Children’s Art is Revealing!
The Visual Language of Children

Nan Williams
nwilliam@mail.ucf.edu

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Children have a visual language that is very special, and learning this language helps teachers see another dimension in understanding their students. We are well aware of the diversity of today’s classrooms; we often see wide differences in culture, language, ability (and disability), parental support, economic conditions and so much more. And often, children may not have the verbal skills to explain their meanings, and rely on intuitively expressing ideas through art. It is beneficial to take time to observe their visual statements, and to respond to them.

The Visual Language of Children

What is the nature of visual language in the drawings of young children?

• They record what they know, not what they see.
  ~ Looking at a red sunset in the sky, they will paint the sky blue.
  ~ Looking at silhouettes, they will draw facial features and clothing detail.
  ~ They know that two objects cannot be in the same space, so they will not overlap them.
  ~ They know that a cube is square on all sides, and will try to draw squares.
  ~ They know that tables have four legs, and they will draw all four legs, even if they are not visible.
• Their work is generally intuitive, not conscious.
• Their visual devices are not unique; they are universal and found throughout history.

What are some common devices children use to show “truth”?

• X-ray
• Exaggeration / distortion
• Fold-over
• Multiple views

How can the concept of “illusion” help students?

• First, students begin to realize that all the arts are based on illusion, not “reality.” Each art form conveys ideas and interpretations, even when imitating what is real.
• Students then understand the futility of trying to make art look “real.”
• Students understand the fleeting nature of drawing: reality of that moment.
• Students understand various devices for creating illusions in their work.
• Students are made aware of their own perceptions and thought processes, and engage in the practical process of reflection.
Opportunities in the Classroom

In the classroom, we sometimes miss opportunities to incorporate children’s art work in the classroom:

- Do we quickly pass by and just share a quick “good job!”? Or can we take the time to look at a child’s drawing, and simply describe what we see? If the subject matter is unrecognizable, we can always talk about the green lines, the shapes, the lines that go around in circles, etc. Even this simple description is an acknowledgment to the student that we have seen what they did, and we immediately see the relief and delight in the student’s face. This is a phase of “specific praise” that we are encouraged to use, and this idea can be applied in all subject areas in describing handwriting, math and science solutions, story ideas, etc. Even objective descriptions of behaviors can be an effective entry into corrections and adjustments.

- Another opportunity might be in the idea of illustrating a story. We often hear, “Write your story, and then if there’s time, you can illustrate it.” But doing the drawing first allows the student to make decisions about details of location, time of day, characters, clothing, actions, etc. Then the story will flow much more quickly, because these decisions have been made.

- Also, in the images we’ll see, allowing or encouraging children to draw “stick figures” may “derail” the normal developmental stage, and encourage the idea of leaning on a trite and unoriginal way of expressing ideas. As we will show, it is very easy to suggest drawing a person by using the shapes learned in kindergarten. This builds independence and confidence.

- Another confidence builder is the idea of limiting patterns or copying. If we start early, children will sustain that amazing confidence we see with kindergartners. When we present images from coloring sheets or other sources, it is easy for children to assume that your example is the only way to go, and they’ll begin to shy away from inventing their own solutions.

- By simply providing moments for drawing, we can help students build observational skills, independent problem-solving (“I messed up!”), and imagination. A five-minute drawing break after coming in from PE, for example, can help refocus. Several different approaches are valuable:
  ~ Give students the opportunity to observe an object placed on the desk. Eyes learn to look, to measure, to compare, and to be specific.
  ~ Give students opportunities to draw from imagination. Learning to use imagery is a first step in solving problems; we visualize solutions.
  ~ Give students opportunities to draw from memory. This also helps in concentration and focus.
  ~ Give students opportunities to illustrate; children are born illustrators! They will enrich their understanding of a story of their own, or one they have read.

- Yet another helpful opportunity: Dealing with “I messed up!” When we encourage or allow throwing away a paper with the beginning of a sentence or drawing, we aren’t providing a chance for the student to figure out what to change. They quite frequently cannot process what they need to change, so they’ll just do the same “mistake” over and over. We need to encourage by asking questions like “What would you like to change? Is it too long? too short? in the wrong place?” and so on. This again builds thinking skills and confidence.

  We want to help students embrace the idea of “failure.” Edison said, “If I fail 99 times, I am not discouraged. Then I know 99 ways it won’t work.” Einstein said, “The most important ingredient in success is failure.” This helps us tackle a problem with excitement and confidence, and toss out what didn’t work. Also, there are many types of learning that require exactness and linear thinking, like forming the letter “a” or solving a math problem. But there are many more types of learning that require imagination and lateral thinking, that is opening up to other sources, new ideas and relationships. This eagerness to explore and find new ideas is an important part of creative thinking, which, by the way, “is an attitude, not an aptitude” according to Schirrmacher (see References). This outlook can be stimulated, as we teach children not “what” to think, but “how” to think.
Another moment of opportunity concerns encouraging children to talk about their own or other’s work. This helps the whole process of thinking, forming sentences, and expressing ideas verbally. It is also amazingly beneficial to engage students in talking about a slide or reproduction of a work of art such as:

~ Winslow Homer’s *Snap the Whip* (old-time school house and game)
~ Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night* (his view of nature’s awesome sky)
~ Winslow Homer’s *The Gulf Stream* (showing a stranded boat and an ominous twister in the distance)
~ Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* (showing diligent work ethic in building America)

The use of questions is a classic and important method of teaching, and gives students a way to form thoughts and exchange ideas. A simplified form of Bloom’s Taxonomy is listed below the image.

![Image](image.png)

**What:** ~ a working man and woman  
~ old-fashioned clothes, serious faces  
~ symbols of their work: apron for her, overalls for him, and a black coat on top  

**How:** ~ arrangement has strong verticals: the shape of the painting, the upright stance, the strength  
~ the house with its tall, Gothic window, steeple in background  
~ simple, non-fancy colors  

**Why:** ~ title: “American” and “Gothic” (Gothic implies religious strength, erectness)  
~ his black jacket might indicate that he’s a church leader  
~ resulting image: self-reliance, pioneer spirit and Protestant work-ethic  
~ an image of those who worked hard to build America  

These types of exchanges are powerful gateways that help us develop the visual literacy, critical thinking and communication skills that are vitally needed in working in today’s fast-paced visual culture. Students welcome these occasions to talk (with permission!) and express their own ideas, and the benefits are bountiful!
References


September 17, 2010
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(sample selection of current conferences)

Florida Association for Staff Development Leadership Conference, Sept. 20-22, 2010 St. Petersburg Beach

Florida Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Annual Conference, Sept. 24-25, 2010, Orl.

2010 Dropout Prevention Institute/School Attendance Symposium, Oct. 4-7, 2010, Hilton Walt Disney World®


Florida Dance Education Conference, Oct. 8-, 2010, News-Journal Center, Daytona Beach, Fla.

Florida Association of Teacher Educators Annual Conference, Oct. 89, 2010, St. Petersburg, Fla.


Education Beyond Borders, Oct. 15-7, 2010, Sofia, Bulgaria

For more information on this electronic newsletter, please e-mail thecore@fldoe.org.

Having taught at all levels for over 35 years, Nan Williams has also served as a longtime Adjunct in art education and Intern Coordinator at the University of Central Florida. She is a former President of the Florida Art Education Association and is a frequent presenter at state and national conferences and writer for curriculum and advocacy publications. She received two large Disney Teacherrific grants for innovative curriculum, a recent Career Service Award from FAEA and Southeastern Art Educator of the Year Award from the National Art Education Association.

Graduate work at Eastman School of Music, many years as a university scenic designer (MFA in Theatre from University of Iowa), the teaching of music, theatre, art and humanities, and service in variety of arts organizations, all represent lifelong arts advocacy, working to provide the substantive arts experiences that students must have in today’s arts-bombed world. She served on the board of the National Art Education Association, and was selected as the National Elementary Art Educator of the Year, Florida Art Teacher of the Year, Orange County Teacher of the Year finalist, Florida Master Teacher, National Teachers Hall of Fame finalist, and a charter member of the Department of Education’s Florida League of Teachers.