Picture This!

If we accept the concept of multiple intelligences, students and teachers will need strategies for developing a wider range of aptitudes and abilities. New technologies are available that will help people with a variety of talents show the world what’s on their minds. However, as the following discussion makes clear, even an “old” and relatively simple technology can increase one of these abilities, visual intelligence, and writing about photography can give the eyes a voice.

Overview

By the end of the current academic year, 46 National Writing Project affiliates in alliance with the Polaroid Education Program will have provided one or more workshops for some 6000 teachers. Over a period of four years, the sessions have focused on incorporating visual literacy with the teaching and learning of writing — all the while enhancing students’ motivation, creativity, and self-image.

Participants in workshops currently receive approximately $75.00 worth of free materials, including cameras, camera bags, film, and curriculum materials along with a three-hour inservice that prepares them to help their students to make rather than just take pictures. “Making” pictures implies a constructivist approach in which the photographer is using conscious, informed choices to construct an image, not just passively recording whatever fits into the viewfinder. Participants learn how to create and read pictures with increased sophistication and to understand how photography can serve as a prompt for and a supplement to writing.

The NWP/PEP Alliance illustrates the value of a “low tech” tool in the hands of talented educators. What follows is a collection of events and applications that evolved out of the NWP/PEP Alliance.

The South Coast Writing Project’s first PEP workshop was led by Peggy Hooberman, a former director of a nonprofit multicultural arts organization who also had 18 years of classroom teaching experience. She was a terrific presenter with loads of amusing and instructive anecdotes. She had experienced every sort of problem that was likely to come up while using cameras in the classroom, from overeager shutter-bugs (“give the camera to someone else while you watch your picture develop”) to unfocused images (“tie a no-closer-than-this string to the front of the camera as a tape measure”). She showed us how to recycle almost every part of an empty film packet, using the batteries for science projects and parts of the film container for picture frames. She told us how to get free and reduced-cost film through local business sponsorships and deals with retailers on film approaching the end of its shelf-life. She shared the advantages and disadvantages of having various quantities of cameras in the classroom — e.g., collaborative groups using a single camera can use and develop some of the same skills and roles as other kinds of production groups, including producer, director, props, and camera operator.

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Editors’ note: This is the first of two articles by Stephen Marcus describing his work with the National Writing Project/Polaroid Education Program Alliance. In this first article, he presents some teaching ideas that readers may adapt for their classrooms. In the next issue of The Quarterly, Marcus will discuss how the Alliance’s marriage of words and pictures has helped teacher researchers document and understand their work.

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Toward the end of the workshop, I asked the teachers to take just a few minutes to jot down a classroom activity that combined writing with the use of instant photography, assuming that they had a reasonable number of cameras, film, and other materials. I collected these “bright ideas” in an anthology. They ranged from an activity for student teachers: “photograph scenes from around the school and write about them from a student’s point of view”; to ideas for kindergartners: “make a ‘floor quilt’ of pictures of small things on the floor — like staples, bits of confetti, a paper clip — and write down what children think the objects are.” While this collection of ideas was necessarily sketchy, it was in the spirit of the Writing Project that teachers became involved in the substance of the workshop, creating their own materials and sharing their expertise.

Photography as a Prompt for Writing
I depend on the kindness of happenstance. In one case, I took a camera to a potluck picnic at the end of the first week of one of our Writing Project’s summer institutes. I figured I’d take some snapshots of people to put on the bulletin board (another small way to help establish a sense of community). As it happened, I took a picture of the food table, groaning under the weight of various delicacies and outright food-crimes. Waiting for the picture to develop, I chatted with an institute participant, science teacher Lyla Allen. Looking at the developed picture below, I asked her, “Um … here’s a picture that doesn’t have any people in it. Is there any way to use it for some science activities that also include writing?” Could she ever. I later typed her comments and displayed them along with the picture in the institute meeting room. Here’s a slightly edited version of her suggestions:

Food for Thought:
• Start by sorting the objects on the table: “living” vs. “nonliving”; polymers vs. nonpolymers.
• Describe the sources of the objects. Tell the “backstory,” that is, how the objects wound up on the table. Pay attention to the geography, life cycles, and technology that brought them to market.
• Write their autobiographies. Take the point of view of a single molecule.
• Attend to the development of the object’s nature or “personality” (e.g., its sweetness or its degree of ripeness).
• Tell the story of the object’s future. Where does it go from here?

This impromptu exchange left us with a document that could be used by teachers and students studying any number of science-related topics.

There are other ways to use pictures with prompts. Here are two, developed by Mary E. Howell.

Shoes:
• If the person taking the step in the picture below is invisible, what will the person do tomorrow?
• How did the person become invisible?
• What was the person in the picture planning to do before he disappeared?

**Cat:**

• What is the cat in the picture below writing about the objects surrounding it?

• Find a reason for the “cabin” of maple syrup to be included with this group of objects, which includes a miniature TV.

• What books would this cat be likely to read and why?

It’s a great deal of fun (oh ... and it’s educational, too) to figure out what pictures to take, what assignments fit which audiences, and how to complete someone else’s “assignment.” The instant-picture technology allows for fairly rapid testing of ideas and revision of visual prompts.

**Photography as a Supplement to Writing**

Photographs can not only serve as a prompt to writing, they can supplement and enrich it. When I was working with a group of English student teachers, introducing them to the use of computers for teaching writing, an idea occurred to me. I knew that people often develop “relationships” with their computers, often experiencing feelings about what I’ve come to call “the host in the machine.” I decided to make the implicit explicit. Before the students arrived for the workshop, I used a book of large tear-out masks and affixed a different one to each computer, giving each computer a different personality. After the student teachers arrived, I asked them to give their computers names and to write poems that elaborated and explored those names. They then took a picture of their masked computers.

Even though the students had only about ten minutes to do their writing, they came up with some extraordinary personalities, ranging from Queen Rom-Rom (“With magic she draws us”) to Sleeps Standing Up (“There was a time when he slept at night”), to Get Even, inspired by a computer with a pirate’s mask (see below):

**Get Even**

I’ve escaped, you see, from Disney’s cage,
that computerized cacophony of fireflies and
New Orleans and boats with incessantly curious
fun-seekers and new sweatshirts.
I am not angry with them,
but my name says what I have to say to them.
Get even.
I say it with a stare.
Get even.
I back it with a pistol.
Get even.
I say it because it is all I can say.
Get even.
Because I am programmed to do so.
Get even.
Because that’s where the wires take me.
Even the elasticity of my plastic skin cannot alter the course, as the boats in this ride cannot be altered. All I can say, over, and over and over again — until now, now when an English course has freed me from the warfare of wirefare—
I
Get Even.
I do not want to be there.
I am not a pirate.
I am not a skull-digger, or a looter like the South Central pirates.
I simply get even.
This poem is my way out.
Now we’re even.

-Neal Modelevsky

I have described briefly here just a few activities inspired by the work of the NWP/PEP collaboration. Hundreds of other teaching ideas connecting photography and writing are now practiced in classrooms of Writing Project teachers. As a direct result of the NWP/PEP Alliance, more students and teachers are being encouraged both to show and tell as we learn to take a broader view of what is, after all, the language arts.

Notes: In the next installment of this discussion, we’ll see how Writing Project teacher researchers have combined photography with writing, exploring redefinitions of the teacher’s craft and role.

Workshop leaders are provided by the PEP but are not company employees. Their fees are paid by the Writing Project site hosting a workshop, either from project funds or by charging a small registration fee.

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The masks were taken from Fun Faces: 15 Punch-Out Masks, by Pierre-Marie Valat (NY: E.P. Dutton), ISBN: 0-525-44544-7