The arts are a field in which we place our own dreams, thoughts, and desires alongside those of others, so that solitudes can meet to their joy sometimes, or to their surprise, and sometimes to their disgust. When you boil it all down, that is the social purpose of art: the creation of mutuality, the passage from feeling into shared meaning (Hughes, 1996, p. 32).

It is difficult to find the exact place where early childhood literacy instruction and instruction in the arts connect. Perhaps it is difficult because most of us in literacy education do not speak often or effectively about art. Perhaps too this reluctance springs from our sense of a concern that we know too little about art to speak intelligently about a subject too often marginalized in our schools. Partially responsible, no doubt, is the fact that these connections have gone largely undocumented (Albers, 1997, p. 338). I am certain we are not as aware of the works of art often found in young people’s literacy processes and products as we could be. I have, however, come across an example of a teacher who has found the place where art and literacy connect. I found this example beautifully described by Lisa Siemens (1995), an elementary teacher in Manitoba. She tells of taking her second grade class to a park to write poetry toward the end of the school year. The trip was a culminating experience for a group of students who had become poets—young writers who had come to know writing as an art rather than a literary skill, and who had lived through a school year’s worth of exposure to poetry, and of living the lives of poets. The following excerpts describe this experience:

Each year on the first May morning, when the sun shines strongly and the sky is blue, we pick up our pencils and notebooks and make our way to the nearest park.... (p. 220)

By the time we visited the park in May, we had already been so many places with poetry that I should not have been surprised that the children would find poetry in the park as well.... They had also turned into writers and poets who knew that writing was one way to slow down, to stop and notice the world, to save the wonders they were discovering (Siemens, 1966, p. 240).

Through Siemens’ description I am reminded of Jardine’s use of the term ecopedagogy (1994, p. 509). “Ecopedagogy in the area of language–arts practices inevitably centres the ‘continuity and devotion’ that a generative and deep understanding of writing and reading texts requires of me and of the life I actually live (in language).” As Jardine suggests, a proper pedagogy is an intermediary between the life of children and the world. Ecopedagogy becomes, then, an authentic pedagogy, allowing for stopping and noticing the world in all of its complexity and mystery.
Poetry, in this instance, becomes an art form available to the beginning writer to “save the wonders.”

For the schools to allow young people to use poetry to describe what they see and feel when they stop and notice, requires a belief in two pedagogical understandings that have received much attention recently. The first of these understandings is that young people are fully capable of making significant discoveries about the real world through observation and reflection. The second of these understandings is that a conventional literary form, such as poetry, can be used by young children as a medium to convey these new—found meanings.

Recently, those of us in early childhood literacy education have experienced an upheaval in our understanding of how children learn to read and write. We have come to know that fostering literacy growth means to build on the formidable understandings children have acquired about language before they enter our schools rather than to assume literacy skills begin with the acquisition of an inscribed set of skills children master in a prescribed sequence and at a time proscribed by mental age (Clay, 1982, Durkin, 1966). The research of Bissex (1980), Dyson (1982), and Purcell-Gates (1986) among many others have given us many convincing examples of the heretofore unknown linguistic and literacy competencies children have at their disposal to interpret the world in which they live. Commonly referred to as emergent literacy, this understanding directs early literary teachers to adjust their teaching to the language abilities of the young learner rather than to require the student to enter an alien world characterized by visual and auditory discrimination tasks which are often as mindless and distant as circling objects on worksheets.

Until the 1980’s it was a common belief that our students should first learn the skills of reading and writing and then use their newly acquired reading and writing skills to learn. This scientific, logical approach makes perfect sense if the curriculum designer looks only at the most obvious characteristics of language; the graphemes (letters) and phonemes (sounds) of printed language. Under this general approach of thinking many of our beginning readers, at first eager to learn to read and write, get separated from meaningful language as they are kept in a holding pattern memorizing sight word lists and phoneme–grapheme correspondences. Societal, familial, and school pressures were enough for many students to learn to read despite this joyless, mechanistic approach. But for many children confusion was followed by failure; and this failure followed by resentment. Intense pressure to succeed in reading meant that failing to learn to read was failing in school in general. We witnessed a special education boom that chose to neglect the product of uninspired teaching as the source of the problem. The schools attempted to mollify the crisis by shuffling reluctant readers off to Chapter One, Reading Recovery, Learning Disabilities, and other programs that often repeated the same mechanistic approaches that had turned the students off to reading in the first place. Many schools found it easier to blame the students for the problem, rather than seriously consider the effects of their instructional methods. Parents, naturally concerned about their children’s success with reading and writing, were often the first to cry out for special classes. Unaware of the potential of a different approach, they helped to feed the seemingly insatiable appetite for a solution through special education.

Fortunately, most of the leaders in literacy education, from those in higher education to those in the elementary schools, understood that blaming large numbers of