

Shadow of the Sky



The sky so bright
Yet dark
These shadows
They call out
Trying to speak
But the light
So bright
Stops them
The light says
The light chases
The dark
Which causes
The connection
We feel
In the stars
That the light
And dark
Make if you
Listen to the
Dark you may
Turn into a
Star because
Of the light
In you.

Justin Baker
5th Grade
Native American Magnet



Filled with Respect

Respect is a quiet click of a camera
This picture captures a thousand words
Words of trust and love
That shines through the eyes
The eyes of two people
But loneliness and discomfort
With eyes that stare pierce
They lie behind backs of
Disrespect
Take the hands of the helpless
Guide them and help them
Be unlike the others who stand selfish
Take someone and hold them
Because with respect we step forward
We raise each other

Claire Schroeder
6th Grade
Frederick Law Olmsted #56

Picturing Poetry

A Collaboration Marries Word and Image in the Classroom

KAREN L. LEWIS

“Writing as an art begins when we surrender ourselves to the world of images.”

—Janet Burroway

WHEN A FISCAL CRISIS ARISES in the life of a nonprofit cultural organization, it challenges the organization in the same way that change challenges us as human beings; we want to protect ourselves so that we can survive. In 2003 the cultural climate in Buffalo, New York, was facing a financial deep freeze. In an effort to shore up dwindling resources, three different local arts organizations formed an innovative and visionary collaboration that allowed them not only to survive, but to reinforce their key missions in new and surprising ways. With help from The John R. Oishei Foundation, these three organizations—Just Buffalo Literary Center, CEPA Gallery, and Big Orbit Gallery/Sound Lab—began working together, sharing office space and some staff, to design multi-disciplinary projects, under the umbrella name of “Writing With Light,” that took advantage of what each organization had to offer. Picturing Poetry, an elementary- and middle-school curriculum combining photography and writing, was the first in a series of dynamic new projects born from this marriage of offices and staff.

The Picturing Poetry curriculum, which I developed in conjunction with photographer and teaching artist Amy Meza-Luraschi, explores the connections between words and images by having students take pictures and then create a written response to one of their photographs. We wanted the project to give students practical experience in the literary and photographic arts, but more importantly we saw this project as an opportunity to shine a light on the creative process itself, allowing the students to see and experience how it works, to see that it transcends any specific genre, and to be able to apply the same creative habits of thought to other endeavors—artistic and other-

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The Picturing Poetry curriculum seeks to focus attention on Stevens' different "ways of looking" by exploring the interconnections between two art forms and discovering how they can speak to each other.

art forms and discovering how they can speak to each other. When I talk to the students, for instance, I link the light used in photography to a brightness of mind, to an idea, to the weight of words. I tell them how we can talk about perspective, texture, composition, and framing with both pictures and writing. We have taught the Picturing Poetry curriculum to fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders in a variety of schools in the Buffalo area for two years with great success, expanding and refining the program as we go, and drawing friends, family, and the larger community into the process as well. All three organizations have benefited from this collaboration, and we continue to develop new creative collaborations that sustain and support us.

We start each Picturing Poetry residency by meeting with the classroom teachers and the education directors from Just Buffalo Literary Center and CEPA Gallery to set the schedule—Meza-Luraschi teaches the photography sessions, I teach the writing sessions, and we co-teach the introductory, editing, and final days—and to decide upon a theme for that particular residency. We choose a theme that will ground the project in the school's values and goals. Since the inception of Picturing Poetry in 2006, the themes we've selected have ranged from the concrete to the metaphorical; we have used the themes *Windows*, *Doors*, *Listen*, *Connect*, *Energy*, and *Change*. At our two most recent residencies we have undertaken a serious exploration of character with the theme *Respect*. We also use this first meeting to encourage the teachers to participate in Picturing Poetry as students. We want them to model the process and share their experiences as much as possible.

When Meza-Luraschi and I enter the classroom for the first day of our project the students typically greet us with quiet, shy faces. They are on their best behavior. As we look for a spot to put down our paperwork, and for an electrical outlet to plug in Meza-Luraschi's computer, a few of the students lean toward us and whisper, "Miss! Miss! Do we get our cameras today?" "Miss, I lost my permission slip!" The teacher briefly introduces us, noting that we work for Just Buffalo Literary Center and CEPA Gallery. It is not every day that a teacher tells her students that two professional artists will be visiting for nine sessions, and that the students will be given cameras and asked to write poetry based on their photographs. There is always a mixture of disbelief and anxiety, excitement and doubt, hope and fear. Despite the newness of the experience most students cannot wait to get started. As Ester, a sixth-grader at Olmsted School put it, "When I learned about the picture and poetry project I felt like I had smiles all over me."

Meza-Luraschi and I begin by brainstorming with the students to define our chosen theme. We create a long list of words and explore how these words can stimulate ideas for photographs. We show the children (via a PowerPoint presentation) a vari-

wise—in their young lives.

In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Wallace Stevens explores what it means to "see" something. The Picturing Poetry curriculum seeks to focus attention on Stevens' different "ways of looking" by exploring the interconnections between two

ety of images that speak to the theme. Throughout the project we attempt to build personal connections to the works of art we share. For example, Meza-Luraschi will model respect by showing a photograph of a young man in a military uniform. We'll discuss how the uniform implies respect. When I ask the students "How many of your parents wear uniforms to work?" a host of hands fly up into the air, and the students can't wait to tell us, "My mom works at Wal-Mart" or "My mom works in a dentist's office." We also model what their final product will look like by sharing a poem that is paired with a specific image. Sometimes we show our own work—I will write a poem using one of Meza-Luraschi's photographs or, if we have a suitable example from a previous residency at another school, we will use the work of our students.

During the second class, Meza-Luraschi has the students investigate light by looking out their classroom windows with pinhole cereal-box cameras. A backwards and upside-down image is projected on a piece of wax paper inside the viewer and Meza-Luraschi uses this to explain how our eyes see the same way. She introduces them to the camera obscura and tells them how early artists used it as a tool to draw accurately from life. The students learn how single-lens reflex (SLR) and disposable cameras work. The class concludes with an introduction to the elements of photography (light, perspective, texture, composition, shape, line, and pattern) and Meza-Luraschi highlights how to use these elements to take meaningful black-and-white pictures.

"Oops pictures" is the focus of the third session; these are photos that show common mistakes photographers make, such as fingers in front of the viewfinder, or a subject that was taken too close or too far away to be recognizable. Meza-Luraschi also tells the kids that she doesn't want them to take "silly snapshots." She gives them a printed list of the theme words that we brainstormed on the first day, asks the students to take all of the 27 pictures the camera holds, and reminds them that they must relate to our theme using the elements of photography. When Meza-Luraschi finally hands out the disposable cameras (clearly labeled with each student's name), the children are thrilled and relieved to finally hold them. They are ready to get to work! "I felt excited like my heart opened wide like an outside tree," Joshua, a fifth-grader, wrote about getting his camera. John, a sixth-grader, told us that he felt "a rush of ideas." At another



A student in the Picturing Poetry program at Highgate Heights in Buffalo, New York. Photo by Lorraine Simon.

The students feel a great deal of anticipation and anxiety as they wait to see the results of their efforts. Jonathan, a fifth-grade special education student, worried “that whoever developed [the photos] might laugh and think that I was wasting film.” Robert, a sixth-grader, wrote, “Waiting for the photos to be developed was like a bird waiting for its eggs to hatch.”

a fifth-grade special education student, worried “that whoever developed them might laugh and think that I was wasting film.” Another student, Robert, a sixth-grader, wrote, “Waiting for the photos to be developed was like a bird waiting for its eggs to hatch.”

After this short period of eager anticipation, the film is developed and ready to be distributed to the students. The children are noisy and exuberant as they open up the packages during our fourth session, revealing their masterpieces. They can’t wait to show us what their film has exposed. There is a lot of discussion among them about the photographs. Meza-Luraschi and I review the photos with each student, pointing out and appreciating the photos they’ve taken that use the elements of photography most effectively. Inevitably there are disappointments. Some students will find that their camera malfunctioned, maybe the flash didn’t work and the images will be too dark, or the negatives will appear unexposed. It’s difficult to witness how these setbacks affect the children, but invariably they handle it with grace. We reassure them that we will be able to offer them a great photograph (taken by one of their peers) to work with during the writing section of the program.

After we have had ample time to look at the photos we lead the students in an editing process designed to weed out the “oops pictures.” We look for one image that will serve as the inspiration for a free verse poem. The “best” image, we tell them, will be properly exposed, be focused and framed, and will incorporate a sense of movement or a unique perspective.

At this point, the project focus shifts to the literary. I lead the students through a series of questions as we search for the image that will inspire and attract the writer within. We want the photo to be able to sustain their interest and spur curiosity. Which image fires up imagination and thought? Which photo is their heart’s choice? They are asked to pay attention to their intuition, to find the photo that refuses to be put back into the envelope. The students usually have no difficulty making their top three selections, but getting to the final shot can take a leap of faith. The bottom line is that they must choose a photo that begins to speak back to them in words. I ask, “Which photo makes you want to write?” It is crucial that this be their choice because it persuades

school, Rasheeda, a fifth-grader, said that she “just wanted to *click, click, click.*” The students end this session by taking a few practice shots. They leap out of their seats to gather for beaming group portraits. They regard the camera with wonder and curiosity.

Students are given about a week to take the photographs, then the classroom teacher collects the cameras and CEPA handles the processing of the film. During this phase of the project the students feel a great deal of anticipation and anxiety as they wait to see the results of their efforts. Jonathan,

them to make a commitment to the writing process.

The next four sessions focus on writing. We begin by examining the “best” photograph for details and symbols. I want the students to deconstruct the photograph, to understand all it has to offer, so they can clearly see how it is put together. I ask them to make a list of anything in their photo they can name; these words will later be used to frame an idea or a metaphor in the poem, or to create a line of wordplay. We next undertake a sensory exploration of the artwork. I ask them to

write down any words that describe smells, tastes, textures, sounds, and colors that relate to their photograph. When they are done I ask them to add to the list words for feelings that are inspired by the photo. I also bring up questions based on our chosen theme in order to bring additional language to the worksheet. For example, during our *Connect* project I asked, “What words connect us? What is the language of connection? What in nature connects us? What sounds connect you? When do you feel disconnected? What would it be like to live in a world without connection?” I talk about writing as thinking and I ask the students to pay attention to the questions that are forming in their minds as they build a deeper relationship with the photograph, and to include those questions on the list. What are they left wondering about? These worksheets become a resource for the poem which will be written during the next session. The experience of looking closely at the photo serves the poem they will write because it slows down the student’s response to the image, creating time for contemplation. Often the most important detail that will show up in the poem isn’t discovered until the 40th minute of looking, and it is important to give children enough time to make these significant discoveries.

This session is very tiring for the children. They look and respond to a single photograph for an hour and leave the class feeling like they’ve been working very hard. Some students may feel overworked by the challenge; some are astounded at the amount of detail they can amass and start shouting out how many items are on their list. “I got to 56!” “I got to 72!” Some students tell me that their hands hurt from writing so much. I use the language of Costa and Kallick’s “Habits of Mind”¹ to compliment and reinforce what they’ve been doing: persisting, communicating with clarity and precision, gathering data through all the senses, thinking about thinking, striving for accuracy, questioning and posing problems, and remaining open to the writing process.

After class, I take home the student worksheets and review them, writing down observations or questions I might have about what they’ve noted. I look for examples of words from their list that I can pair in a fresh way to show them how to experiment with



Students in the Picturing Poetry program at the Native American Magnet School learn how photography works with cereal box cameras. Photo by Jon R. Hand.

¹ Arthur L. Costa, Ed. D. and Bena Kallick, Ph.D., “Describing 16 Habits Of Mind” <http://www.habits-of-mind.net/pdf/16HOM2.pdf>



Students in the Picturing Poetry program at Highgate Heights examine their photographs. Photo by Lorraine Simon.

wordplay. For each student I also demonstrate how to create a metaphor using a word from their list, or comment on any similes that I find particularly original or imaginative. I want to validate what they've done so far, and use my comments as a way to focus their reconnection to the list when I return it to them at the beginning of the next session.

During the sixth session I reinforce the connections between the photographic elements and the writing process. I tell them they can use perspective in writing the same way they used it when they took their pictures. The texture we

see in images, I say, can be created in writing by the word combinations, vocabulary, and details we use. And I remind them how the composition and framing they've examined in their pictures are techniques that can be used with writing as well, with form and line, pattern and alliteration, and the use of text in white space. I also speak about the creative process and let the kids know that the same process they use to write and take pictures can help them become more accomplished dancers, painters, or sculptors.

By this point they are more than ready to start writing the poem. They are waiting for me to turn them loose. I share Emerson's edict, "Every word was once a poem," and ask them to find the poem in our theme word as it relates to their photograph, creating a picture with words. I challenge them to put their best writing forward, to trust the process, to push the language, to write without fear. And then I shut up, put on some music, and give them the space they need to create. At the close of this lesson, the students are energized and on a creative high, having brought these new works of art, the poems, into being. John, a sixth-grader at Olmsted, noticed that "black-and-white photos bring the element of mystery to a picture . . . and open up new possibilities in writing." A sixth-grader at another school, Monay, wrote that this process had taught her that "writers keep going and don't give up." Her classmate Shannon learned that "I should listen to my mind. I am a person who will go and take certain risks."

During the seventh session we switch gears. I ask the kids to reflect and to write about their experience of Picturing Poetry, guiding them by using a question/answer format. We take a few minutes to revisit all the photographs and to think back on how the project has unfolded. The form in which I ask them to write these reflections is inspired by the Japanese haibun, defined in Bruce Ross's *How to Haiku* (Tuttle, 2002) as "prose writing expressed poetically, with figures of speech and rhythmic sound values, and full of emotion, like the writing in a diary." I chose this form because I want to give the students a chance to express their own take on the project in a way that reinforces the creative approach we have been learning.

In her response, Freddi, a fourth-grader, wrote, "I see that art is your heart reflected. I comprehend now that I am art, a living poem, a breathing painting, a mov-

ing music.” Her classmate Hayley wrote, “I am able to just look at something and think in ways others don’t usually think.” Another classmate, Morgan, commented that “Art is a way of speaking in your own language.”

Haibun are concluded “with a haiku that heightens the mood of the story.” We work on these concluding haiku in the eighth session, expressing our final thoughts about the project. We create class haiku together first, which I group into a sequence. The students then are asked to create one original haiku of their own, but some clearly have a knack for writing in

this form and they are able to craft several in a short amount of time. While they are writing I play them some music. Their eyes open wide and then everyone’s pencils start tapping and fingers are used to count out syllables. Some kids get up and dance around the room to the music once they’ve finished writing.

Our last class is a celebration. The students read their poetry aloud as the words and their selected photograph are projected on the wall behind them, via Meza-Luraschi’s computer—seen together in this way, the words and images are striking. One student who was initially resistant to the project regarded her work and said in disbelief, “I did that?” Another student who was a discipline problem all year, often frustrated and angry, grabbed her poem and ranted it with vigor to the delight of the entire class. Then she offered to read any poem whose author didn’t want to read. When it comes time for the teacher to read his or her poem the whole class cheers.

To complete the project, CEPA staff print and mount the artwork and we hang it throughout the school. The “gallery spaces” we create by doing this have tremendous aesthetic value and impact, and we try to create as large an audience for the work as possible. On two occasions we’ve been able to offer workshops in which parents come to the school and choose a picture from among their children’s photographs as inspiration for their own poetry. The resulting poems and images are showcased alongside their children’s work in the final exhibit. To allow as many family members, school staff, and administrators as possible to attend the exhibit, we’ve staged gallery openings during other school events. In addition to the school galleries, we’ve shown student work at CEPA’s main gallery in downtown Buffalo and invited the students to bring in parents, siblings, grandparents, and family friends to share the experience.

In *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative* (Capstone, 2001), Ken Robinson points out that “creativity prospers best under particular conditions, especially when there is a flow of ideas between people who have different sorts of expertise. It requires an atmosphere where risk-taking and experimentation are encouraged rather than stifled.” In developing our curriculum for Picturing Poetry, we have worked hard to fulfill these conditions. The result is a program that not only enhances our students’ writing



A student in the Picturing Poetry program at Highgate Heights decides which of her photos to choose. Photo by Lorraine Simon.

By documenting their community, and their place in it, our students forge stronger links between home and school and develop new perspectives—they become photographers, writers, poets, editors, and most important of all, working artists.

and photography skills, but enlarges their creative vision as well. By documenting their community, and their place in it, our students forge stronger links between home and school and develop new perspectives—they become photographers, writers, poets, editors, and most important of all, working artists. Given the chance to use their imagination, intellect, and personality to their

fullest extent, they discover a new sense of freedom and responsibility. 

Writing with Light is the umbrella name for programming resulting from a collaboration among Just Buffalo Literary Center, CEPA Gallery, and Big Orbit Gallery/Sound Lab in Buffalo, New York. Picturing Poetry was the first in a series of projects born from this collaboration. CEPA Gallery is offering a “best of” collection of 5” x 7” student photographs from the “Picturing Poetry” project that can be used in the classroom as writing prompts. (See examples on following pages.) To inquire about Picturing Poetry or other Writing with Light programming, or to order a copy of the documentary film Picturing Poetry by Jon Hand, please contact the respective education directors: Barbara Cole at www.justbuffalo.org or Lauren Tent at www.cepagallery.org.