Abstract

This study focuses on how integrating visual art and the writing process enhance fourth grade students’ creative writing quality. The qualitative inquiry uses three writing conditions including open-ended textual story prompts, fine art images as story prompts and student created artwork as story prompts to motivate students to write creatively, as well as student interviews, field observations, and artifact analysis. The results show that open-ended prompts both textual and visual lead to more imaginative storylines, complex sentences structure and elaborate character development than the comparison writing condition using a highly scripted writing prompt. The benefits of using visual art and art production in the prewriting process include greater student engagement in the writing process as well as heightened student investment in the end product.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my husband Jeff and our two sons Tucker and Cal for tolerating the visual image of the back of my head for the many months I sat working at the computer to complete this research endeavor. To compliment this image they have taken to lovingly calling me “the groundhog” as I mimic the marmot’s attentive stance while seated at the keyboard. I am immeasurably grateful for their support and well-timed comic relief.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Findings</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unanticipated Findings</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Teaching and Future Research</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEEL’s writing prompt</td>
<td>Appendix A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual story prompts</td>
<td>Appendix B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text prompt writing page</td>
<td>Appendix C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine art painting samples</td>
<td>Appendix D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine art painting prompt writing sample</td>
<td>Appendix E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine art painting writing prompt</td>
<td>Appendix F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student watercolor painting samples</td>
<td>Appendix G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watercolor painting writing prompt</td>
<td>Appendix H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation rubric</td>
<td>Appendix I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Visual Arts: Effective Means to Enhance Creative Writing Quality

In the current education environment driven by high stakes testing many educators and school districts focus on teaching the basics in an effort to command good test scores. Thus attention to arts education or any overtly creative pursuits are often seen as luxuries schools cannot afford for our children (Chicola & Smith, 2005). Several researchers have challenged this thinking by revealing academic gains across various content areas through the process of teaching practices that deliberately integrate art creation and literacy instruction (Andrzejczak, Trainin & Poldberg, 2005; Chicola & Smith, 2005; Cowan & Albers, 2006).

To explore the extent to which using visual arts in the classroom affects the quality of students’ creative writing and overall literacy skills, several studies have been reviewed that examine the boundaries of literacy, and traditional methods for teaching creative writing. Additionally, an investigation of the meaning of visual thinking in general, and specifically Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) as outlined by researchers Housen and Yenawine (2001) to encourage literacy skills has been pursued. Consideration has also been afforded to a variety of research studies that measure the effect of specific teaching strategies utilizing fine art and art creation on student writing quality.

Strategies for Teaching Creative Writing

Before examining how grade school children go about the task of writing an imaginative story it is important to consider the cognitive processes involved in transferring the aesthetic and emotional quality of a spoken tale to paper. Small children make sense of the world through the stories they hear and the stories they tell. Inflections in the story teller’s voice, facial expressions and body movements act in harmony to convey meaning and emotion in the tale told. Children pick up on these nuances of communication, and in the process learn about themselves and construct understanding about the workings of the world (McGarvey, 1999). McGarvey (1999) also suggests it is through storytelling that children discover cultural diversity, character differences, and develop feelings of empathy. She goes on to say that the cognitive processes in play during storytelling exercise both the logical left hemisphere of the brain to provide sequence and structure, and the more creative right hemisphere to convey imaginative content (McGarvey, 1999). The cognitive processes involved for transferring the aesthetic quality of the spoken tale to paper, however, are more complex than simply writing down what has been said. Rather, before students can successfully convey meaning and emotion inherent in a creative story they must employ their long-term memory to access information about the writing process itself and also information about the topic at hand, while simultaneously recognizing and retrieving those words and phrases that create imagery and convey emotion applicable to a given story. In addition, students engage their working memory to monitor the planning, translating and reviewing processes that are ongoing throughout the writing exercise (Bruning, Schraw, Norby & Ronning, 2004). The “cognitive load” Bruning, et al. (2004) contend is quite significant and can often overwhelm the writer’s ability to generate creative thought.

It is not surprising then that teachers attempt to break down the writing process into manageable bits in order to assist students’ writing efforts. Thwaite (2006) reveals, however, in a case study of third graders whose teacher subscribes to a basal writing program called First Steps, some of the drawbacks of this approach. The First Steps program consists primarily of stock forms that essentially ask students to fill in the blanks regarding their story’s setting, complications and resolutions, varying the format for
a variety of writing genre (Thwaite, 2006). Thwaite’s conclusions are similar to those of Ellis (2003) which found given highly structured, scripted formats, students put more energy and focus into filling in the boxes and checking off the steps than into imaginative thinking and creative storytelling. Furthermore, students are apt to limit their thinking and stories to the space allotted by the form itself. Ellis (2003) expands on this by comparing four different writing conditions and including student reactions to each condition. Two of the four conditions, Picture-Sequence and Modeled-Story task, and The Complete-Story-Planner task, Ellis (2003) describes as highly scripted formats for writing. The other two conditions, The Class-Discussion task and The Detailed-Decision task, she describes as unscripted writing activities. Congruent with Thwaite’s (2006) findings Ellis (2003) found that scripted writing procedures, those procedures that essentially supply students with a storyline, resulted in bland writing products and students comment that the process was boring and easy, whereas the unscripted writing tasks resulted in more imaginative and creative writing products. Students’ responses to the unscripted writing process reveal that while they found the tasks much more difficult they also found the challenge more satisfying and were more pleased with their end products (Ellis, 2003).

Assuming the goal is to tap into those strategies and procedures that result in greater creativity and appropriate student challenge, and recognizing that scripted formats fall short on both counts, the question that remains is why not simply focus on unscripted writing formats. The major reason cited is that for many students, the process is just too frustrating and the anxiety generated by a blank page is sometimes too great a challenge (Ellis, 2003). The risk involved is that students will turn off to the creative writing process completely. Allowing students to paint and draw before writing is one way to address the added challenge unscripted writing tasks present without dictating storylines. It appears somewhat obvious that having a visual to refer to while writing reduces the cognitive load, leaving more resources available for developing story elements such as plot, setting, character and crisis. Advocates of teaching visual literacy, Flood and Lapp (1998), state that using visual arts in the classroom motivates learners to use a variety of means such as drawing, drama, and multi-media presentation in addition to reading and writing to communicate ideas. Flood and Lapp (1998) contend that employing instructional strategies that include visual arts may encourage students to more willingly accept the challenges of creative writing.

**Visual Thinking and Visual Literacy**

Arnheim (1969) explored the interplay between our visual perceptions and cognitive thought coining the phrase visual thinking, saying, “Thinking calls for images, and images contain thought” (p. 254). This implies the interdependency of the two mental processes. By extension of this thought process Arnheim (1964) contends that every picture, every visual image we perceive is a statement of thought, and how well we cultivate our visual perception skills determines how well we discern meaning and understanding from a visual image. Flood and Lapp (1998) provide a more current understanding of this commingling of visual stimuli and thought by including drama, visual arts, signage, and media as integral pieces to our thinking, understanding and communication processes.

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a teaching strategy used to encourage critical and creative thinking using visual images. The VTS strategy uses a process of asking three carefully worded questions about an image during group discussion in an attempt to foster these thinking skills. The result of extensive research, the VTS “discovery process,” asks students to look at an image and answer the questions—What’s going on in this picture?, What do you see that makes you say that?, and What more can we find? as a means to construct meaning and understanding from the image (Housen & Yenawine, 2001). Housen (2002), like McGarvey’s (1999) earlier study, contends that the process plays into students’ natural abilities for storytelling. By dissecting an image, by observing for minute detail, students make inferences and draw conclusions about the story behind the photo or painting. While the
VTS strategy does not include writing exercises as part of the process, the group discussions key to this strategy certainly tap into those abilities necessary for creative writing, specifically valuing different viewpoints and reflective thinking (Housen & Yenawine, 2001).

Yenawine (1997) defines visual literacy as the ability to find meaning in imagery. The ability to do this is different for everyone depending on one’s prior knowledge and experience. An advocate for VTS, Yenawine equates the visual literacy process to the process of reading for comprehension in that it is gradual and evolving. One assumes from this stance that like becoming a better reader, becoming more visually literate requires practice (Yenawine, 1997). Housen (2002) explores how using VTS builds critical and creative thinking skills that carry over into other contexts and content areas beyond the initial premise of developing aesthetic awareness. Considering the scripted writing tasks discussed earlier through the work of Ellis (2003) and the difficulties presented by unscripted writing tasks, Housen presents a solution with VTS. She implies that open ended thinking about visuals provides the necessary structure and focus for student thinking that does not inhibit the critical and creative thinking process (Housen, 2002).

**Art in the Classroom**

Chicola and Smith (2005) look specifically at using visual arts throughout the social studies curriculum to put the “joy back into learning” and motivate students in our current test driven education environment (Chicola & Smith 2005, p. 167). Aimed at convincing teacher candidates to incorporate the creation of authentic art into their classrooms, Chicola and Smith (2005), like Housen and Yenawine (2001), see the arts as a means to encourage students to problem solve and develop critical thinking skills as well as expand their imaginative abilities. Arguing the importance of integrating visual arts into all curriculum areas, Chicola and Smith (2005) quote Pablo Picasso saying, “Painting is just another way of keeping a diary” (p. 168). The implication is that using art in the classroom for all curriculum areas affords students the opportunity to give form and structure to new information similar to the way keeping a diary gives form and structure to one’s thoughts. The art making process assists students in making connections across content areas to extract deeper meaning and foster more understanding than is possible through traditional teacher-directed lessons.

Other researchers make connections between the visual arts and academic gains as well. For instance, Livingston (2005) found that incorporating drawing and journaling activities with fifth grade science lessons resulted in participating students’ greater retention of science concepts. Moreover, the consensus of student comments about the process was that drawings made it much easier to remember information later on, presumably when students were tested on the lesson material (Livingston, 2005). Similarly, research conducted in a middle school environment found that using visual arts in a variety of forms—television, computers, multimedia, drama, comic books and/or graphic books—motivated students to become more actively involved in the more traditional communicative arts, reading, writing and speaking (Lin, 2005). While Lin makes no direct connection between using visual arts in the classroom and increasing specific academic abilities, she does suggest that using visual arts increases students’ background knowledge in a variety of meaningful ways that heighten students’ abilities to make connections in their thinking across content areas.

The connection between increased aesthetic awareness and academic growth is not so readily accepted by all, however. Art educator Eisner (1999) offers an opposing view that suggests current research is too limited. Eisner does not deny a possible link between art experience and academic achievement but questions the wisdom of using such claims to justify arts education programs in our schools (Eisner, 1999). His concerns about promoting a link are twofold: 1) the studies, he contends, are vague as to what constitutes art experience as well as the parameters of increased academic performance measured, and 2) the studies imply that art education and experience are worthy endeavors only if they
lead to greater achievement in academic areas, as opposed to promoting art education as an equally valid pursuit comparable to reading or math. Eisner (1999), however, offers three levels of evaluating students’ art experience that may indeed contribute to both art education and academic achievement. The first mimics the VTS method whereby students develop visual literacy by observing, questioning, analyzing and discussing visual images for the sole purpose of building knowledge about a particular image. The second level of art education Eisner (1999) portrays is art experience that allows students to transfer learning from the first level that is image focused to art found in nature. In other words students at this level have developed aesthetic awareness to the point where they can discern, compare and contrast artistic qualities found in nature and in works of culture. And lastly, it is at the third level of aesthetic awareness that Eisner (1999) concedes students would be able to transfer the critical and creative thinking skills developed in the previous two levels to non-art tasks such as are warranted in other academic areas.

Combining Visual Art with the Art of Creative Writing

Several educators offer methods for combining visual arts with literacy instruction in the classroom. Cowan and Albers (2006) describe a process they developed for fourth and fifth grade students that uses art making to explore meanings of specific words. For example, one student created a papier-mâché mask to depict what “enthusiasm” looks like and followed this exercise by writing a poem also titled “enthusiasm” (Cowan and Albers, 2006). The authors contend that the process of creating allows students to become invested in the emotion they choose to depict. Thus when later writing about this emotion, students used the visual they created to remember specifics about their own thinking during the creating process. The students utilize this heightened awareness of their own thinking to create poetry that is more detailed and emotive than previous writing products not including an element of visual art (Cowan and Albers, 2006).

Similarly, Olshansky (2006) developed a writing curriculum focused on art making called Picturing-Writing. Essentially the process asks students to draw and/or paint what they are thinking and then write a story to tell what is going on the picture. The advantage to making art first, Olshansky (2006) suggests, is that while creating, the seeds of story are forming and those thoughts are represented in the resulting visual. Students can then access more detail during the writing process because the burden of cognitive load, which Bruning et al. (2004) mention, is lightened by having the visual to refer to. Research conducted by Olshansky (1998) seems to reveal this advantage. Olshansky (1998) studied 555 first and second grade students in 13 schools in three different states to conclude that the treatment group using the Picturing-Writing strategy dramatically outperformed the control group in quality of writing and use of visual elements within the story. Interestingly, those students identified as at-risk for academic failure participating in the treatment group performed as well as students not at-risk also in the treatment group (Olshansky, 1998).

A case study of two second grade students, one boy and one girl, conducted by Andrzejczak, Trainin and Poldberg (2005) also utilizing Olshansky’s Picturing-Writing strategies came to similar conclusions as Olshansky’s (1998) study. They add, however, that the importance of art making preceding the writing process is crucial to success of the method so that the initial words students write do not constrain the artwork (Andrzejczak, Trainin & Poldberg, 2005)). The presumption is that if students write and then draw they see the process as complete even if the quality of either the artwork or the writing is significantly less than if they had created artwork first. Consequently, Andrzejczak et al. (2005) see creating artwork as the motivational tool necessary to encourage children into the writing process. In a larger scale follow up study, this time headed by Trainin, similar conclusions about the use of Olshansky’s Picturing-Writing strategies as the Andrzejczak et al. case study were found (Trainin, Andrzejczak, & Poldberg, 2006). Moreover, Trainin et al. (2006) suggest that those students motivated
to write more and to a higher level of quality as a result of creating artwork, also increased their writing quality in other contexts, improved their writing ability in general, and showed more interest in reading tasks. That is to say that Trainin et al. (2006) revealed that students’ transfer of knowledge gained through art making and creative writing made a positive impact on how well those students did in other academic areas.

Summary

The body of research investigated for this review does show strong support for utilizing visual arts in the classroom as an effective means to enhance students’ creative writing abilities. Furthermore, the research offers evidence that the process of creating authentic artwork and then writing about it has a positive influence on students’ achievement in other academic areas in addition to creative writing. The sum of the research also reveals that enhancing visual literacy through a variety of art experiences as well as explicitly teaching visual literacy through Visual Thinking Strategies are essential components to reaping the benefits of integrating art into any curriculum area.

Methodology

As discussed throughout the preceding literature review there is evidence to support using visual art creation in the classroom to encourage creative writing and improve academic achievement. I observed a classroom teacher and students in a fourth grade classroom setting who participated in the current study engage in an activity called “History Detectives.” This activity stimulated my thinking about how visual images may spark critical and creative thinking and led to the research presented here. Specifically the classroom teacher asked his students to view a painting, in this case an artist’s rendition of the first trading market on the banks of Cayuga Lake in the late 1700’s. The painting depicted the same location where the Farmer’s Market still exists in Ithaca, New York today. The children carefully scanned the image for clues to inferences they could make about life in Ithaca 200 years ago. Loosely following the Visual Thinking Strategies outlined by Housen, the teacher questioned his students in ways that improved their observation skills and allowed for detailed group discussion. The exercise served to deepen the students’ understanding of and help them make connections to the history of the area in which they live. This activity led me to wonder if the teacher had followed the observation task with a writing task, asking the students to describe the images and the inferences they made in narrative form, whether the quality of their writing would have been enhanced by the visual art experience.

Research Site

The school district where the current study took place is located in a small city that is home to two major universities. There are a total of 2,851 students enrolled at the elementary level within the district, with 293 enrolled within the targeted school (NYSED, 2006 a). The target school is located in an upper middle class suburban neighborhood representing racial demographics that reflect that of the district as a whole with two percent of students of American Indian heritage, six percent Hispanic, ten percent African American, 14 percent Asian and 68 percent Caucasian (NYSED, 2006 b). The socioeconomic demographics of the students in this school district report that 27 percent of students within the district are eligible for free or reduced lunch (NYSED, 2006 a). For the targeted elementary school the percentage of those eligible for free or reduced lunch is much lower with 13 percent reported eligibility. There are approximately four teachers per grade level within the targeted school which would suggest that with a total school population of 293 students a student to teacher ratio of 12/1
school wide (NYSED, 2006 b). The targeted classroom, however, is a bit larger than most others in the school with 27 students supported by one teacher and one teacher’s aide who is in the classroom for approximately one hour each day. Additionally there are two or three parent volunteers who often help during afternoon writing lesson activities.

Participants

Participating in the current study were 27 fourth grade students, 15 boys and 12 girls ranging in age from eight to ten. Two of the girls have IEPs to address specific learning disabilities, another girl receives services for emotional disability and a total of five students, two boys and three girls, receive remedial reading instruction. All students in the class are fluent in English with two students also fluent in a second language. Throughout the course of the research activities, 22 students completed all four measured conditions although eight of these were out of the classroom for the first half of the last writing condition when students were asked to write a story to a picture they painted the day before. Of the remaining five students in the classroom, three completed all but one of the research activities and two students were absent for two of the writing conditions. Consideration is given to these limitations when analyzing the content and extent of students’ writing products.

Researcher Position

As a teaching practicum student I participated in this classroom setting for approximately twelve hours per week for a total of 10 weeks. I was active in the classroom for eight weeks prior to administering any activities related to the research study. The students had recently had a student teacher participating daily in their classroom and understood my role was very similar to that of the student teacher. As part of my classroom responsibilities I led whole group lessons and small group discussions, tutored individuals, monitored student progress, and helped students negotiate issues and conflicts as they arose. The classroom teacher in this setting encouraged my teaching role as well as my role of authority with the students.

Design of the Study

The participating students had some experience viewing visual art as a means to develop understanding as described previously by the “History Detective” activity. Shortly after this activity I also observed these same students taking the PEELs writing test, a district wide fourth grade writing assessment using a limited number of textual prompts to choose from as story starters. After reading the stories resulting from this assessment, I noticed a dramatic lack in descriptive words and phrases compared to the detailed and descriptive language these same students employed during the “History Detective” activity. For the current research, the goal was to discern if the gap between creative speech and creative writing quality would be closed by providing students with alternate methods as story starters, including both textual forms and visual art forms.

The decision to employ the action research approach was twofold. Access to timely baseline data in the form of the PEELs writing assessment represented one factor in deciding to use action research methods. Since the students had already participated in the PEELs assessment, it was reasonable to mimic the setting of this baseline activity for the research activities while observing the same class of students as opposed to limiting the study to a couple of individual students as might be done for an even smaller case study. Time was also a factor. Since the research presented was conducted near the end of the school year, any longitudinal studies would be confounded by the impending summer break. The second factor in choosing action research was the desirability of assessing students’ work created in a
naturalistic classroom setting and in response to typical teaching instruction. Additionally, in the students’ natural classroom setting, the action research method allows for examining the problem of motivating creative writing within the same context students are most often asked to write.

Procedures and Data Sources

I evaluated the 27 students’ creative writing quality in four different writing conditions. The PEELs writing assessment using textual prompts similar to those on most standardized tests, such as A Pet Story or An Accident I Remember (see Appendix A), served as the baseline evaluation. The second writing condition was also a textual prompt but revised to be more open ended, for example, “The howling wind…” (see Appendix B). For the third writing condition students choose from a number of fine art prints and were instructed to write a creative story based on the painting they selected (see Appendices D, E & F), and for the last writing condition the students created their own artwork and wrote a story to go along with their created image (see Appendices G & H).

Using the same rubric (see Appendix I) to evaluate each writing condition, I measured the extent of students’ sensory descriptions and character development, students’ use of imagery and adjectives, and total word count. I hypothesized that the open ended textual prompt would result in more imaginative stories than the typical standardized test prompt because it is less limiting and more dependent on the writer’s personal experience as well as individual interpretation of the prompt. I also hypothesized that both writing conditions involving visuals would result in a greater use of descriptive words and imagery than the textual prompts and that stories created as a result of the students own art creation would be longer and include more detail than any of the other writing conditions.

For the initial writing activity, during whole group discussion students were shown a hat containing 30 small pieces of paper folded up so no one could read the print on each piece. This activity took place during the students’ traditional writing time so the students anticipated that whatever was to happen next would be writing related. As both researcher and teacher leading this activity, I reminded students of some of the other short story writing activities they had done in previous months including the most recent PEELs writing assessment. After allowing students a few moments to recollect what they had written for the PEELs, one of the story prompts, an open ended textual story prompt “The howling wind…,” was selected from the hat as a means to model the impending writing activity through group discussion. The class then engaged in a group discussion about possible story lines this opening sentence could lead to. Some examples included the wind knocking down trees and making it difficult to hear when someone was calling. After encouraging students to use their senses to help them imagine what would happen in their stories, each student selected a story prompt from the hat. Student were then instructed to begin writing their creative story and given 50 minutes to complete their work.

The second writing condition took place in two parts the following day. Part one was a brief group discussion in the morning that consisted of students perusing a collection of fine art color prints (see Appendix D) displayed on the board in front of the room. After a few minutes, students were directed to focus on a pastoral painting done by Winslow Homer in 1878 titled Feeding Time (see Appendix E). Calling students attention to whole group discussion, we examined the painting together. This discussion proceeded by my asking the questions outlined in the Visual Thinking Strategies procedures—“What’s going on in this picture?, What do you see that makes you say that?, and What more can we find? as a means to construct meaning and understanding from the image (Housen & Yenawine, 2001). Following this discussion I read aloud a portion of a story written to go along with this painting as a means to model what the students would be doing for this second writing task (see Appendix E). I asked students to pay particular attention to descriptions of what things looked like, sounded like, felt like, smelled like and/or tasted like. Students were then randomly invited to come up to the front board and select a painting to write a story to later in the day. The second part of this activity
took place after the students returned from their lunch and recess and during their normal writing time. For this portion of the activity students were instructed to begin writing their creative stories based on the painting they chose and given 50 minutes to complete their work.

The final writing condition was also accomplished in two parts. The day after completing the stories prompted by fine arts prints, students gathered during writing time to create their own artwork from which they would write a creative story. The first part of the lesson introduced students to painting with watercolors. Students were each given their own art supplies and then they worked individually on their artwork. After giving students some rudimentary instructions about how to use the watercolor paints with the help of the classroom teacher and a number of parent volunteers, students were given the opportunity to experiment with one of their pieces of watercolor paper. Students were given 15 minutes for this experimentation. The children were then encouraged to begin painting the scene or image they thought of knowing they would be writing a story to go with it. Students were given 50 minutes to complete this painting activity.

For the next day’s writing activity students retrieved their painting from the drying table. Before beginning to write the class was instructed to think about what their story looked like, sounded like, felt like, smelled like and/or tasted like. Students were then given 50 minutes to complete their story.

For the sake of consistency the same rubric (see Appendix I) was used to evaluate the baseline PEELs writing assessment and all three writing conditions. In order to assess if the rubric fairly measured the expected abilities of fourth grade students, the results indicated by the rubric on the PEELs writing condition were compared for consistency in grading to the standardized assessment form (see Appendix J) used to assess the PEELs at the district level. Additionally, the grading rubric was reviewed by the classroom teacher who as a district grader and teacher with 30+ years experience, many at the fourth grade level, has extensive and relevant experience in evaluating student writing.

**Analysis Process**

After students completed each of the writing conditions, each student’s writing for the three writing conditions was matched to that student’s PEELs writing sample. Student work and writing quality were not compared to any other students. Rather, each student’s work was compared to how that student performed at each writing condition. To evaluate students’ use of sensory description and story setting, the researcher/grader counted the number of senses the students made reference to and assigned a number 1-4 as correlating to the level indicated on the rubric. For example, if the student included descriptions involving three or more senses and created a vivid image of the story setting, the grader indicated a score of 4 for the first category on the rubric—“Sensory description of the story setting.” Similar procedures were followed for the next two rubric categories—“Character development” and “Imagery and adjectives.” Each student received two numeric scores for each writing condition, one number indicating the total score resulting from adding the rubric scores from each story content categories, and a second number indicating the total number of words contained in each story.

Once the scoring process was complete each participating student had four sets of scores: one score for the PEELs writing condition serving as the student’s baseline score, and one score for each of the three writing conditions. The four scores generated by each student were then evaluated for changes from one writing condition to the next.

**Validity of Data and Constraints of the Study**

To ensure the validity of the writing conditions, the same amount of time was allotted to each writing condition based on the average amount of time students spent writing their PEELs writing assessment
stories. Additionally, similar verbiage was used to instruct students to begin each writing condition. Furthermore, each writing condition was administered within two months of the baseline writing condition and within days of each other so that students’ natural maturation is thought to play little if any role in any increases in writing quality.

Some limitations of the study are the small sample size and the fact that the classroom teacher administered the PEELs writing condition and the practicum student/researcher administered each of the other writing conditions. Also, because of absences not all students participated in all four writing conditions essentially making the already small sample size even smaller. Lastly, a number of unforeseen circumstances cut into the students’ actual writing time and created significant distraction during the three research writing conditions.

**Findings**

The purpose of the current study was to shed light on the effectiveness of utilizing visual arts and authentic art making to enhance the quality of students’ creative writing within the context of one fourth-grade classroom. Previous research explored throughout the literature review suggests a positive link between art making and students’ critical thinking and creative thinking skills. Furthermore, the research reviewed offers visual art experience as a means to make connections between content areas for deeper understanding of new concepts. The implications for teaching are that by introducing visual literacy and art making in the classroom teachers can indeed enhance their students’ critical and creative thinking skills which in turn may boost academic achievement.

In order to discern what constitutes a meaningful and thus effective creative experience, students participated in a series of four writing activities for this current research. Each activity presented required progressively more creative input from the students, the understanding of the researcher being that the more creative energy students put into a project the more creativity will be reflected in the final product. The final product in each of the four target activities was a creative story. The first two story writing prompts were textual prompts, the first of which constituted the most scripted stimulus whereby students responded by writing a story to a story title which they chose from four different options. The second prompt was a more open-ended textual prompt in the form of a portion of the first sentence of a story to stimulate a slightly more unscripted written response. The third story prompt students responded to was a fine art print representing a somewhat more scripted response than the fourth and final writing condition whereby students created a written response to a painting of their own creation.

**Key Findings**

Three of the most important findings of this action research were: 1) standardized story title prompts used to obtain baseline data resulted in predictable, bland, “safe” storylines whereas the stories written in response to the three treatment writing conditions generally resulted in students taking more risks with their storylines and consequently writing more creative stories, 2) students demonstrated much greater personal investment in their creative stories and often sacrificed their free time to revisit and add to their stories, and 3) for some students having a multitude of options such as those presented by the open-ended story prompts was the key to unlocking their creativity, while for others this sea of possibilities hampered their ability to choose a direction.

*Predictably bland vs. courageously creative.* The story titles students had to choose from to complete the PEELs standardized writing assessment used as baseline data for this research were *A Pet Story, An Accident I Remember, The Day Without Electricity and A Scary Thing Happened to Me.* Students were instructed to select one title and write a story based on their title selection. They were also warned not to deviate from the story focus or combine story titles. Student responses to these
prompts were basically in the realm of reporting a typical childhood event. For example in response to *A Pet Story* prompt, student Amy (all names are pseudonyms) begins her story with:

One day when I came back from school I saw my grandma there. She said, “I’m going to be [hear] for a [wile], and I [whant] you to [mete] Beanie.” I [whent] in the living room and there she was sitting in a crate looking at me like she was [exspekting] me all along. “Ooohhh she’s so cute,” I said. “[Quietely] go ahead and open the crate,” my grandma said. So I bent down and opened it. Beanie came running out and crouched down when she got close to me.

In contrast to this blow by blow retelling of a typical childhood event, this same student began with the following in response to the first research writing condition, an open-ended textual prompt *It was a mistake to…*:

It was a mistake to get a pet alligator for her grandmother’s birthday present. It was not a mistake that she saw her grandmother and the [alligatore] shopping together, doing the [dissco] together and doing karate together. We all know of course that grandmother won. Birdy walked home and heard the phone ring. She picked it up and said “hello.” The other person said, “Hi. Is your grandmother approaching a [alagatore].”

Even though the second example of Amy’s writing is missing some explanatory details, the story line is much more creative and the story hook is more exciting than her response to the standardized prompt. It should be noted here that an unforeseen interruption to the students’ writing during this first writing condition precluded the students’ ability to go back and proofread their stories to make corrections to grammar, syntax and/or clear up confusing points. This limitation and others will be discussed in greater detail in later sections.

Similarly predictable, writing a response to the standardized title prompt *An Accident I Remember* another student, Mackenzie, recounts a fender bender incident she and her mom experienced on the way to a birthday party. After beginning the story with a lament on having to wait ten minutes for her mother to get ready, she continues the narrative with:

Later we were in the car with the radio on. My mom kept flipping from radio station to radio station. Finally she found what she was looking for. Silence. So she turned the radio off. It was a slippery, slushy and rainy day. I never liked to ride in the car at these times, but I would do it for a birthday party.

I began to notice that the car was going faster and faster. And when we had to stop our car slipped a little before doing so. Then I soon realized that my nerves were going crazy! Then all of my cereal splattered all over my face and clothes. When I looked out of the window all that I could see was everything spinning all around me. I could hear my mom yelling to me that everything was going to be ok. Suddenly it all stopped. We had fallen in to a ditch plus we ran over a sign.
Mackenzie concludes her story with a friend driving by, stopping to help them out of their predicament, and ultimately getting to the birthday party. In contrast to this benign fare Mackenzie writes from a cat’s point of view for the third writing condition in response to her own artwork:

This story is about, well about me, the cat your see in the picture. I’m an alley cat. You know the stray kind that lives in the streets. But I am no ordinary cat. I can talk, write, read and draw. Anyway, one day when I was feasting on roasted mouse some hobo just gave me, a boy came up to me wrinkling his nose at the yummy smell of my dinner. Hmmm, I thought to myself, it almost seems like he does not like the smell.

Mackenzie’s story continues with the cat befriending the boy and protecting him from a dangerous drunk. She maintains the voice of the cat throughout the story and concludes the story with the boy and cat as inseparable friends.

The same scenario plays out for the other two standardized story title prompts. The Day Without Electricity led most students to write about fumbling around in the dark and being bored by not being able to play video games or watch television. A Scary Thing Happened to Me inspired stories of trips to the emergency room, trying something for the first time, like skiing, scuba diving, or similar experiences that typically invoke some level of fear.

Whereas the students’ responses to the three research writing conditions bespeak a whole slew of topics that go beyond the bland and ordinary, and I suspect result from students’ drawing on stories they’ve heard or read before and movies they’ve seen, in addition to unique life experiences they’ve had that cannot be pigeon holed into a standard story title.

Joyfully motivated and begging for more. I participated in administering the PEELs writing assessment used as baseline data for this research by following the classroom teacher’s lead. After I read the instructions and made any clarifications needed, the students proceeded with this writing assignment with the general demeanor reserved for test taking. The level of concentration the students put forth was reflective of their effort to remember and record the details of “what has happened” as opposed to creating stories of “what could be.” Observations of the students following the completion of the PEELs writing assessment reveal that not a single student expressed interest in sharing his or her story with a classmate. Nor did students hand in their stories eager to give the teacher a synopsis of their clever offering. Students did not ask if their stories would be read aloud in class at some point. The students simply completed their charge, handed the result over, and promptly moved on to the next activity.

The same cannot be said of the students’ behavior when writing to the three treatment conditions, the open-ended textual prompt, the fine art painting story prompt, and the students’ own artwork as a story prompt. In each instance of the research writing conditions, many students demonstrated an interest in sharing their stories with classmates; hearing feedback from other students, the teacher, and the researcher; and having additional time to add to their stories to make them even better. Surprisingly, several students even sacrificed their free time in the morning as well as snack time to continue working on their stories. One student even requested taking the materials with her on a vacation trip knowing she would miss the opportunity to write her story by being absent. In short the students expressed joy in the writing process, as well as with their written offerings, and a level of personal investment in the end products that was not displayed for their work on the standardized PEELs writing assessment condition.

Although the classroom teacher could not afford additional time to have all the children share their completed stories with their classmates, he did recognize the importance of some level of sharing in order to take advantage of the students’ heightened motivation. To address the sharing issue, the researcher created a gallery of their artwork and led a whole group meeting whereby I read a number of the most intriguing first lines of several students’ writing and asked those willing authors to identify
themselves so that those authors could read their story in its entirety to a group of interested classmates 
during silent reading time. Some examples of the intriguing first lines are:

It was dusk, when the wind whispers over the trees with a sliver of 
silver in its wake.—Michelle, in response to own artwork

Tucked away behind the huge boulder blackening the door to a gloomy 
cave over the ocean at the end of the world, across the desert plains of 
nowhere and where no living thing had ever been, between the great 
mountains of Orethas lived JUNCO!  –Abby, in response to open-
ended text prompt

Through the open door was the culprit. The one whose face was all over 
town.—Gerald, in response to open-ended text prompt

I, Kazul, am the green dragon of Dovania. Before I begin my story, I 
think I should tell you about Dovanian culture.—Jill, in response to 
own artwork

The barking dog wouldn’t stop once he saw the intruder in the trash can. 
–Frank, in response to open-ended text prompt

If you walk along the golden path, through a meadow filled with flowers 
of every color, past a tree and across a bridge, you’ll come across a 
beautiful town called Hamshire. –Lillie, in response to own artwork

The beauty and bane of having options. Following each writing condition, each student 
participated in a brief interview with the researcher in order to record individual student impressions of 
the writing process as precipitated by the various story prompts. The class as a whole represented a split 
in thinking whereby roughly half of the students found the open-ended story prompts harder to write to 
while the other half found the open-ended story prompts easier to write to than the PEELs standardized 
story title prompts. This dichotomy was particularly true for the open-ended textual prompts that 
provided students with the first few words of the first sentence (see Appendix B). For students who 
found the process harder than starting with a title, the comments mimic Thwaite’s (2006) research and 
Ellis’ (2003) research. They found that the scripted writing procedures, represented by the standardized 
story title prompts used in the current research, resulted in bland writing products and student comments 
that the process was boring and easy, whereas the unscripted writing tasks resulted in more imaginative 
and creative writing products and student comments that the process was challenging.

For example, Joseph, a student who found the open-ended writing process easier than starting 
with a story title due to having options states, “I thought this was cool because the story could go 
anywhere.” In contrast, Laura found the process harder due to having too many options: “This was 
harder because the story could be anything so I had to narrow it down first.” Similar student comments 
followed the writing condition using the fine art paintings as story prompts. However, student 
comments following the writing condition whereby students wrote stories prompted by their own 
artwork yielded a greater majority of students finding the writing process easier because they could use 
their painting to remind them of story events they wanted to include in their stories. Laura comments, 
following this last writing condition, “This was easier because I could just look at my picture for clues.”
Unanticipated Findings

Two unanticipated findings that posed substantial influence on students’ writing during the three research writing conditions were: 1) the additional cognitive resources needed to write in cursive resulted in significantly shorter stories and 2) for some students having the freedom to choose the story topic for each writing condition resulted in a great deal of time spent in the decision making phase of the writing process as opposed to time spent actually writing.

Cursive writing hindrance. At the start of my teaching practicum in this classroom, eight weeks prior to beginning the research presented here, the cooperating classroom teacher put me in charge of the “cursive writing club.” As such I worked with small groups of students helping them develop better cursive handwriting technique, while expounding on the virtues of writing in cursive versus writing in manuscript form. Consequently, when beginning the research writing conditions several students asked the question, “Do we have to write in cursive?” Caught in a conundrum, I was left to insist on the students using cursive handwriting.

While for a few students writing in cursive posed no issue, for most the additional cognitive resources required to write in cursive resulted in significantly shorter stories. The average total word counts for stories written in response to the three writing conditions were approximately 30% fewer words than for stories written for the PEEL’s writing condition. The classroom teacher did not require students to write in cursive for the PEEL’s writing assessment. Interestingly, students did not sacrifice the quality of their stories in response to having to write in cursive only their story lengths.

The “freedom” of having options. Selecting a story topic without having a finite number of choices from which to choose proved difficult for a number of students. Whereas for the PEEL’s writing condition students needed only to decide between the four options given (see Appendix A), the more open ended nature of the research story prompts are limited only by the individual student’s imagination. For two students with specific learning disabilities, it was necessary to narrow the options in order for them to write anything at all. Interestingly, another student, for fear of having to make a decision, rewrote a story he had written earlier in the school year. Several other students needed only encouragement from a teacher that the idea they had voiced as an option was worthy of writing a story about.

Discussion

The findings of this research suggest that visual imagery, whether prompted by an open ended textual prompt or by fine art or authentic art making, increases students’ ability to write more creatively. Some of the limitations presented while conducting this research point to the importance of sustained time devoted to art making, as well as sustained writing time as crucial to the writing process. Unforeseen interruptions during the three writing conditions required students to backtrack their thinking repeatedly in order to complete thoughtful stories. As the researcher conducting the post writing interviews following each writing condition, I surmised from student responses that this backtracking posed more of a problem for the creative offerings completed for the research writing conditions than for the PEEL’s writing condition where students often simply reported a list of events. In this last instance, students need only go back to the last event to continue with their reporting sequence.

As a pre-service teacher with extensive background in the visual arts, one of the basic assumptions I make about teaching is that the process of creating is integral to the process of learning. My assumptions are based on the intuitive sense I have about the parallels between my own art making, thinking, and writing processes. For example, I equate painting strategies for finding just the right color and hue to depict feeling in a painting, to the cognitive processes for finding just the right words and
phrases to convey meaning and emotion through writing. Recognizing that my own intuition is neither enough, nor adequate justification for building teaching strategies that affect my students, I set about this research acknowledging both my bias toward the visual arts and my greater desire to implement the best teaching practices to enhance my students’ learning and academic growth.

There is overwhelming support for the use of visual arts in the classroom to encourage creative writing and improve academic achievement. However, many of the researchers discussed throughout the literature review hint to limited use of visual arts strategies in the classroom citing focus on high-stakes testing and teachers’ low confidence level with the arts as primary reasons for the avoidance. The research reviewed as well as the current study certainly provide fodder for arguing that moving out of one’s comfort zone with the arts and investing in the process early on may in fact result in precisely the test results the current education climate demands.

**Implications for Teaching and Future Research**

The implications for teaching are such that incorporating visual arts specifically, and certainly authentic art making, should not be viewed as extra-curricular or “icing on the cake” activities but as essential methods in the practice of teaching. By doing so, we avail students of additional modes of understanding, of expressing their thinking, and of organizing their thoughts thus freeing cognitive resources to learn more deeply.

The implications for future research point to expanding the current research to different grade levels to ascertain how using visual arts affects writing specifically and academic achievement in general for younger versus older students. In addition, subsequent research should explore how using visual arts and art making in the classroom meet the call for differentiated instruction to address the needs of diverse learners.

**References**


Appendix A – PEEL’s writing prompt

Name _______________________________________________________ Date_____________

Choose a story title from the list below. Then write a story to go with the title you chose. Be sure to write the story title you choose on the line before beginning your story. You can use this page as a planning page and begin writing on the next page. Be sure to put your name on each page you use.

A Pet Story
An Accident I Remember
The Day Without Electricity
A Scary Thing Happened to Me

Story Title____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________

Appendix B – Textual story prompts

The howling wind…
The setting sun…
Many voices began…
Tucked away behind the…
The barking dog …
Several of the …
High up on the …
Through the open …
It was a mistake to…
I could hear…

Appendix C – text prompt writing page

Name ______________________________________________Date______________________

Write a creative story use the “story beginning” paper you drew out of the hat. Remember to include details about your story setting and descriptions about the characters you create. Your story should of course have a clear beginning, middle and end, and like all good stories there should be some problem or conflict that is resolved.

____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
Balancing on the top fence rail, I was searching Anna’s face for that relaxed, easiness that spreads from her forehead down her nose, and across her warm pink cheeks when she is entranced by a chore as mindless and simple as throwing corn to the cows. The corn kernels were creating a rhythm in the morning quiet like drops dripping from a paddle when the boatman arches it over the waters surface setting another stroke to pull him forward. The cows ignored my presence, intent only to breathe and chew. If I was to have any chance at all at securing her support for the plan I’d just fixed in my head, I would have to ask now before the day’s chores set her mind and jaw on the negative.

“Jesse MacFarland is with mama in the north field.” My voice was louder than I intended in the cool morning calm, but not loud enough to interrupt the cows seemingly
Appendix F
– Fine art painting writing prompt

Name ______________________________________________ Date______________________

Write a creative story using a fine art painting as your story starter. Remember to include
details about your story setting and descriptions about the characters you create. Your story
should of course have a clear beginning, middle and end, and like all good stories there should be
some problem or conflict that is resolved.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Appendix G – Student watercolor painting samples
Appendix H – Water color painting writing prompt

Name

Date

Write a creative story using your watercolor painting as your story starter. Remember to include details about your story setting and descriptions about the characters you create. Your story should of course have a clear beginning, middle and end, and like all good stories there should be some problem or conflict that is resolved.

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

Appendix I – Evaluation rubric

Writing a masterpiece

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensory description of the story</th>
<th>Masterpiece</th>
<th>Needs some work</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character development</td>
<td><strong>Work shows a main character the reader comes to know through the story. Vivid descriptions of how this character looks, feels, thinks and acts. Work includes at least 3 other characters and describes their relationship with the main character.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Work has a main character that the reader learns some details about. Work includes some descriptions of how this character looks, feels, thinks and acts. Story includes at least 2 other characters and describes their relationship with the main character.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Work has a main character that the reader learns something about. Lacking clear descriptions of how this character looks, feels, thinks and acts. Work includes only 1 other character and a weak description of their relationship with the main character.</strong></td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery and adjectives</td>
<td><strong>Work makes use of similes, metaphors and includes a rich use of adjectives to paint vivid images of the action and interaction in the story.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Work makes use of similes, and includes a rich use of adjectives to paint images of the action and interaction in the story.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Work makes use of adjectives to paint images of the action and interaction in the story.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total word count _________  __________  __________  __________  __________
### IDEAS AND CONTENT

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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- Supporting details are specific and relevant.

### ORGANIZATION

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<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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</thead>
</table>

- You have a very good overall logical plan.
- The introduction and conclusion are strong and thoughtful.
- Transition words are used to connect ideas.
- Paragraphs are used to organize information.

### USE OF EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>4</th>
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</table>

- This piece is smooth and dialogue flows naturally.
- Sentences vary in length and are interesting.
- You have the right kind of words for this type of writing (vivid, persuasive, expressive).
- Your language is original. You’ve made fragments and capitals on purpose.

### VOICE

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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</thead>
</table>

- Your voice is convincing and sincere.
- Your voice captures my attention.
- You have created a mood (anger, humor, sympathy) with your words.

### CONVENTIONS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1</th>
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</table>

- Rare errors in spelling commonly used words.
- All/most sentences have proper punctuation, capitalization, and commas.
- Grammar-All/most sentences are complete.
- Few errors in subject-verb agreement
- Few errors in verb tense.

---

Appendix J – PEEL’s evaluation rubric

_________________________________________

‘S STORY TITLE

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IDEAS AND CONTENT

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- Paragraphs are used to organize information.

### USE OF EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE

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<th>4</th>
</tr>
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</table>

- Rare errors in spelling commonly used words.
- All/most sentences have proper punctuation, capitalization, and commas.
- Grammar-All/most sentences are complete.
- Few errors in subject-verb agreement
- Few errors in verb tense.