

Teaching an Old Book New Tricks

Getting Middle School Students Engaged in Drawing

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Introduction

Altering books, recycling old ones and transforming them into something entirely new is an emerging art form and an interesting activity for secondary students to try. The art teacher can also have fun as she makes her own example!

It is exciting to experiment with new techniques, materials, and ideas. Students often find creative and new ways to use a material and they enjoy teaching the rest of class how to accomplish the result. If a mistake is made, you just rip out the page and don't worry about it, especially since pages must be torn out anyway when collage materials are added so that the book doesn't get too bulky.

Good books to recycle are everywhere and they can be new or used. The Dollar Tree and thrift stores are great for finding nice hardbound books for the right price. Make sure the book has a good binding because the book will be getting a rough work out. Brittle paper in old books should be avoided for first books. Wire bindings can work, but it is best to keep paint off the wire for ease of turning pages.

Some teachers may want to have students use a "practice" book to learn new techniques before they incorporate them into their "official" book.

We recommend that students think of a broad **theme** for their books. This creates a unifying thread on which to base the images and designs. The practice book, of course, need not have a theme, as it can be a conglomeration of images and ideas that are highly experimental.

In class, students could brainstorm a list of themes that seem interesting to them as the teacher lists them on the board. Before students settle on an idea, it may be helpful to have them create a "word web" of ideas related to their theme, to ensure the topic is rich enough to elicit interesting design possibilities. For example, if twenty ideas come to mind when thinking about the topic "Medieval Times", then this could be a good theme to use. Sub-topics such as Castles, Fables, Dragons, Coats of Arms, Chivalry, Architecture, and Religion could easily generate more ideas with design potential. Of course the narrower the theme, the more restrictive the designs may become. At the end of this handout are suggestions for themes that students created. A more detailed list of themes (with some artist references) is included for advanced students.

If students don't have a theme, you could encourage them to create independent pages based around the Elements and Principles of Art or other broad art-related topic.

Make a list of techniques you would like all students to include in their pages. Demonstrate a different technique every few days and set up a "station" in the room for each activity where students can locate the specialized materials for that activity. That way students can work at their own pace or go back and repeat a technique without waiting for you to get the materials.

A suggested list of techniques that we require is included for your consideration on the next pages.

Required Techniques for the Altered Book:

- Must have a hard cover book, more than an inch thick.
- You will select a theme for the book (with instructor approval)
- The following ideas and techniques should be incorporated into your book. You may use one or more techniques on each page and you may repeat techniques.
- Each page should relate to your theme in some way.
- You are encouraged to use poetry, famous quotations, and excerpts from songs or stories.
- To get a good grade, you must have **many** good drawings. Aim for a drawing on every set of two pages.
- Failure to have your book in class will result in a reduction of your grade.

(1) **A definition page** (dictionary definition of the theme), including pronunciation. (Start with a large, decorative first letter like an illuminated manuscript in medieval days).

(2) A **word web** page of categories relating to the theme.

(3) (a). **Use text in a creative way** by creating a design with the text

(b) **Alter the text:** take existing print and block out or circle to create a new meaning..

(4) **Weaving:** cut a warp in the paper and weave with unusual papers, torn papers, photographs, etc. You can paint, write, or draw over the weaving

(5) **Pop-up or fold out:** make it out of cardstock and glue into the book on the centerfold.

(6) **Glue and tissue** for a background with a drawing over it

(7) **Contour drawing** over an interesting background

(8) **Hatch and cross-hatching** in a drawing over a prepared background.

(9) **Stipple technique** in a drawing (creating a picture using only dots, no lines)

(10) **Create a window**—cut out of the cover or cut out of several pages glued together

(11) **Create an author page** with a self-portrait and short biography. Students could cut a photo of themselves in half, glue it to the page, and then complete the other half with pencils, pens, or paint.

(12) Make **marbled paper** and use as a design element.

(13) **Printing:** make a printing block and use it as a design element.

(14) Create a **pocket with stitching** and put a piece of writing or an object in the pocket. Paint or design around the pocket.

(15) Use **stitching as an outline or as part of a design** (not just to hold 2 papers together). Incorporate the stitching into the picture. Try using thin thread and a small needle, or even tear the page out and stitch on a sewing machine (then glue the page back in).

(16) **Collage:** incorporate pictures and paint with a focal point

(17) **Photo extension:** use part of a photo that you have cut—can be cut in the shape of a star, a heart, or any shape, even just in half...then make a drawing around it to complete the picture. This is related to the suggestion of the author page being a half-photo with the other half a drawing.

Or

Photo enhancement: photocopy a picture one or more times (may choose to vary the size of the photo), then add color with pencils, watercolor, or add drawings to the picture to change or enhance it in some way. The image could be photocopied onto a designed paper or onto a textured paper.

(18) **Reproduction of a work of art:** Use a famous work of art on one of your pages—draw the work in a new way, alter it, and make it fit your theme in a unique way.

Helpful hints we learned the hard way

- Decorate the cover of the book when the insides are finished. In a classroom setting, it is too easy for the cover to get scratched, splashed with paint, or otherwise messed up.
- Have students write their names on the closed pages of the book so it can be identified without handling the book.
- Avoid getting paint on the sides of the book because it will glue the pages together. Wax paper used under the pages can help.
- Set up a station where pages can be painted quickly and left to dry for the next day's work.
- Discourage oil pastels for the covers or for early pages that get handled frequently because they rub off. They can, however, be sprayed with a lacquer to make them more permanent however.
- Discourage adding elements to the cover that are merely glued because they can be knocked off easily. Better to wire them on or attach them in a more permanent way. Contact cement or caulk adhesive is fairly strong.
- Encourage students to draw, draw, and draw! It is too easy to collage, stamp, and use transferred images at the expense of drawing. Make drawing an integral element in all of the pages.
- You could spend a few weeks getting everyone started on their books in class. This is when you would demonstrate different techniques and show examples. When all students have decided on a theme and are well on their way, you may decide to have them work on their books only one day a week. Fridays may be a good day for this. Students could bring their books to school on Thursday so they could paint or prepare a background during the last part of the period. Students will work at very different rates, depending on how motivated they are and depending on how complex they wish to make their pages. You could give drawing homework assignments for the books (contour drawing, stipple, etc.)
- The book is a nice way to incorporate lessons that involve preparing papers: marbling, stenciling, paste-papers, hand made papers, printing, wet washes, spattering, spray painting with toothbrushes and stencils, gadget printing, solar printing, nature printing and stamping patterns.
- Because of the recent explosion of scrap booking, you will need to emphasize that the book is not to be a compilation of photos of your friends and family with cute phrases next to each one! You may want to totally restrict personal photos unless they are used in an unusual way.
- Glitzy items, including glitter and glitter glue, can be very effective if used sparingly. Monitor carefully when these materials are available because students have a tendency to go overboard and ruin a nice design with too much glitz.

Getting Started

Before officially starting on the altered book project, have students prime some of the pages. These usually have to dry overnight and if they are prepared in advance, no time is wasted.

- Gesso works well (text shows through in a transparent way). Afterwards use the page as is, or use a dry brush to make random strokes of paint over the surface.
- House paint gives an opaque cover to the pages, concealing all of the writing.
- Water-soluble oil pastels can be blended across a page
- Watercolor or tempera washes
- Glue colored tissue paper to the page in layers
- Glue wallpaper or wrapping paper as a base
- Stamps can be used as repeat patterns as a base.
- Texture some of the paint by scraping through the surface. Use faux finish tools or texture by dragging or pouncing brushes or netting, for example. Thickly applied acrylic paint can be scratched through with combs. Lines or words can be scratched into the paint.
- Pastel chalks (try scrubbing into the page with a soft cloth) then set with a light coat of spray fixative
- Apply random strips of newspaper over a page.
- Try sponging, and then add a thin layer of acrylic.
- Make rubbings on the page by placing the book page over a textured surface. Then use pencil, charcoal, and oil pastels to draw over.
- Use slide-mounts to create embellishments for pages or covers. Decorate the mount as well as the inside window. Use single mounts or fill the page with multiples. (This will add bulk to the book, requiring the removal of nearby pages. Simply tear out a number of pages until the book closes well).
- Use faux-finishing paint effects to create the look of exotic woods, marble, stucco, metals and mosaics.
- Use contact cement to attach edgings of leather or suede to a book cover (old wallets and purses can be cut up).

Think of your theme and make a plan (word web). The word web can become a page or two at the beginning of the book and serve as a graphic organizer or a sort of table of contents. When students get stuck and can't think of what to draw next, have them refer to the word web to see what topics they have left to cover.

A beginning first page may be to use the dictionary to define the actual word(s) of the theme, including the way to pronounce it. You can use the idea of Illuminated Manuscripts by embellishing the initial letter.

The theme name could also be translated into other languages with the text around a drawing or wedged inside the drawing itself.

Use a favorite poem or quote as a starting point.

You can still teach the entire class a particular lesson. The subject of the lesson will revolve around their theme. Printmaking, for example...one student will be carving their block as a tiger face while another may be carving a portrait of a clown.

Have students make an “author” page with a self-portrait of themselves. Have them write a short autobiography and include how they came to use the theme. Typically this is the last page of the book, but it could be placed anywhere, even on a book jacket if one is made.

Encourage the incorporation of artists who may have used a similar theme. Rather than copying facts about the artist, have students record their reactions to the artist’s work or what part of the work they like and how they have used it to motivate a design of their own.

Techniques for Creating Interesting Pages

Collage

Collage can easily be an excuse to avoid drawing. You will need to encourage and suggest that students will need to do more than merely glue the picture to the page. The trick to collage is layering. Incorporate layers of paint, inks, interesting papers, and even 3-D objects for a more interesting composition. Try tearing pictures in odd ways and blend the edges with paint so that it gradually fades into the background. The softer edges, the more interesting the overall design may become. Textured papers can be used in interesting ways (remember Eric Carle from elementary school, with his beautiful books of collaged textured papers?)

Students can add a partial picture and then draw the rest of it with a permanent pen. Maps can become an interesting base for a collage. Try glazing it to look old.

Stitching

Students enjoy stitching paper together because it is a novel idea. For most middle school students you will need a hole puncher and a tapestry needle and yarn. The punched holes give a prescribed path for the stitching. More advanced students can manage without punching holes.

Pockets make a good first stitching project.

Basically, the top page is folded down (in half or at an angle) and it is stitched to the page below it to create a pocket. We suggest using two pages side-by-side and fold down each page. Punch holes around the bottom and up the side. Thread the needle and begin stitching. Tie a knot at the end. The hanging threads can be used as an embellishment to hang beads, buttons, or other amulets. Experimentation is key: use different yarns and threads (even wire!) and different stitches to get different effects.

Grommets are easy to insert and they are a novel way for students to add lacing or stitching. You will need to purchase a grommet setter at a fabric store and plenty of grommets (the kids love using this unique tool!)

Note: If you punch an even number of holes, the end of the fiber will come out the same side of the page as you started. Uneven numbers of holes finish on opposite sides.

Stitching could also be used to attach fabric or other papers or objects. It could be used as an unusual outline or as a path for the eye to follow around the page. It could hold buttons or wire mesh in place.

Variations with smaller needles and thread are, of course, very effective for a more controlled look.

Paper can be stitched on a sewing machine and then added to the page in the book.

Cutting Windows

A page with a window immediately draws the viewer's attention to that spot. There are many variations for the windows:

- For a basic window, simply glue 2 or more pages together to make a more rigid page. Cut the window—square, rectangular, free form, triangular, with or without panes. Draw something in the windows and decorate the background. Notice that each side of the window reveals a view.
- Add “glass” between the pages with acetate sandwiched inside.
- Add screen between the pages using cut window screen or mesh vegetable sacking or netting.
- ((Note: for heavy- weight items, it would be best to glue 4 or more pages together for strength and to help the page to hold its shape.
- “Frame” the window with yarn, string, stitching, or any other malleable material.
- Use an empty slide holder as a frame and cut a window to fit.
- Add “curtains” by drawing or use tissue, fabric, or wallpaper.
- Cut a window in the cover of the book. (Hint: place a cutting mat behind the cover as you cut to ensure no other pages are cut). Try using thin wire to stitch across the window.
- Cut a window in the cover of the book, then glue a small picture frame to add dimension.
- Book covers can be made from odds and ends: cigar boxes, compact discs, license plates, scrap or salvage metal, circuit boards, plywood, or other interesting flat materials.
- You may want to paint the pages before cutting the windows, then save the cutouts for another page.

Cutting Doors

Doors require the viewer to manipulate your book to discover what is hidden behind the door.

You will have to glue pages together to make one thick page for cutting the door. The door may be cut so that it opens down the middle with two small doors. Or, a traditional door that opens on only one side can be cut. For either one, an X-acto knife would be used to cut along the top and bottom of the door. Cutting down the middle will make two doors, cutting on the left or right will create a traditional door. The next page may be glued to the background, with the image sandwiched between. Or the door can be used as a “teaser”, where we see only part of the image until we turn the page to reveal the entire scene.

Cutting Shadowboxes and Niches

If you want to include a small amulet that is 3-dimensional, you will need to create a “hole” for it to fit into the book. To do this, you will use bulldog clips to hold pages together while you apply glue to the sides, creating one very thick page (usually a ½ inch to 1 inch thick). Once the block of pages has dried, cut the space for the amulet, placing a cutting mat under the last page. It may be best to let the back cover serve as the “floor” of the shadowbox where the amulet will be placed. A craft knife (or X-acto knife) can cut through three or four pages at a time, if the blade is sharp. Continue patiently cutting small groups of papers until all are removed.

If the pages are messy, they can be fixed when all are cut. Or, the student can hide the messy cuts by gluing pieces of fabric or paper from the top and over the sides, overlapping the pieces of paper until the opening looks smooth.

The shadowbox or niche need not be centered or square or rectangular. You can cut the pages in half and use only one half for the shadowbox and leave the other pages loose.

Small cardboard matchboxes (increasingly rare these days) can be imbedded in the book and used as a **drawer** to hold small amulets. Glue pages together as thick as the box. Cut a space for the box on the edge of the pages. Place the box into the cut space and glue one or more top and bottom pages to hide the box. Make a drawer pull from a bead or brad.

Adding Text to Pages

Text may be intellectual and meaningful, or it can be merely decorative in an expressive way. A favorite quote or poem can often be the spark for a creative page. Your own handwriting, whether neat or illegible can add personality to the page, communicating something about you as an individual.

Decide in advance if correct spelling is important in the students’ books. If it is, have them submit their text before including it in their book so that you might suggest corrections. Or, have them type it on the computer and run a spell-check.

The placement of the words on the page requires some planning. The writing tool you choose will make a statement as well. Simple black pencils, paint pens, thin brushes, brush pens, Sharpie markers and oil pastels can be used, depending on how you have painted or embellished the page. Even crayons can be used.

Some ideas for adding text:

- Use rubber stamp alphabets. You can make your own from gum erasers or easy-carve rubber. Thinned acrylic paint works well on the stamps—apply with a small makeup sponge. Inkpads are available in many colors, including rainbow effects, metallics, and pearlescent shades. Overstamp in several colors plus off-registers give a casual layered look.
- Clip letters from magazines, like in ransom notes.
- Write across the paper in large free-style cursive handwriting using gel pens, pencils, Sharpies, or paint pens.
- Incorporate writing on vellum, tracing papers, transparencies, or tissue.
- Use different writing tools and build up layers of text over each other, simulating simultaneous conversations in a crowded room.
- Use press-on lettering, stencils, or transfer techniques.
- Use wire or stitching to add more marks to the paper.
- Tuck text into pockets.
- Glaze over some of the text with thin paint or glued tissue. Wipe some of the paint away to create a layer effect.
- Encourage students to make **written notations** about their sketches and drawings. Write about what you think is successful but also what does not work or what you would like to change if you had it to over, what aspects could be improved? You could also write about your feelings toward the work, the mood it conveys, or what you were trying to communicate. Having students write about their work and reflecting on their creative process encourages them to become more analytical and introspective about why they made the choices they did.

Making Image Transfers

You could simply glue down an image, but if you transfer the image it is transparent, which means it will allow the background of your page to show through. It is a great way to create more depth and interest in your collaged pages. Because of the transparency, transfers seem to work best on semisolid and light-colored backgrounds.

Transfers can be a time-saver if the image is very intricate to cut out.

You can also make multiples of the same image and use it on the same page. Try reducing the image several times for a look of perspective.

All of these transfer techniques start with a black-and-white photocopy or color laser copy. Reverse text on the photocopier before you make your transfer.

Glue transfer:

Materials: gel medium, PVA glue (or white school glue), Photocopied image, water
Apply 3 layers of gel medium to the photocopied image, allowing each layer to air dry before applying the next one (about 20 minutes to dry for each layer). Paint your book

page a lightish color and set aside to dry. Resist using machines to speed up the drying—just air dry.

When the gel medium is completely dry, paint the back of the paper with a wet brush, using lots of water until the image soaks into the medium.

Remove the paper from the back by gently rubbing in the center and working toward the edges.

It may appear cloudy while it is wet, but it will dry clear. If the image tears it means that you will need to paint more gel medium onto your next transfer.

Apply glue to the book page and gently place the transfer over the glue and smooth to remove bubbles. Allow to dry. Continue with your decorations.

Caulk transfer:

Materials: Black and white or color laser copy or inkjet copies, Elmer's clear Squeeze 'N Caulk, paintbrush, water.

Note: ink-jet prints are not lightfast and can fade dramatically in as little as two weeks! You will be happier if you use regular photocopies or color laser copies. They are not archival either, but they are better than the ink-jet copies.

Reverse the text on the photocopier before you begin.

Paint the caulk onto a piece of fabric or a piece of paper.

Lay the photocopy face down on the wet caulk so that the image is against the caulk.

Smooth down with your hand. Do not get caulk on the back of the image.

Let dry for 24 hours.

Soak the back of the image, getting the paper very wet.

Use your fingers to rub off the paper, using lots of water to make it easier. Rub until all the paper is gone. Let the image dry. If it still seems hazy, re-wet and rub off more paper. Let dry again.

You can add details with colored pencils and correct any area that didn't transfer.

Contact Paper or Clear Packing Tape Transfers:

Materials: clear contact paper or clear packing tape, scissors, photocopy (no ink-jet), bowl of water, gel medium

Basically anything that is clear on one side and sticky on the other side will work for this type of transfer.

The good thing about this type of transfer is that letters and images are not reversed.

You might want to add color to your photocopy first with colored pencil, since it will also You can also get different effects with different colored packing tapes (blue, red and yellow).

First, apply contact paper or tape to the image (measure first to get just the image covered).

Second, burnish with a bone folder or back of a spoon to ensure good contact.

Third, soak the image in water for several minutes—the longer it soaks, the easier the next step.

Fourth, carefully rub off the back of the paper with your fingertip. The image should show up on the sticky surface and appear transparent!

Fifth, use gel medium to glue the image to your background.

Note: The transparency of this method makes the image especially effective when it is layered over text and other patterns.

Wax Transfer

If you have tried using fingernail polish remover (acetone) to transfer images to various surfaces and failed, you need to try one more time on a layer of beeswax.

Materials:

Melted beeswax (use an electric frying pan—about 200 degrees for safety, or double boiler and old brushes), black and white or color laser copies, nail polish remover with acetone. You will be glad if you set a table outside to do this so the polish remover does not smell the room.

First, melt the beeswax. Then lightly brush your paper with a quick brush of the wax.

Second, place the photocopy face down on the waxed paper.

Third, dab the back of the paper with acetone. Check your progress by pulling up a corner to see if the transfer has occurred. If not, continue rubbing with the acetone.

Note: If you do not like the transfer, a warm iron can melt it off the surface and you can try again.

Beeswax can be used over and under collaged areas—as a glaze and as a glue.

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Student's Themes for Altered Books

Wishing	Alone/together
Fantasy vs. Reality	Music
School vs. Summer	Mythical Creatures and Dragons
Shadows	Jungle
Music	Nature
History	Ecology
Dance	Culture
Ocean	Countries
Clouds	Travel
Fashion	Abstraction
Wildlife	Boxes
Movies	People
Myths	Animals
Sports	Patterns and Designs
Masks	Shoes
Cultures	Masks
Poems	Clowns
Planes	Fish
Shoes	Egypt
Textures	China
Time	South America
The City	Food
The Country	Insects
What if...?	Cars/Transportation
How come...?	Normal/Moody
Cereal	Anger
Shadows	Sane/Insane
Views	Depressed/Happy
Life and Death	Sports
Chairs	Underwater
Water	Hobbies
Imagination	School subjects
Cars	Randomness
Ice & Fire	Yourself
Cold & Hot	Your Family
	Colors
Night & Day	Flowers
Middle school and changes	Landscapes
Friends	
Artists	
Life/death	
Joy/Pain	