Drawing, journals and their role in learning: A theoretical paper.

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In art and design, experiences encourage intellectual flexibility and creative inquiry and educate students in understanding the value of process as much as finished artworks. This paper will discuss the value of process and inquiry in learning and, in particular, will focus on the role that journals play in helping students to generate and work through ideas, to record insights and to communicate their methodologies and learning experiences. It will reason that the format of journals encourages exploratory approaches to thinking and that their immediacy extends capacity for creative response. It will also highlight the significance of drawing as a kinetic activity central in extrapolating our experiences of the world and expressive, not just of artistic intent, but also of all kinds of thinking.

Introduction

Drawing has long focused activity around the life drawing class - transcribing, in line, the shapes, form and motion of the body in space. By tradition, drawing the human figure encapsulates the idea of drawing as an activity sustained through familiarity, and understood through formal inquiry and personal expression. Drawing, in these terms, is known, primarily, as an observational activity, the phenomenon and material of the world are recorded through intense looking and visualised through use of formal language (the elements of composition and design), with the innovations of the artist offering alternate visions of things familiar. Conventional training in the discipline encompasses these dual characteristics - the ‘innocent eye’ (fresh and spontaneous expression) and ‘the trained eye’ (translation through formal language) (Sullivan, 2004, p. 19) and despite a general and theoretical reconfiguration of the nature of art practice, and new insights into the psychology of perception, these conventions are still valued, by many, as the backbone of visual training and staple of the drawing studio.

While there is still conjecture about how we make meaning from what we see, there is acceptance that perception encompasses much more than a purely sensory response. Graham Sullivan (2004) speaks of the ‘knowing eye’, whereby conceptualisation plays a prominent role in our understanding of what we see, he writes:

….. perception is not a mindless sensation. Although it may be immediate and intense, perception does not just provide data picked up by the senses; it also plays an active role in conceptualisation. We don’t really see with our eyes, they merely take in sights and send them on their way via the optic nerve to the brain where they become insights. So it is the brain where we see representations of the world around us (p. 19).

The images that we see are constructed from visual bits drawn from different regions of the brain and cohered and understood largely through our experiences, tactile sensations and the social, cultural and philosophical influences in which we are submerged. This broader understanding of seeing means that to teach drawing, solely, through ‘training the eye’
leaves students with vast shortfalls in their conceptualisation of meaning in relation to the self and to the world around them.

In 2007, I took on the role as Head of Drawing at the Tasmanian School of Art, where traditional definitions of drawing had been the mainstay of teaching and learning over many years. Units fell, readily, into two categories – observational drawing, taught through life classes, and ‘media and methods’ units, taught through project work - set and self-directed. For all, learning was orientated towards acquisition of skills of observation (as an end result) within a framework of formal expression (visual language and technique). The challenge lay in re-defining studio-based teaching and art-learning practices to connect understanding of perceptual phenomena within a framework of critical and scholarly inquiry (while holding on to the need for skill acquisition). In short, this meant a shift from teaching ‘what to see’ towards learning activities that emphasise cognitive interaction with subject matter (challenging what is being observed) and appreciation of image as a notation of visual thinking and understanding of the importance of this in relation to image as end result.

Figure 1. Example 1 of student work.

There was a second broader educational trend that also came to the fore in redesigning units. It has become apparent, in recent years, that with the increasing compartmentalisation and breaking down of learning into short-term courses, there is a tendency for students’ to seek immediate and accessible ‘answers’ rather than seeking knowledge and expertise. There is inclination towards task-orientated outcomes, without recognition or understanding of the underlying processes and creative stages that students move through, a situation, I believe, aggravated by the reality that knowledge is becoming increasingly fragmented, exists in many formats and at increasing speed. We need to seek ways of countering these trends, to provide educational experiences that help students to become independent and reflective thinkers so they can recognise and draw understanding from bites of information and be inquisitive enough to want to engage at deeper levels. It is crucial, for educational standards, that students progress beyond the obvious; to understand why they tend to think as they do and have a view on what they are learning; to understand how to construct and progress their own knowledge; and to be skilled in handling information creatively and inventively. Being able to critique and control information and
dominant perspectives must surely be a priority, if we want students to move beyond them as limiting structures. Current thinking highlights the importance of universal tools of scholarship to learning - methods of abstraction, analogy, empathy, synthesis and transformation - within a framework of control, self-awareness, self-knowledge and meaning. Robert and Michele Root-Bernstein (2001) speak of scholarship in terms of a synthetic education, which has as its goals, the following:

1. Emphasise the teaching of universal processes of invention in addition to the acquisition of disciplinary products of knowledge.
2. Teach the intuitive and imaginative skills necessary to inventive process.
3. Implement a multi-disciplinary education that places the arts on an equal footing with the sciences.
4. Integrate curricula by using a common descriptive language for innovation.
5. Emphasise the trans-disciplinary lessons of disciplinary learning.
6. Reach the widest range of minds; ideas in every discipline should be presented in many forms (pp. 316-27).

Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein emphasise the value of understanding over knowing, creating over passive acquisition, flexible and transferable knowledge (teaching and learning across disciplinary boundaries), transformation from one mode of conception and expression to another, and contextualisation. Drawing, the earliest form of visual communication is one of the immediate, efficient and fundamental tools that can move students into this type of learning. Drawing builds fluidity is highly adaptive and is the ultimate transferable skill.

**Drawing the ultimate transferable skill**

The author Robert Solso (1994, p. 147) wrote: “We ‘think’ art as much as, no, even more than, we ‘see’ art.” (Sullivan, 2004, p. 19); Pablo Picasso remarked: “I wanted to say the nude. I don’t want to do the nude as a nude”; Paul Klee wrote that “Art does not render the visible; it makes visible” (quoted in Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2001, p. 46); and Georgia O’Keeffe disclosed: “Even if I could put down accurately the thing I saw and enjoyed, it would not give the observer the kind of feeling it gave me. I had to create an equivalent for what I felt about what I was looking at – not copy it.” (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2001, p. 8). These individuals are acclaiming the role of thinking in observation. They are telling us: don’t just look – think, find the unfamiliar in the familiar; see with your mind, not your eyes.
Figure 2. Example 2 of student work.

Observation creates a link between sensory experience and mental acuity. The difference between passive looking and actively observing is vast; as we track through daily life we recognise things in order to locate ourselves, but rarely, do we transcend surface appearance to actually ‘see’ them. We do a lot of looking but as Frederick Franck (1973) comments:

we see less and less…Ever more gadgets, from cameras to computers, from art books to video tapes, conspire to take over our thinking, our feeling, our experience, our seeing. Onlookers we are, spectators…. Quickly we stick labels on all that is, labels that stick once and for all. By these labels we recognize everything but no longer see anything…… Millions of people, unseeing … have never learned to see, or they have forgotten that man has eyes to see, to experience…. (pp. 3-6).

Observation not only underpins visual arts, it is the keystone of many disciplines. The writer E. E. Cummings characterized himself as a “wily observer of everything-under-the-sun” (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2001, p. 34); Wyndam Lewis remarked that “The first – and last – thing that I do is use my eyes” (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, p. 45); the physician Edmund Pellegrino said “the clinician’s craft begins with the eye” (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, p. 35); and Frederick Franck (1973) declared that:

What I have not drawn I have never really seen… When.. I see… I dive into the reality of what confronts me, become part of it….. It is in order to really see, to see ever deeper, ever more intensely, that I draw… Drawing is the discipline by which I discover the world (pp. 3-6).

It is not by accident that many have advocated visual acuity as key to understanding. We must be able to perceive, deeply, to recognise patterns, abstract underlying principles and form analogies between the properties of things. Drawing, whether notational, abstract, observational, schematic, or unstructured - is a primary learning tool, a great way of honing perception and gaining insight. Precisely what we think about, what we are looking at, and how much sense we make of it “depends on our knowledge, experience and
familiarity with the subject of our inquiry. It also depends on how much notice we take of what we are looking at, how casually or intently we observe it” (Moore, 2007).

Figure 3. Example 3 of student work.

The Greek word *Graphe*, from where many inscription terminologies derive, encompasses in its meaning both the act of drawing and writing. Using the interconnectedness of drawing and writing as a basis for investigation, the theorist, James Elkins, has documented the history of human mark making from ‘pure’ writing and drawing to a comprehensive listing of aggregates that can be neither classified as writing, pictures or notations (allographs, semaisiographs, pseudowriting, subgraphemics, hypographeometrics, emblemata, schemata). The significance of Elkins work is that it highlights drawing, in its many forms, as a meaningful act for the expression of ideas. His study demonstrates that drawing, like writing, is a primary communication tool, involving a dialogue between the creator and the drawn, between the drawing and the observer. He comments, too, that drawing is not, solely, the realm of the artistically inclined. Elkins (1999):

> The variety of informational images… and their universal dispersion should give us pause…. (he reasons that) informational images….engage the central changes in society; that they can present more complex questions of representation, convention, medium, production, interpretation, and reception; and that far from being inexpresseive, they are fully expressive and capable of as great and nuanced a range of meaning as any work of fine art (p. 4).

What is evident through Elkin’s book is the intently human need to find ways to express complex ideas in understandable form and drawing can, often, do this in ways that writing cannot. He confirms the idea of drawing as a conceptual, communicative tool that has less to do with a desire to accurately record than as a means of thinking and understanding. Drawing, then, can be seen as a translation, an abstract activity, and a form of synthetic thinking that reveals the mind at work. To illustrate this further, I refer, to this drawing of a section of the human brain, by the neuroanatomist, Santiago Ramón y Cajal (Figure 4).
At first glance, we would suppose that the scientist drew directly from what he saw, but this is not the case. Ramón y Cajal drew from memory and from his tactile understanding of the brain and the spinal cord. He would spend his mornings preparing and observing dozens of sections of the brain or spinal cord. Later, he would draw directly from memory, and only, after a considerable period of time drawing, would he look at his specimens again, to analyse the differences. He repeated this process, over and over, until he felt his drawings captured the essence of what he saw in an entire series of preparations. His pictures capture the abstract reality of the anatomy underlying any slice of that portion of the brain taken from any individual, not a representation of particular slice taken from a particular individual. They capture the essence of neuroanatomy so accurately that, even in this day of sophisticated photography, high-tech stains, and three-dimensional representations, many textbook writers still prefer his drawings for their clarity and conciseness. (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2001, pp. 88-89). This is just one of countless instances that illustrates the value of drawing in extrapolating our experiences of the world. His and others visualisations, such as the imaging of black holes or the structure of subatomic particles, which can only exist in the mind, “chart through drawings the evolution of human thinking and our understanding of the world around us” (Robin, 1993, p. 5).

**Reflective journals**

The example of the drawings of Ramón y Cajal, is only one of many in which drawing corresponds to an abstract form of thinking underscored by exploratory, synthetic and evaluative states of learning. To build learning in these skills, reflective journals have been integrated as assessable components in all drawing units. Whether in individual or set project work or in drawing from life, students are required to document their thinking, methods and to reflect on their learning. Journals foster deeper engagement on many levels and can contain many different types of information relating to learning: notational, observational, exploratory, descriptive, discursive, speculative, insightful, synthetic, evaluative, abstractive, documentation, contextual, revisionary and any other kind of

*Figure 4. Drawing of different neuronal forms by Ramón y Cajal.*
relevant information. Journals don’t require complex manual skills, but do require purposeful reflection on the mental conversations that shape practice - they are not simply sketchbooks, diaristic outpourings or mere repositories for source material.

Figure 5. Example 4 of student work.

While there are challenges for some students in developing the skills of reflective journaling, generally, as even the most tentative documentation begins to reveal the steps students have taken to move from one point to another, they begin to appreciate the time invested in them. The immediacy and lesser investment in time (as compared essay writing and making objects) encourages risk-taking and responsiveness to change - a page can be turned, a drawing reconfigured, a comment added to, connections expanded and revised. Within this experimentation, students begin to recognise patterns and more ways of imagining things and appreciate more widely the things they are interested in. It only takes a small change of focus, a slight shift in emphasis, the concentration on a detail or an examination of something that has been marginal, to bring about a change in perspective and enhancement of experience. Most significantly, journals keep students in learning modes longer and the more ways students can visualize their thoughts ideas the better their chances of insight.
Figure 6. Example 5 of student work.

Journals are important in developing awareness of learning and knowledge of the materials with which students are working. They also provide students with a ready document, a visual map, from which to structure one-on-one interaction between student and tutor and for presentation in class critique sessions. The requirement that students discuss work-in-progress is important in transforming individual perceptions into social communication. The interaction and feedback raises additional awareness of issues, the dimensions involved in answering them and identifies scope for improvement. The journal is central to this type of interactive learning, the significance of which is highlighted by B. Beyer who wrote:

“The most supportive environment for the teaching and learning of thinking exists where student and teacher thinking can occur continuously, where learning activities regularly require thinking, and where students and teachers frequently reflect on and discuss their thinking. In such classrooms the active search for knowledge constitutes the focus of learning” (Beyer, 1997, as cited in Davis, 1993, p. 183).

Finally, journal work is significant in building context, the social, cultural, philosophical and natural material contiguous with project work that provides a picture of where ideas and methods fit within collective knowledge. Including context material in their journal helps students to form links and identify the gaps essential to meaningful learning and to explore various models of practice.
Figure 7. Example 7 of student work.

Conclusion

Students are seldom encouraged to report on thinking and problem-solving processes – the incremental (and lateral) steps through problem-identification, inquiry, to solution and further. Yet it is the journey, not the solution, which produces meaningful, lasting and transferable learning. I have tried to show how drawing and journals are useful in developing this type of experiential learning and how these tools are relevant, not only to artistic endeavour, but to many kinds of thinking.

References

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