“...and [he] told her she could keep it forever and ever.”

“Now we’re going to write,” said Ms. Smith. Promptly, twenty-one kindergartners, some with crayons, some with fat or skinny pencils, began talking and turning their oversized unlined papers this way and that. Soon the chatter generated by Joan de Hamel’s *Hemi’s Pet* (1985) slowed as drawings of real and make-believe animals flew, trotted, crawled, and ran across the students’ papers.

**Background**

When we watch children in primary or elementary grades, we delight in all this drawing; we accept it as a way of meaning; we accept it as writing. “Read what you have written,” we invite. So automatically playing the “believing game” (Elbow 1973, 148), they read their circles with lines radiating out as “a bright sunny day”; they read their row of stick figures as “I love my family.” Yet somewhere up the ladder of academe, we educate out of students this powerful writing tool we let middle- and high-school students know in subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways that drawing belongs to little kids.

I find this curious since I draw when I write. I usually line up boxes along my top margin like square soldiers. Then, apparently depending upon the nature of the writing, I fill them in with lines and shading—the more complex the piece of writing, the more intricate the details in the boxes. I don’t do this consciously, perhaps because they are “fugitives of my unconscious” (Torrey 1989, 65), yet boxes always appear on my papers.

So curious (or obsessive) did I become about connections between drawing and writing, I began a quiet and admittedly unscholarly research project—no control groups, no statistics—just random glancing at people engaged in the act of writing. I saw much drawing going on surreptitiously—clouds, smoke, flowers, houses, hands, cowboys, and cats sat side by side scribbles and squiggles on page after page. Some people even drew beautiful, suitable-for-framing designs like the elaborate mandalas a friend of mine creates before he ever writes a word.

**Theory**

As is usually the case when something strikes the mind, I noticed articles on this “frittering” everywhere. Obviously my curiosity was shared by readers ranging from *American Baby* (Lamme 1985) to *Omni* (Torrey), from *Psychology Today* (Winner 1986) to *College English* (Fulwiler and Petersen 1981). I wondered: if drawing, scribbling, and doodling fascinate us all, if all these loops and lines hold tacit meaning, why don’t we use drawing in middle and high schools as the powerful writing tool it is?

In a jointly written article, Toby Fulwiler and Bruce Petersen validate this notion of drawing as a writing tool by not only identifying three types of doodles and suggesting doodling as analogous “to journal writing, free writing, and rough drafting” but also by explaining that doo-
dles help “develop concrete records of otherwise incompletely synthesized intellec­tion” (626). In other words, they believe that doodles help make visible that which might remain ethereal.

Ruth Hubbard (1989b), borrowing the terms disigno interno (inner languages) and disigno esterno (visual modes) from the Italian painter Frederico Zuccari, echoes Fulwiler and Petersen: “These final products—on the canvas or printed page—are only a representation, of perhaps interpretation, of what goes on in our minds” (134). Further, she quotes Walter Grey’s study of the modes in which people communicate; “15% of the population thinks exclusively in the visual modes, another 15% thinks only in verbal terms, and the remaining 70% uses a mixture of approaches” (133–134). When I read those statistics, I began to realize why so many people naturally turn to drawing while writing.

Then I heard about Judy Skupa’s dissertation (1985). In it, she analyzes the writings of three groups of elementary students: those permitted to draw and look at their drawings before writing, those permitted to draw but not look at their drawings before writing (blind drawers), and those who were not permitted to draw at all before writing. Her data show that those permitted to draw and look at their drawings wrote best.

Skupa’s research supports that of psychologists James Gibson and Patricia Yonas. They recorded the delight two-year-olds took in making marks across a page, but they noted that if they replaced the child’s marker with one that left no trace, the children would stop writing (Winner 25).

I am reminded here of Janet Emig’s observation about Sartre’s blindness and his frustration at not being able to read his own work: “The eye . . . permits individual rhythms of review to be established and followed” (1978, 66). It seems obvious that the graphic symbol, born from the self for the self, different yet similar to the written one, contains its own intrinsic power, power arising from its unique ability to display a visual knowing and from its unique ability to enable a focused concentration.

Beginning to understand why drawing emerges as so powerful a writing tool, I hypothesized that meaning embodied in a graphic symbol leads to what Susanne Langer calls “symbolic expression” (Cassirer 1946, ix). Put another way, drawing provides “a cognitive economy in its metaphoric transformations, which make it possible for a seemingly limited symbol to spread its power over a range of experience” (Bruner 1971, 14).

Perhaps Betty Edwards (1986) most clearly explains it. Making a case that perceptual skills (those used when drawing) enhance thinking skills. She proposes that learning to see and draw is a very efficient way to train the visual system, just as learning to read and write can efficiently train the verbal system . . . And when trained as equal partners, one mode of thinking enhances the other, and together the two modes can release human creativity. (8)

That’s power.

To withhold that power from middle- and high-school students—no matter how well-intentioned—to permit only elementary students access to that symbolizing system ignores the importance of drawing as powerful preliminary of writing. Along with brainstorming, mapping, classical invention, the pentad, and other prewriting strategies, students should be encouraged to draw into meaning, whether as prewriting for their reflexive or extensive pieces or as initial responses to literature. In order to help that happen, we need to

1. Enable students to reenter texts in visual, non-threatening ways
2. Encourage drawing as a prewriting technique
3. Appropriate drawing as a springboard for further writing
4. Consider drawing an initial graphic probe, a strategy for tapping deeper or other awarenesses.
Application

In an effort to capitalize on the power in drawing (as well as to test my hypothesis), I visited many middle and high schools, and through interactive inservice (teaching classes, being observed by teachers, then meeting with those teachers afterwards), I was able to invite drawing as response to literature, then to see where that response might lead.

First, I talked to the students about symbolic drawing. I explained that such drawing is a symbolizing system just as writing is a symbolizing system: the former is one of images, the latter is one of words; the former is visual, the latter is verbal. Together we talked about the cave drawings found to date as far as 16,000 BC, to the Old Stone Age. I showed pictures of symbolic drawings taken from the caves at Altamira, Combarelles, Les Eyzies, and Font de Gaume in France. The students were hooked.

I followed with examples from the archaeological finds at Novgorod. These birchbark manuscripts show actual school exercises done by Onfim, a six- or seven-year-old boy, in the first half of the thirteenth century. Some are letters; some are syllables; some are remarkably contemporary looking “drawings of himself, battle scenes and pictures of his teacher” (Yanin 1990, 89). Onfim used letters and drawing to give form to his meaning.

Next, I showed a *pictograph* and defined pictographs as capturing the essence of what the reader knows. The one I chose was a simple stick figure of a man with twenty or so lines emanating out of each foot because five-year-old Mary told me as she pointed to her picture, “My father’s barefoot.”

“She drew what she knew,” I explained.

Next I showed four-year-old Derrick’s map as another example of symbolic drawing, the *ideograph*, a more sophisticated visual that the pictograph since it conveys relationships. Here I pointed out the way Derrick outlined the trip from his house to the babysitter’s house as well as from his house to church. As Hubbard (1989a) says,

As each of us attempts our search for meaning, we need a medium through which our ideas can take shape. But there is not just one medium; productive thought uses many ways to find meaning. (3)

Through discussion, it was made clear that drawing as a powerful tool of writing was not the same as drawing as an art form. The students realized that such drawing gives form to thought for self then communicates that meaning to others. This got them past the reluctance to participate, even to try because of the “I-can’t-draw” syndrome, meaning “I’m not an artist.”

Making connections between the history of writing and the symbol system children create, the students grew more curious. They wondered whether they could still tap drawing as a medium of meaning. The students were anxious to try the “new” symbol system; they were ready to put it to use, so I placed Richard Brautigan’s poem “In a Café” on the overhead.

I watched a man in a café fold a slice of bread
As if he were folding a birth certificate or looking
At the photograph of dead lover

(Brautigan 1979, 46)

After reading it aloud as students followed along, I said, “Let’s tackle this poem by fooling the usual and perhaps dominant hemispheres of our brain. Take your pen or pencil in the hand opposite the hand with which you usually write and draw what you know.” Heads down they worked. I did, too.

In about five or seven minutes, I intervened. “Switch to your comfortable hand and write what you discover in your drawing.” Again heads bowed down as they worked. Mine did too.

“Let’s see what happened. Who would like to share?” I invited. Many hands shot up.

Stephanie shared her drawing of an eye in the upper left corner and a tear in the upper right corner, She read,

My Scottish grandfather wore khakis. He was a railroad man—
his box house was next to the station. They were both painted railway yellow with coal black trim. I only saw him twice.

“Talk to us about any connections you see between the poem and what you drew and wrote,” I invited.

“The poem made me feel sad. All of a sudden I thought about my grandfather who I only saw twice. I think I thought about him because I feel bad I only saw him twice before he died. Maybe he sat at a table alone. Maybe he thought about me.”

“What did your drawing and writing tell you about the poem?” I press.

Stephanie thought a long while as she studied her work and Brautigan’s. Finally she said, “My grandfather was a loner. When you read the poem, I felt lonely. That made me think of Papa Mac. When I thought of him, I thought of what he did and where he lived. That’s what first popped into my mind. The colors came later.

“Now I think I’d add that the poet wanted to tell us not just about being lonely but also about being lonely even when you are around people, like in a café or by a railroad where you’d see lots of people.”

“The more I think about this, it’s like my mind keeps changing because now I’m thinking more of isolation than loneliness. Maybe the man in the café, like Papa Mac, wanted to be alone, wanted to be isolated. That piece of bread wasn’t bread at all, not when he really looked at it. It became the birth certificate or the photograph. The poet could be telling us something about wanting to see something so badly you do see it. Maybe the whole poem is about out perceptions.”

Stephanie’s writing and subsequent telling seem to validate Lev Vygotsky’s contention that drawing is not representational but rather it yields “predispositions to judgments that are invested with speech or capable of being so invested” (1978, 112). It’s unlikely that if Stephanie had been given the poem in the traditional setting any mention of Papa Mac would have occurred. It’s even less likely that the sequence of conjectures following that telling would have occurred. Later, when Stephanie drafted her essay about the poem, there was a quality, a depth to her writing which, according to her teacher, hitherto did not exist.

Continuing the sharing, another student held up a shaky sketch of a seated man. She read, “withered and solitary the man sits and waits. Auschwitz thin in striped pajamas, quietly letting go.”

T: How did your drawing cause that writing, Cathy?

C: Unexpectedly I thought about The Diary of Anne Frank, I think because we just finished reading it. When you read the poem I thought how that man in the poem could be a Jew who had been in a concentration camp. Then after the war he came to France. I thought of France because of the word “café.” He could have trouble eating because every time he goes to eat he thinks of the concentration camp.

T: Do those thoughts help you understand the poem?

C: Well, it’s awfully short—like Anne Frank’s life. I think the poet wanted to condense everything like Anne had to condense everything in that tiny room. I know poems are always condensed, but in this one it’s like it shows what it means. You can get a lot of meaning into a little space if you choose carefully. I want to choose carefully. I want to my life to be full even if I’m only thirteen years old.

These thoughts shared aloud echo Hubbard’s own exploration of the relationship between her words and images. Here Cathy conveys the complexity of that relationship. First, Brautigan’s poem caused an association with a book Cathy had just finished, which came out through the shaky drawing and the thin man. That, in turn, caused an allusion to a concentration camp to surface in the writing. When sharing, Cathy made application to her own life, her own desire to live life to the fullest.

As with Stephanie, the tendency is to use
drawing as the basic response, then to move in hierarchical, heuristical ways from the known (their graphic representation) to discoveries, to transformations, and to higher levels of knowing.

Another example comes from a twelfth grader named Raul who drew a large trash can. Bits of paper spilled over and cluttered the area around it. He wrote simply, “The man is a discard. No one cares about him.” Raul didn’t elaborate orally. At first blush it seemed nothing further had been triggered. However, when I revisited Raul’s class several weeks later, he thrust a neatly written two-page paper at me. “Read this,” he murmured, “I wrote it after your drawing class.” The title “A Disenfranchised Man” promised and the prose delivered a profound look at a person living in America, homeless, without privilege, without identity.

Raul and others had used drawing as a visual probe, a method of inquiry which helped them transform the raw data of the poem into something they and others could understand.

Conclusion

In Authors of Pictures, Draughtsmen of Words, in which Hubbard investigates how children use drawings and words to make meaning, she also cites adult authors (not just picture-book authors) who found drawing helpful in their works (see chapter 6) Writers like E.B. White, e.e. cummings, D.H. Lawrence, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, S. J. Perelman, Gabriel García Márquez, Flannery O’Connor, and John Updike rise up to remind us not to relegate only to little kids the joy of making meaning through drawing.

Finally, referencing several teachers at the middle-school and high-school levels who are giving their students the freedom “to use visual as well as verbal solutions to their problems” (152), Hubbard concludes,

Drawing is not just for children who can’t yet write fluently, and creating pictures is not just part of rehearsal for real writing. Images at any age are part of the serious business of making meaning—partners with words for communicating our inner designs. (157)

My experience again and again with drawing into meaning permits me to redouble her words. We must try to facilitate an environment where middle-and and high-school students discover this powerful writing tool, for as Gabriele Rico reminds us, “Before there are words, there are images” (1983, 157).

Works Cited


