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Re-Seeing Story through Portal Writing

Cover Page Footnote

S. Rebecca Leigh is Assistant Professor of Reading and Language Arts at Oakland University, Michigan. Her current research focuses on how access to art serves as a pathway to literacy learning and its impact on students as writers.

Re-Seeing Story through Portal Writing

S. Rebecca Leigh

"Writing is hard"; "Writing is difficult"; "Writing is work";

"Writing is just o.k. I'd rather go to the dentist."

Many authors would agree with these fourth grade students. Writing can become a low dread. Through regular practice the dread may go away. But what if regular writing practices are mundane? Where, then, is the motivation for students to improve? The verbocentric K-12 classroom with its emphasis on traditional approaches to literacy learning, often seen through fill-in-the-blank workbook exercises, drills, and prescribed essay formats, offers little motivation for students to ameliorate their craft. With limited and constrained writing practices, it comes as no surprise that many students struggle with writing and, in particular, they don't stick with the writing once it steers them through temporary periods of dread. Students need meaningful and engaging opportunities to play with language and reflect on their writing as a pathway for cultivating writer interests and envisioning new directions for their stories.

In this 6-week qualitative study, I sought to understand how students in a grade four classroom used portal writing to re-see, re-imagine, and re-create their story ideas from drafts where the writing became challenging, or the interest to finish waned. Portal writing is an aesthetic writing strategy that I developed where the teacher encourages the writer to circle (i.e., portal) with a marker what he thinks are key words in his unfinished draft of a story about a personal experience and study the redacted words in a different genre, a poem. The poem serves as a kind of portal through which the writer re-sees the story, and from which he discusses ideas with others, with the aim of finding the story's focus. The student then uses his insights to return to the draft and revise. Portals serve as entry points for new thinking, where the student decides if the story will change slightly or dramatically. With some literary license, I have created the words "portaling" and "portaled," as it suggests an action of circling words with purpose.

In this essay, I explore selected examples of children's portaled stories for re-seeing their writing in three ways: experiencing poetic form, developing new titles, and discovering small-moment writing. These pathways for writing serve as examples of what can happen when we take a creative stance toward writing. I propose that what the students in this study experience with portal writing can provide access to understanding the need for the aesthetic in writing as a pathway toward making the writing process both accessible and exciting for young writers. Throughout this essay, I invite teachers to examine how they approach writing when students become stuck, and to consider how they might use portal writing in their own classrooms.

Portal Writing: Background and Significance

In order to provide a framework for this research, this section provides a background to portal writing, showing how it was conceived. I examine the need as described in the field for visual pathways that enhance students' experiences with writing.

The practice of cutting up writing is not new. In the nineteenth century, British poet William Blake engaged in etchings involving painting over words, a process he coined *illuminated printing*. In the mid twentieth century, American novelist and painter William Burroughs popularized the technique during what is commonly known as the cut up period of the 1950s and 60s. During this time, artist Tom Phillips published *The Humument*, a Victorian novel altered with ink and gouache. In this text, Phillips artfully demonstrates story as multiple where germs of ideas, hidden behind ghost-like walls of existing words, emerge from paint and pen ink. Since this period, many poets and artists such as Bervin, Johnson, and Ruefle have reimagined great works from writers like Shakespeare and Milton, for example. Familiar lines are carefully chiseled away with a range of media (e.g., marker, paint, textured fabrics, rubber stampings, etc.) to reveal poems and ideas anew, sometimes through artfully rendered visual composition strategies to draw one's eye closer to selected words.

Though cut up writing is oftentimes abstract because words can be randomly selected, black out poems in Austin Kleon's latest text *Newspaper Blackout*, by contrast, are easy to understand. Kleon takes a strategic approach to portaling by carefully choosing words that collectively tell a story. In addition, his poems show how story ideas can surface from unlikely sources. Love stories, for example, emerge from the business section, and childhood memories surface from the economic pages.

Intrigued by aesthetic and writing connections, I took cut up writing a step further and coined the phrase portal writing, an artful writing strategy for students who seek direction in their writing. Where Phillips' and Kleon's work remains in a portaled state, portal writing by contrast asks: "What happens when students use their portals as entry points for new writing?" Thus the research question that guides this study emerged. As a literacy professor and researcher on how access to art serves as a pathway to literacy learning and its impact on students as writers, the idea of portal writing came to me because I am interested in the generative learning potentials that the arts can provide in the pedagogy of writing instruction.

Historically, language arts programs have been taught with an emphasis on language to the exclusion of other ways of knowing like art, music, drama, etc. (Berghoff, et al.). While verbal children are best served by a traditional model of language arts instruction, visual children by contrast are rarely recognized for their visual thinking capabilities and are thus relegated to construct meaning and express knowing through words exclusively. In response to warning voices over the last twenty years from researchers on the limitations of verbocentric curricula, research on writing has shown that access to the aesthetic offers generative writing potential and motivates students to write. Researchers Dyson and Olshansky, for example, argue that creating visual images as a way to search and organize ideas for writing is a natural process. Because this visual and verbal process is natural, when given opportunities to practice showing their thinking by creating visual images, students can further discover the aesthetic as a pathway for developing narrative writing. Reading visual texts critically, argues Ray, can also enhance meaning in writing. Harst, et al. found when literacy is experienced from a multimodal perspective, learning deepens because students are able to increase their communication potential by demonstrating their thinking and knowing through more than one mode.

A growing body of research on writing performance indicates a positive impact when integrated with the visual arts. Eisner, for example, has long argued that the arts invite students to tolerate ambiguity, explore uncertainty, sort out one's own questions, and participate in critical thinking, analysis, and judgment. He also argues that access to visual communication within the writing process can help students to envision their story ideas because visual form, with its open potential for meaning, can influence what we think about and therefore provide entry points for writing (Ernst, Hobson, Olson). Graves argues that the positive impact of the visual arts on writing performance may have to do with the complementary forms of art and language where in writing we invent, revise, and publish and in art we work on referential sketches, engage in preparatory story, and polish definitive drawings. In other words, students are able to apply skills learned in one mode to another.

In light of the above findings, the privileging of language in some schools continues and is troubling, as Kress and van Leewen point out, because the dominant mode of communication is shifting from writing to the image. In a growing visual culture, Crafton agrees and says schools are called to accept broader definitions and practices of literacy. The call is warranted. Recently, Epting argued that precision of thought and expression in writing continues to be an area in which students struggle as writers. Specifically, students experience difficulty with maintaining a paper's focus or expressing their own questions and ideas. She emphasizes the value of stopping, pausing, and thinking about what and how words mean. Students need time to absorb their writing and reflect on their language choices as a pathway for using language to shape their thinking.

Applebee and Langer echo similar concerns in a recent article in which they compare writing instruction at the middle and high school level from two separate studies conducted thirty years apart. While the data shows that students are writing more and across the curriculum, schools "are not providing students with opportunities to use composing as a way to think through the issues, to show the depth and breadth of their knowledge, or to go beyond what they know in making connections and raising new issues" (16). According to George, teachers of writing can support student writers through visually based writing experiences that invite students to think through their ideas and invent new ones. "Our students have a much richer imagination of what we might accomplish with the visual than our journals have yet to address" (12). Put another way, invention is essential for the writer as fully formed ideas seldom come on their own.

Study Context and Methods

Context

This study took place at the end of the school year in a fourth grade classroom in a public elementary school in the Midwest of the United States. There were 22 student participants. A total of 94 samples of portal writing were collected and analyzed. Over a six week period, six students worked on three drafts, ten students worked on four drafts, and six students worked on six drafts. Lauren, the classroom teacher and former graduate student of mine, encouraged students to choose their own topics for writing. My

reason for sharing my vision for this study with her was because of her interest to grow in her understanding of writing practices. She was in her sixth year of teaching at the time of the study. Prior to this study, no one had experienced portal writing or viewed texts by Phillips or Kleon.

Methods

There were two primary modes of data collection in this study: the portaled stories and student feedback shared in class about portal writing. I used my field journal to take notes on what the students shared about experiencing portal writing, doing my best to record feedback verbatim. These particular data, while anecdotal, illuminate what students thought about portaling as a tool for thinking about writing. The study comprised of the following phases:

- Phase 1. Students selected an unfinished story they had written.
- Phase 2. Students read their story, asking themselves, "Why do I think this story is incomplete? What can I do with this story?"
- Phase 3. Students selected particular words or phrases that stood out to them by circling or boxing them.
- Phase 4. Students read their selections, deciding to either keep portaling or stop. Students were encouraged to talk within their table groups during the portaling process as a way of sorting through and exchanging ideas.
- Phase 5. Students masked remaining text with dark colored marker so that selected words stood out and could be easily read.
- Phase 6. Students read their portaled story for story direction, asking themselves, "Do I want to change this story slightly or dramatically?"
- Phase 7. Students wrote a new story, using some or all of their circled words.
- Phase 8. Students shared their revised stories at the end of each week in whole-group settings.

They celebrated decisions made in their writing by reading their portals and explaining how portal writing affected their plans for a third draft. In this story sharing, students experienced writing as process.

To get a feel for how the strategy works, students first portaled the poem "Everyone Needs a Father" by fifth grade writer Stephanie Miller, as cited in Fletcher's book, *Craft Lessons*. Together, we circled words that stood out to us and asked questions such as: "What are we noticing about what happens when we portal a story? What kinds of words did each of us portal? Are they similar? Different? What do these words make us think about? What kind of images do they help us see? How can we use these images to help us think of a new story? What kinds of questions did we ask ourselves about the poem during the portal process? How do these questions help us think about the poem? And what directions do these portals give us?" In trying to answer these questions, students discovered how different story ideas can emerge from one story about a father, and how they can use portal writing to discover new directions in their own stories.

Results

In this study, children portaled their stories for re-seeing their writing in three ways: they experienced poetic form, developed new titles, and discovered small moment writing. In the following section, I share selected examples of how children engaged in portal writing.

Children Experienced Poetic Form. Before students created portals in their writing, we encouraged them to think like writers by asking themselves questions about their stories. For example: What is this story about? What was it supposed to be about? Which part(s) do I still like? Where can I take this story now? In my field notes, I took notice of some children planning their revised stories before they portaled a single word (i.e., looking for particular words they wanted to keep) while others circled words at random. This random approach is open and flexible, allowing for surprises in the way words look and mean when juxtaposed with others. John (all names are pseudonyms), for example, consistently took an open approach to his unfinished stories. One story in particular titled “Diabetes” (below)—which he wrote about his diabetic brother—illustrates:

One day when I Arrived with my mom At the hospital we walked in we went in the elevator I said I’m anccichise to see Brendan I said the elevator stoped we got out there it was one three I slowly opend the door the door went I heard a voice “hello” it was my brother and dad. I said what are you doing Brendan playing xbox his Room was so cool and there was a frige and microwave. So the Doctor told everything what he had to do so we packed all the stuff they gave us.

John decided to portal this story because, though he said he liked what he wrote, he wanted to “make it sound better.” In pursuit of improving his story, he portaled words that he felt captured the essence of his story:

arrived
hospital
elevator
anccichise
elevator
slowly opend
Bredan
xbox
frige
microwave
Doctor

Words in isolation, these portals elicit images of stopped-time. They also create rhythm and movement by retelling John’s story in a different form. Words cohere in a slow yet tumbling fashion. Though portal writing does not involve drawing pictures, these portals graphically identify key words from John’s original draft that help him search and organize ideas for writing (see Dyson, Olshansky) Together, these visual portals create imagery in the writing, making the writer wonder, what will happen next? What direc-

tion or focus can this story take? This aesthetic pathway for developing narrative writing offers students a creative structure for seeing story ideas. In a whole group share John explained: "I liked the shape. It made me think about who was in my story." Pointing to his portals, he explained further, "I kinda like how it's short." "Short?" I wondered out loud. "This is interesting to me. What do you mean by that?" I asked. As John tried to explain, I learned that short meant focused. "How do these circled words help you as a writer?" I probed further. "I don't know," he shrugged, "I guess the way they look." He paused for a moment and then continued to explain. "It looks different, like I notice words n' stuff." The poetic form that portals create, it seems, helped John refine his ideas in his revision, "Room 214":

There it was Room 214 I stoped and I wondered for a second I wonder how my Brother is going to React so I keep on walking I slowly opened the door there was my brother he was laying on the bed I asked my dad when is the doctor going to get here. he (said), I do not know She got there like 15 minutes After. it was really long when the doctor was telling us then my Brother Beged my dad to see what the doctor said.

Portal writing helped John improve his narrative by focusing on elements of his story from the original draft to the second. Where in the original he mentions being anxious to see his brother in the hospital, in his revision he takes a more reflective stance about the hospital experience. For example, he describes his anxiety (e.g., "I stoped and I wondered"), asking himself how his brother might react to having diabetes, and leaving the reader wondering what the doctor said that took "really long." By focusing on the portals "anccichise," "slowly opend," and "Doctor," John used portal writing to graphically think through issues in his writing (see Applebee & Langer) and was able to narrow in on his perspective as a concerned sibling. "Why didn't you use the other portals?" I asked during the group share. He explained that he only used words that stood out to him adding, "I was scared so I used words that helped me to write about that."

In talking to John later at his table, he helped me to understand that while adults may know the potential of poetry for helping writers discover language and form, children know it more acutely somehow when they have authentic opportunities to experience it.

Children Developed New Titles. In listening to discussions at their tables, I learned that some children enjoyed talking about which words they were portaling (e.g., "I'm circling *hospital*") and why (e.g., "Oh, this sounds good!"). As students circled and shared some of their word choices, they demonstrated that there is no one correct way of portaling text; the writer decides.

To help her students think critically about their circled word choices, Lauren and I asked several questions that the children could ask themselves as they reread their portals. For example, do the words construct a different story or the same story? Do the words magnify a person? A place? A mood? A voice? Do you notice a word or words that you did not notice before? Does a word make you think differently about your story? Is there a word that changes meaning? Do any of the words that you circled conjure up new words or images in your mind? These questions furthered thinking about story, but

they also nurtured thinking about the story title. While for some students this meant providing a title for their story, for others this meant revising an existing one. The opportunity to work on story title alone was particularly important for students hesitant to delve into hefty revisions right away.

Of the 94 stories collected, 18 were untitled. After students portaled their stories, 17 of those 18 stories were given new titles. Some of those titles focused on main characters within a story. An untitled story about two friends became, "All About Carlee and Gracie"; an untitled story about a pet dog became, "Dog Lola"; and an untitled story about two mischievous boys became, "Nate and Clone." Other titles focused on existing themes found within stories, such as "Scared in the Night," a story about getting spooked when trick-or-treating.

When coming together as a whole group, students acknowledged that titled stories can provide readers with a direction. "People should know what the story is about," clarified one student. Indeed, titles helped readers make decisions in their reading choices. The title's tone, as discussed in class, could also help readers in their decisions to choose books that sounded serious or funny. Of the 47 titles that were revised for clarity, some students experimented with humor when they reworked their titles. For example, "My Dog's Bath," a story about a dog who makes a scene in the bathroom and frustrates the mother who is washing him becomes "Mom's Look." The portals "mom" and "sad face" helped Jenna to come up with a title that emphasized her mother's reaction to the bath scene: "She was mad!"

Other students used portals of character names as a way to make the writing more personal. For example, "Vet Day," a story about a cat going for a routine checkup at the veterinarian's became more personal with "Harliey At The Vet." Students also used their portals to be as specific and clear in their titles as possible. Yet again, a story about going on a ride at an amusement park changed from a very broad title, "Univrs!," to the ride itself, "Twister." Using portals to create more focused titles was especially important for expository pieces. For example, George's narrative on the benefit of reading books to learn about bats and vampires was originally titled "Books," a broad title that could be misleading to readers. The portals "books" and "vampires" helped him to see how clarifying the title to "Books About Vampires" better communicated what his narrative was about. "I like this title better," he explained, "because it helped me focus on my story. I took out the parts about bats." In this example, George demonstrated the power of using portals to visually communicate ideas within the writing process. Portals, because of their potential for making words serendipitously cohere, can influence the story ideas students think about and provide necessary entry points for writing that Ernst, Hobson, and Olson argue as essential to the writing process.

As students presented their stories during group share, they also pointed out their revised titles, noting what they liked about the revision. For example, Jenny revised her lengthy title "Having A Aunt With A Machine In Her Chest Isn't Fun" to "The Heart Machine." Sitting in the author's chair in front of her peers, Jenny explained how her portals (e.g., Aunt, isn't fun, play, skating, whole bunch, machine, hard) got her thinking about what she was most upset about in her story. In talking about her aunt, she explained further how these words helped her to think about the machine in her aunt's chest. "That's how I got the idea for heart machine," she said. In circling and talking

about the words that mattered to her, portal writing encouraged Jenny to think of other words beyond the page. Thus, she was able to think of the word “heart” which gives her story title more focus and also shows her what Eisner has long argued about the impact of visual communication—that exploring what students know through visual means is a generative, meaning-making process.

Of course, not all portaled texts yielded improved titles. Sometimes, the original title provided more clarification to what the story was about than the revised title. For example, “Fishing At The Dock,” a story about fishing with friends changed to “Adventurer” in which there is no identifiable adventurer in the story, and “Halloween Camping” a story about spending Hallowe’en night in a camper with friends and family changed to “Costumes,” in which the camping experience, not costuming per se, dominates the story. Regardless, portal writing augured thinking about writing as creative process, where portals or circled words were not viewed as fixed realities of ideas. Rather, they offered students opportunities to re-see and re-think their writing and make decisions based on the portals they created.

Children Discovered Small Moment Writing. As children shared their stories, they often read a specific paragraph they were proud of, asking themselves, “Which part of my writing is effective and worth sharing today?” By being encouraged to do this kind of sharing, they participated in a community of writers. This supportive environment made it possible for students to engage in class discussions about focus in writing, a rather abstract term often used in writers’ workshops. But because portals can help students move from the general to the specific in their writing, and because portals provide a creative way to attend to language and details, students can experience focus directly. It no longer feels abstract. Rather, it feels like something they can do. To help demystify what it means to write with focus, we asked students questions that nudged thinking about their word choices:

1. Do the portals construct a different story? The same story?
2. Do the portals magnify a person? A place? A mood? A voice?
3. Do I notice a portal I did not notice before?
4. Does a portal make me think differently about the story?
5. Can a portal be used to change the title?
6. Is there a portal that changes the meaning of the story?
7. Do any of the portals I circled suggest new words or images?

By asking these kinds of questions, students were able to experience how in moving from general to specific details they could get even more specific. So specific in fact, that some full-bodied narratives with characters, plots, and crises developed into focused stories about a pair of shoes or a favorite toy. This kind of specificity in writing, this kind of focus, is what Ralph Fletcher calls “small moment writing.” In this study, children simply called it “Oh! Awesome!” and “cool!”

Julie experienced small moment writing through a story about her cat. In the original draft, like most first drafts, she mentioned a lot of ideas:

My cat has gone to the vet every year and it's time agann for the vet. The vet is a scary place for a cat. They get shots. Lots of needles. It can be scary. I don't like going to the doctor. I don't like getting shots. I know some people get sick.

Maybe she will be crazy or relaxed. Or go behind the refridgerater agann or they'll put a blagkit over her head like always. She gets more than one shots. It makes me sad. I don't like to look at shots.

Julie portaled the words “cat” and “vet” and the phrase, “she will be crazy.” Julie shared with me that she had to think about these words carefully, “like how I wanted to use them,” she explained. Ray would argue that by reading and rereading these portals critically, Julie was able to enhance meaning in her story by describing rather than telling what happens to Harliey when she goes to the vet. “I like how your story got funny,” remarked one peer during a group share, “Like when you said the devil is hatched. Cool!” More peers nodded in agreement. They had just heard Julie read her revised story about her cat:

Harliey gose to the vet every year to get her shots like rabies, fless, colds she gust got her rabes shots when we got there she was a Davil and when they give her shots she screams when she dose that I said the Davil has hatcht and wons we got home it was gross she had a dump they skared her so much she pooped her self.

I asked Julie during group share to explain how she decided to develop the scene at the vet. “Cause going to the vet part was funny.” “Do you like to write humor?” I asked. “Yes,” she said adding, “and I circled ‘crazy,’ so like I thought I could explain that better.” Julie helped me to understand that the portal “she will be crazy” helped her zoom in on a particular aspect of her story and develop it further. By identifying key words through portals and using them to develop her ideas, she had to think of how to describe feline craziness. In so doing, Julie—and her peers in their own narratives—practiced precision of thought and expression in writing, which Epting argues is essential in the writing process. By stopping, pausing, and thinking about what and how words mean, portal writing helps students with maintaining focus and clearly expressing their ideas. I asked Julie one more question before recess: “How do you think this story compares to your first draft?” She paused for a moment and then said, “I think you kinda know my cat in this one.” Indeed, the revised story offered a close-up of Harliey and highlighted the vet experience. Creating portals in writing as a way of discovering ideas for small moment writing made it possible to magnify and illuminate ideas. Julie took this small moment in Harliey’s life and developed it. When the idea is small, says Fletcher, the writing is big. Julie’s description of Harliey at the vet is big, the writing memorable.

Discussion

Though the sample size of this study is limited and thus makes it difficult to generalize from these findings, the writing that grew out of students’ portals shows that portal writing can be used as an effective tool for writing inquiry for elementary students. Students’ experiences with portal writing confirm that there are lessons to be drawn from this study.

First, students experienced revision as a creative process, one in which they could develop their ideas and discover new story directions by simply redacting words from a narrative text. A creative stance toward revision offered students a pathway to continue working on and improving their writing. Portal writing provided students a pleasurable pathway for reworking a story.

Second, students attended to detail in their by writing by looking carefully at word choice and creating unique word combinations and phrases. As students talked at their tables about their word choices, they reflected and revised, giving rise to portals that held a potential richness of story. With peer support, students attended more closely to detail and therefore participated in the ownership of their ideas through their own poetic inventions of groups of words.

Third, students wrote with focus by using their juxtaposed words as aids in finding a story's focus. Often, first drafts are packed with multiple story ideas where too many directions can confuse and frustrate the student. Portals provided students support in developing a particular aspect about their story that might otherwise have been missed in a draft.

Fourth, students used form to reflect on the potential stories that emerged from their portals. Eisner and McLuhan argue that form influences what we think about. The poetic form of portals where words can tumble, stretch across the page, or both, gave students another way of seeing their stories. McLuhan argues, "The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act – the way we perceive the world" (41). Media served as an extension of students' ideas through which they were able to graphically identify key words and perceive new story ideas. The playful configuration of words standing out against a darkened page affected the stories they saw. Form thus played a role in the revision process because it helped students to see different story structures and motivated them to write some or all of them.

Finally, reluctant writers experienced joy in writing by portaling a text other than their own. In so doing, they were able to ease into their own writing and discover their own interests. Access to different kinds of text (e.g., a poem, a chapter from a novel, a scene from a play, newspaper and magazine articles, song lyrics, recipes) can also help broaden students' perceptions of what counts as writing and ultimately help them participate in creating their own texts and forms.

Closing Thoughts

The data in this study raise several questions about how portal writing might extend to students beyond the elementary classroom. Specifically, I wonder: How might secondary and college students respond to portal writing exercises? How might English Language Learners as well as students taking second-language courses benefit from portal writing? In what way can portal writing be used in content-area classes? And how might students in art education benefit from drawing portals as a process of preparing and refining their artist statements?

As I watched the students in this study construct portals in their stories, discover new ideas and directions in their writing, and as I learned how portaling supported talk about writing and encouraged writing, I am convinced that Malaguzzi—teacher advo-

cate for the arts in learning—is right: “The wider the range of possibilities we offer children, the more intense will be their motivations and the richer their experiences” (72). Redacting words with marker or mixed media illuminates story as creative exploration, but more than this, it can widen children’s writing experiences by showing them how to look closely at language and apply new understandings to their own writing. In looking closely, students were able to experience the power of language through their own word choices. They experienced how portaled words can act like rudders, gently steering them in new or improved story directions. Through the creative act of circling words, they shouldered possibility for where to take their stories next. The students acted like authors, making purposeful and meaningful decisions in their writing.

I believe the more children experience portal writing, the more knowledge they will construct about how written language works and cultivate their own interests on what to write and how to write it. Given the open potential for meaning in portal writing, students can be empowered and develop confidence in their writing pursuits.



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