

visual collage

by Cynthia Weiss and Kurt Wootton



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Introduction

In 1994 a group of twenty leaders in the field of literacy met for a week in New London, New Hampshire, to discuss the current trends in the field of literacy and language development. These educators—later called The New London Group—published an article in the *Harvard Educational Review* redefining the way we currently view literacy. They coined the term *multiliteracies*. This term encapsulates two key ideas:



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*The first relates to the increasing multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral, and so on. . . . Second we decided to use the term **multiliteracies** as a way to focus on the realities of increasing local diversity and global connectedness. Dealing with linguistic differences and cultural differences has now become central to the pragmatics of our working, civic, and private lives.*

Habla best practices provide concrete models of how the concept of *multiliteracies* work in classroom teaching and learning. The best practices we document suggest models of how different “modes of meaning making” and “linguistic differences” can be realized in the form of classroom experiences. Habla’s best practices involve a conversation between different artistic mediums and often embrace translation across languages.

Perhaps the practice that best embodies the idea of multiplicity and the juxtaposition of different images is the collage. Collage, (from French, *coller*, to glue), is a visual art process where disparate forms and shapes are combined to create a new whole. The principle process is one of composition and juxtaposition. Collage is both an intentional as well as intuitive process. The manipulation of materials on the page mirrors the composition processes of both writing and thinking. Artists literally, and metaphorically, compose patterns and relationships between shapes to create new images and narratives with form.



Finding Meaning

As with all artistic mediums, the form of the collage provides a vehicle for communicating something the artist finds meaningful. In a classroom environment, students will often comment that they have nothing meaningful to say, which leaves us, the teachers, with the challenge of helping the students to realize that they can pull from their own ideas and experiences.

We have found that framing an essential question at the beginning of a course of study is critical. For instance, when Kurt was teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* in a class where the students were learning English, he asked his students at the beginning of the semester, "How can we represent our understanding of a novel visually?" The class discussed empathizing with the characters, understanding the complex relationships between the characters' worlds, considering how the novel reflects the life of the writer, and being able to imagine what lies behind the words. Students considered how aspects of the novel reflected their own lives and considered choices they had made in life in relation to the novel's characters. Later in the semester Kurt introduced the collage and his students experimented with the materials offered as a way to visually demonstrate their complex understanding of different levels of the text.



Procedure

Preparation of Materials

We've learned a critical part of the collage process actually happens *before* the students enter the room. The teacher should carefully select the materials and organize the space in a way that allows the students to all be successful with the art-making process. Here are some suggestions:

- 1. Begin with a heavy matte paper or cardboard to use as the background.** Give everyone the same size to work with. Smaller might be better if it's the first time students have made collages, perhaps 6" x 8" or a square format of 8" x 8" or 10" x 10".
- 2. Select a variety of materials that will work well together in any collage.** By choosing a particular aesthetic for the materials, the teacher can help students to have a successful outcome. For example, avoid giving students all of the colors of paper available. Instead choose a group of colors that complement each other.
- 3. In organizing the space, select paper materials that that have a *belonging* to each other.** Group materials by color and texture and organize papers by color families, (blues, greens, earth colors, etc). Include complementary colors to add a visual interest.

- 4. In another station, include wet materials- acrylic paints, gesso, if desired.** Use the same process of organizing and limiting paint colors. (Gesso and white paint are great materials for layering and concealing sections of the collage-for editing by erasing.)

Some Advice for Obtaining Original and Imaginative Work

Avoid using magazine pictures with commercial advertising that can create literal and often trite imagery. Invite participants to include texts through: cut out words, handwritten texts, stencils, paste-on letters, found objects and found words. Also, rice papers and thin, patterned papers are great to use on the top layer of a collage.

Possible Materials

Various construction and rice papers, matt board, white glue, glue brushes (or *Yes Glue* and palette knife), scissors, x-acto knives, cutting surfaces, acrylic paints, pre-mixed, art magazines, newspapers, found objects and found papers.



Modeling Art Work

Show examples of work by collage artists who have created a wide-vocabulary of model work. You can include collage work by Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, Romare Bearden, Sabrina Ward Harrison, and Yucatecan artist, Fernando Garcia Ponce, as well as examples by students. Ask students to share what they notice in this work as a kind of research for their own work.

Beginning with a Background

Explain that starting with laying down a background form on their matt board in paint or paper might be a helpful way to begin. For the background, students will think in terms of broad colors or shapes that will cover the entire surface so that no cardboard or white matte paper will be showing (unless intentionally). For students that do not see themselves as artists, simply covering the surface with paint or gluing shapes of paper to cover the surface will help them to see that they can indeed be successful with the materials.

Before the students begin, model different possibilities for building the background and then add layers. Demonstrate some of the following possibilities (it might be better to start with one or two, allow the students to work, and then introduce new visual vocabulary and processes along the way).

a. Compositional Choices

Share with students the variety of ways that forms can be composed on the page using: Asymmetry, Symmetry, Focal Points at either the edges or center of page, and Negative and Positive Shapes. Students should be encouraged to use both the positive shapes they cut out in their paper and the negative shapes (the paper that remains from the cut-out) in their compositions. The use of both creates a lovely balance and a shared language of forms.

b. Organic and Geometric Forms

Ask students to create an inventory of shapes—cutting out organic forms found in nature, wavy lines, cloud, leaf, sun, forms—as well as all kinds of geometric shapes—squares, circles, triangles, rectangles, etc. Good connections can be made to math and geometry lessons here. Students can place their leftover shapes in a community box open to everyone in the class. This collection will help expand the range of options for each participant, as well as create harmonies across the set of work created by the class.



Creating

At this point students are generally ready to dive right in. We've found that if the three previous parts of the process—meaning, materials, and modeling—have been rich, the students are ready to jump in and work for hours on their collages. The teacher can walk around the room and gently offer suggestions to students who might run into difficulties along the way.

Reflecting

Reflection is a critical part of any learning process and it is something that happens not only at the end of the process, but along the way. Collage is a wonderful medium as an end in itself as well as a powerful tool for idea generation, revision, and visual representation within the writing and reading process.



During a **Teacher Institute at Habla**, after a day of working on collages, Cynthia asked everyone to place their collages in front of them and write a description of what they saw. They discussed what this revealed about their artistic process and then talked about what they might work on next.



Norma Olaenta reflects on her collage:

*In **To Kill A Mockingbird** the seasons are very important. In each season different events happen and different people appear. The changing of the seasons shows time passing, day by day, month by month, and year by year.*

It's an old book and we open the book to read different stories of diverse people who live in the same place but each having different conditions and possibilities. The overall mood of the book is like autumn. As the leaves fall down, the stories fall down in front of our eyes and they involve us.

Kurt's class reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* hadn't finished their collages at the end of the semester. He asked them to use their unfinished work as inspiration to write a reflection on their collage. He explained that it might be in the form of a poem, narrative, or list. When the class had time to write and share their reflections, he asked them to choose two critical lines of their reflections and form them into a "collage poem" they performed as part of their end-of-semester exhibition.

To return to the New London Group's concept of *multiliteracies*, collage and writing processes used together offer a very powerful tool for meaning making across media. Collage work represents a spatial and poetic visual narrative. When participants are asked to write from their collage, they often find that their writing opens up, has space to breathe, and leads to more poetic and expansive writing.

References

New London Group, "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures" *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 1 (1996).

Note: Beth Olshansky at the University of New Hampshire has developed a process called *Image-Making in the Writing Process* that has made an invaluable contribution to the research and practice of the impact collage within the writing process. (See: www.picturingwriting.org).

Collage is one of many best practices that are part of the **Habla Best Practice Handbook**. Visit the Habla website at www.habla.org to learn about additional best practices or to attend one of **Habla's Teacher Institutes** and experience the best practices taught by master teachers from around the world.