

# Icons

*by Arnold Aprill and Kurt Wootton*



# Icons

## Introduction

Bernard Williams, a Chicago-based visual artist, shared his strategy of addressing complex subjects through the creation of simple images or icons. His approach starts with the students discussing a subject and then creating a list of words representing that concept. These words become the basis for simple images cut out of paper. The images are put up on the wall and complex narratives emerge from the juxtaposition of the icons.



**Bernard Williams** developed the practice of using icons with students in his work with **CAPE** (Chicago Arts Partnership in Education). CAPE is one of the leading organizations in the United States partnering public schools with arts organizations throughout the city of Chicago.

## Why does this work?

**1. The image is powerfully simple.** Because of the simplicity of the image, the icon practice allows an entry point into visual art for any student. Students don't need a great deal of artistic "skill" to make it work. And yet the simplicity and clarity of the images produces a powerful collective installation.

**2. It's not messy or expensive.** Since the only critical materials are scissors, tape, and



paper, it's easy for any group of students to create an installation without a great deal of preparation.



**3. There is a balance between the individual and the collective.** Each student has their voice represented by an image on the wall, yet the piece gains its power through the juxtaposition of the individual images.

**4. It creates a tension between the abstract and the concrete.** With the icon experience we move from stories and ideas to a concrete representation on the wall. However, the concrete representation is an abstraction of an

object. The movement between the linguistic and the visual creates a space for us to examine how language and image use symbols to represent the world around us.

### Procedure

You'll see from the following examples that there are many ways to incorporate the use of icons in the classrooms. The procedure for

developing icons is remarkably simple, which is one of the reasons we've identified it as a best practice.

**1. Limit the palette.** It's essential to carefully select what color(s) of paper will be offered to the students. It might be tempting at first to give the students all the colors of paper available, but we learned from teaching artist Cynthia Weiss that "limiting the palette" is crucial for creating a group installation. As you'll



see in the following examples, icons work very well when they are made just from black paper. At times we have combined black with another color, maroon for instance, but we try to keep the palette to between one and three colors.

**2. Meaning.** For the icon practice to be successful, it must be about something. All of the examples below first begin with a deep examination of an issue, a personal story, or a poem. The object, as represented by the icon, must be essential to the artist, something the artist cares deeply about. Icons should not be used as a quick activity in the classroom, but a way of probing more deeply into a text or a complex concept.

**3. Choose the essential object.** From the piece of writing or the concept that's been discussed, each student chooses an illustrative or particularly powerful object. One possibility is to quickly brainstorm several objects that are in the piece, and then for the student to choose the one that in poet Mary Jo Thompson's terms "gives off the most heat."

**4. Draw the silhouette.** With a pencil, on the given paper (see point 1 above), draw a silhouette of the object. Model this first for the students. The critical direction is "Do not use

a pen, pencil, or marker to draw on the object. The object should be recognizable by only its outer contours."

**5. Cut.** With scissors, cut the object out of the paper.

**6. Create the installation.** All of the students will tape their objects on a wall. It's best to have the objects near each other in order to create a focused space. With objects scattered on all the walls of the room it doesn't have the same power or feel of an installation. Bernard Williams sometimes puts up rows of black tape on the walls to organize the images suggesting a narrative while not explicitly telling a story.

**7. Perform.** Students stand in front of the wall of icons and read a line from their story or poem, forming a collective verbal experience that parallels the images in the installation.



## Variations:

We described perhaps the easiest way to incorporate the use of icons into the classroom. We have also cut icons out of large, black foam boards and used them in performances.

In a professional development workshop, photographer Morris Bowie asked students to take a series of photographs that showed their relationship to their icon.

## Examples

Our America: Bernard Williams at Bronesville Alternative High School in Chicago, IL

In a high school in Chicago, the students studied a series of books about the complexities of growing up African-American in the United States, and particularly Chicago, including *Our America* by Jones and Newman and *There Are No Children Here* by Kotlowitz. The main goal of the class, Williams explains was to “examine the impact of environment on identity.”

Williams describes the next part of the process as the “3Cs.” The students **collected** discarded objects in their communities. They created icons and **collaged** the objects in a public installation. Finally they used the collage to **contest** their own assumptions. The full docu-

mentation for this work can be accessed on CAPE’s website [here](#).

## You are the Object: Arnold April at the Habla Teacher Institute

At the Habla teacher institute, founder and creative director of CAPE Arnold April led the artists and teachers through a process of poetry writing and icon development. The students began by making a list of objects associated with someone they care about. April asked the participants to write the phrase “you are” and then combine that with one of the objects.

### Example:

*You are the black glasses with the thick frames always resting on the nightstand.*



## Dreaming of the Past: Habla in Mérida, México

They repeated this process many times composing a short poem. After the poems were completed, the teacher chose one object from their poem and created an icon. After posting the icons on the wall, they performed a group poem by combining the lines that matched each icon.

Students at Habla spent a semester reading poems and stories from the genre of magical realism. They watched Tim Burton's film *Big Fish* and discussed the blurred line between reality and fantasy. As the semester progressed, they interviewed their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents about stories in their family from their distant past, stories about an ancestor who

fought in the Mexican Revolution or a great-grandfather who was trapped on a bridge during a flood for three days. After they wrote their stories, the group created icons from their stories, hung them on a cordel (see the cordel practice in the Habla handbook), and told their stories to the community.



**Habla** is an educational center and lab school based in Mérida, Yucatán, México, dedicated to fostering school environments that promote the success of all students from multiple cultural backgrounds. For teachers, artists, and school leaders, Habla offers: cultural and language experiences, teacher institutes, and an annual international educational forum.

[www.habla.org](http://www.habla.org)