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Read-Create-Write:

Using Altered Books to Inspire Critical Thinking

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Abstract

Altered books as an art form are a relatively new approach to recycling and expression, but with a little imagination, they can serve to incorporate art into the English Language Arts classroom and guide students into creative, critical thinking about symbols, meaning, and expression. The process of reading, questioning, creating, presenting, and writing reaches the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

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Read-Create-Write:

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I have long believed in the importance of art in critical thinking. As the philosophy of STEM took over education circles, I pushed back and insisted on art projects in all of my English/Language Arts classes. I had nothing but my instincts to back me up, but an understanding administrator gave me free reign as long as student achievement improved. The more recent emergence of STEAM (adding “arts” to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) reinforces my long-held conviction that artistry and creativity have value in promoting problem solving and critical thinking (Buchsbaum, 2015; Guyotte, Sochacka, Costantino, Kellam, & Walther, 2015).

Artistic thinking, especially applied to analytical processes, encourages innovation by breaking down expectations and forging new ways to approach problems (Watson & Watson, 2013). Function may precede form, but form affects practicality. This applies to reading, interpreting, and writing about literature as much as it does engineering. The US Senate recently recognized the importance of the arts as core subjects when they passed a bipartisan proposal called the Every Student Succeeds Act (S. 1177) as part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. While the driving force behind the legislation is the National Association for Music Education, the recognition of art as important is a step in the right direction (NAfME, 2015).

As a mixed media artist, I was able to participate in [*Reversing Vandalism*](#)¹, a 2001 project initiated by the San Francisco Public Library after a number of books were vandalized. Instead of throwing the books away, the library chose to send the destroyed property to artists around the

world, who transformed the books into art for display. That experience inspired me to incorporate altered books into my teaching of high school students.

Altered books (and now altered journals) are a reasonably new art form, but are based on ancient practices of reusing outdated materials. Egyptian scribes regularly recycled outdated official papyrus documents for personal use (Eyre, 2013), while the Romans reused parchment after washing the original ink off with a citric acid wash (Dié, n.d.). The modern movement began in the 1970s, when art poets began using inexpensive books as a form of art diaries. The explosion in rubber stamping and scrapbooking at the beginning of the 21st century established altered books as a constant in the arts and crafts world (Sparks, 2010).

Before librarians, English teachers, and bibliophiles panic, altered books do not desecrate valuable books. Generally, books selected to be transformed are those destined for the trash heap because they are beyond repair or use in their original form. These books are rescued and repurposed through tearing, painting, cutting, drilling, rebinding, unbinding, and any other manipulation imaginable to become something artistic. Sometimes the base book provides a theme for the completed work; sometimes the theme is completely unrelated to the text. Altered books become sculptures, poetry, and canvases. In my classroom they are foundations for creative critical thinking.

Several years ago I created one unit for a World Literature course that included Eastern philosophy based on a book, *Watching the Tree* by Adeleine Yen Mah (2001). Yen Mah writes of her search for significance through a number of Eastern philosophies from *I Ching* to Zen. The course was effective enough the first time that I repeat it whenever I have a World Literature course in my schedule. Most high school students in the US are unfamiliar with the foundations of Eastern religion, so the book becomes a natural way to teach students the value of other

cultures and to refine what they themselves believe. I tend to stay true to Socratic dialogue in my classes, so my lessons are based on questions.

Because Eastern culture values images, this particular book lends itself to an art project, and I introduce students to the art of [altered books](#)² (“Altered Book Tutorial Video 1,” 2013). The first several chapters of the book are foundational, so those are covered together as a class. Once I have established a system for questioning, analysis, and symbolism, I set students free to explore the rest of the text. Students self-select any chapter and take themselves on a systematic journey to discover and share the lessons they learn through an altered book spread, a presentation, and a short essay. The final projects are often brilliant and imaginative, even from students who didn’t consider themselves artistic at all before the project began. Although they complain, at the end of the year, most students consider this their favorite unit of the year.

The unit is a cycle of chapters beginning with reading. Students read the chapter and make note of the essential elements of each philosophy discussed. Then they must generate questions. In the first few chapters the teacher composes the questions, but students begin to add their own as early as the second chapter. By the time they begin their individual journeys, most are able to ask the how and why questions that form the basis of critical thinking.

When students begin their independent chapters, they are able to ask the kinds of questions that lead to thoughtful reflection and they must, then, begin to think in terms of symbols. Some students find this especially challenging and may need guidance to think beyond the school box. Hobbies become an entry to symbols, especially for students who are musicians, athletes, or gamers. Each interest area has its symbols; once these are uncovered, students are able to transfer the concept to their reading. Students will need to research symbols and meaning, but that’s part of the challenge. As they think through their chosen topics, most will find a voice.

Thinking in images and then working with their hands to create those images seems to connect student thoughts to the images that they can then transform into words. Perhaps this is the result because the art forces them to slow down and focus on one aspect of the chapter. The final step is an expository essay of both the chapter and their reflective journey through it. Please refer to Figure 1, which depicts the unit composition process.



Figure 1. Collage of unit composition process.

The books for the altered book project generally come from secondhand shops. Hardbound are best, and they are usually quite inexpensive. Library book sales are another good place to look. Outdated textbooks are ideal because they are usually thick with sewn bindings.

There are dozens of helpful websites with ideas for creating altered books: [Altered Book](#)³ (n.d.), [The Art of Happiness](#)⁴ (Hatzigeorgiou, 2008-2014), [Go Make Something](#)⁵ (Vollrath, 2014), [Lisa Vollrath](#)⁶ (2013) and [Tim Holtz](#)⁷ (2011). The most important element of this part of the project is to reassure students that assessment is not on the artistic merit of the work, but rather on the thought processes behind it.

As students create their altered books, they will make connections between their personal lives, their artwork, and the text. This becomes the foundation for their oral presentations and their written work. My preference is to make the presentation reflective of the experience and the written work a blend of information and personal narrative. Students may struggle with making something instead of doing school in the traditional sense, but the effects of the lesson seem to be memorable and long lasting. One student, whom I will call Mary, remembers exploring the harmony of Yin and Yang while finding balance in her own life. She says, "...the altered book really helped me connect to the text more and really understand the text more deeply because...I had to think more critically about the text so I would be able to interpret it successfully" (personal communication, December 11, 2015). Mary was a struggling student when she came into the class, and she found the creative process helpful in understanding complex texts.

Another student, whom I will call Ann, has a two-fold memory: "It really gave me an insight into an entirely different culture and way of thinking, and made me want to learn more because I saw truths that transcended time and culture and race. Also, it was fun to paint on a book, though it felt a little sacrilegious" (personal communication, December 12, 2015). Ann is now a scientist, so that she was able to connect to the humanities in a real and memorable way as a high school sophomore validates my belief that art is a critical element in learning.

Students expend a good deal of thinking into how they can tell the story of the chapter in an unusual medium. This kind of thinking expands the possibilities of how to approach the English Language Arts classroom. As a former student observes, “Honestly, my main take-away in regards to altered books is this: everyone learns differently and the school system should embrace this fact. I don’t think students should be put in boxes” (personal communication, December 11, 2015). Students have something to say and this project, with its multiple modes, affords them a unique voice with which to speak. Figures 2 through 7, which follow, are altered books created by students in two different classes. The artwork itself is as individual as the students who created it. Each interpreted the literature in a unique way.

The chapter in Yen Mah (2001) about Yin and Yang has been a popular one for students. The work in Figure 2 is by a particular student who used the traditional symbol and connected it to the author’s mention of one of her other works, *Falling Leaves* (1999).



Figure 2. *Yin and Yang in Harmony* (p. 157). Student work by Melanie White. Copyright 2015 by Melanie White. Reprinted with permission.

Figure 3 depicts work by a student who chose a more straightforward look at the differences between Yin and Yang, using a unifying color to demonstrate the necessity for both to work in harmony.

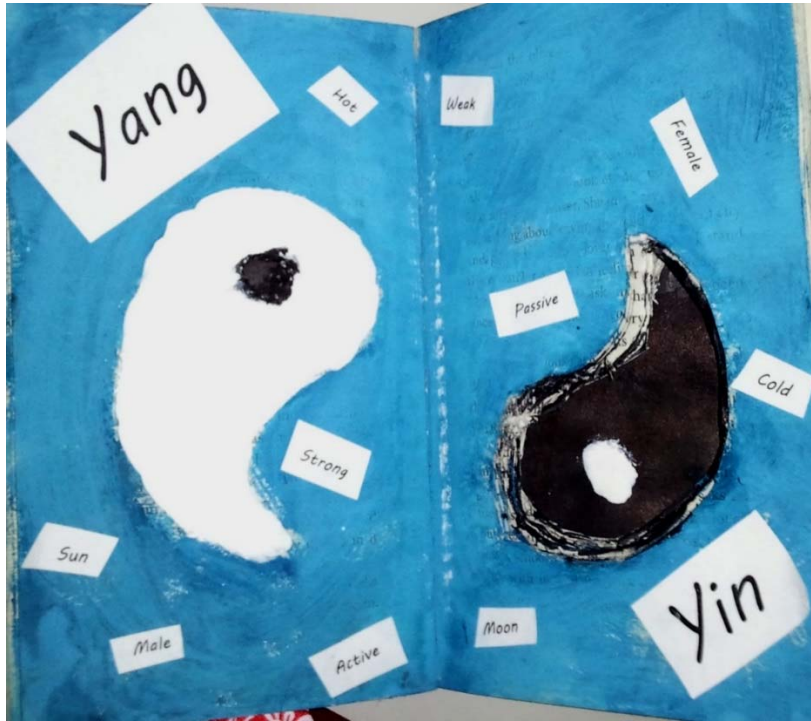


Figure 2. *Opposites in Balance* (p. 156). Student work by Abby Brooks. Copyright 2015 by Abby Brooks. Reprinted with permission.

The work in Figure 4 is by a student who also chose Yin and Yang, but decided to focus her attention on the introductory story about a frog who lived contentedly at the bottom of a well and his conversation with a turtle who had the whole ocean as his home.



Figure 3. *Zuang Zi's story of Turtle and Frog (p. 144)*. Student work by Madelin Ryan.

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The work in Figure 5 is by a student who opted to explore the chapter about Qi, the life force that must remain in balance for a healthy life.



Figure 4. Balanced Qi (p. 103). Student work by Abigail Quarles. Copyright 2015 by Abigail Quarles. Reprinted with permission.

The student who completed the work in Figure 6 actually did multiple projects. This particular one shows the elements of the *I Ching* and the eight trigrams that practitioners use to discern answers to their questions.



Figure 5 *Wisdom of I Ching* (p. 12). Student work by Reagan Davenport. Copyright 2015 by Reagan Davenport. Reprinted with permission.

The work displayed in Figure 7 is by a student who is an artist in her daily life, so I expected something spectacular. I was not disappointed. She chose to illustrate *yuan qi*, a phrase that means inspiration. She wrote that her mind saw inspiration as a cloud, patiently waiting for perfect conditions to send down its contents, rain or snow, to the earth.



Figure 6. Yuan Qi (p. 230). Student work by Emilie Johnson. Copyright 2015 by Emilie Johnson. Reprinted with permission.

Useful Resources for Creating Altered Books

Altered-Book.Com (<http://www.altered-book.com/>⁸)

This website is an ideal place to begin. It includes basic information about the craft and history of altered books along with suggestions for materials from adhesives to waxed paper backgrounds.

Altered Book Tutorial Video 1 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIqaedoCtyM>⁹)

The artist in this video demonstrates more advanced techniques, including disassembling books, creating new spines, and making pockets.

The Art of Happiness (<http://karenswhimsy.com/altered-books/happiness/>¹⁰)

This website contains beautiful examples of altered books along with other tempting galleries of the artist's work.

Tim Holtz, Configurations (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaaZfKYKvV0>¹¹)

Tim Holtz uses his *Idea-ology* products in this video, but his techniques and ideas are both informative and entertaining.

Lisa Vollrath, A Crash Course on Altered Books, *Mixed Media Club*. (<http://mixedmedia.club/a-crash-course-on-altered-books/>¹²)

Lisa Vollrath is one of the best known artists in the mixed media world. In this website she discussed book selection, preparation for altering, and samples of her work. A YouTube video of Vollrath in action was published in 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiMI0M3gmcl>¹³

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Smart thinking: skills for critical understanding and writing. Melbourne: Oxford University Press. For practice in distinguishing degrees of support see *The Argument: Degrees of Support*. 3. Evaluating the argument One important aspect of critical reading is our ability to evaluate arguments, i.e., to judge and assess an argument's persuasiveness. If you are persuaded by an argument, you will accept it based on the strengths of the reasons provided. Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum. NY: Pearson/Longman. Avoiding logical fallacies A logical fallacy is faulty logic used in writing or speaking. There are many types of fallacies. You need to be able to recognize them when you read and avoid using them in your writing. See *Some Common Logical Fallacies*. Other sets by this creator. Pathways 3 Reading and Writing Unit 7. 20 terms. abbytutor. Pathways 3 Reading and Writing Unit 8. 20 terms. abbytutor. Unit 9 Pathways 3 Reading and Writing. 20 terms. abbytutor. Unit 6 Pathways 3 Reading and Writing. 20 terms. abbytutor. This set is often saved in the same folder as Pathways 2 Reading, Writing & Critical Thinking Unit 2. 21 terms. andreacarson123.