

The Reciprocity of Art and Literature

By Mered Lawson

I love children's literature and rediscovered it when my children were young. As an elementary art teacher, I choose books for their pictures as much as for their words. Like a good book, a piece of art takes us on a journey. It's a silent story that often does not get told out loud. In my first CRISS training, I realized the story is worth telling.

I started with the tried and true books of my childhood, first with my children and then with my students. Rhymes are particularly appealing as a tool for exploring rhythm and word families. Using well-illustrated rhyming activities, I worked with students to finish the second line of couplets, reinforcing their comprehension and creativity through an adaptation of One-Sentence Summary Frames.

When I read aloud to them, we always talk about the artwork. I model questioning by asking probing questions, such as "Why are these good illustrations for this story?" One book I use often is *Little Blue and Little Yellow* by Leo Lionni, a story about friends who become green when they play together. The artwork consists of simple blobs of color and yet, because of its simplicity, is very well received. It sends a message that art needn't be elaborate or for the talented only.

Harold and the Purple Crayon by Crockett Johnson is a perfect accompaniment to line drawing. A model I often use is, "Why did Harold choose the color purple in particular?" Some delightful comments I've received from students are, "Maybe it's a magical color." "It probably was Harold's mother's favorite color, and he used it because he knew she'd be angry with him being out so late at night drawing."

To check metacognition, I always use a question, such as, "How did the story help you understand the art concept we are working on today?" But I just as easily could ask, "How did the art concept help you understand the story we are working on today?" Since a goal of CRISS is "the development of expert, strategic readers," the accompanying imagery of a story is a strong tool.

The authors of the Project CRISS manual suggest that students transform their thoughts about images into words by using strategies such as You Ought To Be in Pictures and

Learning Logs. The creativity involved in producing visual art is a tool that can surely be carried through to creative writing, as art is wonderfully interpretive. *Word and Image* is a local art exhibition that combines both images and stories. A child may begin with the artwork and write a story to accompany it or begin with the story and illustrate it. The youngest students tell their stories orally,

which are then recorded by adult volunteers.

For a young student, the strength of the written word and the images provoked are very powerful. I had a student years ago who adored the Harry Potter books, but was not interested in seeing any of the films, because she had her own vision of those characters and would not accept someone else's. She learned that the written word can be so personal that the image created may not work for everyone. I work with my students so they can mentally paint their own pictures when no images are available. For every picture, there's a story, and for every story there's a picture. Literature and art go hand in hand.

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About the Author: Mered Lawson is an art teacher for four elementary schools in Pinellas County, Florida. Prior to her current position, she lived in Greece for 29 years and ran a small English language school for ESL students, as well as bilingual students. She notes she often incorporated art into her literacy lessons then as she incorporates literacy into her art lessons now!

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