“Let the teaching style grow from the nature of authentic drawing which means that it will be spontaneous, improvisational, deeply involving minute by minute. It will mean picking up clues when they appear on the paper or in conversation, knowing when to insert oneself into the pre-and-post-drawing conversation and when to step aside. You can’t plan for these moments: you have to develop the art of intuitive response.”

As a teacher in the public schools and instructor in art education at the University of British Columbia I have been studying children’s drawings all my adult life. I am always astonished by what I find. Some drawings can even be considered works of art when they have a significant content and achieve a perfectly integrated formal structure. (See my study of three drawings by six-year-olds in Draw Me A Story, 1998). Others are simply everyday statements about growing up. Even these, while lacking the perfection of art, have a raw aesthetic energy.

Whether defined as art, not-quite-art or non-art, extensive analysis has taught me one thing: children use drawing as a language medium. As any language must do, drawings record emotions and feelings, articulate thoughts and perceptions; embody a reaching out to relate to the world; speak of a conscious or unconscious need to communicate. I would summarize in this way: a few drawings achieve the status of ‘work of art’; most radiate a degree of ‘aesthetic energy’; all are language artifacts.

In the mid-eighties I became increasingly aware of the ‘whole language’ approach to teaching. Primary teachers have always made word/drawing connections but suddenly academics were telling us that drawing contributes significantly to literacy. In some classrooms it became an integral part of most language arts lessons. It didn’t last long. Political pressure from ‘back to basics’ activists forced this enlightened policy underground and a strategy for improving literacy was diminished, if not temporarily lost.

Perhaps the pendulum is beginning to shift again as we realize that drawing is a language in its own right and words and drawings together are a third possibility at the core of the child’s hidden language resource. Words and drawings, an intricately entwined ‘double helix.’ The drawing part of a manifesto for a new language arts education might be something along these lines:

- children use drawing as a language medium to articulate, express and communicate
perceptions, thoughts, and feelings.

- drawing has the potential to help children achieve literacy in its several forms: oral expression, written expression and reading.

- reformed language education would embrace words alone (speech, writing and reading); drawing alone (graphic presentations without printed text) and words and drawings together in mutual support. The instruments for this reform would be 1) a daily drawing regimen at home and school from age two and 2) drawing-as-language employed in every school subject when it contributes to learning and literacy.

Barnette Newman, the American abstract expressionist said (and I paraphrase): “Art criticism is to painting as ornithology is to the birds.” Applying this epigram to the theory of drawing-as-language presented above, I will now consider three drawings:

**Drawing One: Dragon Parade**

![Dragon Parade](image)

This drawing from memory by a preschooler illustrates the two poles of our thesis:

Drawing functions as a language by describing the annual Chinatown dragon parade, an important event in the artist’s life. Line drawing is used more eloquently for this purpose than would be possible with words. If asked to comment on a dragon parade [by an inquiring adult], children of this age would likely be reduced to mute embarrassment.

There is no printed text but the drawing at its inception has potential for stimulating word
use. Discussing possible themes, and later finished works, builds a foundation for spoken and written literacy. Vocabulary and syntax are stimulated by references to subject matter, content and form. Moreover, drawing has the power to lead conversation into deeper areas of thought and feeling, themes that might otherwise be denied language articulation. ‘Serious’ conversations about drawings have the additional value of strengthening the bond between child and adult.

Is Jon’s drawing a work of art? Before exploring this possibility it should be made clear that the answer has nothing to do with marks or report cards or standards. Evaluation is appropriate but only as anecdotal comments on general progress. Why then pursue the question? To increase our appreciation of how drawing contributes to mental development and literacy. Two terms are useful:

1) “aesthetic energy” which springs from how forms relate to each other and to content and subject matter.

2) “works of art,” a term that signals a near-perfect realization of aesthetic energy and fusion of form and content. Aesthetic energy is the product of intellectual development, internalized learning and mental health. These are generalized assumptions, guides to understanding the dynamics of art and its production, not test items for standardized achievement.

Works of art are a fusion of form and content. In terms of content, there must be an authentic theme, one based on a meaningful life experience. Jon had witnessed the annual Chinatown dragon parade. Any child would be impressed by the visual and aural experience, the vivid colours, the wild dancing beneath the dragon skin, the ferocious masks. For Jon it was also participation in an event of ethnic cultural significance.

In analyzing form we look for relationships, how forms are organized to create meaning, how they articulate feelings and emotions, tell stories, create unified structures. There are two ways to achieve good form, good design, and good composition:

- principles are consciously applied—repetition, diminution, rhythm, and so on;
- through empathic involvement with subject matter, content, and performance.

Post-naïve artists employ both; children, too young to apply principles, are able to experience a deep empathic identification with subject matter and performance. Jon’s drawing is evidence that the human mind, uninhibited by self-consciousness, performs miracles of formal integration. This, I believe, is at least a partial explanation. In Jon’s drawing we see a good form in the integration of a multitude of structural elements and we see it in the consistent use of an inverted pyramid. Many “great works of art” are based on triangulation: Jon intuitively turned the triangle upside down.

Another part of the explanation is drawing’s inherent structural advantage. Created under the scanning mechanism of an information loop, individual marks—400 by rough count—are placed precisely where they will do the most good, each relative to the ones already in place. The eye scans, the brain/mind processes (largely in the preconscious), the hand/tool stylus records on paper.

To appreciate drawing’s unique advantage think of the disadvantage of oral expression where words disappear rapidly over a memory horizon, or of writing where structures must
be built from units of an abstract code. Those are not easy tasks for this age group or any other, and the benefits of aesthetic energy must come mainly from drawing if they are to come at all.

Success depends on the drawer being on ‘automatic pilot,’ achieving a suspension of disbelief, having easy access to the preconscious, being able to identify with subject matter empathically. These are the very conditions that are beneficial to mental development, learning, and mental health. They are also natural and spontaneous for most children.

**Drawing Two: Dragon Parade**

Parents and teachers may wish to organize daily drawing around various sources of imagery. If a story is read, children should be encouraged to visualize it from several points of view before drawing. If a model is posed it will be helpful to discuss the visible forms first. Hogan’s is a memory drawing but we should recognize that while memory plays a role, the drawing is really an invention of the imagination. As in Jon’s drawing on the same subject, Hogan, with unbelievable sureness of touch, adds lines to a gradually expanding structure: not a line scribbled out, not an approximation anywhere, no evidence of trial and error. The ‘hidden order of art’ operates here too (although I’m sure making a good composition was not on his mind).

At the micro level I am hypnotized by detail and zoom in on the two dragon heads where forms are spectacularly complex. At the macro level I follow the river-form of the two undulating dragons. If you wish to take the time, there are a thousand drawings in one to enjoy here. Or scan the whole and feel the rhythm of the repeated forms just as you might respond to the drum if you were actually at the parade.
Drawing Three: Rain Forest

From the point of view of language, this too is a remarkable drawing. When I was a child our teacher, supported by the prevailing pedagogy, held us to reading simplistic sentences about Dick and Jane and in writing, to practicing letter forms and words endlessly. In art we coloured-in hectographed images from a publisher’s catalogue. Is this what ‘back to basics’ people want to return to?

In contrast to my intellectually barren school days, Conor was thrown into an exciting language adventure. Let’s see what we can make of his work:

This is language in the service of science education and three symbol systems were engaged:

1) A lively oral exchange between teacher and pupils on the topic of insects and the rain forest. Concepts, vocabulary, and syntax were modeled by the teacher and practiced by a class of eager children.

2) A worksheet provide space for a drawing and a printed text. Conor had an
opportunity to compose a scholarly text. While words are misspelled we should keep in mind that he heard them in his mind, knew what they meant as he printed them. The transfer from oral language to writing was underway. In my day, writing was restricted to words that could be correctly spelled.

Conor’s teacher evidently believed that spelling would eventually catch up and undoubtedly took immediate remedial steps to begin that process. (It is simply misguided dogma to think that holistic teaching has no use for spelling, syntax, grammar, and phonics.) In the meantime, a complex paragraph was composed.

3) The teacher provided a printed translation, a model of correctness, and an opportunity for Conor to practice reading. Having written the text, is there any doubt that the boy would read and perhaps reread his own writing in the teacher’s corrected form? Are we not impressed then with his reading level? If activities like this are part of a daily, even hourly routine, can we doubt that Conor would eventually achieve full literacy? And as for spelling, can we not then have faith in its gradual improvement?

I am increasingly convinced that drawing is the key to stimulating the flow of words, spoken and written. It begins as a private language, a mediation on personal experience and this is the source of its power to nurture mental development. (For this reason there should be frequent free drawing periods.) But there are bound to be ambiguities in personal drawing. When he made his ant drawing Conor knew the answers, but his audience might ask, “…just what is this dark shape over here?” or “what is happening with the ant who seems to be carrying something?” Ambiguities lead to questions and questions to answers: the drawing becomes the focus of a lively discussion, one that would otherwise not have taken place.

Would it not be a good idea to formalize a discussion segment, an opportunity to “explain your drawing to a friends”? Oral or written responses would be equally productive. A printed passage like Conor’s might lead to an unbounded discussion or an improved or expanded text. Would literacy benefit? Would learning become internalized and memorable? It seems most probable.

When children draw they engage their deepest thoughts and feelings and project psychological situations that adult caregivers can learn to “read” and respond to. Drawings, and the words they stimulate, will reveal current problems, preoccupations, worries, fears, enthusiasms, epiphanies and so on. The goal is to engage the child’s perceptions, thoughts, feelings, memory and imagination.

Editors’ Note: A version of this article was originally published by the Drawing Network, October 2, 2002. It is republished as a reminder that inquiry and expression through the arts inhabits children’s art and play, and that as researchers and enquirers, we might recall the value of listening to the work of children as they explore, interpret, and share their understanding of their individual worlds with us.

About the Author

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