Literacy and the Aesthetic Experience: Engaging Children with the Visual Arts in the Teaching of Writing

A teacher uses visual images to open up spaces for imagination and to encourage children to go beyond the familiar during writing workshop.

In the many months since September 11, 2001, I have come to think that the work of literacy cannot possibly be measured by improved test scores or national standardized reading levels. This has been a time of fear and loss. It is also a time of fearing what we, too, may prove capable of. In some ways, September 11 has become a watershed event that lets us look at literacy in new ways. Since then, it seems that literacy needs to be a way we reason. Literacy needs to be a way we comfort, and a way we bear witness. Literacy needs to be how we reach across the barriers that separate us. If we imagine literacy as an aesthetic experience, then we can imagine its purpose is to illuminate the human condition. In these times, of all times, we need to maintain literacy as an art. For it is through the arts, most particularly, that we find ourselves transcending the things that keep us apart. I want to share ways to engage students with looking at the visual arts in order to write. Looking to write is a different way to start writing, and unexpected things happen. Aesthetic experiences occur. We engage students' imaginations in particularly empathetic ways. The boundaries of their experiences expand.
Maxine Greene (1995) consistently poses the question, what is an aesthetic experience? I think of the aesthetic experience as one marked by interactive engagement. An aesthetic experience happens when we read a novel and ask not only what happens within the novel, but also what happens to us when we read it. An aesthetic experience is the meaning that happens somewhere between the text and ourselves. Thinking about Maxine’s question leads to a harder question: do we have aesthetic experiences in schooling? I think we see aesthetic response when students describe their own experiences in relation to characters or narratives they know intimately from literature. And I think we would see more aesthetic experiences if we engaged students more often and more purposefully with the arts. Maxine Greene (1995) writes that “informed engagements with the several arts is the most likely mode of releasing our students’ (or any persons’) imaginative capacity and giving it play” (p. 125). What gets in the way of orchestrating these “informed engagements” are constrictions of inherited curriculum, limitations in resources, and difficulty in planning with students meaningful literacy experiences around the arts. Nevertheless, there are ways to work through these difficulties. I want to share some ways to orchestrate aesthetic experiences in literacy, particularly by engaging the visual arts in the teaching of writing.

There is a way in which the visual arts express meaning that is different from other modes of representation (Eisner, 1994). An art object portrays not only an event or a figure, it reveals how the artist felt about that subject. Moreover, that sense of the felt is peculiarly accessible to the young, who look before they speak, who sometimes know more than they can say. Dewey (1934) asserts that art “strikes below the barriers that separate human beings from each other. . . . Art renders men [and women] aware of their union with one another in origin and destiny” (p. 272). In this way, the art object gives us access to the imagined experience of the “other.” It is an experience of empathy. Our work can be to bring art, in the original or in reproduction, into the learning lives of our students and into our teaching.

**PORTRAITURE AND POETRY**

One way to write through the visual arts is to introduce children to a collection of portraits. I like to introduce Picasso’s portraits of women with the idea that we will write poetry around the images. Both poetry and painting have the ability to pick us up and move us to another place. They are among the most transformative modes of communication. Also, they can provide entry points for writing that begin with looking and that do not assume a certain level of literacy in order for children to be successful as writers. Some children become confident poets before they become confident in other genres; sometimes they can articulate what they see in a visual image more than they can say what they see in a written text.

Consider Carrie’s poems, inspired by two of Picasso’s paintings of Olga. Carrie is 13 years old. She doesn’t know how Picasso sought and adored Olga, but then was unfaithful to her, and came to hate and abandon her. These are experiences of “the other” for Carrie. But she can see the transformation on the canvas (see her poems in Figure 1).

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**Figure 1. Carrie observes, draws, and verbalizes the transformation of Olga in Picasso’s paintings.**

Olga

On the canvas

my hair is smooth and long,

my arms white

and my lips red.

How long will

Picasso think I’m beautiful?

Olga

When did I become a monster?

Jagged bones,

an insect’s head.

You gave me a skeleton

but no heart.

You have devoured me.
Carrie created these poems by writing down what she saw and wondered about as she looked at the paintings. She made line drawings of the images, she made word lists, she jotted down phrases. Then she worked her “looking” into poetry by arranging her noticings in two columns. Carrie and I conferred about her punctuation choices and line breaks to make her poems more graceful. Carrie’s poetry demonstrates empathy and insight, inquiry and observation. She envisions the moment portrayed in each painting, and all that it implies for Olga’s past and future. She reminds us of the profound empathy children are capable of, and of the ways we perhaps underestimate their knowledge. Seeing Carrie’s poems emerge without a minilesson on how to write poetry from painting makes me think that perhaps I can back away from always giving a writing minilesson. Maybe I can let the children have more opportunities to make discoveries. Thinking of writing as an aesthetic experience helps us resist letting the writing process become dogmatic. We cannot teach aesthetic experiences. We can, however, engage one kind of art—painting—with another of the arts—poetry—and make writing itself an aesthetic experience.

I use the term workshop for the work we do together with writing and the arts because I mean the term more in its artistic sense, as in when we are working together in a studio, or exploring a medium, than in its sense of autonomy for writers. I do ask the students to engage with the paintings in order to write. I am orchestrating certain genre choices some of the time. Partly I use the term simply because we did the work when otherwise we would be in writing workshop. I think of the work sometimes as a genre study and sometimes as a craft study, and often it is part of a larger study—for instance, a poetry unit where the students are reading and writing poetry in many ways (Flynn & McPhillips, 2000). But there is no doubt that my purpose is two-fold and only one of those purposes is to find new ways to write. The second is to imagine ways to engage students in a relationship with the arts. This world, and our children, need the arts.

Poetry, the Arts, and Inquiry
The arts, most especially the visual arts and poetry, are too often reserved in schooling for a portion of the population that is considered to have merited access, students who have already achieved “literacy.” I suggest that we incorporate the arts and poetry as part of a curriculum of inquiry. “The language of poetry is the language of an inquiry,” writes poet Lyn Hejinian (2000, p. 3). More than any other written genre, poetry attempts to express the most through the least, to achieve the greatest clarity with the most rigorous discipline. The experience of writing poetry through engagement with portraiture specifically can be transformative for elementary and middle school writers. The work of looking closely at imagery and deliberating word choice sharpens the students’ analytical skills and enriches the language of the classroom. Also, the time spent intimately engaged with the paintings becomes a way of looking and being in the world.

The choice to look at women in Picasso’s paintings within this poetry workshop reflects several interests. One is practical. Paintings and drawings are much easier to reproduce and use in the classroom than are, for example, sculpture, artifacts, or objects. Another is that Picasso made so many images of women. It is relatively easy to go to the library or access a museum or commercial Web site and come upon images of Picasso’s women. Rubin’s (1996) Picasso and Portraiture is filled with portraits of the women in his life. And when we come upon these images, we come upon a conversation waiting to happen. There is a unifying focus, the women, that gives us a place to start conversation; there is variety to stimulate comparison and interpretation; and there is strong, clear imagery. It is easy to compare the ways Picasso chooses to portray women, or at least it is easy to start that conversation. And that conversation models the kinds of conversation—about choice, modes of communication, expression—that we want to have in literacy classrooms and beyond the doors of the classroom.

Storytelling about the Arts
Storytelling is an art that helps students access new concepts (Saccardi, 1997). I create a context for children to explore the images in the form of a story about Picasso and the women. I tell how he fell in love with Olga, the Russian ballerina, and seduced her from the stage and into a domestic role as wife and then mother. How he began to fall in love with the young, jubilant Marie-Thérèse Walters. How she appears on the beach where Olga and Picasso played with their son Paulo (Rubin, 1996). The purpose of this storytelling is to excite interest in the images, to reveal information that may help the students understand the images, and to share what it
feels like to be in an intimate relationship with the arts. Since this is a story I may tell with young children, I make it a story about how this one man loved, how his passion was so great that it kept moving onto new things all the time.

As I talk about each woman, I hold up an image. I use postcards or color reproductions that I’ve laminated. Looking at the image Olga in an Armchair from the Picasso Museum in Paris, I imagine Olga’s pride as a ballerina, and as a wife and mother. I wonder how she felt to see herself shown so stiff and formal, and why the painting is unfinished, and what that might mean in terms of a love abandoned. I think aloud for the students, showing what it is like to notice and respond to imagery, and also what it is like to be curious about the experience of someone unknown to me. I am also demonstrating how we “read” a painting, how we make observations and interpretations. I speculate on Olga’s possible sense of shock when she sees the painting of Marie-Thérèse, and her horror when she realizes that she has been portrayed as a monster in Seated Bather, but Marie-Thérèse takes on the persona of a bouncy bather in Bather with Beach Ball, both in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. I notice that Picasso exaggerates and distorts in his paintings, that he is painting not what these women look like, but what he feels about them.

From Recording Observations to Craft Study

Next we practice looking closely and interpreting our observations as craft. If this is the first time the students have seriously engaged with the arts, I may introduce an observation record sheet to help them organize their notes on form, color, and composition (the craft of painting). For elementary school students especially, we need to model what it means to look closely at art. Also, we can demonstrate ways of recording observations and questioning so that these processes will lead to writing. For example, an observation sheet may pose particular questions to encourage students to look closely (Saccardi, 1997). (See Figure 2.)

It is helpful to look at one pair of images with students as a large group in order to demonstrate how to relate what they notice with ideas about artistic craft and choice. I start with a vivid comparison, such as Olga in an Armchair and Seated Bather (Olga). Looking at Olga in an Armchair, we read the visual image and record notes about the elegant curves of the lines of her dress and her arm, the strained colors, the whiteness of her skin and the darkness of her dress. We notice her gaze, the way she looks not quite at the viewer and artist. We think about what makes her seem so feminine and contained, how that almost makes her monstrous more shocking. I want them to see that abstracted forms can demonstrate a lot of artistic choice; they are not random marks. We ponder Picasso’s feelings toward Olga that may have prompted him to paint her in this way. We wonder what Olga might have felt when she saw the painting. We compare it to the earlier image. The students will understand their task much better if they examine two images at once. Comparison is the clearest method to sharpen students’ skills in observation and analysis when looking at art, as it is with any text. It lifts them out of content observation to observation of form (Calkins, 1996). My job is to listen, to help them say more, to push them to look closely, and to think about why the artist painted in this way and not another.

From Painting to Poetry

When we encourage the children to observe closely, we help them imag-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does Picasso show Olga in this painting—write down words or phrases you think of as you look at her.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Try to describe the forms and colors he uses to shape Olga.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you look at this painting, how do you imagine Picasso feels about Olga?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. This example of an observation sheet focuses on a response to a Picasso painting.
ine the choices the painter makes, which are similar to those a writer makes. We are also encouraging them to articulate in writing the experiences they imagine in the painting. As they look, they jot down simple phrases and questions, and it is from these phrases that their poems emerge.

When they write their poems, most students begin with language they recorded on their observation sheets. Their purpose now is to select, arrange, connect, and craft these phrases. Some students’ poems will closely describe what they see. But some may write about what the painting makes them feel. Poetry can evoke the mood of the paintings, as in 10-year-old Nelson’s poem, inspired by the painting Bather with Beach Ball (see Figure 3).

Nelson’s poem bounces. It is airy and joyful like the painting that inspired it. Nelson is a fifth grader who lives in the projects in Manhattan. In his notebook, he writes that he hasn’t ever been to the beach, but he thinks, based on the painting, that it must be a place where you go with people who love you. Our class can’t go to the beach, but when I say we are going to the museum, Nelson stands up on his chair and shouts “YAY!”

Ten-year-old Nelson and 13-year-old Carrie show us that when children engage with the arts, they learn to imagine experiences that are unfamiliar to them, and in that process, they expand the boundaries of their own experience. This means that in their writing, they are able to access experiences that they never had, but that are now a part of their repertoire. Their powers of expression escalate, as does our knowledge and expectations of their expressive powers.

**AMERICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING AND INVENTED JOURNAL ENTRIES**

In engaging with the arts, we learn a lot about the natural empathetic powers of children. Children also find strategies to describe their own experiences and their ways of looking at the world. Justin is a student who looked at a painting and found new ways to express his own experiences. He was a fifth-grade student in a class exploring Western Expansion. As part of this interdisciplinary study, I show American landscape paintings, and the students literally imagine the paintings as their own historic environment, taking up a narrative role within the scene in the form of an invented journal. Justin imagines himself into the painting and writes his journal from within the painting. He retains, however, his own sense of identity within this setting. In fact, transporting himself into an alternative, imagined setting seems to help him find the freedom to describe in writing some of how he feels about his lived experience.

We start this experience by looking at Thomas Cole’s painting The Oxbow. This is a favorite for me because it is large-scale, beautiful, available on the museum Web site (www.metmuseum.org), and in almost every library book on American landscape painting. It embodies American notions of Manifest Destiny and the romanticizing of the West, and represents ties to nature as symbolic of ties to God. The painting presents the East as a domesticated pastoral landscape dotted with churches and farms, but across a river, the West is presented as a dark and mysterious landscape of woods and mountains, shrouded in thunderstorms, with evidence of God’s or nature’s power in the trees blasted by lightning.

I ask the students to create a journal entry from this scene or one of the other reproductions. Students may be anywhere in their chosen painting; they may move around the landscape in their journal entry, and
they may come upon their classmates. Students in the same painting thus create varied and sometimes interlocking visions and voices from within that setting. I start by talking with the children about what they see in the painting. They describe the cultivated landscape to the east and the wilderness to the west. They see the river as a divider and a path between the two parts. Gradually, they see the blasted tree that has been destroyed by lightning, and they observe the thunderclouds passing overhead to the west and the sun streaming out in the east. They find houses and orchards and wagons and people in the east. They find heavy foliage and mysterious dark copses to the west.

Interactive Storytelling
I do a little interactive storytelling in which I demonstrate how a story moves around in the painting. I may begin the narrative like this:

*This morning Willie and I got caught on the other side of the river, and we thought we were never going to make it back to the farm. We were playing in the bottom of the boat that Farmer Wilson ties up by the shore. We were playing that we were on our way to New York City, where Aunt Ida says the people all live in sin and filth. Out of nowhere, the sky got all black and the wind whipped up, and the boat just washed out into the water and across the river...*

And so on. I try to create narrators who are near the children’s age, whose story involves some kind of tension, and that tension is involved with the landscape. Since often the class is not experienced with historical journals, I may give them a focus lesson on aspects of historical journals—explaining that they need to show who is writing, describe the setting (and remember that the painting is their setting), and document what is happening that day. Rather than looking at professional literature for this genre, we look at some of the primary sources that are available, particularly at [http://www.isu.edu/~trinmich/Oregontrail.html](http://www.isu.edu/~trinmich/Oregontrail.html), a Web site that has online journal excerpts from the Oregon Trail.

The Social Aesthetic Experience
Interestingly, when we interrupt our writing periodically to share our narratives, an unexpected result of this sharing is that students start to incorporate elements of each other’s writing in their stories. Tamara and Felicia, in their own writing, come upon each other in the woods, so that their journal entries meet. There is something about the social environment of engaging together with

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ArtsConnectEd links the resources of a major museum to classrooms, offering instant, virtual museum access through the Internet. Students can take a virtual gallery tour, linger and zoom in for a closer look at a work of art, or create art in an online artist workshop. ArtsConnectEd, sponsored in part by ArtsNet Minnesota, won recognition as a “Best of the Web—Museum and the Web” award for educational use.

Three sections of this site offer online opportunities to integrate the arts with the language arts:

- **Art Gallery** links to online images of work taken from the extensive collections at the Walker Art Center and The Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Collections of portraits, landscapes, sculptures, and mixed media are displayed as lists of works that include digitized images and a brief description of the work.

- **For Your Classroom** links to K–12 online resources that include thematic units, museum-related activities, virtual museum tours, and an entrance to various collections. In one K–3 activity, Imaginary Autobiography, the teacher displays an image of a portrait from the online gallery on a classroom computer screen. Students use details from the painting to write an autobiography and compare and discuss their various interpretations of that person’s life. Students can go to the online gallery to read background information for some of the portraits.

- **Playground** provides opportunities for children to explore various artistic elements. “Explore the Toolkit,” allows students to use multimedia tools to explore line, space, and balance in creating their own works of art. Students may also view digital movie clips of artists at work and listen to artists thinking aloud about their creative processes.

—Linda D. Labbo
the painting that introduces social processes into their writing. We end up with almost a village record. This social process, combined with writing that started with looking, helps some students write, and gives me a chance to make new discoveries about students who are not easy to know in the classroom. Which brings us to Justin.

Justin doesn’t like to read, and he rarely writes more than a sentence or two in class. He has been in four fifth grades in two years and has been living in a homeless shelter. Justin spends a long time looking at the painting and posing questions about what he sees. Then he listens to some other students’ entries. Here is an excerpt from his journal entry:

I am where there is thunder and lots of dangerous animals and I hear the animals and rain. There is a light part, where there are fields and sunshine and quiet, but it is behind me and it feels like I can never be there. It’s like I am always alone and it is always dark. Other people live in the light part. I ran up to the dark, dangerous part today because I didn’t like how my family acts around their friends and how they treat me different.

Well, I’m in the dangerous part now. I see a dirty pond, full of shadows and rotting leaves, and a sudden cliff hidden behind trees and wet bushes, and also a big storm coming towards me. So I run so the tornado or storm doesn’t take me off my feet. I hide in a burnt out tree that has been hit by lightning. It’s dark in the tree, but it’s a different kind of dark, not a scary dark but a warm dark. I tell myself that my family might be worried about me and they might be looking for me. So, I leave this dark, this tree, and I go home and when I go home, everybody hangs around me like I’ve been gone for a week. So, I tell my mother why I ran away and she tells me that she didn’t know how I felt. She tells me that she is sorry and that everything will be back to normal, only better.

Justin shows that he is setting his entry in the painting. For me, though, it is more important to see how Justin finds a way to express his own sentiments in his writing by engaging with this painting in order to write. When Justin shares his piece with the class, we discover that he has thoughts about the light and the dark, and that he has poetic leanings toward metaphor. We see that he tries to express what a boy feels like who wants everything to stay safe, and what it is like when that safety is threatened. We see that by writing within the painting, Justin is able to illustrate how a boy who is treated differently feels, and how that boy finds a way to reach out to his family. We feel a little closer to Justin, and he seems to feel closer to us and to the class. When he shares his piece, another boy in the class who also lives in a shelter says that he will run away too in his piece, and he can come upon Justin in the hollow tree, and they can be safe in the warm dark together. They will never actually leave the painting, unless it is to visit another one. They go off together to find another painting to inhabit.

Writing as an Aesthetic Experience—Coming to Know

The writing of these children shows what happens when literacy is an aesthetic experience. When he starts with looking, Justin writes willingly and purposefully. He reminds me that we do so much writing that starts with reading, and we need to continue to look for alternative entry points for writing. There is also something about the aesthetic experience that is a sympathetic one. We have to look sympathetically in order to look closely. Dewey (1916) writes that “sympathy as a desirable quality is something more than mere feeling; it is a cultivated imagination for what men have in common and a rebellion at whatever unnecessarily divides them” (p. 121). Starting with looking means that we are paying attention to powers of observation and imagination. We are cultivating sympathy, as Carrie’s poems demonstrate so artfully. We are also weaving familiarity with forms of representation other than the written one into literacy, so that we are rising to the task Eisner (1994) sets us, that education “ought to enable the young to learn how to access the meanings that have been created through many forms of representation” (p. 19).

Reflecting on September 11

There is another thing that happens when we engage students with the visual arts, something that I didn’t know before September 11. Having a literate relationship with the arts helps us come together in what Maxine Greene (2000a) calls ways that are humane. In the months after September 11, in schools downtown, the air was full of burning, the streets were full of guns, teachers were aching and anxious, and children were uncertain. I want so much for you to understand what it was like then in New York City, so you can understand how tremendously important it is that we are living and writing in a world with art. The poet William Stafford (1996) asks, “What can a person do to help bring back the world?” (p. 96). Art is a means of engaging with the world, and literacy is a means of expressing this engagement so that we are less alone.

Television visualized that day for many people—the planes, the fires, the grief and shock. But television didn’t move us forward. It didn’t help children or teachers. Television seemed to keep us in that day. The buildings fell and fell. The schools
were evacuated. The children and teachers found their ways to safety. But we went back, right away, even though the televisions didn’t show that. The air was full of smoke, a gray haze that hurt your throat bitterly, that burned the eyes and smelled, sometimes, of things unimaginable. There were machine guns. There were bomb scares. There were anthrax scares. There was sudden homelessness, and sudden poverty. It was such an un-childlike environment. It was very frightening for a very long time.

Maxine Greene (2000b) writes that “the arts are on the margins of most of our lives, the margin being the place for those feelings and intuitions that daily life doesn’t have a place for and mostly seems to suppress” (p. 293). In downtown Manhattan, many of us felt as if the children lived, and we worked, in the margins. We needed to illuminate those margins to express the anxieties and longings that were suppressed in the daily work of breathing the air downtown, of making ourselves go down into the subway, of looking through the air where the buildings had been. Writing poetry gave us purpose. Looking at paintings gave vision to that purpose. I looked with some children at Picasso’s Guernica, a painting of another bombing, another people who lost control of their own storyline. We looked in the painting at the women carrying children through the rubble, at the way the human bodies were distorted in pain, at the male figure who was dismembered and killed, but still held up a closed fist in an expression of defiance, and at the light that spread over the figures.

I shared with the students how Picasso created this painting as a way to memorialize the deaths of the civilian population of the Basque town of Guernica. Guernica was deliberately bombed by the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War to test the notion of Blitzkrieg, or total warfare, as a way to annihilate the spirit of the enemy and force them to submit. Many students talked about how one of the images that has stayed with us is the light shed by fire fighters who remained inside the stairways in the World Trade Centers. Somehow that light came to mean something important to us, as Picasso’s bright light bulb seems to illuminate more than a ghastly scene of human fear. It seems to suggest the possibility of human endeavor and hope.

There is a way in which thinking through the arts leads us not to think of vengeance, but of the glimmering possibilities of courage and justice in a darkened world. I asked some sixth graders who had been looking with me at Picasso’s painting how it seemed to relate to their experiences of September 11, and we worked on writing a poem together. They wrote down or called out phrases or words, and we put them on chart paper, and then I showed them how to relate their ideas back to the painting and to break the poem into stanzas. This kind of interactive writing lets us help the children see their words as poetry (Fagin, 2000). Figure 4 is the poem that we wrote together in a sixth-grade classroom downtown, smelling through our windows the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If Picasso Were Here, on September 11</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a poem inspired by Guernica, 1937)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Picasso were here,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>would he put the planes in his painting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushing into the buildings like play-dough,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so silent on the television,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>silent as the buildings falling</td>
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<tr>
<td>like tinker-toys or Lego blocks on those tiny screens,</td>
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<tr>
<td>But we felt them like an earthquake under us.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The school rocked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and the air turned gray</td>
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<tr>
<td>and we didn’t know which way to run.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Picasso were here,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>would he put the firemen in,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>holding up their lights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>like moonbeams in the dark hallways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like the light in his painting,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that light bulb blazing with hope,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with truth and courage in a darkened world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would he paint the people jumping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from the high windows?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or the people stepping over them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or the people on fire?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or would he just show the city watching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and the children crying,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and that would be enough?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And does that light keep burning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>even though they lost that Civil War in Spain,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the one he painted the painting about,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and we are, (we think), dropping bombs right now,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>someplace in Afghanistan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And if it is burning, can we see it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because we don’t feel safe anymore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and we need someone to paint that light.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Class poem written shortly after September 11
experiences of others. When I think about what matters in literacy, I think about this work, and how these children did this work in the literacy classroom by engaging with the art forms of painting and poetry. When we forge a literate relationship with the arts, or an artistic relationship with literacy, we create the possibility of solace and strength and continued creativity. Sometimes as teachers, we seem to have so many barriers around us. So many tests that determine children’s placement. So much time that is controlled. Such limited access to truly wonderful resources. So much that is confusing in the world around us. And yet, of course, we still teach what matters to us. We can still manipulate and negotiate curricula. We can create our own frameworks for the curricula we inherit. We can reflect on the experiences our children have in school and how we can transform these into aesthetic experiences. Experiences that matter. Experiences that last. We can weave these into aesthetic experiences. Experiences that last. We can weave opportunities to engage with the visual arts and to write from the arts into writing workshop and into other curricula. We can think of schooling as a place where we open spaces of the imagination.

**The Possibilities of the Aesthetic Response**

These children—some of them relocated from their homes, many without electricity or water or phones, as they were to remain for weeks and even months to come—were not just shocked, but displaced by the violence that had unfolded around them. They write “If Picasso were here,” words that express such a sense of the precarious, such longing not to be alone. Poetry and painting became places where they could examine that nexus of fear and longing and desire, where they could imagine some experience of transcendence. Picasso is here when they write him into their poem. It is an inextricable tangle of artist, painting, and child. Looking at Picasso’s painting helped us to think about how artists express loss, suffering, fear, and the darkness of destruction as well as the light of hope. It helped us to see that there are many ways to feel a sense of community, many ways to express outrage that do not betoken the death of another. Developing a relationship with this one painting helped us to write, and it helped us to be in the world.

In writing this poem, these sixth-grade students engaged with a present calamity, interrupted a narrative of vengeance that was becoming universal, and related their own experiences to the imagined experiences of others. When I think about what matters in literacy, I think about this work, and how these children did this work in the literacy classroom by engaging with the art forms of painting and poetry. When we forge a literate relationship with the arts, or an artistic relationship with literacy, we create the possibility of solace and strength and continued creativity. Sometimes as teachers, we seem to have so many barriers around us. So many tests that determine children’s placement. So much time that is controlled. Such limited access to truly wonderful resources. So much that is confusing in the world around us. And yet, of course, we still teach what matters to us. We can still manipulate and negotiate curricula. We can create our own frameworks for the curricula we inherit. We can reflect on the experiences our children have in school and how we can transform these into aesthetic experiences. Experiences that matter. Experiences that last. We can weave opportunities to engage with the visual arts and to write from the arts into writing workshop and into other curricula. We can think of schooling as a place where we open spaces of the imagination.

**References**


**Web sites with Picasso images:**

- www.moma.org (The Museum of Modern Art, New York)
- www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/picasso_pablo.html (links to museum pages)
- www.art.com (sells inexpensive posters online; includes many Picasso images of women)

**Author Biography**

**Mary Ehrenworth** is a Literacy Staff Developer with the New York City Public Schools. Her book, *Looking To Write* (Heinemann 2003) shows ways to engage children with writing through the arts.