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First Graders Constructing Meaning Through Drawing and Writing

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*Timmy is hunched over his desk, arms wrapped around the page, his entire upper body leaning into the hard and gentle lines. He stirs the marker bin like he would a cake batter, searching for specific colors, wondering out loud which ones to use. He is careful. He is deliberate. He is responding to text with the thoughtful consideration anyone would expect from an architect. The classroom is abuzz. In the midst of this gentle hum of meaning-making energy, Timmy is approached by the teacher from the side and asked, "Talk to me about your drawing." With a quizzical brow, he turns and says, "That's not my drawing, that's my writing."*

In this single suspended moment, what Dyson (1986) has long observed is clearly understood, "Young children are symbol weavers. Their 'drawings' may be composed, not only of lines and colors, but of language as well" (p. 381).

Timmy is one of 17 first-graders in a pilot study reviewed herein. In the study, the researchers observed how children construct meaning through drawing, writing, or a combination of the two. Specifically, we asked when given a choice between drawing or writing or both drawing and writing, which forms did first graders choose to communicate meaning? In parallel fashion, based on these same student responses and drawings we hoped to determine ways in which students made qualitative aesthetic choices (Eisner, 2002; Siegesmund, 1999). We believe this study contributes to existing research (Dyson, 1986; Gardner, 1980; Hubbard, 1989; Hubbard & Ernst, 1996; Olshansky, 2007, 2008; Skupa, 1985) on the communicability of drawing and writing as vehicles through which children make and share meaning; it serves as a reminder to educators, particularly those who privilege language over other forms of expression, of the multimodal nature of literacy learning (Berghoff et al., 2000).

### **Defining Literacy with Art**

All too often, literacy is narrowly defined and confined to the advancement of reading and writing. A broader definition of literacy includes reading and writing but also incorporates a learner's ability to communicate and comprehend knowledge. Literacy in art may or may not include reading and writing, but without doubt embraces the ability to communicate and comprehend aesthetic responses to stories, knowledge, ideas, and feelings. Eisner (1998a) suggests that art is a sign system in which learners can communicate knowing. The very essence of thought, according to Langer (1957), is cast into symbols. The written word is not the only symbol that can cast thought. Becoming fully literate is a process that encompasses various modes through which meaning is constructed. Is showing meaning relegated to language? Recall Timmy's declaration, "That's not my drawing, that's my writing." In effect, he revealed his drawing and writing as one and the same—coequal happenings on the page.

As an example, consider this story about a friend's son. When he was in third grade he was assigned to write a report on hamsters. His research centered on a hamster's habitat, food, and life cycle. His excitement about writing this report was indescribable, for he owned a cherished hamster. For two weeks every afternoon he read library books on hamsters, observed his own hamster and drew what he noticed.

There were pictures of the hamster eating, playing, grooming itself, and sleeping. He also included different angles such as face on, from the side, and from the back. An aerial view revealing the hamster's bulging black eyeballs above his soft little whiskers was also attempted. All the drawings were done with great care. The soft pencil mark showed his skill and control over his pencil. The variance of line was sensitive and

showed the hamster's physical appearance and personality by the way he formed the soft and wispy whiskers and the fur on its body and carefully detailed angles of the hamster playing, running, and sleeping. With a soft value and shadowing added to the drawings, the hamster came alive. A perceptive viewer would be able to understand all about hamsters by merely studying these pictures. The classroom teacher felt differently and considered the report inadequate; the accompanying text underdeveloped and the drawings, while *lovely*, did not tell her enough about hamsters.

This is an example of how language was privileged over drawing. Although the child could not distinguish writing from drawing as a method of communication or comprehension, the teacher could. A word of caution: this is not the fault of the teacher. Her training in early childhood education, standards, and high-stakes testing has required that she place a premium on written language. The cultural and historic context of her knowledge has also influenced her classroom practice. She has been convinced that without good reading and writing skills, children will be illiterate.

### **The Problem with Choosing Between Writing and Drawing**

Donald Murray writes, "when I ask a child to show me writing, I'm as likely to be given a drawing as a draft" (quoted in Ernst, 1994, p. vii). These words reveal an important point about Timmy's work and the work of all children who are learning to use new languages, methods of expression, and written language. Drawing and writing are complementary modes of expression (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984).

The problem with moving children from drawing to writing is largely due to school and cultural expectations and their narrow view of literacy. Newkirk (1989) writes:

Schools are far more concerned about verbal competence than graphic competence. In fact, it is easy to feel impatient with students...who spend their time drawing when they could be writing, who clearly view the written message as marginal. School culture is word centered; while we might admire the drawings of young children, we're not terribly concerned (as a culture) when the interest in drawing gives way to an interest in print (p. 36).

Several researchers support Newkirk's point. Skupa (1985) suggests some of the best writing actually comes from ideas generated first by drawing. Similarly, Olshansky (2007) argues, "students' use of descriptive language was far greater at all grade levels when students created pictures before they wrote" (p.3). And Carroll (1991) writes, when "we educate out of students this powerful writing tool" (p. 34) we skew the world's understanding of the import of drawing in writing development. These studies suggest that children might actually benefit from drawing as a means of emergent literacy within the curriculum of classroom practice.

### **Writing and Drawing Development as Emergent Literacy**

Drawing is appealing to many young learners. After learning to speak, drawing is often the first method of making meaning. Drawing is a highly prized medium in which many children find comfort as a mode of expression. As children progress through school, drawing is often reserved, if at all, for after the real work is done. Verbocentric ideology (Eco, 1976) in schools, the belief that language should be privileged over other ways of knowing, consistently limits how children learn to understand their world by limiting the importance of multiple forms of communication and comprehension. The concern with verbocentric ideology is not new. Arnheim (1974), Eco (1976), and Eisner

(1994) raised concerns decades ago over the existing preoccupation with words in schools and urged educators to consider the multiple ways (drawing, dancing, singing, etc.) children are able to demonstrate their thinking. Drawing is one such way of exhibiting knowledge.

The first attempts of children to communicate through writing may look like scribbles (Wilson & Wilson, 1987). Researchers Anna Kindler (1998) and Christine Thompson (2002) suggest that early writing is not merely scribbling, but rather drawings that are intended to signify something meaningful to the young artist –in other words, a form of expression. The young artist’s drawing is a set of symbols that convey meaning and is used as an additional attempt to communicate besides spoken language. Although many researchers including Lowenfeld (1957) have shown how drawing progresses in a linear fashion through a set of given stages, Kindler (1998) suggests that there is no one single stage development in drawing but rather a set of alternative paths subject to cultural influences. This is particularly important when discussing emergent literacy. At the suggestion of Clay (1975), emergent literacy depends on many factors that contribute to learning to read and write including drawing, pictures, stories, books, cultural influences, and familiarity with the written word. In tandem with Kindler, Clay’s theory suggests that developmental drawing may be just as multifaceted emergent literacy.

Wilson & Wilson (1987) have made a case for drawing to be considered within a family of languages. They suggest that drawing meets the requirements of a symbol system in two ways. Their first suggestion centers on the idea that art, like language, provides symbol systems that adopt, combine, and extend ideas. Secondly, they suggest that art has graphic configurations of a culture that are predictable, conventional and regular as a given language. In support of Wilson & Wilson’s case for drawing as a symbol system, and as the opening paragraph stated, Dyson (1986) and others advocate children as symbol weavers and suggest that their drawings are language. Kindler (1998) takes issue with the second part of Wilson & Wilson’s theory. She suggests that no two people will define art in the same way. She stresses that art has often been unintelligible to the general population and has needed philosophers and critics to interpret its meaning. Kindler’s theory suggests that art may represent but not communicate shared meaning – a necessary event for language. Again, Kindler’s theory does not diminish drawing as an emergent literacy. Rather, Kindler’s theory suggests that drawing in emergent literacy can employ symbolic language but requires qualitative aesthetic response (Eisner, 2002; Siegesmund, 1999) for a deeper, more comprehensive understanding than would emerge from a single literacy.

In support of Kindler’s suggestion that drawing is language oriented, Thompson and Bales (1991) propose that language is at a premium when groups of children draw together. When groups of young artists draw together they engage in a multimedia activity involving hand gestures, play, talk and noises that go along with their drawings, rather than allowing a two-dimensional visual product to speak for itself. Thompson’s (2002) work also suggests that qualitative aesthetic responses are discussed, shaped, and changed by working within a group through communication with others.

### **Drawing and Writing: Code Switching**

As young children begin to move from drawing to writing they often engage in a kind of code switching (Hoffman & McCully, 1984). A person who is learning a new language commonly uses code switching in order to communicate in the new language.

Code switching, according to Gumperz (1982), involves using a word in the learner's native language as a substitution for a word that is not known in the new language. Often confined to bilingual speaking, code switching may also occur during writing.

Although children practice writing through attempted scribbles, mark making, and drawing long before first grade, it is during this year children learn to formally write words and construct sentences (Clay, 1975). It is often seen, during the first grade year, that children become "bilingual" when they move from their first written language, drawing, to their second written language—writing, words. Code switching occurs when children substitute pictures for written words. Children often resort to drawing when they want to move to a more comfortable method of communication (Hoffman & McCully, 1984). Code switching from words to pictures occurs when the learner does not know how to spell a certain word, form the correct letters, or perhaps use a word in its proper context. Sometimes students simply have an aversion to writing. They may find comfort and greater ease in expressing themselves with drawing. Children may simply resort to pictures in order to express themselves adequately (Hoffman & McCully, 1984). As the old adage suggests, a picture is worth a thousand words. In order for a picture to do the job of a thousand words, the image, evoked feelings, and aesthetic response must be nonlinguistic. This involves inference making and qualitative reasoning (Siegesmund, 1999).

### **Qualitative Reasoning**

Up to now this study suggests that learning to read and write is multifaceted and involves more than reading printed language and grasping concepts of graphemes (letters) and phonemes (sounds). Largely due to the advocates of whole language, students may now edge closer to the transfer of comprehension of meaning that is central to all learning (Thompson, 2002). Proponents of whole language support concepts of what writing means rather than what the writing says. This is critical, according to Thompson. She writes: "Print has become something that requires personal interpretation. Meaning is not simply ideas transferred from page to mind, or mind to page, but ideas filtered through the mind of each student as they make meaning" (p. 187). The ability to not only perceive an image or the written word, but also conceive what has been written is an appropriate goal of literacy instruction as well as arts education. Whole language theory suggests that children become competent in literacy when they are able to shift thinking from how they perceive through their senses to how they conceive their world. This shift from conception is a step beyond perception and involves consideration, inference making, imagination, and creativity (Thompson, 2002).

Siegesmund (2005) suggests that when students move from perception to conception they are learning to make inferences. Essentially they are reasoning qualitatively. He writes:

Students assemble an assortment of visual qualities to construct a meaning. Students have to make judgments and then point to the visual evidence that justifies those judgments. This work can happen entirely in a visual realm outside of language...it may be a critical educational opportunity for students who struggle with linguistic expression. (p. 23)

When students construct meaning outside of language they are engaging in careful analysis of their personal feelings along with scrutiny of the sensory qualities of their artwork. Siegesmund (1999) calls this reasoned perception. Siegesmund suggests that

artists use reasoned perception when they are thoughtfully engaged with their artwork. This thoughtful immersion of reasoning qualitatively supports learning and cognition (Heid, 2005; Siegesmund, 2005).

What students have to say is important even if their skills in writing and language are not fully developed. Students who struggle with linguistic expression may find comfort in thoughtfully immersing themselves in a meaningful engagement with drawing instead of writing. When students are comfortable with a manner in which they can find expression and make meaning, they may be influenced to continue their schoolwork. Siegesmund (2005) continues, “Through qualitative reasoning, students discover that their insights are important and that they possess the means to express them. This is surely a significant outcome for education” (p. 23).

### **Forms of Representation**

The nucleus of language is the word; respectively, the nucleus of art is form. Creating a form of representation to express oneself is a highly complex method of meaning-making. If people could express themselves solely in language, there would be no need to draw, paint, dance, sing, etc. (Eisner, 1998a).

Eisner (2002) writes, “Forms of representation are means through which the contents of consciousness are made public” (p.8). According to Eisner, helping children express themselves through multiple forms is one of the most important practices of teaching. One of the challenges of making public the language of our conscience, according to Graves (1983), is finding words to describe emotion. Sometimes, “knowledge cannot be reduced to what can be said” (Eisner, 1998b, p. 68). In the case of the boy who drew his hamster, drawings were the forms of representation that told us how hamsters play, eat, and sleep. Langer (1957) asserts that our knowledge and understanding is much more skilled than our ability to explain what we know. With this in mind, educators should encourage art as a form of knowing that helps learners express their knowledge, understanding, and, ultimately, their own selves.

### **Aesthetic Response**

When we ask children to make meaning of a story, a hamster, a work of art, or a work of music we are asking them for an aesthetic response. We are asking the student to make inferences or qualitatively reason to construct a meaning (Siegesmund, 2005). When children respond to their feelings through art, poetry, drawing, or writing they are choosing a form of representation to express themselves (Eisner, 2002). In other words, they are responding to an inward feeling through an outward mode of expression. The inward feeling is the aesthetic response; the outward expression is the form of representation (Cibic, 2007).

Aesthetics analyzes the way we look at things around us. We are engaging in aesthetics when we use our perceptions, feelings, senses, and imagination to gain insight to what we feel and understand about the world (Greene, 2001). This requires being fully present, whether we are looking at art or at something ordinary. Langer (1951) suggests that all forms may yield aesthetic experiences if we learn how to attend to them. There is potential for an aesthetic experience for any individual who encounters the world. Learning in the arts means learning to think (Heid, 2005). Thinking in the arts is a form of qualitative inquiry in which we use our senses, imagination, technique, and appraisal (Eisner, 2002).

John Dewey (1934) asserts that aesthetic experience refers to how we critically reflect on objects we experience, whether it is art or the world around us. What is especially important in understanding aesthetics is that at its core, we are engaging with the world and the wonder of life. Cultivating this sensitivity requires learning to attend to the smallest nuances of art or life – and expanding our definitions of literacy. Upon acquiring this sensitivity we transcend to a higher plane of existence. We transcend to a plane that releases imagination, passions, curiosity, and extraordinary circumstances (Greene, 2001).

### **Getting Started**

An eight-week study was conducted in a first-grade classroom in South Carolina in fall 2005. Every Wednesday, the children listened to a picture book read aloud. After the story, classroom conversation included how art and language were used in the story. After each discussion the children returned to their desks, where they found blank sheets of paper and a bin of markers and crayons. The teacher invited the children to respond to the storybook. They were told that they could draw, write, or both draw and write. As the children responded, the teacher walked around the room and documented on note cards what each child said about his/her work. The teacher also entered notes in a journal and recorded authentic talk.

Time was made for each student to share his/her work. The work was collected and coded. The work was entered into an Excel chart so verbal responses could be readily tracked. During this study, 104 responses coupled with student feedback were carefully examined. Of the total responses, 31 included drawing only, eight included writing only, and 66 included both drawing and writing.

### **The Storybook**

One of the stories read was called *The Singing Snake* (Czernecki, 1993). It is an Australian Folktale that explains the origin of the didgeridoo and why snakes hiss. The story begins with an Old Man who has grown weary of the animal noises around him. He holds a singing contest to encourage the animals to improve their voices. As a prize, the Old Man will create a musical instrument in honor of the animal with the best singing voice. Given that his is raspy, snake lodges a lark in his throat and fools everyone into thinking that the voice is his own. However, the clever lark outsmarts him and scratches his way out.



*The Singing Snake* by Czernecki, 1993

After the story was read, the children went back to their desks and responded to the text through drawing, writing, or both drawing and writing. The three students below were ultimately followed more closely. They were chosen because they each showed diverse relationships in art and language.

### **Tamara's Story**

Tamara would sit quietly in her seat and carefully write out each letter, occasionally looking up at the classroom ceiling as if to find words glued there. Her knitted brow made her concentration visible. When finished she would find the teacher, tug on her sleeve and burst, "Wanna come see my writing?" Sometimes, she would jet from the carpet at the end of a story and exclaim, "Today I'm going to write!" Tamara saw herself as a writer, often declaring out loud, "I am a writer!", yet she consistently included art in her responses as a means to extend comprehension. When asked if the drawings matter, she said, "Uh-huh, pictures make words look good." According to Tamara, *looking good* meant her drawings sometimes picked up where her uncertainty of how to spell particular words set in. Concerned with spelling words correctly, drawing allowed her to explore the range of her vocabulary knowledge through art. The art making in her case was not an afterthought, for she was equally invested in communicating meaning through both her art and written work.

Tamara's response to *The Singing Snake* included both drawing and writing. The writing tells the reader which aspect of the book appealed to her, yet the drawing *shows* the reader much more of her understanding of this text: The body of the snake is not sleek; it is bumpy and looks as if it has just swallowed something. The Cheshire smile suggests a secret, some sly and cunning knowledge, and a small red/yellow sun in the upper right hand corner of the picture lets the viewer know that these events take place on a hot, sunny day. In a dialogue with her peers, Tamara explains:

Tamara: My snake ate all kinds of stuff like right here and here and he knows he's in trouble but I make him smile anyway.

The contour drawing forces the viewer to look beyond the long squiggled line of the snake, to pay attention to the details, like the bumps she pointed to. The arts teach us about looking and seeing, and allow us to reveal moods and ideas that can be challenging to express in words (Albers, 2007). Indeed, it is a veritable challenge to write about slyness when you are in first grade. As adults we call it *Cheshire*; young children like Tamara call it "he's in trouble but I make him smile anyway." The meaning is the same and she uses art to communicate it.

Tamara's written text, "I like The Part Whn (SIC) The Snake Singing," is equally deliberate; she uses neat and even lower and upper-case letters, intermixed at will, making the letters look, in her words "more creative." Both text and picture combine to show the reader that she likes the part where the snake is singing, yet each informs the viewer of different things: the written text tells which aspect she likes; the visual text shows why. When art is involved, it nudges us to see "beyond the given" (Davis, 2008, p. 14).



I like the  
part when the  
snake singing



Tamara's response to *The Singing Snake*

### Timmy's Story

Timmy often hovered over his pages, as if to conceal his response. Rarely did he like to talk about his art midway through -- the talk was a distraction from the natural flow of thought. His explanations revealed he was interested in details. When his work was complete he happily explained the action and emotion he worked to convey with each mark. In his response to *The Singing Snake*, pointing to the highly pigmented background and radiating bands of color behind, he explained:

Timmy: See this? I'm making fast lines that go like this [*demonstrates to his peers*]. It looks like it's moving faster and faster. You can get trapped in it!

Talking about his art brought out a kind of energy in his smile that only children seem to have. Over the eight weeks, Timmy consistently favored art over language. Trying to make sense of his passion to draw, he explained, "I can draw words." Like Tamara, he saw some drawings as visual representations of words. He could really express himself through drawing. As the weeks progressed, it became clear that Timmy understood the communicative currency in art and that his skill in drawing would make adding writing to his response almost superfluous. Newkirk (1989) explains:

Ironically, *because* of their skill, these children may resist the idea that text and picture can be coequal, because making them coequal would take time and energy away from their drawing and require considerable text -- more than they would feel comfortable producing -- to do any kind of justice to their drawing. (p. 60)

For Timmy, the art is justified in its own right. Not yet comfortable in expressing himself through writing, he finds his voice through color and line. He grounds his comfort in meaning through art before traversing the tricky terrain of language.

Timmy's response to *The Singing Snake* was exclusively art. The drawing shows two well-crafted snakes. When asked what he was drawing, he replied, "My two snakes are eating birds." Indeed, the viewer can see two snakes chasing birds and trying to swallow them. Timmy elaborated the story through the use of his drawing. Elaboration shows a proclivity to being highly creative (Starko, 2001). As well, Timmy chose to pigment the snakes in high intensity colors that magnify their sinuous movements. One

snake appears to be quite vicious with its face in profile, mouth open wide, sharp teeth evident, and its beady eyes directly on its prey. Timmy's entire picture plane is replete with activity. One's eye wanders around the sinuous snakes getting caught up in the turmoil, the movement, commotion, and emotion. The viewer wants to find his or her way out of the picture but gets caught, like the birds, in the excitement of the snakes.



Timmy's response to *The Singing Snake*

### **Expressing Meaning: More than One Way**

This study supports the view that literacy learning is multimodal (Berghoff et al., 2000). In the traditional classroom however, where language is privileged over other ways of knowing, opportunities to construct meaning through art diminish as learners progress to higher grades and reading and writing therefore shift to the more common curricular resources of the classroom. While some learners are ready for the new shift, many comfortably linger in other forms of expression such as drawing to show their comprehension (Eisner, 1998a).

In first grade, varying abilities in writing abound. Exposure to and the personal construction of visual text may provide young writers opportunities to develop and reveal some of their own literacy strategies (Albers, 2007). Simply put, there is power in children's use of art and, when it is valued as a conduit for understanding how children construct meaning, understanding children's literacy processes is also expanded.

Tamara and Timmy's written and drawn responses raise potential research questions. If art is a conduit for learning language, and we argue that it is, what happens to the qualitative experience of literacy learning when it is not presented and represented in the classroom in symbolic ways? How are children's attitudes toward drawing and writing culturally situated in the school? What are teachers' attitudes toward art as a way of knowing?

Children's ways of meaning making in art, like that of the third grade boy's report on hamsters, urge us as educators to consider our own school-based conceptions about

what are the processes through which children become literate? Until we stare down and critically examine what those conceptions are, a word-centered school culture will remain.

Inquiry-minded educators whose classroom practices are informed by children's ways of meaning making are the educators who have the power to affect change. Knowledgeable educators can learn to cultivate a unique sensitivity to what students see, hear, smell, and taste (Heid, 2005). If educators begin to view literacy learning as a multimodal happening, children may transcend to a higher plane that releases imagination, passions, and curiosity (Greene, 2001) through more than one form.

Pictures do more than *make words look good*; they remind us of children's ways of meaning making – as well as our incredible responsibility as educators to pay attention to children's drawings as part of the literacy process. Children like Timmy count on us to practice in the classroom what we say we believe. If we believe that literacy learning is multimodal and that it is a process, we cannot in turn limit literacy instruction to one privileged mode (i.e., language). When we dismiss the drawing of a smiling, bumpy snake as nothing more than a sketch, we immediately communicate to children what we value in the process of becoming literate – language trumps all other modes of knowing.

As educators of literacy instruction, we have to remember that each mode carries its own meaning potential. Viewed this way, we can understand why a mood can be drawn instead of written, why an idea may be written instead of drawn, etc. Learning to read and write is highly important; art is simply part of the process through which children can produce and express meaning. Those who linger in other forms of expression like art do so for a reason. Lingering matters; access to art as a way of knowing can support children's sense of agency and voice (Cibic, 2007). And when children feel good about themselves as meaning makers, we can help them ease into reading and crafting sophisticated written texts.

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