Observation Drawing with Children

A Framework for Teachers

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Teaching Children to Draw from Observation

Children are challenged to think as they draw from observation just as they are when they paint, sculpt, or make collages. They think about using art materials and developing strategies for representation. They think about conveying meaning and understanding aesthetic properties.

What is the role of the teacher in presenting observation drawing to children? The teacher's task is not to tell children steps to follow to carry out that cognitive challenge; the task is to enable children to construct their own individual drawing strategies.

The teacher lays the foundation for observation drawing by giving students extensive experience with materials. She builds a framework by keeping in mind developmental guidelines, and by planning lessons with clearly defined objectives and in carefully crafted sequence. She sustains it by choosing objects suitable for the given age group and appropriate to lesson objectives. She bolsters it by fostering aesthetic properties and encouraging awareness of them. Essential to all aspects of that framework are the ways the teacher motivates, guides, and responds to children as they draw. The aim is to stimulate each child's thinking and cultivate it as it grows and changes from month to month, year to year.

This book describes how teachers can provide children with opportunities to do observation drawing. Explicit instructions with predictable outcomes are not included; instead, a specific approach is described through a series of lesson plans focused on children 4 to 12 years old. These plans are

organized around four developmental periods: kindergarten, first and second grades, third and fourth grades, and fifth and sixth grades. Each of these developmental periods forms a chapter in the book. Within each chapter there are two main sections: a developmental framework and a set of lesson plans. In this chapter we provide an explanation of those sections.

DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORK

To help teachers view children's work in observation drawing within the appropriate developmental framework, each chapter begins with a description of characteristics pertaining to a particular age group. The following topics are included:

1. *General development.* What are children of this age like? What are their cognitive abilities, social concerns, and interests? In all education, knowledge of child development is the bedrock of good teaching practice. In art education, this knowledge helps teachers select objectives for their lessons based on what is important to children during any one particular period.
2. *Representation.* In observation drawing, children must invent strategies to translate what they are looking at onto a flat sheet of paper. These strategies are based on three vital components: what the child understands about the object being drawn, what the child understands about the materials being used to create the drawing, and how the child makes correspondences between the materials and the object being observed. Choice of strategies is influenced by experiential history, art education, individual differences, culture, and development. What kinds of strategies do children invent for representation during the four developmental periods?
3. *Aesthetics.* Aesthetic properties emerge in drawing when a correspondence is made between the expressive qualities of an object and the expressive qualities of a material. For example, the sharp, poking, zigzag line used by a child to show the scales of an iguana is considered aesthetic because a connection has been made between the way the child experiences the feeling of the scales and the way the pencil has been manipulated to show them. The object itself is not defined as aesthetic. The drawing gains aesthetic properties through the child's creation and use of variation in marks, lines and shapes.

   The ability to perceive the expressive qualities inherent in objects, experiences, and materials relies on a particular type of per-

ception defined by Heinz Werner (1957/1978) as "physiognomic." Motoric and sensory phenomena are used in forming concepts, as are qualities of affectivity, expressivity, and energy (Smith, 1987). As quoted in Chapter 1, "response to expressive properties is a primary mode of perception for young children, in fact, it is probably the basis of the aesthetic aspect of their drawing." Very early in their development they begin to compose, select, and arrange graphic elements. This creates aesthetic order and interest in their drawings (Smith, 1983).

In Chapters 3–6, children's developmental stages in aesthetics are defined by their level of awareness of the aesthetic properties within their own drawings and the drawings of their peers, and by their control of aesthetic properties within their own work. This aesthetic understanding is significantly influenced by education. Education that offers formulas strips children's drawings of their life, energy, and integrity. But reinforcing children's own aesthetic ideas strongly affects their awareness and control of these properties. It also prepares them to make aesthetic assessments of adult work later on. With this in mind, we can ask, what are children aware of and in control of in terms of aesthetics during these developmental periods?

4. *Concepts of the material.* Creating a drawing requires translating a person's ideas into the language of drawing materials. The elements of that language are acquired by manipulating tools and materials, including paper, pencils, erasers, and charcoal. As children use these, they begin to form concepts of the material; that is, they begin to form an understanding of the various effects that can be produced. Pencils (#2 or softer) can be used to make dark and light marks, thick and thin lines. Charcoal can make smudgy or sharp lines. Children's concepts of a material evolve when they have frequent opportunities to use that material, whether it be a pencil, a brush, clay, or collage. These concepts vary from person to person because of individual differences, amount of experience with materials, and amount of art education received (Cicchetti, 1991). How do children in the different age groups understand drawing materials: their qualities, their characteristics, or their potential for capturing experience?
5. *Objects to draw.* Selecting an object to draw from observation is a difficult task. It requires matching an actual object to an educational objective, a material, and the interests and skills of a particular age group. This section in Chapters 3–6 provides general guidelines and specific examples for selecting objects that will attract chil-

dren in the given age group. How does the teacher select objects matched to particular lesson objectives and materials?

6. *Problems and responses.* Each chapter describes common problems children face when doing observation drawing and includes responses for dealing with these problems. Children are eager to have adults comment on what they are doing. A teacher's comments can encourage and validate each child's efforts. A quick, "Oh that's good," or "I like it!" does not suffice, because it implies that it is the child's job to please the adult. Value judgments, though difficult to avoid, leave children guessing about how and why their work is "good" and do not provide any specific or helpful feedback. Sensitive responses should highlight the features the child is responding to in the object. The teacher needs to view the drawing through the child's intentions and not as an incomplete or inaccurate representation of the object. What kinds of problems are typical at each age? What kinds of teacher responses are appropriate?

All of these developmental descriptions (overall development, representation, aesthetics, concepts of the material, objects to draw, problems and responses) serve two purposes. If one reads them *across* chapters, one can begin to grasp the context within which observation drawing takes place—how drawings, in general, change with age. If one concentrates, instead, on a single chapter, one can begin to grasp the range of individual responses that can exist *within* a given age group.

LESSON PLANS: IDEAS AND METHODS

In Chapters 3–6 the developmental framework is followed by lesson plans appropriate for each particular age group. These lesson plans provide sample ideas to use with children. More important, they present an approach to working with children when teaching them how to draw from observation. This approach involves several steps ranging from the establishment of an objective for what is to be learned to the evaluation of the drawings produced. Samples of drawings associated with the lesson plans are included in each chapter. These drawings have been selected as examples of the range of products a teacher might expect to see. All are valid responses to the task, reflecting the children's different methods of translating visual information into a drawing on paper.

Every teacher and group of children brings a different set of skills, values, responses, and interests to the challenge of observation draw-

ing. No two classroom situations are alike and children generally thrive in an atmosphere that is flexible and adaptive to their individual interests. It is our hope that these lesson plans will stimulate thinking about how best to integrate observation drawing into one's particular classroom situation.

Establishing Objectives

In developing a lesson plan, one must begin by stating an objective. This is critical, because it establishes what the teacher hopes the children will accomplish through the observation-drawing experience. Four general objectives are presented in this book.

1. *Learning to look.* Learning to look at an object and to reflect on what you see in a new or different way is the first step in all observation drawing. When very young children first attempt observation drawing, learning to look is their major concern. It is, therefore, the primary objective when planning lessons for this age group. For older children, learning to look is the foundation on which they build solutions to more complex drawing problems, such as rendering pattern and texture.
2. *Expression.* Lessons devoted to expression focus on the arrangement and quality of visual elements (line, shape, or texture) as they are used to create an emotional response in the artist and in the viewer. As a way to convey meaning consciously, expression is an appropriate objective for children in third grade and older.
3. *Composition.* Lessons in composition encourage children to think about where they place items on the paper. Relationships between objects themselves and between objects and the paper's edge are emphasized. Lessons dealing with these relationships are appropriate for children in fourth grade and older. Some sixth graders and older children may produce metaphoric meaning in their use of composition. For example, an isolated figure in the paper space may convey loneliness.
4. *Space.* Lessons devoted to spatial issues involve representing the three dimensions of an object or the depth of a space within the two dimensions of the paper. With younger children, the emphasis is on how appearances change according to one's point of view. For older children it means discovering strategies for representing depth and volume.

Guiding Development of Drawing Strategies

Creating or inventing a personal graphic response to some scene or object from nature poses formidable challenges. Children must learn how to look carefully at objects and then develop strategies for translating their observations into marks on paper. The method described here underscores the importance of a teacher's guidance while children are developing personal drawing strategies. This means asking relevant questions when speaking with individuals or when moderating a discussion about drawings with students in the class. The construction of relevant questions requires both a knowledge of drawing development and an appropriate lesson objective. This guidance, in contrast to specific "how-to" directions, helps children acquire confidence in their abilities to tackle this unique graphic problem and highlights the learning that is taking place within each lesson.

Appropriate guidance in the development of strategies for representing space and volume is particularly important in observation drawing. Young children often begin with very concrete strategies for representing front and back. One 5-year-old represents her cat's face on the front of the page and his tail on the back of the page. Another 6-year-old makes a red ball "round and fat" by making multiple layers of red marks within a circular shape (Wolf & Fucigna, 1981). By third or fourth grade, children employ strategies such as overlapping and size-distance scaling to represent in front of and behind or near and far. By sixth grade, most children are trying to figure out more culturally recognizable ways to represent spatial depth and volume.

In our experience, teachers often respond to children's interest in spatial representation by providing adult solutions such as one-point perspective, cross-hatching, or "shading." When children use strategies that they have not developed themselves, their drawings appear contrived and mechanical. Adult artists do not use these strategies in prescribed situations but see them instead as choices in a repertoire they have developed. Maturity is required when attempting to integrate these strategies in a way that genuinely reflects a personal response.

Although it might seem easier to provide some automatic answers to questions of translation, the teacher's role is to ask questions that help children discover their own strategies. Once developed, these strategies will be infinitely more accessible and useful to children.

Format of the Lesson Plans

The lesson plans in Chapters 3–6 will be presented in the following format:

Objective
Materials
Room Arrangement
Motivational Dialogue
    Topic Question
    Association
    Visualization
    Transition
    Sharing and Reflecting
Evaluation
Extensions

Each component of a lesson plan is described below, with an example from the lesson on drawing a tricycle in Chapter 4.

Objective: What will children learn through this drawing experience?

Example: Learning to look. To learn that the parts of a tricycle connect and can be translated into connecting shapes on paper.

Materials: What materials are needed to do the task?

Example: 12" x 18" drawing paper and pencils.

Room Arrangement: A simple physical setup that best facilitates observation drawing is suggested. It is understood that parents, teachers, and children work under many different conditions and constraints with the result that many individual adaptations will be necessary.

Example: Children are seated in a circle around a tricycle. Their work tables are behind them.

Motivational Dialogue: The objective structures the dialogue or motivation that takes place before the children begin to draw. The motivation is what the teacher talks about or does to stimulate reflection. The lesson plans in this book include sample questions and comments of a teacher (identified as "T") and sample responses of children ("C"). Of course, these dialogues always vary from child to child and group to group. (Sample responses of children are not provided in the lesson below.) The challenge of the motivation is to translate the abstract objective into an idea children can understand.

TOPIC QUESTION: Motivations usually begin with a topic question that focuses the children and allows the teacher to find out what they know about a particular object or subject. All lesson plans in this book provide sample topic questions. Some include examples of children's verbal responses. The responses chosen display great diversity, but all can be considered age appropriate.

> *Example:* Who remembers using this kind of bike when you were little? What is this kind of bike called?

ASSOCIATION: Through dialogue, the teacher helps the children to clarify their ideas and build enthusiasm for the topic being considered. During the association period, the teacher should be prepared with relevant questions to keep the dialogue going.

> *Example:* How are the wheels the same and different? Who can tell me why this trike has two small wheels in the back? Which parts help you steer?

VISUALIZATION: The visualization period is a critical juncture. During this time the teacher poses questions to help students figure out how to translate their responses to the object into marks and lines on the paper. Visualization questions should continue to focus the children on the objective of the lesson and, more important, encourage the children to think of their *own* strategies for translation into the material.

Visualizations should not provide teacher-generated solutions to the drawing problems at hand. In fact, when children listen to peers, they often receive many more pertinent solutions to the challenges they are facing.

> *Example:* Which parts are connected to the big wheel and how will you draw their shapes? How will you draw the handlebars?

TRANSITION: Finally, in the transition period, the teacher helps the children begin drawing by posing questions about where to start their picture.

> *Example:* Which part of the trike will you draw first? Which part of the trike will you draw next and how will you connect it to the first part?

SHARING AND REFLECTING: The purpose of these questions is to point out what children did and to help them notice particular qualities or strategies evident in their drawings. It is important for children to spend time exam-

ining their work together at the end of each lesson. Children often learn from one another, especially if the teacher is careful to point out the specific strategies each of them has used to represent the object. Various aspects of the drawings should be discussed in terms appropriate to the group. Through this process the teacher can re-emphasize the overall objective of the lesson, as well as reveal and support each student's imaginative interpretation and aesthetic response. Dialogue about children's work can occur between teacher and child, teacher and group, or between child and child.

Time needs to be scheduled for this kind of discussion. For very young children, the most productive time is immediately after a drawing session. The best method is to pin up work on the wall so all the work is clearly visible to each child. Another way to share is for children to sit in a circle and hold their work or place it on the floor in front of them.

Having children take the time to describe their own work and the work of others helps sharpen skills of observation and communication. Learning to look closely at each other's work helps them reflect on their efforts. This kind of sharing and reflecting brings to consciousness the processes used in making a drawing, thus emphasizing the thinking involved. Being aware of his own strategies shows a child that drawing is a matter of looking and thinking, not a matter of luck or special talent, factors that are beyond his control. Clarifying what a child already knows and what she has done gives her strategies she can use and depend on in her next drawing (Halley, 1991).

> *Example:* What shapes did Rebecca draw to show the wheels of the trike? Which wheel is biggest? How did Jessie show that the front wheel connects to the handlebars?

Evaluation: The concluding evaluation questions are for teachers to ask themselves in order to determine the effectiveness of the lesson. Was the objective right for the age group? Did the object fit the objective? Did the visualization questions really emphasize the objective?

> *Example:* Have the children paid attention to the parts of the trike and translated them into shapes in their drawings? Have they shown how these shapes are connected?

Evaluation serves another purpose as well. It helps the teacher determine where to go next in planning a future sequence of lessons in observation drawing.

The point of sequencing by complexity is to help children become more confident through a deeper understanding of the subject matter and a deeper understanding of the materials used to represent that subject. The lessons

in each chapter are arranged, in general, in order of difficulty. Individual teachers need to determine what might be an appropriate next experience for a particular group. Sequencing is based on the results of each lesson and the interests, struggles, and abilities of the group. For example, if children are very interested in vehicles, they could draw toy cars and trucks. If students need more practice in observing connecting parts, they could draw playground equipment.

Extensions: Extensions are suggestions for further experiences found at the end of each lesson. They extend children's thinking about a particular objective or object and often involve the use of other media such as clay, paint, or collage materials, each of which has unique qualities and limitations. While the focus of this book is drawing, these different materials may be used when working from observation as long as the children have had prior and extensive experience using them.

> *Example:* Children could continue to explore how parts connect by drawing simple mechanical objects. They could create a three-dimensional construction in which one or more of the connected parts can move. Making a collage of the tricycle would help children focus on the quality of the trike's shapes.

The challenges confronting the teacher trying the approach and techniques described in this book are as great as those facing each child drawing from observation. The teacher must carry out rigorous preparation for each drawing experience, pay careful attention to each experience while it happens, and engage in continual reflection and evaluation. The job is demanding, exciting, and rewarding.