

DOORWAYS: OPENING OUR VOICES IN THE CLASSROOM

Darcy Hicks
Westport, CT, USA

ABSTRACT:

As a teacher, an artist and writer, I have spent much of my life committed to the idea that developing our voices is crucial to communicating what we have to share. For the last five years I have participated in a partnership between the Yale British Art Center and the New Haven public schools, taking part in the development of a teaching approach which addresses how the creative process happens (Levenson and Hicks, 2015). The power of our individual voices - how we communicate in a way that shows who we are - is an essential part of writing. However, in the American public school setting, the time spent on the creative process, which helps to develop the voices of developing writers, has been nudged aside by standardized curriculum and testing, and both students and their teachers have suffered as a result. We must take a hard look at our classrooms, and at how much time is spent on these crucial steps in the creative process. After teaching in both the regular classroom and in the art room at a public school, as well as coaching teachers across the grades, I know that we can make room for every student's voice.

"Doorways" is the learning approach I developed in order to bring structure to the valuable steps in the creative process - steps which teachers find challenging to fit into the school day, especially during writing time. I use this approach to bring my own voice into the classroom, and to invite students to do the same. The Doorways approach begins with sensory experiences, stimulating the mind so that we can explore what we have to say. It then relies on making art to explore our topics, allowing us to develop our ideas and make decisions about how to express ourselves. The result is writing which emerges from individually selected topics, improved vocabulary, increased description and detailed language, and clear story structures. In addition, it engages students in the writing process on their own terms, creating enthusiasm and confidence even in previously disengaged writers. The sharing of this type of personal writing creates a trusting, empathetic environment and involves students in their own learning and self-discovery.

KEYWORDS:

Doorways; voice; writing; art; Visual Literacy; Artist-Writer's Workshop; self-expression; education; classroom; creative; process; learning; topics; research; self-discovery; poetry; senses; sensory; vocabulary; skills; visual; sound; touch; smell; text

BODY:**Introduction**

Across America, most school curriculae is focused on skills, leaving very little time to explore when and why we might use them. I have often wondered: what is the use of learning how to write well if we don't spend the time exploring who we are and what we have to express? Of course, I do believe in the importance of mastering skills. As an artist, I know how to stretch a canvas and mix oil paints. As a writer, I learned grammar and spelling, and how to form a clear sentence and make paragraphs. These skills are invaluable to me as an artist and a writer. But I wouldn't do either if I didn't know who I was, and how to share my ideas in a way that is my own: if I didn't know my voice. As a teacher, before I developed the Doorways approach, my knowledge of the creative process nudged at my conscience. With little time for observation, reflection, and sharing, I jumped right into the teaching of writing skills, giving my students writing prompts so they would have a topic. But I know of course that writers, like artists, don't have their topics handed to them. They create because they have something to say, and they have found a way to say it. By ignoring these crucial steps in the creative process, I felt that I was cheating my students of the thing that would make them lifelong writers and artists. I was also cheating myself of a happy, satisfying job: as the time for the creative process became more rare, my enjoyment of teaching went with it. It is for this reason that I have dedicated my career to helping students and their teachers in the search for voice.

Finding Our Topics

I began teaching third grade in 1994. Every year, there were always a few students who would come to class ready to talk, draw, sing, or write - their ideas waiting to travel from their brains to their arms, mouths and fingers and onto the page. But for many other students, this looked like an unattainable, magical state of being. Their blank pages stared back at them, and my efforts to draw them out often met with frustration on both of our parts as they tried to guess what I wanted them to say. For much of the day I was required to teach them standardized skills, and the time allotted for this increased as standardized testing became a bigger part of the picture in the American public schools. The curriculum provided standardized writing "prompts," or the beginning of stories, so that students could all write starting from the same idea (i.e. "I was walking in the woods and saw that there was a hole in the trunk of a tree. As I approached, I could not believe what I saw..."). My students rarely connected on a personal level to these prompts, as they weren't their real-life experiences. I believed then, as I do now, that writing is best when the topic is personal to the writer. But with so little time for writing as it was, I didn't know how I could take more time to learn about their interests, their stories, and their ideas.

In addition to being a teacher, I am also an artist. In the evenings and on weekends, I painted at home. As I worked, I began paying attention to what inspired me to make a painting, and what process I went through to get to the finished product. There was so much I did before ever putting the paintbrush to the canvas. I couldn't imagine just being handed a paintbrush and being asked to create something without having spent time reflecting, planning, and often writing in my journal. As I thought about how I was teaching writing to my students, I knew that I was asking them to do just this: jump in and create something without any real thought. We were starting the creative process in the middle, forgetting about the first few links which explore who we are as expressive beings. Not only was this ineffective in teaching students to become writers, but it was affecting my enjoyment of my job. I could not stop thinking that I needed to find a way to love my role as a teacher, so that my students could love learning. This meant finding the buried chain of creative steps that lead to the need for the skills I was teaching.

Mary Oliver, in an interview with Krista Tippet, replied to a question about finding topics for her poetry: "With the willingness and wish to communicate, very often things very slippery do come in...attention is the beginning of devotion." Mary Oliver has spent much of her life outside, looking very closely at nature. In "The Summer Day," she captures the result of paying attention, and even describes that very habit in that same poem when she writes: "I do know how to pay attention."

If paying attention is the answer to finding our topics, how can teachers nurture it? It would be wonderful to spend hours outdoors with our students, looking carefully at grasshoppers. But we all know that is unrealistic, from the perspectives of time and accessibility. So, we are faced with the challenge of structuring time, and an environment in the confines of our classrooms, somehow enabling topic exploration through sensory experience.

Art and Research in the Teaching of Writing

As a beginning third grade teacher in 1994, I was lucky to find myself at a school with Dr. Karen Ernst DaSilva as the art teacher, who had just written Picturing Learning, a book about Artist-Writer's Workshop, a process that connects picture-making and writing. In art class, Dr. Ernst DaSilva gave the students the time and the freedom to express themselves for forty-five minutes with a variety of art materials and choice of topic. Artist-Writer's Workshop involved discussing art works, making choices about our own art works, writing about our work, and sharing with the class. This ability to make individual choices, and the time they had for reflection and sharing, gave the students the chance to find their creative voices. Ernst DaSilva writes, "By asking students to look, notice, and think about what they see, we can empower students to depend on their own vision," (Ernst, 1994).

Dr. Ernst DaSilva asked the children to write about their art during the last five or ten minutes of the art period, and we classroom teachers could not help but notice how much better this writing was than in our classrooms, where we gave them far more instruction and much more time. As a result, many classroom teachers - myself included - began to include picture-making into the writing process in our classrooms. In doing so we all saw many young writers who had previously struggled begin to flourish. With the art room as the model of what seemed to work for our children and their creative, authentic voices, we began to bring art supplies into our classrooms, asking our students to draw and paint their stories and ideas before writing. Although the art-making cut into the writing time, the writing improved and the volume was the same, or even longer than it had been for many students without the step of making a picture. Their art served as a guide for elaboration, details, and it grounded the students by giving them a visual of what they were trying to say.

As a teacher, I was thrilled to have a window into my students' thinking, and found that I was learning more about my students than ever. This helped me to be a better teacher for them and to individualize my approach to their writing process. Because the writing spoke for itself, we as teachers were supported not only by Dr. Ernst DaSilva, but by our principal, Angela Wormser-Reid, who believed in the idea that teachers are researchers. In fact, we were encouraged to have a research question going into the year - something to investigate as we taught. Mine was how to balance my belief in choice of writing topics with the confines of time.

The Battle Between Choice and Time in the Classroom

As I began giving my students choice in the classroom, I discovered that many students did not know what to do with this freedom. Many were frozen in the face of a blank page, and had relied on the writing prompts which allowed them to skip the daunting step of thinking about what to write, even if they hadn't enjoyed the process. Thus in an effort to give students the ability to choose their own topics, I experienced a frustrating year of trying to balance my belief in choice and the fact that many of my students did not know how to make a choice. Below is an excerpt from my journal after a typical writing lesson, which demonstrates my dilemma:

"I am sitting on the rug with my third graders after reading Come On, Rain, by Karen Hesse. I chose the book because of its rich sensory vocabulary, and because I know it is a shared experience: we have all been in the rain. I am walking the line, or struggling with the "innate tension," as my colleague Karen Ernst DaSilva wrote in Picturing Learning, between choice and structure with my students. I want them to choose writing topics from their own experiences and understanding, but I also know they need inspiration and guidance.

After reading and discussing the book, we share our experiences of being outside in the rain. As always, there is a sharp division between the kids who are making connections between the book and their own lives, and those who seem more detached. I remind them that they can draw a picture before making words, and as usual that helps a larger group of them feel ready to get started. I start by taking a "Status-of-the-Class," calling on the students as they raise their hands, indicating they are ready to tell me their plans for writing. As I call on them, they share their ideas and I guide them in a different direction only when I see they are making a choice that will not lead to the kind of writing I know they are capable of:

"When it was raining at the playground and my mom let us keep using the slide! We got our pants all wet!" (me: Sounds like a great story! Get started!)

“When it rains at the bus stop my dad takes me in the car and we listen to the radio.” (me: That’s a special time, and a great thing to get on paper).

“Can I write about a crazy storm that blows me all over the world?” (me: Yes, of course).

“Can I write about Groudon? He was in a storm.” (Who is Groudon? I ask). “He’s from Pokemon!” (me: Hm. I’d be more interested if the story was about you. You can make it up, but no Pokemon characters).

We keep going, and after a few minutes most of the students are spread around the room, in various states of starting their work: getting art supplies from the shelf, drawing, or writing. But still on the rug, I am faced with a familiar sight: a small handful of kids (in this case, three) who haven’t raised their hands and don’t look like they are about to. They sit cross-legged, in no hurry to get started. I am aware of the clock and the fact that these kids in particular need as much time as possible to get something on paper. I gather them near me, to begin the tough, tooth-pulling task of getting these kids off the rug and writing - hopefully soon - so we don’t waste our short writing time trying to think of ideas.

I prompt them with, “Did you ever get caught in the rain?” Silence. “How about, did you ever wish you could go outside when it was raining but you couldn’t?” Two hands raised. Both kids remember times when they were disappointed to miss recess because of the rain, and after discussing what they did instead, they went off to draw and write. The last girl looked up at me with bored eyes. This was not a student who seemed to be in touch with her ideas.

Desperately, hearing the noise level in the room increase and seeing the need for me to return to a position of authority among the rest of the class, I turned to her and blurted, “What if I told you you could write about anything at all today?” Her eyes changed, but not in the way I’d hoped. She looked fearful, and shook her head no. Too much, I thought. She needs structure, not a free-for-all. “Maybe rain isn’t a good topic for you. What is your favorite weather?” I asked.

“Sunny,” she replied simply.

“Okay!” I said, still knowing we had a way to go before she would settle on a moment. “What do you do when it’s sunny?”

“I dunno,” she said. “Play, I guess.”

On and on this went, until she settled on drawing a picture of a time she went to a friend’s house and they played on the swing set. Finally. But by now, we are halfway through writing time. My goal to get everyone writing without a stale, corporate-generated prompt was fulfilled, but with a price: my other goal, to conference with three kids so I could rotate through the class every two weeks was not going to happen. Instead, I had time to conference with only one, and then did a room sweep, making quick observational notes on as many of the kids’ as I could. In the name of sticking to my conviction that writers need choice, I lost control of the time and the ability to really connect with my students while they were writing.”

As a result of this lesson, I had to ask myself, not for the first time, if my conviction to helping students learn to find their own writing topics was a losing battle. Maybe some kids have that devotion to which Mary Oliver refers, and others simply do not. Maybe creativity, or the ability to at least choose your topic for creative output, can’t be taught - at least not in a traditional classroom setting. The author Neil Gaiman writes, *“You get ideas from daydreaming. You get ideas from being bored. You get ideas all the time. The only difference between writers and other people is we notice when we’re doing it.”* Most teachers I know will react to this quote the way I did: how on earth do we provide time for daydreaming in our busy classroom **schedules? My research question about balancing choice with time was leaving me frustrated.**

Problem-Finding: Researching with my Students

Luckily, around that time I began reading Donald Graves' book, Bring Life into Learning. In it, he writes about the lack of attention to the very important work of "problem-finding," pointing out how much educators can learn from artists such as Henry Moore and Georgia O'Keeffe about the importance of helping students to "recognize a problem to be solved or an idea to be expressed." He continues, "When the learner finds the problem, it is the learner as artist/scientist/inventor who can evaluate whether the problem has been solved or not." This resonated with me as an artist, and as a teacher who wanted to leave my students with more than just the skills of getting words on paper. I wanted to leave them with the desire to write, and the ability to recognize not only their topics but whether they had successfully communicated with others.

I, for one, had already found my problem to solve: How do I teach my students how to find their own topics, or as Graves would say, to problem-find? I continued to look toward established writers and artists for guidance, but I also looked to my students in order to explore the practical execution of these ideas.

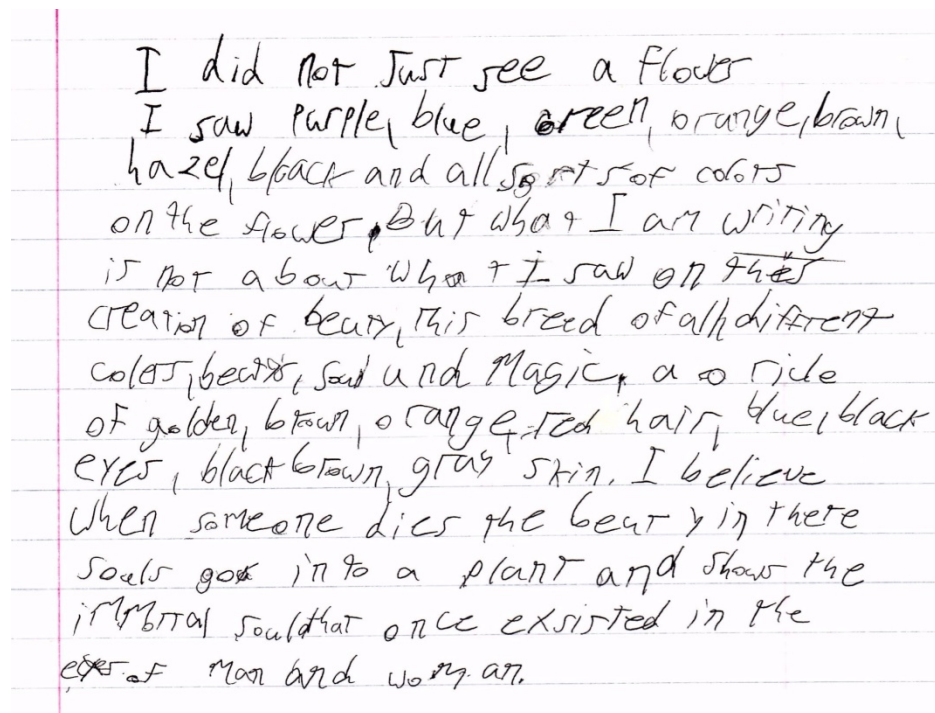


Figure 1: Christopher, grade 3, after drawing a flower I had on my desk.

Christopher was a devoted writer. Like many of his classmates, he was happy to be free of prompts. Through his writing, I knew that he was noticing the world, finding inspiration and recognizing what he needed to write about. His pieces had his voice, and it was a confident voice. I decided to do what Mary Oliver and Neil Gaiman and so many other artists and writers encourage us to do: pay attention. What were kids like Christopher doing that could teach me to teach the others? I began asking Christopher - and other students like him - a lot of questions. "How did you get your idea?" "What were you thinking before you started this piece?" "Did you know what you were going to make before you started? How did it change as you went through the process?"

I realized right off the bat that I had to follow my questions with, "And don't say, 'From my head!' Think back!" Sometimes this took patience for both me and my students. But their answers helped me to see that the curriculum, which focuses on skills, starts the writing process at a later stage of the actual creative process. Often there was a labyrinth of thinking and connecting that went into a choice-driven writing piece. One of my students, after writing about her great-grandmother's death, described how she got her idea from

seeing a picture of a pink flamingo in a book, and that reminded her of the time she saw a flamingo with her great grandmother (Hicks, 2001).

As I listened to Caley and many other stories like hers, I began to realize that beginning the writing process with the actual writing was like finding ourselves in a room that was already inside other rooms - and we didn't know how we got there. My job as a teacher-researcher was to go back out, and retrace the way in, through all the doors that led to that final room of skills. As I painted and wrote at home, I continued to engage in a metacognitive approach to my evolving thoughts and stages. How was I getting my ideas? What drove my creative process and what were the steps I took before ever picking up a paintbrush or a pen? I also continued to research what writers and artists said about their processes. The artists and writers cracked open the door, but I realized that the students with whom I worked every day, like Caley, were the ones that could push that door open and allow their classmates -and me - through.

THE DOORWAYS:

The following is a description of some of the Doorways that were opened for me by my students and other artists, and by my own introspection. The key was for me to keep inquiring and observing, following up with as many students as possible, and then build on their process. If a student told me she got an idea from looking at something, I provided as many visuals as possible in the room for further inspiration. I went to museums and paid attention to how various artists were inspired to make art. I took notes on my own process as an artist and as a writer. I asked everyone I knew who created anything, "How did you get your idea? How did you decide what to do with your idea?"

As I paid attention to the answers, I re-created my room to accommodate the ways people got inspired. This turned out to be largely sensory experiences, and the possibilities were endless. Below I describe just four out of dozens of Doorways that I have set up in my classroom.

The Visual Doorway

The creative thinking process is the same, no matter what the medium. I knew that I could learn about how to get ideas about writing from any artist who would share this type of thinking.

Georgia O'Keeffe talked about how she was inspired by colors and shapes, made by the light of the sun on mountains, bones and flowers. (Portrait of an Artist, Laurie Lisle). I shared this information with my third grade students, and we looked at her painting of a Red Poppy to try to see how she saw. This inspired one student, Alexa, to revise a piece she had written about a tiger. As was our practice in Artist-Writer's Workshop, Alexa had already drawn a picture of a tiger and wrote about it (figures 2 and 3). After discussing O'Keeffe's poppy, she took it back out of her portfolio and re-drew the tiger, zooming in to make a close-up, like the poppy (figure 4). As a result, during our writing conference, she realized she needed to take on a much more intimate point of view in the writing. In fact, her perspective changed her whole voice, from third person to first - that of the tiger itself (figure 5). O'Keeffe cracked open the door to one way of finding our topics. And Alexa threw it open, shining a light on the power of art to help us see our topics, and discover our voices.



Figure 2: Alexa's tiger drawing

The tigers big yellow eyes gleam in the sun. The big leaves brush ~~against~~ against his fierce orange face as he hunts the ground looking for his pray. The other small creatures scurry into there homes hoping not to be a tigers meal. The bright sun dims into a night feeling. The big tiger lays down in a pile of leaves and sticks and falls as leep for the long peaceful night.

Figure 3: Alexa's writing about her tiger drawing



Figure 4: Alexa's tiger drawing revised, after looking at Georgia O'Keefe's painting of a poppy

I am the tiger of the rainforest
 I am the tiger whose feet tremble the ground
 when I walk
 I am the tiger whose eyes gleam sharply in
 the sun
 I am the tiger whos fur blows wildly in the
 wind as I hunt the ground searching for
 my pray
 I am the tiger whose leaves brush against
 my fierce orange face as I watch the other
 animals scurry into their homes hoping not
 to be a tigers meal. As I start to slowly
 trudge along I feel very serene so I lay
 my silky body down in the soft leaves and
 sticks / for a long peaceful night.

Figure 5: Alexa's revised writing, in which she changed the voice to first person

It was already common practice in many of the classrooms at our school to have a collection of art reproduction postcards in the room for the kids to study or copy. As part of the Artist-Writer's Workshop approach, we knew this was a great bridge to writing. Although we couldn't leave the room and watch grasshoppers, much less tigers, we could bring those visuals inside and learn to pay attention.

Although the art cards, as we called them, were a valuable tool for students who needed to "see" before writing, not everyone gravitated to the art cards like Alexa did. They had helped many struggling writers, but not all of them. I needed to keep finding the other ways artists and writers get ideas.

The Sound Doorway

I knew that Wassily Kandinsky used his ears, listening to compositions and allowing the sound to translate onto the canvas. In fact, the titles of his paintings (*Composition VII*, *The Yellow Sound*, *Improvisation 28*) serve to show us that for him, sound and vision were inseparable. (Ward 2006). I came across a story about Kandinsky's painting, "The Great Gate of Kiev," which was inspired, as are many of his paintings, by music. In this case, he was inspired by a piano cycle of the same title by Modest Mussorgsky. I showed my students his painting, explaining how artists, writers, sculptors, and scientists get ideas from one another. We listened to Mussorgsky's music as we studied the painting, trying to make correlations between the sounds we heard, and the abstract colors and shapes we saw. The poem, "Evening Concert, Sainte-Chapelle" by John Updike to show how a writer might capture sound:

Evening Concert, Sainte-Chapelle

John Updike, 1932 - 2009

The celebrated windows flamed with light

directly pouring north across the Seine;
we rustled into place. Then violins
vaunting Vivaldi's strident strength, then Brahms,
seemed to suck with their passionate sweetness,
bit by bit, the vigor from the red,
the blazing blue, so that the listening eye
saw suddenly the thick black lines, in shapes
of shield and cross and strut and brace, that held
the holy glowing fantasy together.
The music surged; the glow became a milk,
a whisper to the eye, a glimmer ebbed
until our beating hearts, our violins
were cased in thin but solid sheets of lead.

The wonderful thing about this poem is that it is about music, but it is also so visual. Updike translates music to visual art for us with his words. This made the connection I was looking for.

After discussing Kandinsky's painting, I put on music (Mussorgsky of course), and let my students paint with watercolors before writing. This was the day I began to see the potential for students who had previously been uninspired writers.

The brush glides with the vivid
 colors, withdrawing time. The mass of
 lines dazzles in the ball with the
 swift strokes a science comes upon the
 colors the mist covers them a patter
 out of the mist comes, higher, higher
 Boom colors collide the vivid red dashing
 every where then a array of swirls
 fall, Boom, the echo fades away. A hush
 falls upon the land

Figure 6: Dina, grade 3, describes what happens on the page as she paints to music

Splitting through
 green splatting
 through red
 swirling through orange
 crack of yellow
 these are
 perfect colors,
 around and around
 goes blue sleek
 is brown splishy
 is black chirping
 is purple
 A mix of purple
 and orange is
 dazzling.
 Green and red is
 enlivening. Green
 and blue outstanding.

Figure 7: Alec, grade 3 writes a poem after painting to music

Dina, a hard worker who relied on teachers and writing prompts for topics, seemed on this day to discover a voice I hadn't seen before in her writing. She was in the habit of beginning all of her writing pieces with, "Once upon a time," and then a made up story which lacked any detail or sensory vocabulary. Here, she pulled me right in with, "The paintbrush glides..." (figure 6:) Gone was her formulaic, teacher-pleasing approach and there on the paper was her authentic self. Alec, who suffered from emotional issues and had the disturbing habit of pulling at his own hair, never wrote unless an adult sat with him, prodding him every second. Today, he did this piece on his own, swaying calmly with the music as he painted and wrote a poem (figure 7:). I called his mother and we celebrated over the phone: he had found his doorway. From that day on, I provided earphones for him so he could listen to classical music during writing time.

Science/Observation Doorway

Scientists always made great artists and writers. In fact, Mary Oliver, in her way, was a scientist as she observed nature with such intensity. In "A Summer Day" and in "Moles," among other poems, her perspective is unique precisely because of the amount of scientific understanding she had for her topics. With my art students, we looked at her poems, and at the drawings from the pages of Thomas Edison's journals and his observational notes. We looked at the bird paintings of John James Audobon and wondered if we could notice every detail of something, like he did.

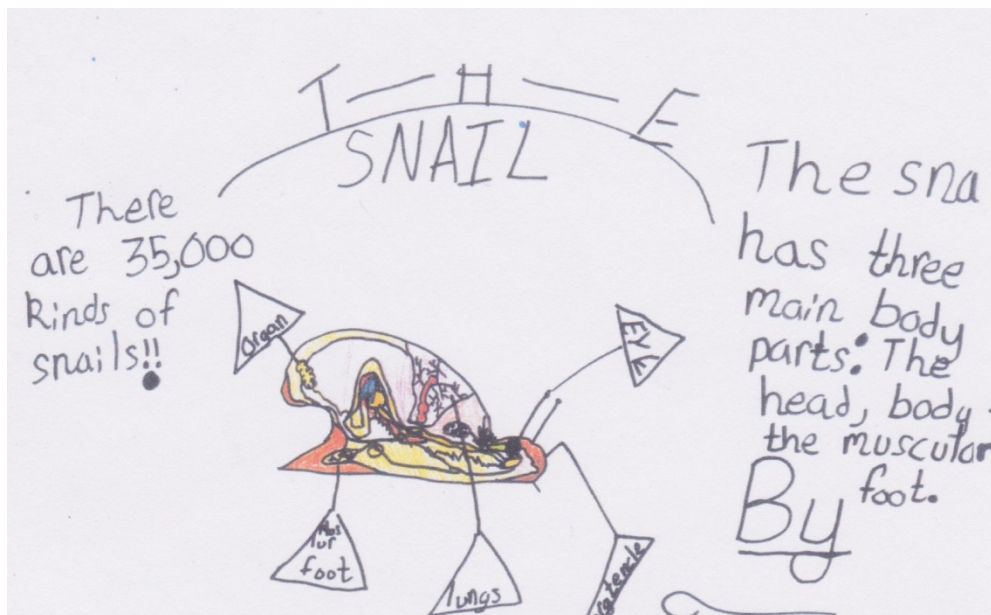


Figure 8: Gianni, grade 3, showing his understanding of a snail

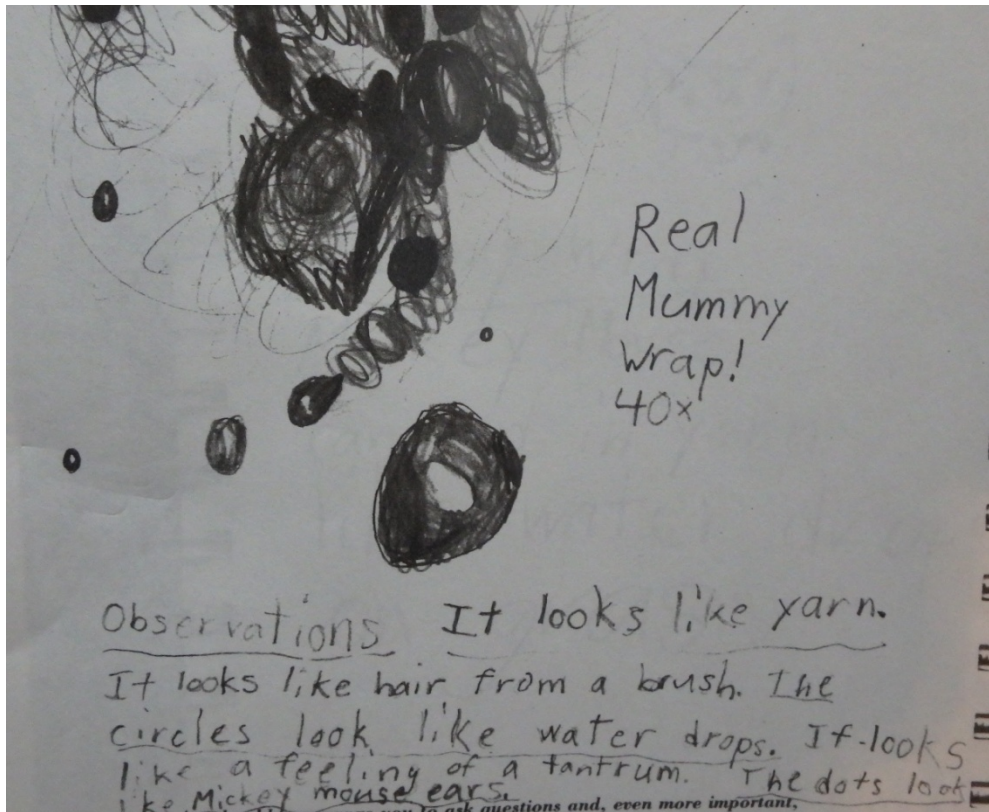


Figure 9: Eli, grade 1. Journal page from his observations through a microscope

This was already the doorway for Gianni, who always wanted to show what he knew about snails (figure 8) and other creatures, and was fascinated with what he saw inside. He, and others, were thrilled when I introduced this Doorway, bringing in shells, feathers, pinecones, even taxidermy owls from the Westport Nature Center. I even put pencil sharpeners, staplers and scissors at the Science Doorway, asking the kids to draw like a scientist, to discover how things work. This allowed teachers to use what they discovered through observation to pursue non-fiction writing.

My son Eli, then six, had just gotten a microscope with slides of various things to inspect. One of the slides had “real mummy wrap!” He drew what he saw in the microscope into his journal (Figure 9). I told him that scientists could write about what they saw like no one else could, and shared Edison’s journal pages with him. His observations (figure 9), especially the abstract sentence, “It looks like a feeling of a tantrum,” became a lesson I shared with my students about similes and personification, and how art helps us to see things in unique ways. I supported his idea with a poem by Debra Chandra called “Suspense,” focusing on the personification of the sunflowers as if they have faces.

Suspense

By Debra Chandra

Wide-eyed

the sunflowers

stare and catch their summer

breath, while I pause, holding basket

and shears.

The students decided, upon hearing this poem, that Debra Chandra must have observed and drawn the sunflowers like a scientist in order to see them this way. The more doorways we explored, the more my student-experts were beginning to think about where artists and writers got their ideas. I knew that my students were engaged in this research with me, and enjoyed investigating and retracing the steps artists and writers took before creating a finished piece. This had a positive effect on their own process, as they began to notice their own ways of getting ideas.

Touch Doorway

As my students' enthusiasm for doorways built in the art room, the devotion to writing became a natural result. Barrett, a boy who was more interested in the loose string on the edge of the carpet or the tiny piece of chalk pastel he found in the corner, was my next challenge. He hadn't reacted to the doorways so far, but I would find his. He was kinesthetic, that was obvious. He always had something in his hands, and usually left behind proof of his presence (smudgy fingerprints; shreds of paper). This must be a doorway, too. I brought in bubble wrap, a container of sand, a bowl of marbles, some cotton, and a feather. I introduced it as the Touch Doorway, and a whole world of previously disenchanting writing students flocked to it. The trick was teaching them to "make the jump" - that is, not to just draw and write about what they touched, but what it reminded them of. This meant to keep from being too literal - to stretch one's thinking so that we could notice our ideas, and develop them in a way that could be shared. Amirah felt the sand, and thought about a time in her life when she felt that sensation. It reminded her of a time she went to the beach at night with her family on the Fourth of July on a windy night, which she painted (figure 10), and then wrote about (figure 11), summoning all the sensory vocabulary I could have hoped for, especially considering her usual dislike of writing due to a learning disability.



Figure 10: Amirah's memory of the Fourth of July

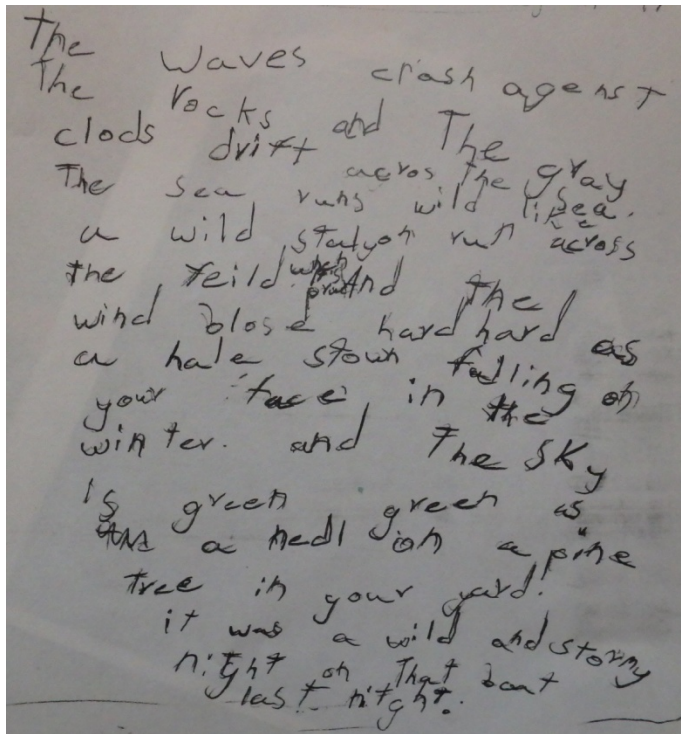


Figure 11: Amirah's writing about her memory

Smell Doorway

As teachers, we need to remind ourselves to share our own work with our students. At home, I had been keeping notes on my process as an artist and trying to retrace my own thinking in order to explain it to my students. I kept an art and writing journal, and often shared it with my students, but our research about topic finding meant I needed to go deeper, and share my creative process with my students the way I was asking them to share theirs with me. How was I getting my ideas?

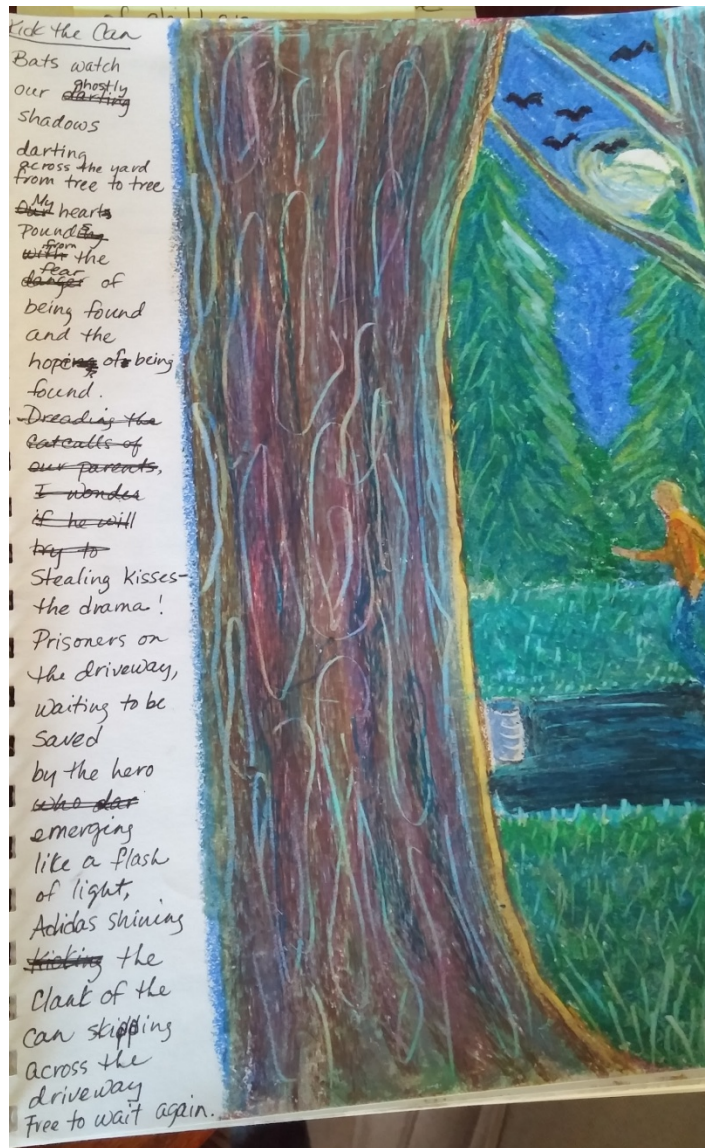


Figure 12: a page from my journal

The more I retraced my creative steps, the more I recognized that I was often inspired by smells. A weekend trip to a used furniture store, for example, caused me to ramble on to my husband in the car ride on the way home how my grandmother had a blue painted piano. I knew that the connection was in the smell of furniture polish, which was a pervasive scent, both at the used furniture store and at my grandmother's house. When I got home, I wrote about her, and on Monday I shared it with my students. Another example I shared was from our class field trip to Devil's Den, a hiking preserve we visited as part of our study on trees. The smell of evergreens and wet earth brought me right back to when I played kick-the-can in the neighborhood backyards as a girl, hiding behind the trees on soft beds of long pine-needles well into the night. This inspired me to capture that memory in a drawing and a poem (figure 11), which I once again shared with my students.

Soon after, the Smell Doorway was born. I read about the close connection between the part of the brain that retains memories and the part that detects smells (Herz and Cupchik, 1995). A collection of empty spice containers became the holders for any smell that might inspire a memory for my students: coffee beans resulted in stories about mothers in the morning; cinnamon inspired stories of cooking and holidays; lemon peel brought out summer memories.

Text Doorway

Georgia Heard's book, Awakening the Heart, became an answer to my need for some sort of structure during these months of Doorways development. In her book, Heard describes "Poetry Study Centers," or places around the room where she stored objects to inspire poetry. These centers were not unlike my Doorways, and furthermore, they were organized in a way that I needed. I borrowed heavily from her experience as a master teacher who had solved the same question for herself that I was currently struggling with alongside my students. She had organized her room around the Poetry Centers and I realized I needed to do the same. I got to work making my art room more committed to the Doorways approach, arranging the Doorways in more accessible areas of the room, clearing space so that the students could visit them whenever they needed inspiration. To give the students more independence, I placed instructional guidelines at each Doorway, reminding them of the the important steps to using them. For example, closing their eyes when they use a sense in order to concentrate on their thinking, and remembering to "make the jump," finding a connection to the experience rather than just drawing a lemon after smelling lemon at the Smell Doorway, for example.

Also, one of Georgia Heard's Poetry Centers became a new Doorway for us: the Text Doorway. Words inspire pictures, and more words. I typed up lines from poems and descriptive picture books, and titles of paintings and cut them into strips of paper. These "phrase strips" were put into a box and students could find one that put a picture in their heads to go and draw before describing the story it sparked. I also put a bin of picture books at the same center, picking the ones with especially descriptive language. When using these books as a Doorway, the instructions were to open to a page and read just a section, as a way of inspiring a picture in one's mind.

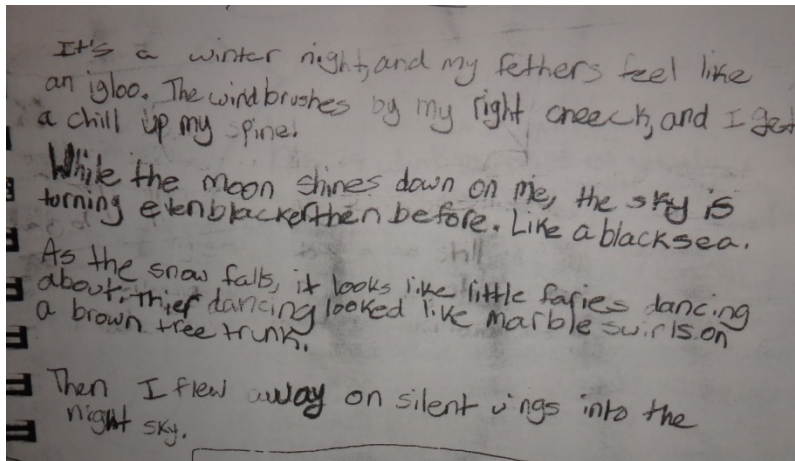


Figure 13: Julia, grade 3 reacts to a picture book by changing the point of view.

One of the books in the Text Doorway was Owl Moon by Jane Yolen. Julia drew the owl in the moonlight, and then wrote this piece (Figure 13) from the perspective of the owl rather than from the little girl's point of view in the book.

Choice Leads to Voice

As the Doorways opened in my classroom, there was a renewed energy from both the students and from myself. I suddenly found myself excited to get to school, to learn more from my students as they showed me their thinking and shared their developing voices.

In the midst of this excitement, Karen Ernst DaSilva, our art teacher and my mentor in this research, took another position in the administration. I was unsettled, not only to lose such such a supportive colleague and friend, but also because I was offered her position as art teacher. I was trying to crack the idea-finding problem for writers, and I wasn't sure what would happen to that research process if I changed positions. However, it was important for our

school culture to maintain the connection between the art room and the regular classrooms so that we could continue to nurture the art and writing connection. As a result, I took the art teacher position. Dr. Ernst DaSilva reminded me that my quest to allow choice in the creative process was going to continue in the art room, and that my questions would follow me to my new position. The creative process, and particularly the quest for inspiration and voice, was still at the base of my question, whether the students were making art or writing. And because of Artist-Writer's Workshop, writing still happened in the art room. Although the balance of art and writing was going to be different (much more art, less time for writing), the process was the same:

1. Find your topic
2. Make an art piece to express the topic
3. Write about the art piece (many of the classroom teachers took these shorter writing pieces and had their students continue them in class, expanding them in their own writing time)

Now in the art room, I had a different curriculum to follow, which focused on materials, artist studies, and the color wheel. But it still put me in the middle of the creative process, focusing solely on skills. As with the writing curriculum, it did not address the idea-finding step, and seemed to assume that the topics would be teacher-driven. I still had a handful of kids in each class who didn't know what to make. Their challenge - and mine - was the same as it had been when I taught writing: the blank page.

The result of switching positions in the midst of the Doorways research had positive implications. Regardless of whether I was teaching writing to my own classroom of third graders, or whether I was teaching art to all different ages, just once a week, the findings were the same: when students are able to engage in a sensory experience at the beginning of the creative process, they can learn to select topics that connect to their lives in some way, thus investing in the production of their creation. This is how their voices emerge.

Beyond Topic Finding: Doorways Findings

Doorways was the answer to my research question about balancing choice and time. Investing time in my lessons to guiding reflective thinking as they experience their senses at the various Doorways had paid off. By November, the Doorways were set up around the room and students spent about five to ten minutes at the start of class exploring their senses, making connections, and discovering their own personal topics for expression.

In addition, I began to see that the Doorways not only addressed the task of topic-finding, but their experiences through sight, sound, touch and smell seemed to improve their writing, particularly because of their increased use of sensory vocabulary. Amirah, before using the Touch Doorway, hadn't used words like "crash," or "drift," much less expressions like "the sea runs wild like a stallion runs across the field." The writing that came from the Doorways experience was more elaborate, detailed, and descriptive.

I also noticed something else: the students were feeling a sense of ownership and confidence in their voices in ways I'd never seen before. Julia, who used the Text Doorway, surprised me not only because of her descriptive writing, but because of the fact that she chose to write from the perspective of the owl, reminding me of Alexa's tiger from when I taught in the regular classroom. I was seeing a pattern in the direction my students were taking: not only were they choosing topics on their own, but they were getting closer - more intimate - with the topics.

In addition, my students were engaging in metacognition. I would often hear them talking about their "process," saying things like, "I usually get my ideas from the Visual Doorway but I'm trying to test out other Doorways lately to stretch myself." Or even, "I'm a kinesthetic learner," or "I have strong olfactory nerves." Who knew that my search to help them find ideas for their writing would result in brain studies? I often asked them, if we had a few minutes before their teachers came to pick them up at the end of art, to write reflections about their writing process at the Doorways. Again, they were my informants in this approach, and there was no end to what I could learn from them.

Most importantly, they were communicating with each other in a way that I hadn't seen before: they were sharing who they were, or who they thought they were becoming, as writers and as people. Through their writing pieces, which were no longer about stale writing prompt ideas, but rather about their actual lives, they were sharing their authentic selves. Their memories, opinions, dreams, imaginations, and reflections all became part of the fabric of the classroom community.

Choice and Time Found a Balance

I remember how panicked I was when I was trying to help that small handful of kids find their writing topics after reading Come On, Rain at the start of this article. It was a common theme for me to be racing against the clock, knowing how much I had to cover before moving on to math or lunch or an all-school meeting. I never felt satisfied in how I had used our writing time. Teaching art held the same challenge: getting through a minilesson, set-up, art time, a few minutes for writing, and cleanup all in 45 minutes before their teacher came to get them.

Somehow, this problem resolved itself when Doorways became a permanent fixture in the creative process. First, the time I'd been spending trying to help them find meaningful writing or art topics was no longer required. They knew where to go, and what to do, and even how to think.

In addition, the students were invested and engaged in the creative process. When the students became part of the problem-finding, they cared about the problem-solving. Jacob Getzels (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi 1976) describes it this way: "...the formulation of a creative problem is the forerunner of a creative solution."

The students were so excited to be a part of my research, to learn about themselves and each other as writers, and to see how they could contribute to the collective invention that became Doorways, that things actually began to move faster than I could keep up! They began to think of their own Doorways, from their own interests. One student, Max, brought in his collection of Sports Illustrated for Kids and asked if we could have a "Sports Doorway." I used it to teach them how to make figures in motion (figure 18), and introduced them to Matisse's dancers and the medium of collage. The same Doorway allowed them to spend a minute or two trying different movements, such as balancing a ball on their heads or jumping rope a few times, as a way to kickstart their thinking. Indeed, the correlation between gross motor skills and language development has long been studied (Piek, Dawson, Smith, Gasson 2008) - but the fact that these discoveries were being naturally explored by my third graders was what made these Doorways work.

Further Research and Applications for Doorways

After nine years of teaching in the classroom, I left to raise my own three children, but remained invested in the continued discovery of how Doorways could work in various educational settings. I wrote about Doorways (Hicks, 2001) and taught after school courses at my art studio, using Doorways to help children create both art and writing. I taught workshops in my own school district as well as others in Connecticut, particularly in Bridgeport which is a much lower income school system than Westport. I wanted to be sure Doorways and the use of art in writing worked in all settings.

In 2010, I met Cyra Levenson, Assistant Curator for Education at the Yale British Art Center in New Haven. Together, along with Judy Cuthbertson and the help of the Child Studies Center at Yale, we developed a way to use the vast resources of the art center in classroom settings. Today, it is called Visual Literacy (Hicks and Levenson, 2015), and is used across all grade levels and schools. The Yale British Art Center runs a bi-weekly consortium for teachers as well as a Summer Institute to support teachers in the adaption of Visual Literacy, and I coach the teachers in their schools.

As a teaching coach at the Yale British Art Center, I was also fortunate to be a part of the effort to discover how to teach the creative process in the classroom. The result of our research, known as the PIE Model (Perception, Interpretation, and Expression), shows that in order to create, we must experience life through our senses (Hicks and Levenson, 2015). It is through this creative process that we find our voices as writers. The implication of this is that, if we devote classroom space and time to the creative process, we will allow students to develop their voices, opening the door for a lifelong inclination to write.

The creative process, according to the PIE model, begins with sensory input. From there, the teacher uses the sensory experiences to explore the students' thinking through discussion, drawing, and finally writing. If students are given the opportunity to see the world through their own eyes (through perceiving), to compare it to others (through interpretation), and to create a product that has meaning (through expression), they are developing their individual voices. This in turn poses the question to classroom teachers: how do we build an environment in the confines of a classroom which allows for multiple sensory experiences, therefore opening the door to discovering our creative voices?

Conclusion

Elliot Eisner writes that "education is the process of learning how to invent oneself." (Eisner, 2002). He continues, "Our sensory system becomes a means through which we pursue our own development. But the sensory system does not work alone; it requires for its development the tools of culture: language, the arts, science, values, and the like. With the aid of culture we learn how to create ourselves." In this way, we as teachers have a responsibility to create an environment that allows every student to invent him or herself. The school day is about six hours, much of it spent in a square room. The challenge is to turn that square room into a world, where our students can tap into our thoughts and feelings through sensory experiences, every day.

When a girl visits the Visual Doorway, and chooses a picture of a bird to copy before she writes, she spends time remembering her grandmother who had a parakeet for a pet. When a boy walks into class and spends two minutes at the Touch Doorway, scruffing the head of a teddy bear, he thinks about his dog and how he sneaks him onto his bed at night. When a child spends time smelling things at the Scent Doorway, inhaling the aroma of coffee beans make her think about her aunt when she comes on the weekends for dinner. They realize in those moments who they are. And that feeling is powerful. It is the feeling of identity and confidence. When they share these pieces of themselves, they find a way to connect in a real and personal way.

The impact of Doorways on the students as writers is that they become better at noticing their writing topics, and expressing them with rich sensory vocabulary and detailed description. The impact of Doorways on the students as people is that they become self-aware, connected, and devoted to their creative process.

Works Cited

- Chandra, Debra. "Suspense." Awakening the Heart by Georgia Heard. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999.
- Eisner, Elliot W. *Arts and the Creation of Mind*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Ernst DaSilva, Karen. Picturing Learning: Artists & Writers in the Classroom. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994.
- Getzels, Jacob W. and Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. The Creative Vision: Longitudinal Study of Problem Finding in Art. Hoboken, NY: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 1976.
- Graves, Donald. Bring Life into Learning: Create a Lasting Literacy. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann 1999.
- Goodman, Allegra. "Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work." *New York Times* 12 March 2001: sec. Arts.
- Heard, Georgia. *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999.
- Hesse, Karen. Come On, Rain. Pacific Grove, CA: John J. Muth, 1999.
- Hicks, Darcy. "Choice Matters," *Primary Voices K-6*, pub. NCTE October 2001.
- Hicks, Darcy and Levenson, Cyra. "Opening the Door: Teaching Toward Creativity." *Connecting Creativity Research and Practice in Art Education*. Ed. Flavia Bastos and Enid Zimmerman. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association, 2015.
- Lisle, Laurie. *Portrait of an Artist*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1980.
- Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*. Ed. Lee Basandall and Stefan Morawski. St. Louis/Milwaukee: Telos Press, 1973.
- Piek, Jan; Dawson, Lisa; Smith, Leigh J; and Gasson, Natalie. "The Role of Early Fine and Gross Motor Development on Later Motor and Cognitive Ability." *Human Movement Science*, October 2008.
- Tippet, Krista. "Interview with Mary Oliver." *On Being Podcast* 15 October 2015.
- Updike, John. "Evening Concert: Sainte-Chappelle." *The New Yorker*, 30 June 2003.
- Ward, Ossian. "The Man Who Heard His Paintbox Hiss," *The Telegraph*, 10 June 2006: sec: Art.

Biography

Darcy Hicks, M.Ed., graduated from Smith College with a degree in Fine Arts and from Lesley College with a Masters in Education. She taught in the Connecticut Public Schools as an elementary classroom teacher and as an art teacher. Her research in art and literacy has resulted in nine conference presentations at the National Council of Teachers of English, an article published by NCTE and a chapter in the book *Connecting Creativity Research and Practice in Art Education*. Currently she works as a Visual Arts teaching coach, enabling partnerships between the Yale Center for British Art and the surrounding public schools. Her Doorways approach is an integral part of her coaching across classroom settings.