

April 2018

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Recommended Citation

Darke, Kelly (2018) "Daily Visual Journal for Improved Literacy," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 50: Iss. 3, Article 8.

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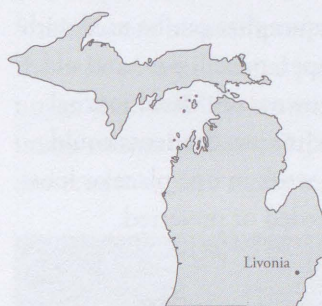
Daily Visual Journal for Improved Literacy

by Kelly Darke

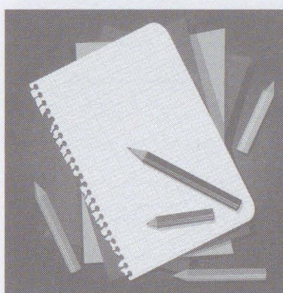
Daily visual journal entries entail creating a small piece of visual art and then reflecting, through writing, on the image and the process. As an artist and art therapist, I have been creating daily visual journal entries for years as a way to process my feelings as well as explore visual ideas and art techniques. I originally began this process as a way to create a habit of making art after I had many months of not creating my art and I realized I needed a simple, structured way to create the habit of creating. Many other artists keep visual journals, however I felt that written self-reflection was an important addition to the process. In addition to the possible therapeutic and artistic benefits, the Arts Education Partnership, in a study of the benefits of various art forms, argues that, "Visual arts improve content and organization of writing; promote sophisticated reading skills and interpretation of text, reasoning about scientific images and reading readiness" (Henry, 2002, Expanding the Mind section, para. 5). In addition, daily visual journals are an opportunity to spend time engaged in writing about a topic in which students have a vested interest. While time spent writing, alone, does not conclusively lead to stronger writing skills (Graham & Perin, 2007), it is certainly hard to imagine that students would become better writers in the absence of time spent writing.

According to Ben Tilley, "Integrating arts and literacy enriches students' learning beyond test scores. It also boosts students' confidence as writers" (As cited in Barnett, 2013, The Arts and Two C's section, para. 1). In addition, Barnett writes that "arts activities can deepen students' critical thinking abilities. The arts help children comprehend relationships, nuances, and how problems can have multiple solutions" (2013, The Arts and Two C's section, para. 3). Accordingly, through the practice of creating a daily visual journal—creating visual images, noticing, and reflecting—it is possible to connect our visual and critical thinking.

The practice of creating daily visual journal entries can be integrated into the classroom, if not daily then perhaps weekly, as a way for students to reflect on



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themselves and their week at school. This activity can be adapted for use with students in various subject areas to enhance the curriculum. Teachers can include visual journaling at the end of a lesson or unit, as a way to allow students to reflect through visual art on the topic of study, or at the end of a week to reflect on their learning in general. Students can be given a set amount of time at the end of the day, or week, and art materials as simple as a pencil and paper and allowed to freely express their thoughts about a topic. For example, at the end of a lesson the teacher could ask students to doodle for a few minutes while considering the lesson taught. Then, ask the students to write about the process of doodling: Was it relaxing? Does it remind you of the lesson? What thoughts came up while doodling? Teachers could use this process as a way to transition through lessons or simply as a means of relaxation and stress reduction for the students. Through this process of personal expression and reflection, students are encouraged to slow down and notice their thoughts and feelings during the process of creating as well as when the art is completed. Self-reflection and choice in writing are also linked to improved writing outcomes (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998), providing additional literacy benefits.

To get your students started with a daily visual journal, I have included three techniques that can be used with very few supplies, such as paper, pencil, pen, and old magazines. Examples of my own daily visual journal pieces are shown for each technique. Students could use a sketchbook to keep all work in one place or loose paper if different sizes are needed or preferred.

Technique 1: Doodle

Supplies

1. Base paper
2. Pencil or pen

Process

Doodling (see Figures 1-3) is simply drawing lines and shapes without a preconceived final image. Teachers of all grades could use this technique with their students by asking them to think about the current lesson; then, the teacher sets a timer for a few minutes and asks the students to doodle until the timer sounds. Once complete, the teacher asks the students to turn their paper over and complete the self-reflection (see directions below). Teachers can use a prompt that is more specific to the current lesson or simply allow for the abstract free expression that comes with doodling, for example, "Try filling your page by drawing a line with a pen or pencil, then connect another line to the first but going in a different direction. Continue this over and over until you are satisfied." Alternatively, students could be prompted to "start with a triangle; connect another triangle to the first. Then continue connecting triangles, either of the same size or all different sizes, until you fill the page or create an interesting design. There are endless ways to doodle, from straight lines criss-crossing each other to a collection of joined circles meandering across the page—just put your pencil to paper and begin."

Self Reflection

There are many possible ways for students to reflect. You might ask them to write about what kind of doodle they created, whether they created spontaneously or planned and organized their design, what the process was like, how it felt while creating, and what the final image means to them.

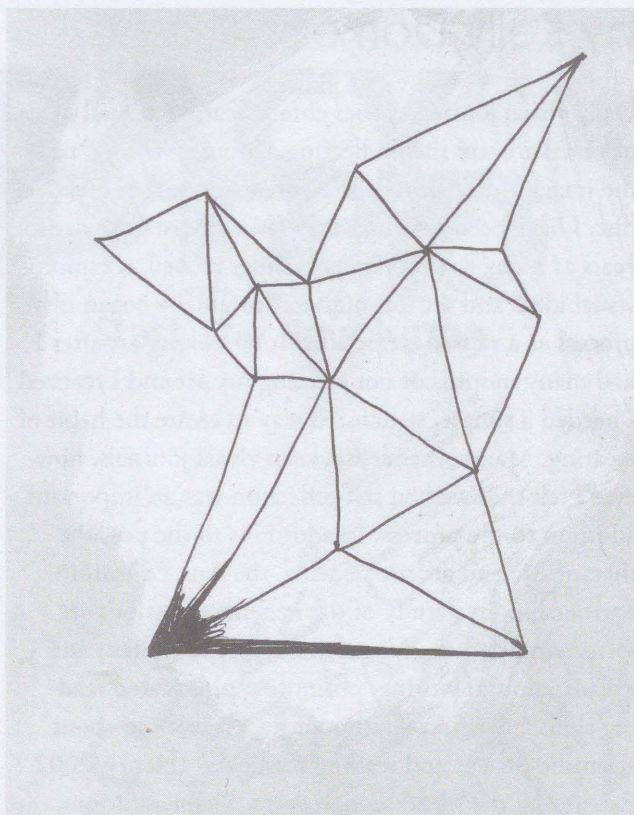


Figure 1. Abstract pencil drawing on paper.



Figure 2. Abstract pencil drawing on paper.

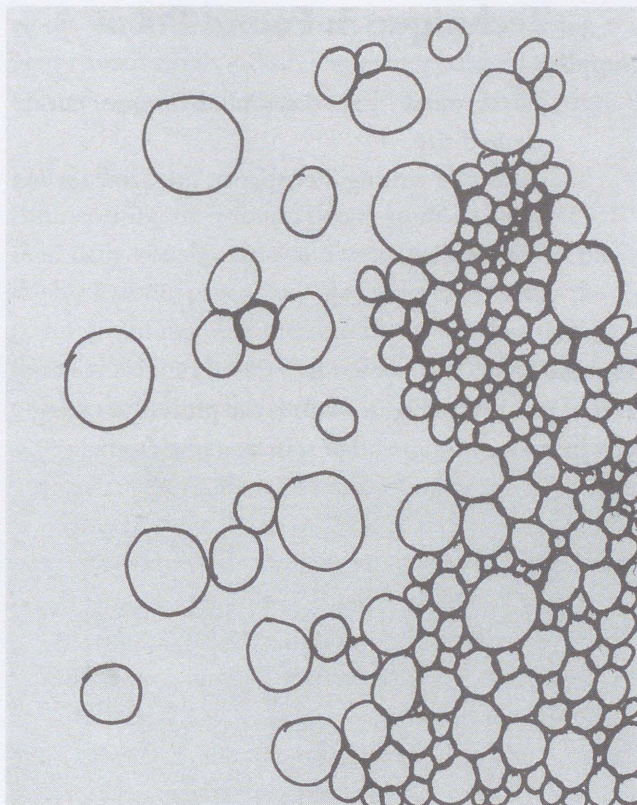


Figure 3. Abstract pencil drawing on paper.

Technique 2: Collage

Supplies

1. Background - your sketchbook or paper cut to desired size
2. Magazine images
3. Glue stick
4. Scissors

Process

Collage (see Figures 4-6) is the process of taking pre-existing elements, such as magazine images, paper, fabric, and photographs, and assembling them into a new image. You can create an abstract design using different magazine images and layering them in unexpected ways, or you can create a still life using everyday images from magazines to create a new story. When using this technique as part of a daily visual journal, teachers may ask students to create a collage representing the current lesson or a collage to express how their week at school has progressed. On the back of the collage, students respond through writing to the self-reflection prompt.

Self Reflection

Students can be prompted to describe their collage on the back of their journal page, comment on the type of image (e.g., still life, abstract), or talk about what the image means to them. Depending on the time frame and students, they may respond to one or all prompts.



Figure 4. Magazine image collage with door and window.



Figure 5. Magazine image collage with leaves and cloud.



Figure 6. Magazine image collage with bed, flowers, book, and mug.

Technique 3: Found Poem

Supplies

1. Background - your sketchbook or paper cut to desired size
2. Source of writing: newspaper, magazine, or old book
3. Glue stick
4. Markers

Process

Found poetry (see Figures 7-9) is the process of taking text from one or more other sources and rearranging it into poetry. To create a found poem, students begin with looking through various sources of writing, such as newspapers, old books, or magazines. Teachers then ask the students to "choose words within that writing that you are inspired by, or words that reflect the current lesson, and then rearrange them for your own poem. There are two simple ways to create your poem: you can cut out words, rearrange them into your poem, and glue them down; or you could use markers to color over

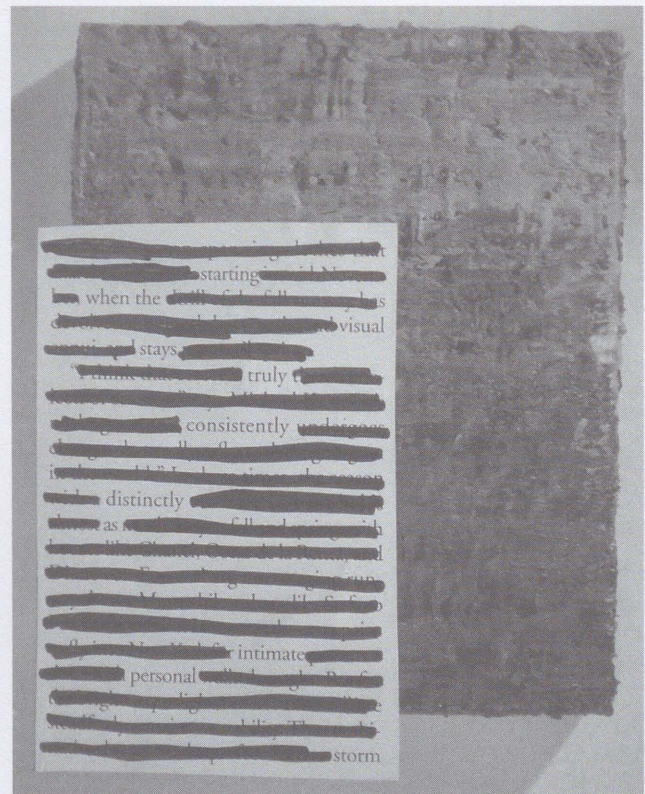


Figure 7. Magazine image with words and ink.

all the words that are not part of your poem, leaving your chosen words visible." Students could then write a self-reflection on the back of their visual journal page.

Self Reflection

After creating their found poem, students add it to their daily visual journal and write their reflection on the back of the page. They may write about what the poem means or could mean to them, whether they found words or phrases that reflect their current mood, or how they chose their words.



Figure 8. Magazine image with words, with marker, and ink.

Summary

Integrating some form of a daily visual journal into the classroom can be a great way for students to reflect on the current lesson or reflect on how they feel about the school week. Teachers can use this visual journaling idea to ask students to reflect on very specific prompts or simply as a way to unwind at the end of the day. Whichever approach is used, a daily visual journal is a simple, inexpensive way to enhance any curriculum, and infuse it with art and literacy.

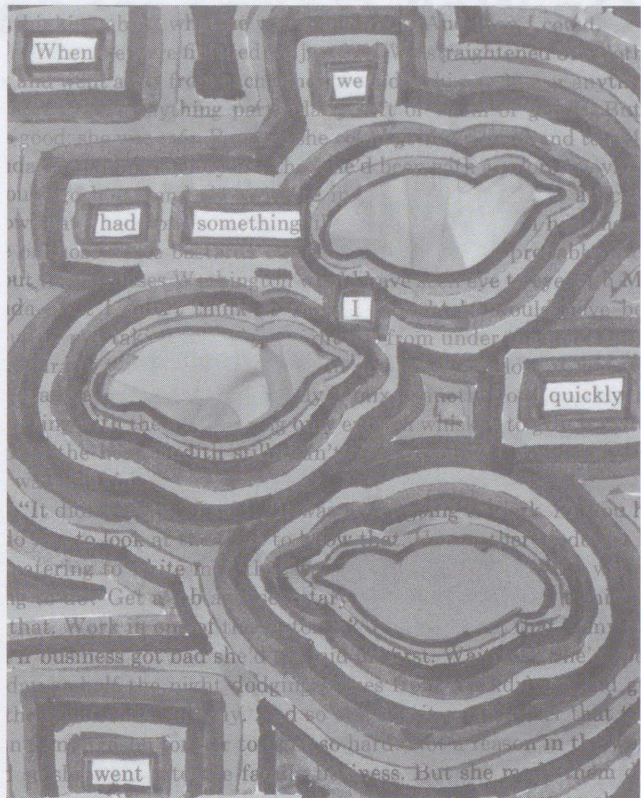


Figure 9. Magazine image with words and marker.

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Author Biography

Kelly Darke is a registered art therapist, professional artist, and certified K-12 fine art teacher. She owns and works at Mindful Art Center, an art studio in Livonia, MI offering art therapy services and art instruction for adolescents and adults, as well as monthly art exhibits featuring local artists. She can be reached at Kelly@kellydarke.com.