DRAWING IS LEARNING

To understand and to be understood

by Laurence Musgrove and Myra Musgrove
Two of the most basic needs in our lives are to understand and to be understood.

And to achieve those two purposes, we are taught in school to use letters and numbers.
But there is a third language system available to us that is highly effective in learning to understand and to be understood: the visual language of images.

Yet, we are not taught to use this third language, even though our early learning is dependent on visual recognition and communication.

So why was the language of images devalued and discarded? How might it be used in teaching and learning?
I believe that we can help our students be more effective learners, if we can help them learn and practice this third language by integrating it into our schools via drawing across the curriculum.

Now, let's define some terms.

**Thinking**

= How our minds process information (we remember that a friend is visiting tomorrow)

**Visual Thinking**

= How our eyes and minds process visual information (we look into the guest bedroom to see if it is clean)

**Drawing**

= How our eyes, minds, and hands create visual information (we sketch out directions to the store for our friend)
I first became aware of the power of visual thinking and drawing when I found my students resisting the reading assignments I gave them. They tended to blame their books for being boring or hard to understand.

I thought that if I could draw them a picture of what happened when we read, they would better understand reading as a relationship between reader and text and how their responses grew out of that relationship. In other words, I hoped they’d see that what they brought to that relationship determined the quality of that relationship.

Then I realized that one of the important things they brought to reading was their history as readers.
So I asked my students to draw a picture of what happens when they read to help me understand how their reading histories might be influencing their current attitudes toward reading.

Their drawings surprised me. Some showed engagement, development, and positive experiences, but others showed oppression, anger, and despair.

After studying many of these drawings over several years, I soon discovered five basic metaphors for reading, and the most basic reading metaphor of all: Movement.
Suddenly it struck me that if the core metaphor for reading was movement, the core value of reading must be the freedom to choose what and how to read. And I wasn’t giving my students that freedom.

About that time I came across Dan Roam’s The Back of the Napkin.

Dan argues that drawing can be a useful tool for solving problems and presenting solutions.

He believes the visual language of problem-solving can be reduced to 6 images that represent 6 questions and answers: who or what? when? where? how? how much? why?

After receiving all of those powerful drawings from my students on their reading habits, I decided to have them use drawing as a reading response strategy in my literature and writing classes.
But, I wanted to give them more freedom, so I developed 21 visual formats and a strategy I call Handmade Thinking.
Because I’ve had success in teaching handmade thinking as a choice-based learning and response strategy in my classes, I’ve explored other areas of visual teaching and learning.

Handmade thinking

Visual agenda

Note-taking

I draw the visual agenda for each of my classes based upon the graphic facilitation vocabulary of Brandy Agerbeck in The Graphic Facilitator’s Guide.

I teach students visual note-taking based on Mike Rohde’s The Sketchnote Handbook.

I teach a graphic novel’s class based on Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics and have students draw comics of their own to learn the special visual vocabulary of sequential art.
So here's my simple conclusion:

School bias toward textual and numerical literacy limits our students' ability to understand and to be understood. It limits our abilities to teach as well. It's time for a national drawing across the curriculum project.

If you are interested in joining me on this project, contact me at lmvgrove@angelo.edu
NOTES

SUNNI BROWN HAS A SIMILAR MULTIVARIABLE CHART IN HER EXCELLENT BOOK ON VISUAL, CREATIVE, AND CRITICAL THINKING, THE DODGIE REVOLUTION, WHEREIN SHE FOCUSES ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VERBAL AND VISUAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION.

RUDOLPH ARNHEIM’S CLASSIC VISUAL THINKING IS A CLEARLY WRITTEN INTRODUCTION TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND VISUAL PERCEPTION, AS WELL AS CONTAINING A GOOD ARGUMENT FOR ART IN EDUCATION.

LITERATURE AS EXPLORATION BY LOUISE ROSENBLATT CHANGED THE WAY I THINK ABOUT THE TRANSACTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN READER AND TEXT AND THEIR OFFSPRING, LITERARY ENGAGEMENT AND RESPONSE. AN EXPANDED DISCUSSION OF THIS IMAGE OF READING IS IN MY JAEPL ARTICLE “WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE READ: PICTURING A READER’S RESPONSIBILITIES.”

SEE MY BLOG ESSAY “THE BELIEVING BODY” ON MY RESEARCH INTO THE METAPHORS WE READ BY (THEILLUSTRATEDPROFESSOR.COM/FREEDOM-AND-FAITH-IN-READING).

SEE EXAMPLES OF MY VISUAL AGENDA, STUDENT SKETCHNOTES, AND STUDENT COMICS VIA THE MENU AT THEILLUSTRATEDPROFESSOR.COM.

RESOURCES

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