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WRITING POEMS FROM IDEA BUNDLES

by

S. Rebecca Leigh

## Abstract:

In this three-month qualitative study, 36 pre and in-service teachers were invited to create and write poems from four idea bundles (e.g., the mixed bundle, the verbal bundle, the visual bundle, and the arranged bundle) in response to four picture book read alouds that address themes of abandonment (Wild, 2006), homelessness (Wild, 2007), togetherness (Woodson, 2015), and renewal (Tan, 2010). Bundles included a variety of visual and print media (e.g., photographs, art, magazines, newspapers, sheet music, books, greeting cards), used to enhance literacy experiences in writing poems. The purpose of the study was to investigate how different visual and verbal media support students in their efforts to write poems. Analysis of 136 idea bundles, poems, questionnaires, and class discussion on read alouds as they related to students' writing suggest that idea bundles provided a meaningful pathway for supporting students' efforts to write vivid and descriptive poems.

“I wrote things I could never have made up on my own.”

While on sabbatical and looking for a creative, restorative practice to bring some balance to my academic life, I participated in a six-week online painting course with 258 women from around the world. Each week, we opened our emails and clicked on links to watch video demonstrations of Australian artist Tracy Verdugo invite us to paint, create, and explore our own aesthetic voices. In our first week, we watched Verdugo make little packets or bundles from various print and visual media that she tore and cut from dated magazines, long forgotten books, and scraps of handmade art. When stacked together, these bundles can be used to spark a direction and/or emotion in a painting. One simply opens a bundle by placing each piece down so that inspiration can be drawn from one or more pieces.

Some of us in the online course also created bundles for others by sending little packages of pictures and words thousands of miles across the globe with the hope of sending that one page that kindles ideas for another artist's work. In one of our lessons, we wrote free verse poems from these bundles; this is when I felt the strongest blast of creative, serendipitous joy, for the bundle expresses itself in myriad forms: colorful pages, striking patterns, and varied fonts and textures. During the exercise I was intrigued by how quickly words came to me and was deeply curious about the different pages from which some words flowed more than others. As a teacher of writing and as a researcher who studies aesthetic approaches to writing instruction, this feeling was especially poignant as it made me think of my own undergraduate students in teacher education who simply “don't get” poetry and need, I believe, a real connection to language for poetry to penetrate.

The following semester, in two teacher education courses in which poetry instruction is normally covered, I invited my students to create and write poems from four different idea bundles in response to well-thumbed picture book read alouds whose profound themes of abandonment (Wild, 2006), homelessness (Wild, 2007), togetherness (Woodson, 2015), and renewal (Tan, 2010) offered vision and direction for their poems. In this invitation, I explained two things to my students: that their work on bundles and poems could potentially be used to study how aesthetic approaches to writing support students in their efforts to write openly and figuratively; and that while I collected their work throughout the semester--that is, work protected by self-selected pseudonyms--I would not open the envelope with their signed permission forms, which would reveal who had consented to participate, until after final grades were submitted. At the end of the semester, I learned that all 36 students had agreed to participate in the study.

In this four-month study I sought to understand how bundles support my pre-service teachers in their efforts to write poems. Specifically, I wondered: In which type of media do students find the greatest support in writing poetry? In this article I describe my process for developing idea bundles; present selected student poems from four different idea bundles (e.g., the mixed bundle; the verbal bundle; the visual bundle; and the arranged bundle); and offer directions for teachers to support their student writers by examining media more closely as a process for expanding one's creative pool from which ideas can spark and grow. “Writers don't need to be given formulas,” said Barry Lane, “They need to be shown possibilities” (Ayres & Shubitz, 2010, p. 127).

## **Idea Bundles: How They Work**

In the 12-minute video on how to make bundles, Tracy Verdugo provides a demonstration of how she tears pages from retired books and magazines that she picks up at “off shops” (second hand stores) and stacks into beautifully uneven quarters, that is, four squares torn from an 8”x11” piece of paper. A bundle can be as thin or as thick as one chooses. What is important when making a bundle, explains Verdugo, is looking for visually stimulating material and resisting the urge to censor a page in the tearing stage; a page may at first seem directionless but could offer a wellspring of ideas later. Once a bundle is complete, the writer writes one word for each page to generate a list of as many words as there are pages. Words can come directly from a page (e.g., seeing the word “marinate” printed on a page about apples bathed in lemon juice) or directly from an image (e.g., writing the word “apple” for a picture of an apple). Words can also be implied. For example, the word “summer” comes to mind when seeing a picture of an apple pie. Words can also be figurative. For example, the expression “bad apple” could also come to mind when looking at an apple image. The writer then uses this list to write a free verse poem by developing ideas with sensory details, using all or some of the words from the list. This is where the bundle gets exciting, where the mind grinds and crackles at the same time.

Verdugo typically refers to these packets as inspiration bundles, and while the word “inspiration” may work in art-making--for something that can inspire can evoke stimulation and feeling-- I believe it can put unnecessary pressure on the writer to feel something worth responding to for each page. Comparatively, the word “idea” strikes me as more open because it calls on one’s lived experiences. Viewed this way, media that sparks connections to experiences offers up ideas for the writer and therefore allows for natural, meaningful directions in one’s work.

### **Theoretical Connections for Idea Bundles**

The notion of literacy, how one defines it and practices it, continues to expand in a globalizing world where today’s students are immersed in a social media culture that offers multiple web-based communication tools allowing users to create and share multimedia stories through any combination of digital text, imagery, video, audio, etc. Now more than ever, schools need to provide learning experiences that are relevant for the multimodal 21<sup>st</sup>-century classroom (Avgerinou, 2009; Kuby & Rucker, 2015; Shaw, 2014).

This study is grounded in the work of Anne Dyson (1988), Peggy Albers (2009), and Beth Olshansky (2008), which acknowledges that we increase our communication potential when we express ourselves through more than one mode (Harste et al., 1984). Idea bundles call on students to react to different page-media by attending to visual devices (e.g., dot, line, shape, value, texture, color, space, movement) and text features such as font and font size that inspire words for their poems. Visual media (e.g., magazine images, photographs, handmade art) and print media (e.g., newspapers, books) each have their own meaning potential to communicate particular ideas (Ray, 2010), creating opportunities for descriptive and vivid language from which poems can be developed.

There is a strong literature base on teaching literacy through the visual arts (Albers, 2009; 2007; Barton, 2014; Dyson, 1988; Flood et al., 2008; Hubbard, 1989) and a growing body of research showing how K-12 teachers approach their poetry instruction aesthetically as a process for engaging students about and through language (Certo et al.,

2012; Gilrain, 2015, Reed, 2017). The visual literacy literature also reveals that Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), heavily influenced by the work of Rudolf Arnheim (1974) and Lev Vygotsky (1986), encourages attention to how meaning is constructed visually. Through a facilitated discussion of open-ended questions such as, “What is happening here?” and “What do we notice about how the color evokes a certain mood?” (Bang, 2000) with a particular emphasis on some basic art elements (e.g., How is line used here?) and principles of design such as “How does the use of space affect what we see?” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), bundle-writers can attend to sensory details from their piles and use them to develop their written ideas. This is an important distinction from merely adding details to one’s writing. When we tell students to add details, typically they do just that, by plugging words into their sentences. But, “Good sentences live in the ear” (p. 17), says Canadian author and prairie naturalist Trevor Herriot (2014) and come from writers who know that details are always developed in one’s writing, never merely added or dropped in.

### Overview of the Study

The goals of this study were fairly simple. First, I wanted my students, 36 pre and in-service teachers, to experience enjoyment in writing their poems. All too often, students lose interest in the genre before they have had different experiences with it, a concerning situation for students who have chosen a profession in which they will one day teach poetry/writing to others. By approaching poetry aesthetically through different media, I hoped that the bundles would broaden their understanding of how to construct meaning in unique ways. Second, I wanted them to experience the power of visual media in moving their ideas forward in writing. While society is becoming a more visually aware culture, writing instruction in the traditional K-12 classroom continues to be verbocentric in approach where teachers have little opportunity to expand literacy curriculum beyond words (M.Siegel, personal communication, October 18, 2013). Finally, I wanted them to explore different media, not simply visual and verbal media in the binary sense but their textures, shapes, colors and fonts, etc., as a process for understanding which medium truly sparks words and ideas for their writing. These goals were especially important for my pre-service teachers, a group of students who openly shared in their weekly written exit slips (Leigh, 2012) that it is stressful when they have to figure things out for themselves. They were frustrated and even struggled with open invitations for learning that promotes flexible thinking.

From the video, the students watched Verdugo provide a demonstration of how her poem came to life from her bundle. Pulling back the curtain on this process, I used a document camera in the classroom to show them what that process looked like for me (see Poem 1) using seven varied pages from my bundle; sharing my observations of what I felt was going on in the pictures; pointing to particular visual and verbal devices that resonated with me, such as looking at the space between objects; noticing the size of objects and what that communicates suggests; and generating a list of words by saying and writing down one word for each page (e.g., *wovenstripe*, *sun*, *geranium*, *flicker*, *plum*, *feather*, and *heavy*). The students saw that the words *wovenstripe*, *sun* and *geranium* were printed on pages torn from a book; *Flicker* came to me from a watercolor painting of a street lamp. *Plum* and *feather* were literal representations in the magazine pages, and the cartoon image of a man trying to lift two palm trees prompted for me the word *heavy*. Next, they saw me rearrange some of the words as well as develop an idea

by introducing a few new ones from re-examining the pages and their potential meanings, resulting in a short poem that I felt proud to share:

Look at you glisten

**Geranium Sun**

**heavy plum**

**feather** in the sky.

Run away with me

along the **wovenstripe**

and

**flicker** through the trees.

*Poem 1.* Leigh's poem Geranium Sun.

Over the course of four months, 36 students created three idea bundles—the mixed bundle, the verbal bundle, and the visual bundle—from materials that I brought to class from which they wrote poems. There was also a fourth bundle that I had pre-made for them—the arranged bundle. I read the picture books *Fox* (Wild, 2006) and *Visiting Day* (Woodson, 2015), texts ideally suited for young children, as well as *Woolvs in the Sitee* (Wild, 2007) and *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2010), texts that speak to an older audience—for their poetic text, depth of color, and strong, human-interest themes. I felt they could provide vision and direction to any student unsure of what to write from his/her bundle. These picture book stories are a normal part of my instruction. During each read aloud, students were encouraged to capture any aspect of the text that resonated by jotting down an idea or a word, such as a strong verb or rich description, which could be used in their poems. In so doing, students' notetaking provided a wellspring from which they could incorporate—if they so desired—an author's rich language into their own writing and/or develop a poem inspired by one of the book's characters or themes. Students then followed the same guidelines as I had demonstrated with my poem, "Geranium Sun" (see Poem 1). They created an idea bundle from the media provided, attended to visual and verbal devices from each page that caught their attention and considered how these devices might impact their word choices, wrote one word per page, and constructed a free verse poem of any length they desired from their list of words. Students were encouraged to experiment with line breaks and fragment sentences, manipulate syntax and reconfigure words.

Students shared one or two lines from their poems to the person sitting closest to them, creating meaningful opportunities for them to grow in their appreciation of poetry with its form as well as its feeling. In listening to someone share words that flow and tumble on the page one can appreciate the openness of ideas, including cadence and rhythm of language.

At the end of the semester when students were able to gain some reflective distance from their engagement, they examined all four bundles and discussed how one kind of bundle supported a poem more than another, discussed which pages resonated and therefore affected what they wrote, shared how the picture book stories impacted some of their poems in content, tone, or both, and talked about how they might have grown from the experience as writers. All of this discussion, while anecdotal, was recorded in my field notes that I later applied in my analysis.

## Methods and Analysis

The summer prior to the study, I looked for visual and verbal diversity in the magazines and books that I had collected, discarding any media that included controversial images, such as alcohol ads, and religious texts. Living with a chef, I have access to culinary magazines, which I consider ideal resources for descriptive writing, since they yield strong verbs (e.g., pureeing), descriptive adjectives (e.g., cremini, hearty), and vivid images (e.g., blue versus cobalt, red versus crimson). I also included unfinished watercolor projects of mine for their abstract quality and children's book pages in Italian, French, and Spanish to help bring cultural diversity to the bundle as a way of offering English-speaking students the opportunity to explore unique meaning with unfamiliar words. Friends donated monochrome and color photographs, greeting cards, sheet music, and newspapers.

I coded each page with a colored dot to identify which type of media students selected for their bundles and entered this data in an Excel chart. To protect their anonymity, students selected a pseudonym from a basket (e.g., name of a constellation or writer's surname) and wrote this name on all four bundles. On a 5x7 questionnaire, students wrote their word-lists and poems on one side, and on the other, they identified number of media selected and which page(s) offered the greatest support for their poems and why. When they were finished writing, they paper-clipped their pages to the form so that I had access to the media that inspired each poem. On average, students collected seven different media for each idea bundle and used six of their list-words.

For the mixed bundle (MB), I read Margaret Wild's (2006) *Fox*, a story about Magpie and Dog whose deep friendship helps them overcome their disabilities – a burnt wing and a missing eye respectively. A lonely fox enters their lives, and readers discover the depth of his betrayal. It is an emotional story, one that offers perspective on what it means to be vulnerable. For the verbal bundle (VB), I read Wild's (2007) *Wolvs in the Sitee*, a story about Ben, a homeless boy who confronts his fears in search of his own truth and leaves readers to speculate who the wolves may be. The story of a young girl who goes with her grandmother to visit her father in prison, Jacqueline Woodson's (2002) *Visiting Day*, offers a strong theme of togetherness and family that led my students through the visual bundle (VSB). Finally, Shaun Tan's (2010) *The Red Tree* led my students through the arranged bundle (AB) where they were confronted with a story about renewal as they watched and listened to a young girl wrestle with one bad day to the next to discover that hope not only lives, but glimmers, in the hubbub of everyday life. After each read aloud, the students got up from their seats and, with the weight of a powerful story in their psyche, were invited to create their bundles from an assortment of media spread out on tables and begin writing their poems. Listening to a read aloud before writing mediates, I believe, thinking and reflection about one's own story. It offers vocabulary or language that can populate students' ideas for expression. If what Herriot (2014) says is true that good sentences live in the ear, then I want Tan's, Wild's, and Woodson's words living in my students' ears to potentially impact their writing. Choice and expression are interrelated (Behizadeh, 2014) and provide some grist for the mill of authentic writing.

I used grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze 136 idea bundles for their effectiveness in motivating students to write descriptive and vivid poems, which allowed me to address categories, recurring patterns, and search for possible meanings. I

also used open and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) as a process for making patterns with media more visible, first analyzing individual bundles and then examining relationships between and among categories as the data, axial coding for example, expanded in my grouping of idea bundles. Student commentary, shared in class or on an exit slip, helped in clarifying and refining codes beyond the questionnaires.

For the purposes of this article, I have included just 13 poems from the study whose wordplay--that is, the freedom to experiment with language--I felt most profoundly and whose explanations on how media supported them as writers provided the greatest clarity of the relationship between bundle and poem. Findings suggest: 1) visual media challenged students to embrace the open potential of pictures; 2) verbal media challenged students to embrace literal meanings and; 3) the mixed bundle was the ideal bundle for motivating students to write. In the poems that follow, words in boldface refer to those derived from specific pages within a bundle.

### **Challenges and Directions from Visual Media**

Student questionnaires and class discussion revealed that many students found it “hard to look beyond the literal image.” Atwood wrote, “It was difficult to come up with a different word other than the literal picture.” They asked: “When an image offers several ideas at once, how do you know which one to write about?” Some students experienced difficulty in embracing the mystery or openness that comes from working with images. Many students wanted to know what was visually important, when the writer, not the teacher, determined importance. They wanted to know if they were reading images correctly, when correctness is not a part of the image-poem experience. Many students limited themselves to the notion that there is one way of looking at or interpreting an image.

Other students, however, countered these views on their questionnaires. Paterson, for example, claimed that, “Pictures leave more room for interpretation.” Fitzgerald agreed: “You have more choices in pictures.” Wrote Dahl, “I liked the challenge of finding and pulling out words from the images. It made the theme of my poem more open-ended as I felt as though I didn't have specific words to include.” On an exit slip, a place for students to document their learning, one student wrote: “I really like working with pictures, they're so whimsical and mysterious.”

Generally, once students let go of the notion that there is a right way to view an image for words, they were able to focus their attention on writing from images that felt personally relevant, while others attended to art elements and their impact on how they read an image. Photographs, in particular, inspired students to engage in descriptive writing more than any other visual medium.

**Photographs.** The medium affects the message, argued McLuhan (1967), noting that the objects we use impact how we see the world. For Lee, that meant writing a poem about a car when the photo of a 1965 El Camino was the first page in his bundle. For Lee and his peers, it was hard to miss the significance of texture and color (or the absence of color) from photographs. Said Lyra in a class discussion, “Photographs have texture to them. You can write about texture,” which supported Polaris' view that, “Texture provides more opportunity for diversity in my word choice.” Perhaps no picture shows texture best than a grainy photograph, an observation not lost on Lowry, who wrote: “I can respond to images that are so detailed like that. It speaks to me and is easy to recall a detail when it appears granular.” It was in this mindset that Lowry developed a visually

rich poem, drawing from the grainy detail of a girl's twirled skirt and applied that image to a poem about a tangled up dance (see Poem 2).

In Poem 3, Steinbeck's word choice of "boney arms" emerged from a photograph whose white backdrop offset dark and spindly branches "too lifelike to ignore." Steinbeck wrote: "Photos feel more personal than any other image," adding, "When it's personal, you see things differently." The photo of a child's swing and another photo of a worn watch on an aging hand sparked for Steinbeck the interest to write a poem that brought together these two images in a themed and abstract poem on adulthood (see Poem 4). Hinton, who revealed that Poem 5 developed from a bundle that offered "a large emotional feeling," explained that paper glossiness draws your eye to what is bright and colorful: "You notice things and I like that because you start to put ideas together and work from there." In this mindset, it was a vibrant photo of a road with its "pebbly detail" that Hinton worked with in writing a poem on travel. For Updike (see Poem 6), that meant noticing an elderly passerby, his back slightly hunched over, captured standing alongside a car in a monochrome photo. "It was eerie and evoked fright in me. I could imagine myself standing there but also imagine this man in his own kind of cell," drawing reference to the incarcerated father in Woodson's (2002) *Visiting Day*.

**Crossword** days  
are **tangled** up  
in a sidewalk hop  
of blue **mosaics**  
and polka dots,  
where **bambinos** dance a **ragazzo**  
against the sunset sky.  
Red tones fade to **copper**  
as day leads to night and  
fire **crackles**  
the world to sleep,  
ready for the day's **encore**.  
*Poem 2. Lowry's AB poem*

An **autumn sunset**  
A creamsicle drip  
drip, dripping  
into the water's **edge**.  
An **empty** sky  
**gripped** by the boney arms of winter's **trees**.  
*Poem 3. Steinbeck's AB poem*

Childhood is a **fantasy**,  
a **splinter** in **time** that  
we long to rid of  
as we make it home  
by curfew.  
Adulthood **blooms** like **nightfall**,  
then suddenly it's whiplash  
that never ends.  
*Poem 4. Steinbeck's VSB poem*

**Travel** with me to my **happy** place,  
where the **rolling** meadows don't ask **questions**  
and the **road** we're on gives us **feedback**.  
*Poem 5. Hinton's AB poem*

We walk away  
down a **narrowing** hall  
and I know:  
**Loneliness** **pecks** at his heart  
in a cell, crammed  
**pride** draining from his soul.  
The only hope he has  
is their **forgiveness**.  
*Poem 6. Updike's VSB poem*

### **Challenges and Directions from Verbal Media**

Student questionnaires and class discussion revealed that it was "harder," explained Vonnegut, "to be creative with word choice when words are provided in a text." Dahl put it another way: "It's a challenge to use a word that has a negative connotation like 'hassle' especially if it doesn't work with the rest of the list but it's hard to throw it out too 'cause you feel like you should use it." Spinelli, who also experienced difficulty in "getting ideas from words," or Morrison, who "couldn't create what I felt because the words came straight from the page," wrestled like so many others with constructing meaning from someone else's words. There was a general dislike for the verbal pages, since students felt so limited by them. They were annoyed enough to complain but not annoyed enough to stop writing and be able to talk about the potential of meaning with words (e.g., the use of a culinary term in a non-cuisine context), or use different parts of speech than what they found in pages (e.g., a change in noun (rag) to a verb (ragged), and/or change a singular word to plural). These discussions on language provided unexpected directions in what they ultimately felt that they could write. Words in Italian and magazine pages, in particular, offered students meaningful directions in their poems.

**Italian words.** Most words in contemporary Italian language end in vowels, making its musical quality distinctive and pleasing to one's ear. Almost entirely phonetic, it is a relatively easy language to pronounce, which is an important consideration for the

non-Italian writer who sounds out words for effect as part of the process in deciding whether or not to use an unfamiliar word in his or her poem. While some Italian words like *tempo* have made their way into the English language, including those words generally understood among English language speakers, such as *bambino* for “child” and cognates where two words share similar meaning, such as *tranquillo* for “tranquil,” most of the words included in their bundles were unfamiliar to students. Even so, students generally agreed that Italian, more than Spanish and French, offered a degree of “songlike,” or rhythmic, flow to their writing. In addition, not knowing the meaning of words took the pressure off knowing how to use them properly. They had creative, Italian-license to play with meaning. There is value in playful writing, argues Kittle (2008), for “Out of this freedom, good writing grows” (p. 31).

In Poem 7, the words *tempo* and *tranquillo* inspired the verb “sprinkling.” Explained Didion, “I was looking for a word that also sounded light and would fit the mouseketeer [sic]. I would read this poem to my kids in the field placement. This is the bundle I am most proud of because the words provided are unique and words that I wouldn't normally choose on my own.” The decision to make “tranquillo” a place or destination for the mouse also demonstrates flexible thinking and works semantically in the poem. Likewise, Ephron explores meaning in Poem 8 with “voglio,” which conjures up a rich image of a tree thick with leaves. “The word [voglio] stood out to me because of the font and size of font used. This one presented a challenge, but it works.” While I am unsure of the meaning of the word pair “cashwum flight” as Ephron intended, the uncertainty of it lends a particular vibrancy to the poem that makes me want to read it again and again.

The **lone** mouseketeer,  
picked up his **tempo**  
by **sprinkling** the world  
until he reached  
**Tranquillo.**

Poem 7. Didion's VB poem

I sat beside the **voglio** tree  
under leaves of **bowls and light**  
in the **property** that fell with cashwum flight.

Poem 8. Ephron's VB poem

**Magazines.** Students' bundles included a range of magazine genres, from culinary pages to sports, fashion, and travel. Providing different magazine content helped to ensure that students discovered, in one or more bundles, pages that spoke to their recreational interests. Diverse magazine media also positioned students to consider word choices in unlikely contexts, such as “the event marinated,” “clouds blush,” “woven flavor,” “the zest of May” or “some people are trapped by the wales in their minds,” wrote Spinelli. In addition, access to diverse magazine pages exposed students to a range of layout and design decisions with varying effect. In Poem 9, for example, it was the color and size of font for the word “dance” that made Big Dipper look back at an image of fireworks before coming up with the word “trippy.”

In Poem 10, Pegasus took the words “drink” and “enveloped” from a culinary context to describe a boy’s darkness, a poem inspired by the wandering Ben in Wild’s (2007) *Woolvs in the Sitee*. “It connects to me and what I know from my past.” In the arranged bundle, Ephron wrote that “more variety of words,” such as “crumb” and “shield” provided a rich pool to work with and to practice Shaun Tan’s (2010) wholeness of text (Ray, 2010) where the writing begins and ends in similar ways to create a cohesive piece.

**Fireworks dance** in the sky  
and create trippy leaves.  
*Poem 9. Big Dipper’s AB poem*

I **drink** the sweet musty air  
in streets **enveloped** in darkness  
and I wonder,  
Why wasn’t I a **keeper**?  
*Poem 10. Pegasus’ VB poem*

Sometimes we wake up  
**minutes** before death  
and sometimes we don’t.  
Sometimes we wake for a **crumb** of our favorite **taste**  
unable to **flush** away or **shield** ourselves  
from what’s really underneath the **lid**.  
Sometimes, we wake up.  
*Poem 11. Ephron’s AB poem*

### **The Mixed Bundle Is The Ideal Bundle**

Student questionnaires and class discussion revealed that the mixed bundle, where students gathered a variety of visual and verbal media, offered a compelling experience with poetry, more compelling than the verbal bundle (all print media), the visual bundle (all images), and the arranged bundle (an assortment of visual and verbal media that I arranged and handed to students). “I wrote things I could never have made up on my own,” wrote one student on an exit slip, referring to writing from the mixed bundle where student choice and a blend of visual and verbal media made a difference that they could feel in their writing. “This is my favorite bundle,” shared one student. “I felt like it brought out a lot of thoughtful words.”

While a few students like Dahl enjoyed the surprise in working with pre-selected pages from the arranged bundle that eliminated “thinking or planning too much when I had the chance to choose my own,” or, in Vonnegut’s experience, “having constraints forced me to tighten my writing regarding specific word choice.” For most of Dahl and Vonnegut’s peers, the arranged bundle “seemed more difficult to write something with pieces I didn’t pick.” Having some control over the process of creating a varied bundle mattered: “This was the bundle that held a deeper and heavier message. I could create what I felt.”

In Poem 12, a close-up photograph of pink hydrangea “felt open” and “quiet” laid out against two pages “that felt closed,” such as a photograph of a snail and the word “frozen” lifted from a magazine, Hinton, who felt Magpie’s sense of hopelessness in Margaret Wild’s (2006) *Fox*, riffed from these pages to create a poem that speaks to Magpie’s plight as she considers her options alone in the desert. “I liked how bright the photos were but that I could write a poem that’s dark.” Indeed, the mixed bundle offered Hinton a canvas from which an unexpected emotional response could be explored. Like Hinton, Ephron also felt moved by Magpie’s circumstances in that the writing in Poem 13 captured a theme of vulnerability in the line, “where we are immigrants beyond our driveway.” Magpie is safe with Dog, but, outside of his reach and alone in the desert, she is vulnerable, like an immigrant. “I just purchased my first home so it stayed with me, the idea that Magpie is homeless.” It is in this line of thinking that Ephron takes the word “rebuilt,” which comes from a page on remodeling cars, and in the line “home is perspective, character rebuilt,” communicates the idea that home is a mindset; one can rebuild her life on that.

In Poem 14, “the only map” that Steinbeck will follow “is the one that will give you the world,” referring to a beloved niece that came to mind from a magazine image of a baby. The word “gallop,” which comes from a drawing of a horse, paired with “spirit” from sheet music, “made me think of the fox that has been shut out of the world by the world but still wants the world.” The process in writing Poem 14 involves, as do many of the poems, multiple layers--that is, layers from images, from words, from personal experience, and from the read aloud--where the student must decide what to use, what to discard, and what ideas to develop. The end result is a poem that speaks to the writer: “This bundle spoke to me very quickly and was so easy to write. [This bundle] captures what we can’t get out on our own.” The mixed bundle offers students a unique canvas of ideas from which they can make their thinking newly real, for the poem is immediate and unleashes a written voice where good writing can grow.

Quiet **music** playing,  
sitting alone and **frozen**,  
**stuffed** inside my **shell**, dark and hard  
surrounded by walls, stone and gray  
**walls** that keep me safe  
from the outside world  
that I long for secretly.  
But I am **stuck**,  
hopelessly  
inside my shell.

*Poem 12. Hinton’s MB poem*

**Home** is where the **goldfinch** fly  
where the **woods** lie  
within the **front door**  
where we are **immigrants** beyond our driveway.  
Home is perspective, character **rebuilt**  
and only as **natural** as the woods we live in.  
*Poem 13. Ephron's MB poem*

**Autumn** twists into winter  
like my finger in the **curl** of your hair.  
**Rounded cheeks**, a heavy smile  
My **heart gallops** in sync with your **spirit**.  
The only **map** I follow  
is the one that will give you  
the world.  
*Poem 14. Steinbeck's MB poem*

### **Pedagogical Directions**

Idea bundles can offer students a compelling experience with poetry, especially when they are provided a selection of media worth hovering over, snatching those images that pop and truly catch the eye. Teachers who use idea bundles in their own poetry lessons can offer students a real connection to poetry where discovering one's written voice is not only possible but easily felt. As teachers (and students) gather materials for their classroom bundles, the following questions may facilitate a closer look at print and visual media. As this study demonstrates, the medium (for writing) matters, which is why a close examination of media is important. Once these objectives are clear, two categories can then be used to further determine how to select pages for bundles. These categories include both general and focused bundle considerations.

#### **General Bundle Considerations**

- What kinds of print materials do I want to include (e.g., books, magazines, newspapers, crosswords, sheet music)?
  - What genre of magazine do I want to include that emphasizes print (e.g., news, lifestyle, pop culture, music)?
  - Which of these genres yield strong verb and word choice?
- What kinds of visual materials do I want to include (e.g., magazine images, black and white photographs, color photographs, art, wrapping and tissue paper)?
  - What genre of magazine do I want to include that emphasizes images (e.g., cuisine, art, photography, architecture, travel, sports)?
  - Which of these genres yield strong images? Culturally relevant images?

#### **Focused Bundle Considerations**

- What alternative meaning does the word \_\_\_\_\_ have?
- What two words from a page can I combine for a unique word combination?
- How might I describe this image? The color? The light?
- What symbolism do I see in this image?
- What is a literal word and figurative phrase that describe this page?

- What words, such as adjectives and adverbs, do these patterns and colors conjure up for me?
- Which visual details (e.g., dot, line, shape, value, texture, color, space, and/or movement) am I attending to that affects how I am constructing meaning?

From a critical literacy perspective, teachers may also engage students in discussions on what influences their understanding of what is being represented and what has been silenced in an image by asking the question, “Who is absent or misrepresented in this image?” Particular pages can enable bundle-writers to express poetically what their past has conceived, making the search and collection of potentially compelling media a worthwhile endeavor in the pursuit of writing poems that illuminate personal voice.

### **Final Thoughts**

Poetry worksheets are reminiscent of traditional approaches to teaching poetry and therefore deservingly bottom drawer material. By way of contrast, the idea bundle is a rich packet of visual and verbal media that kindles poetic voice and offers indelible reward to even the most reluctant of writers. The bundle is as much a stack of media as it is a quiet pool where students can let their minds drop--that is, consider ideas and directions for one’s writing--and enjoy the deepest contemplation with words and images out of which a poem can emerge. Bundle-writing is fresh and immediate, yet rooted in students’ own sense of what a poem can look and sound like.

In this study, both visual and verbal media challenged my students to look beyond literal meanings (of images and words), a tension that ultimately provided unexpected directions in what they felt that they could write.

Photographs held a particular cache. Unlike my generation, most of the students in this study did not grow up with photo albums and boxes of snapshots in their closets. Quite a few students, themselves millennials, observed that for the first time ever they held black and white photographs. They are more familiar with downloading, editing, and sharing digital images than they are printing them. But perhaps their interest and ease with working with digital images illuminates the potential in using digital images for digital idea bundles.

Pages in Italian and a range of magazine content also provided students a word bank from which they could explore creative meaning in constructing their poems.

The mixed idea bundle was the ideal bundle for motivating my students to write poems, while the visual bundle was “too open to interpretation,” the verbal bundle “too limiting,” and the arranged bundle “too restrictive,” since they could not choose individual media themselves. When students select pages that immediately resonate and write from the language of pictures and words, they increase their communication potential in developing their poems. This is especially important for the struggling writer or English language learner (ELL) who benefits from visual communication that enlivens writing experiences and helps support self-expression (Gulla, 2012; Haines, 2015).

Serious subject matter from the read alouds provided enough of a nudge to help my most reluctant writers. The idea bundle is an interpretive engagement that is open and flexible and therefore affords the writer the intellectual space needed to digest stories that carry emotional weight. The combination of seriousness (from the books) and serendipity (from the bundles) provided, I believe, a comfortable entrée into poetry for my students.

Finally, even though we live in a growing visual culture where students today are thought of as being comfortable with interacting with images through various online

media, that does not mean that they understand how images work (Felten, 2008). Visual media traffics in subtleties and, as such, students need meaningful opportunities to talk with their peers about how meaning is constructed visually. For the developing writer attending to art elements and principles of design (Albers, 2007; 2009) in their bundles, these classroom discussions are essential in learning how one concrete image can conjure up several mental images and words in one's mind. The idea bundle is the art of generating words as much as it is the art of reading images to construct utmost meaning in one's poem.

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