teacher, maybe designing the cover of a soon-to-be-published personal narrative, revising a piece from their writing folder, sharing with a response partner. Students have easy access to materials they need - pencils, sketch pens, various paper choices, dictionaries, crayons. Writing process posters are available for reference, and student writing is visible around the room. In this setting, students are encouraged to converse with each other about their writing, creating an active and energy-filled environment.

The elements of the Writer's Workshop demonstrate how this can, and does, work. There is a predictable pattern of a ten-minute mini-lesson on a timely writing technique, a quick-status-of-the-class check, at least 30 minutes for the workshop's main business of writing and conferencing, and a few minutes at the end for a sharing session. Students determine the topics and form for their writing, which is kept in a folder to organize their "in progress" writing. The teacher's role is that of a facilitator: monitoring, encouraging, conferencing, and providing help as needed. Students have response partners or groups with the purpose of helping each other improve their writing with instruction provided by the teacher based upon student needs. With partners

or within groups, students have an opportunity to share their work with peers as they focus on a particular issue, such as including describing words in their text. The accompanying drawing is a great resource for the partners to use as they brainstorm together – details from the drawing can be added to the text.

Lucy Calkins developed the idea of the mini lesson, which is essentially a brief instructional session that addresses some element of writing.³ It might be using vivid verbs, punctuating dialogue, or discussing process or technique. Often the mini lesson is based on writing conventions or possibly a problem that has occurred in student work.

Inherent benefits to the writer's workshop model are many. There is no lost time with students waiting for others to finish. Each student continues on to the next topic or piece at his or her own pace and on his or her own level. A development of writing independence occurs, and students consequently become motivated writers as they take ownership of their time and talent. Students write to learn and learn to write by working through the process of prewriting, drafting, response, revision, proofreading, and publishing. Great accomplishments occur naturally as the students work toward completion of their projects. The more the children write about what really matters to them, the greater their chances of becoming higher-level thinkers.

Visual Literacy

According to Simonides, "Words are the images of things." Similarly Aristotle stated that, "without image, thinking is impossible." The term visual literacy was coined in the late 1960's by John Debes, co-founder of the International Visual Literacy Association. He defined visual literacy as the ability to discriminate and interpret visible actions, objects, and symbols, natural and man-made.⁴ Although this is a twentieth century term, communicating through images is an ancient concept and practice. In early cultures, people inscribed their stories on cave walls in pictographs to record the events in their lives and express their thoughts and feelings. This idea of saving our thoughts and feelings might be considered a form of journaling, a practice that has continued throughout time. Words and images in our journals, diaries, and memoirs help us keep track of our thinking. Not surprisingly, young children use markers, pens, pencils, chalk, paint, whatever they have to make marks and words on walls, furniture and siblings' homework papers. The process of communication employs various methods of symbolic systems, writing and drawing specifically. Studies have shown the children spontaneously use alternative symbolic systems to enhance, add depth and meaning to their writing.⁵ To look at words and images as two systems working together, one study compared drawing, as a planning activity for writing, with discussion, as a traditional planning activity. The focus of this comparison was to determine the effects of each on the quality of narrative writing. The subjects were 42 second- and third-grade students, randomly assigned to two groups; the drawing group and the control group. These two participated in 15 weekly sessions consisting of a 15-minute discussion followed by 45 minutes of drawing or language arts activities and 30 minutes producing a first writing draft. Students' writing drafts were analyzed for the effects of drawing and discussion planning activities on writing. Repeated measures revealed that the writing quality of the drawing group was significantly higher than that of the control group. It was concluded that drawing is a viable and effective form of rehearsal for narrative writing at the second- and third-grade levels and can be more successful than the traditional planning activity of discussion alone.⁶

Development theory and research tells us that children must master visual skills before they can develop

verbal skills, with some theorists even suggesting that visual skills are essential for future speech and reading skills. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development is built on the principle that children develop through their activities, using sensory experiences to build their language. ⁷ A child looks at the world and needs to make sense of it by identifying objects, learning to distinguish things that are other than themselves, and noticing unique characteristics about the objects that they see. Developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky describes a zone of proximal development, a range of social interaction between adult and child. Children perform within that range and build an oral vocabulary as they expand and extending the original language. ⁹ Learning the simple word *ball* expands to *a nice, big, round ball* and then extends to *what can you do with the nice, big, round ball* ? This understanding of things and symbols directly relates to children's ability to later interpret verbal cues through speaking and reading – visual to verbal. Berger explains, "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak." ⁹

Each day, we encounter a variety of images and text together from charts and maps, signs, lists, television or movies, the Internet, catalogs and brochures, and product labels. Students need to combine all this visual and verbal information to make sense of the texts they see throughout their days. Author and teacher trainer, Steve Moline, claims that visual texts are complex and can be just as demanding to produce as verbal texts. Moline gives the example of a metropolitan street map and reminds us that visual texts make information "more accessible, more memorable, and more concise" than words alone. According to Moline, a complete literacy program includes both drawing and writing as means to communicate information. Students need to be taught how to explain information through various images including maps, tables, graphs, and diagrams. ¹⁰

Research shows that there is a strong connection among visual images and language. Writing expert Donald Graves considers drawing to be a "natural part of children's progression in writing." ¹¹ He calls drawing an unconscious "rehearsal" for the writing that follows, and he says that drawing allows children to think about what they want to say before they have to write it, helping children with context as they later reread their written texts. Dyson studied children's symbol making and the relationships between talking, drawing, and writing. Her findings show distinct differences in how children use the three categories of language, drawing, and writing. This study show clear and definite relationships among talking, drawing, and the writing process in children's early literacy by comparing the writing of 60 third-grade students who drew before writing a story and 59 students who wrote without drawing. The results showed that the students who drew produced more words and, overall, wrote better than non-drawers. Additionally, the results were consistent for boys and girls, regardless of group. ¹²

Art, and the creative process that generates art, provides students with a basis to begin thinking about writing. A research-supported program titled Picturing Writing has the students create works of art and use them as a foundation for writing inspiration. ¹³ This study indicates that connecting visual and verbal imagery helps students express themselves. Students are motivated by the inclusion of their visual images, specifically paintings. It appears that paintings, particularly, offer a natural narrative within the medium, allowing students the potential experience of "stepping into the painting" and becoming part of the story. This strategy allows for many connections and memories to emerge through their writing.

Skills in visual and perceptual ways of thinking are essential for critical thinking and problem solving. Betty Edwards, author, teacher, and artist, observes that many schools think of arts education as "enrichment." Edwards, however, sees the arts as crucial for training specific ways of thinking. In her book *The New Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* , she shares methods to train students to see the "whole picture." ¹⁴

Surprisingly, some of the first in the education field to comment on the use of visuals in instruction were Hoban, Hoban, and Zisman back in 1937. They claimed that visuals were not achieving their full potential value in the learning process because educators failed to use them wisely. They list four principles that teachers should consider when integrating visual aids in instruction: (a) "The value of visual aids is a function of their degree of reality"; (b) "The value of visual aids is a function of the nature and extent of the pupils' previous experience"; (c) "The value of visual aids is a function of the objectives of instruction in the particular classroom situation"; (d) "The value of visual aids is a function of the intellectual maturity of the learner." These basic principles still hold wisdom for educators even today. ¹⁵

To apply these principles to the students and their writing, we just need to think about the old adage, a picture is worth a thousand words. What is a tremendous level of vocabulary that would be to fill the pages of students' notebooks! But there is definite truth in this statement. The concept that an image is actually text and that there is a story within that image is apparent to children. It seems an accepted idea that a picture exists to tell us something, and so, generating words from images comes naturally for young children. The next step for the students, putting the spoken words and thoughts in writing, may not come so naturally.

Writing is not a just process of recording details but one of making significance of them. We grow a piece of writing not only by jotting down notes and writing rough drafts but also by noticing, wondering, remembering, questioning, even yearning. We write to communicate, plan, petition, remember, announce, list, imagine; above all, we write to keep track of our thoughts and to make something of them. Children's writing is supported by their drawings. They make pictures to understand and to tell what they mean. They rehearse for their writing by first drawing. Drawing is generally far more important for children at this point than the writing, an appropriate developmental response for 6- and 7-year olds. They are not apt to do their planning by thinking it over from a distance, whether they are building a block tower, playing outside, or drawing a picture. They actively involve themselves in building, playing and drawing and make decisions as they go along, constructing meaning as their project evolves. This process shows the thinking that is happening as they are creating.

Drawing is Thinking

In 1956, Dr. Benjamin Bloom proposed a theoretical ranking of the levels of thinking that people use. At the basic level, people operate at a very concrete level of knowledge. From there, people are then able to comprehend what the facts are about and use those ideas to compare or retell events in their own words, an important skill for writing. The next level of complexity of thought states that individuals are able to apply what they have learned from facts, allowing them to demonstrate knowledge, solve or apply what they know to new and related situations. The next level of thinking allows people to analyze what they know. At this level, they can classify, categorize, discriminate, or detect information. The two highest levels of cognitive thought, according to Bloom, are synthesis and evaluation. In synthesis, the individual is able to put ideas together, propose plans, form solutions, and create new information. In the evaluation stage, the thinker is able to make choices, select, evaluate and make judgments about information and situations. These highest levels of thinking are goals for our students. As teachers, we want to provide the opportunities for thinking to occur. Making choices is one avenue to the building of thinkers as students learn to take more control of and accept more responsibility for their learning.

Because Writer's Workshop is focused on children making choices, visual literacy brings art into the process helping children become thinkers, writers, readers, and students. When drawing is part of literacy, it encourages the student to slow down and take notice, an important skill for writers. Drawing becomes a planning activity. As is a concrete representation, drawing provides a way of depicting rather than describing objects or actions in the real world. The act of drawing allows students to begin thinking of their picture as text, using it as their story, weaving their thoughts and their images together for meaning.

Where do ideas come from? How can students be inspired to write? Teachers hear the common phrase, "I have nothing to write about - nothing happens to me!" Unfortunately with the traditional approach to writing, predetermined prompts, this comment seems to be a valid reaction. By supplying a topic, teachers unknowingly reinforce the idea that the student's lives aren't worth writing about. How can you make a connection when there seems nothing there to connect to from your life experiences? Instead, a more meaningful approach would be to have the students take their own personal moment - an image, a memory, a phrase, an ideas and "declare it a treasure." Placing value on a small moment in time empowers the students to not only begin their writing but to develop an authentic piece with substance and voice. Keeping those many memories, ideas, and stories in their journal or sketchbook further validates them as true writers. Teachers themselves need to draw and write along with their students; maintaining a journal, sketchbook, or folder along with the students shows a true passion for writing, the goal we set for our students.

Strategies

Blending the Writer's Workshop model with the concept of visual literacy creates a new approach of Artists'/Writers' Workshop, identifying and acknowledging the balance of the two components of this approach. Students will be guided through the process using the mini-lesson format to encourage growth through guidance and introduction and mastery of standard English conventions. Additionally, mini-lessons will include visual literacy strategies of reading a picture, responding to a written text, and stepping into the picture. The addition in the schedule of field trips to museums is measurably enriching as students experience first hand the wonderfulness of great art. In contrast, simple walking trips in the neighborhood or around the school grounds to draw and sketch their own views of the world are equally important. Building experiences will build vocabulary begin to use in their language and ultimately their writing.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One

Reading a Picture

Objective: Writers can get their ideas from their memories.

Focus: Students will include details in both their drawing and their writing. This lesson will take one hour - 15 minutes for the mini-lesson, 40 minutes for drawing and writing, 5 minutes for the closing.

Materials – Painting of landscape, such as Hayes Common by William Henry Millais, Paul Mellon Collection at the Yale Center for British Art, accessed through the website collection; students folders; coloring materials, including water colors, crayons, oil pastels, colored pencils



There are certainly innumerable choices to use for this lesson. Art galleries and art shops offer posters of great art. The Yale Center for British Art shares its collection and can be accessed by computer. Other suggestions are *Landscape with a Lake* by Paul Sandby, *A Winter Landscape* by George Smith, *A View along the Thames towards Chelsea Old Church* by John Varley, *Woodland Scene with Rabbits* by Sir Huber von Herkomer.

Procedure:

- Gather on the rug in a circle or group. Review through discussion how we as writers get our ideas – what we see, what we know, things we remember, our imagination, other people. "Today we are using our memory when we write."
- Display painting of landscape and have the students read the picture.
- Move to level of inferring as students share what might be happening in this painting.
- Have the students think about what memory they have when they look at this painting and turn and talk to your partner.
- Remind students that as they draw and write today, it is important to include details in both your drawing and writing to help the reader really understand your work.
- Students select materials and return to the tables to begin drawing/writing their memory.
- Conference with students as they begin their work. Locate a couple who would like to share at the end of the writing time.
- About half-way through, students should begin to move to writing if they have not already.
- Continue conferencing to encourage students to include details.
- Closing: Two or three students sit in the Author's Chair to share their memory, if they feel ready. Ask for questions or comments for the authors.

Assessment: Writer's folders – rubric for: turning & talking, drawing & writing memory, use of details in both drawing and writing

Lesson Two

Responding to a Text

Objective: Writers can get their ideas from text. The class will "publish" their writing in a class book to place in the library.

Focus: Students will use details in their illustration and description in their writing

Materials: *I am an Artist* by Pat Lowry Collins, illustrated by Robin Brickman

Procedure:

- Gather on the rug in a circle or group. Introduce focus – "Today we will be listening for words that help make a picture in our minds. As I read, think about the describing words that help you make that picture. Also, maybe you will hear some words you don't know. We can discuss those at the end. We want to hear the story without too much interruption so our minds can keep drawing pictures."
- Read aloud *I am an Artist*. Show pictures after reading the page and a long pause.
- Discussion of describing words and what they mean to each student. Demonstrating with hand movements or body movements may help the child.
- Introduce the objective of creating a class book, reflective of the text *I am an Artist*.
- Have the students think about what they would like to describe in their writing and turn and talk to your partner.
- Remind students that as they write today, it is important to include details in both your drawing and description in their writing to help the reader make a picture of their own in their head.
- Chart describing words that students are thinking about and discuss their meaning.
- Students select materials and return to the tables to begin detailed drawing/descriptive writing.
- Conference with students as they begin their work.
- Work will likely continue for a day or two past initial lesson
- Students may add to the book as they complete their contribution.

Assessment: Contribution to class book

Lesson Three

Content Connections

Objective: Writers get ideas from things they know.

Focus: Students will use details in their illustration and description in their writing

Materials: *Follow That Map! A First Book of Mapping Skills* by Scott Ritchie, writing and drawing paper choices, including graph paper, various coloring materials

This story introduces mapping skills as Sally and her four friends look for her missing cat and dog. The text is accompanied by a colorful map that uses symbols to identify places such as the library. Next, the children explore the park, and the map shows how to follow a route. They continue their search in the city, the countryside, and eventually across the world and the solar system. On the way, a different type of map—including, weather, topographical, and treasure—is featured and explained.

Procedure:

- Gather on the rug in a circle or group. Introduce focus - "Today as we read this book about maps, think about how the words and pictures together help us understand what the writer is teaching us. What if we only had words OR pictures? Think about what might happen if details are missing from the words or pictures in the story."
- Read aloud *Follow That Map! A First Book of Mapping Skills*, showing the various maps as the story progresses.
- Invite discussion of how words help with the maps
- Introduce the idea of creating a map that helps explain something (weather) or locate something (missing pet) .
- Have the students identify their idea for in their map and their writing and turn and talk to your partner to tell what type of information they will be including.
- Remind students that as they write today, it is important to include specific details in both their drawing and description to give the reader sufficient information
- Students select materials and return to the tables to begin
- Conference with students as they begin their work to discuss their map, what it shows, and how their details inform their readers.

Assessment: Conferencing, students identifying and including specific details

Notes

¹ Sally Helene Tooley. "The Art in Teaching Writing," *Masters Theses & Specialist Project*, 3.

² Lucy Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing*, 12.

³ Calkins, 189.

- ⁴ Maggie Hommel, Ben Riegler, and Kimberly Ulrich, *Expanding the Definition of Literacy*.
- ⁵ Helen Caldwell and Blaine H. Moore. The Art of Writing: Drawing as Preparation for Narrative Writing in the Primary Grades, *Studies in Art Education* , 207
- ⁶ Caldwell, 208
- ⁷ Lesley Mandel Morrow, *Literacy Development in the Early Years*, 101-102.
- ⁸ Morrow, 102
- ⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 7.
- ¹⁰ Steve Moline, *I See What You Mean: Children at Work with Visual Information* , 2.
- ¹¹ Tooley, 35
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Tooley, 6.
- ¹⁴ Betty Edwards. Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: A Course in Enhancing Creativity and Artistic Confidence
- ¹⁵ Tooley, 18

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youth/literacies/visual1.html.

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Appendix A - Implementing State Standards

Having completed this unit, the students will have achieved the following Connecticut State Language Arts Standards for Kindergarten through Third Grade:

Standard 3: Communicating with Others

Students produce written, oral and visual texts to express, develop and substantiate ideas and experiences.

Guiding Question: How do we write, speak and present effectively?

Component Statements:

Students use descriptive, narrative, expository, persuasive and poetic modes.

Students prepare, publish and/or present work appropriate to audience, purpose and task.

Standard 4: Applying English Language Conventions

Students apply the conventions of standard English in oral, written and visual communication.

Guiding Question: How do we use the English language appropriately to speak and write?

Component Statements:

Students use knowledge of their language and culture to improve competency in English.

Students speak and write using standard language structures and diction appropriate to audience and task.

Students use standard English for composing and revising written text.

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