



SUMMARY

Long before they learn to read and write, children often express themselves through the simple drawings they create. A veteran art teacher explains how this basic creative outlet, if it is nurtured, can be instrumental in helping youngsters develop — and improve — their reading, writing and speaking skills.

Joan Lipson Davidson has taught students at all grade levels for more than 35 years. She is president of the New York City Art Teachers Association / UFT and is a member of the NYSUT Committee on the Visual and Performing Arts. She is a past president of the New York State Art Teachers Association and a recipient of its Art Educator of the Year award. Although retired, she continues to develop curriculum and present. Her award-winning paintings have been exhibited in one-woman and group shows throughout the country.

How Drawing in Conjunction with Writing Contributes to Literacy

The process of drawing and writing in a series stimulates children to make connections between letters, words and visual symbols. It sparks their interest in acquiring the skills to communicate their ideas through images and words.

The drawing and writing series is a way of working and a way of thinking. It encourages the learner to think in at least two modes, each expanding and clarifying the thinking of the other.

For many students, the arts are their primary way of knowing and communicating. According to Howard Gardner (1993), a factor in creativity is to build on the learner's interest — a predilection to working in a particular domain.¹ In this process, the domain of image-making is augmented by writing. Literacy learners differ in many ways, including cultural background, neurophysiology, material resources, experience with language, and developmental level.² Educators must tailor their teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of literacy learners.

The drawing and writing process involves documenting layers of thought and using each layer as a stepping-stone to another layer. Picture a delicate, smooth-skinned red onion whose aroma gets more pungent as you peel away each circular, slippery layer. The goal of the process is to create a need for learners to discover and unlock what is unique about them, their personal voice — what they want to say in a form that is understandable to others. Picasso declared: “All of my paintings are researches ... there is a logical sequence in all this research.” Picasso, in fact, executed approximately 45 sketches in preparation for *Guernica*.³

The drawing and writing series process stimulates an engagement in both visual literacy and the specific topics related to early literacy outlined by the New York State Standards for English Language Arts for pre-K through grade 5. Based on real-world experiences, sounds, shapes, words, meaning, interaction with peers and adults, literature and media, students will achieve the

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following standards, which align with the ELA standards:

1. ELA Standard: Language for Information and Understanding.

Students will collect data, facts and ideas; discover relationships, concepts and generalization by creating a drawing and writing about the drawing, then reading their writing and drawing from their writing. They will create a series of work by repeating the process. (Adult help in writing may be necessary, depending on a child's age and ability.) The drawing and writing generated will be based on the meanings children construct while engaged in a process that supports their imagination.

2. ELA Standard: Language for Literary Response and Expression.

In the process of drawing and writing, students will gain experience in developing a story by writing about characters in their drawing, the setting and will develop plot ideas based on what is happening in their picture.

3. ELA Standard: Language for Critical Analysis and Evaluation.

In the process of drawing and writing, students reflect on and respond to the work of their peers. In presenting their work to the class or to individual groups, students will expand their speaking and listening skills and vocabulary.

4. ELA Standard: Language for Social Interaction

Through interactive dialogue, students will relate information in their drawing and writing to other events, increasing their awareness of possible content for their work. Students will gain empathy for and connectedness with others by viewing their artwork and listening to other points of view. The process engages children in drawing and writing for real-life reasons — to communicate something they want to say.

Gardner notes that “If, in early life, children have the opportunity to discover much about their world and to do so in a comfortable, exploring way,

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Do you think your artwork helped with your writing?

“For me writing didn't help my drawing, but drawing helped my writing.”

Carisse, Grade 3

Did writing help you with your artwork?

“Yes. If you write something, you know what the picture should be about and you know what details to add.”

Madalyn, Grade 3

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The use of the drawing and writing series process is appropriate as soon as the youngster can use words to talk about his or her image.

they will accumulate an invaluable “capital of creativity, on which they can draw in later life. If, on the other hand, children are restrained from such discovering activities, pushed in only one direction, or burdened with the view that there is only one correct answer or that correct answers must be meted out only by those in authority, then the chances that they will ever cast out on their own are significantly reduced.”⁴

For pre-school children, the art and writing process supports their visual imagery and gives them an idea how writing connects with their images. Expression pre-language takes the form of sound, movement and drawing, if given crayons, pencils or other writing instruments.

Both Viktor Lowenfeld and Rudolf Arnheim explored in depth the development of graphic characteristics in children’s drawing. For these young artists, content is often constructed during or after the shape is drawn. Over a week’s time, a series of drawings could have similar — or different — content. The use of the drawing and writing series process is appropriate as soon as the youngster can use words to talk about his or her image, which may seem like scribbles to a viewer who cannot “read” the picture.

Working with Carisse and Alex

The drawing and writing series process is illustrated by the works of eight-year-old Carisse and Alex, a pre-schooler age 4 years and 7 months. The series by Carisse was collected when I worked with third-graders in a New York City public school, PS 31 in the South Bronx.⁵ I worked intensively with 14 children, beginning with their entire third-grade class. All but one of the students who showed an interest in continuing their drawing and writing series were not the academic stars of the class. They enjoyed making images — that was their way of communicating. Their teacher wondered how the writing skills of these students had so improved, and I explained that the classroom curriculum needed to provide these image-makers with an opportunity to use drawing as a way to make sense of the ideas and facts they were presented.

Carisse, Grade 3

Carisse’s drawing had a positive effect on her writing, and her writing helped her think more carefully about her drawing. Growth was apparent in terms of her increased perception about her environment, her understanding of how to use the whole paper to tell her story and her development of graphic and writing techniques to communicate ideas.

In her first drawing, she includes herself and her mom, differentiated only by the fact that her mom is holding a shopping bag. Face, dress, size and body parts are all drawn the same. The bag her mom carries symbolizes she is going shopping. The dots for eyes and nose and upturned crescent line for a mouth symbolize a face and show no expression. All forms are reduced to their bare minimum to tell a story.

Carisse created her second drawing after reading the story another student wrote about her work and after discussing her writing and drawing in a small group with me. The questions posed in the group were: (1) What else could be happening on the block? and (2) How could a story be developed from the activities? In the second drawing, Carisse has more figures and each is doing something different.

In Drawing #3, Carisse shows she has an interest in drawing her block more accurately. Instead of relying on her memory, her mom suggested she look out her window. She then drew the block she saw across her street. The buildings now look quite realistic and her figures show more details in their body parts, eyes and accessories. Compared to her earlier drawings, growth is evident. As Carisse began writing, more details about learning to ride a bike came to mind and she included them in her story. Proud of her writing, she explained, “I knew I loved to do artwork, but I never wrote such a long story.”

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Carisse’s Drawings and Writings

Writing #1

In my block I see drug dealers some-times. I like the rain a lot. Me and my brother are looking out the window. We see a little girl in the rain with an umbrella and another lady with a bag.

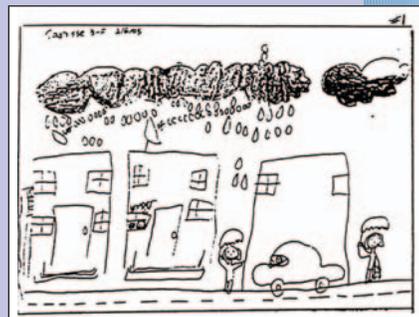
Writing #2

created in response to writing on first drawing.

Writing #3

My Block

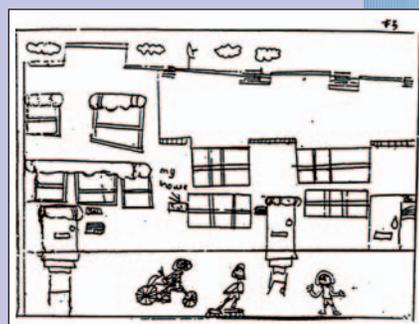
My block is a nice place to live. It’s not separate buildings. The private houses are small, but the top house has a lot of space. A Lot of people live here. My friends live on the block. Their names are Richard and Jessica and they like to play together. Sometimes we roller blade or ride our bike. At first I didn’t know how to ride my bike, but in the summer of 1995 my father taught me how to ride. One day he was teaching me and I kept jumping off the bike because I was scared to run into something or fall off the bike. I continued riding but I was always afraid. One especially warm day, after I had been practicing with my Dad for almost a whole summer, my Dad, after work, took me bike riding as usual. He said, “I’m about to let you go” and I said, “No, don’t let me go, don’t let me go.” But he still let me go and I rode in the basketball court. When I went in the basketball court I saw people playing basketball. They moved out of the way because they did not want to get hit. My Dad followed and yelled, “Watch out Carisse, you are about to hit the gate!” I just missed the gate and went to



Drawing #1



Drawing #2



Drawing #3, a completely new drawing is created based on observation of the building across the street

a wide open space where bikes could ride. My Dad was proud of me because I rode a bike by myself. Then we went back home.

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Feedback from peers and adults is vital to sustain the growth of the learner.

Alex (Pre-K, Age: 4 years, 7 months)

More recently, I collected the series by Alex in a home situation. I was encouraged to see how the process sparked his interest to recognize letters and words.

As Alex dictated his story and responded to questions to tell about particular parts, he responded in more detail, then added more details in his drawings the next time.

Watching me type, he wanted to try. As he sat at the computer I pointed to the letters and he touched the key.

The next day, he remembered some of the letters as I called them out and he located them on the keyboard. Later in the day he transferred this

knowledge to naming the letters and recognizing words as I read him a story. He continued the process at home — with the support and feedback he received from his parents and relatives as they read the book to him — and at school, where his teacher and peers applauded his efforts.

The role of assessment and feedback in the process

Feedback from peers and adults is vital to sustain the growth of the learner. Gardner explains how a significant support system from someone with whom the learner feels comfortable and cognitive support from someone who could understand the nature of the breakthrough are vital to nurture the creativity of the student.⁶



Role of parents in the process

Parents have an opportunity to become learners and facilitators, now and in the future, for their children who cannot yet write. If parents work with their child's teacher, they can learn how to ask questions to help their child clarify and think about their graphic symbols in different ways. When parents write the explanations dictated to them by their children or listen to or read their children's writing and compare it with their image, they get a peek into the "unspoken" life of their youngster. The process provides an entry point for the parent to become a partner in their youngster's journey to develop reading, writing, and speaking skills.

Role of teachers and parents

Authors Pressley and Hilden⁷ (2006) explain that a balanced literacy instruction program includes teaching specific reading strategies along with building word knowledge through vocabulary work. They cite 30 years of research that has shown that explicitly teaching cognitive comprehension strategies (e.g., predicting, questioning, seeking clarifications, summarizing, attending to elements of story structure, constructing mental images, and connecting to prior knowledge) leads to improved reading comprehension. In the drawing and writing series process, an image exists first and becomes the foundation for questions to clarify

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Alex's Drawings and Writings

Writing #1

This picture is a story of robots. And the robots are defeating their enemies and I am one of the robots I guess. The good guys, the Ninja turtles, will find the robots before the bad guys find them and they run to get their weapons for battle.



Drawing #1

Writing #2

The picture is about the Ninja Turtles fighting Mr. Underwear. The Ninja Turtles are running in battle. They jumped off the building when they saw Mr. Underwear. He was climbing the building and then he was bouncy, boingy, boing off both buildings because he was made out of rubber. Before he broke them into pieces they punched him in the face. There is the Jersey Devil and the Vampire Succuborn. They are just crawling around the Ninja Turtles.



Drawing #2

Writing #3

The setting for this picture is bubbles which 2 aliens are trapped in. One of the Aliens has two eyes and one has one eye like a plankton — a type of shrimp. The red stuff is lava. The pink is an electric net that zaps birds and then they die. The Ninja makes people eat rocks and dirt. There was a purple boy who was killed in the desert by a thief because he had money in his body. The thief took the money out of his body because he wanted to be rich. The Ninja replaced the boy's bones with metal bones. He then cut the bones into pieces so the boy could become evil. The Ninja has 10 legs and 2 swords and one shield. He plans to make the Aliens eat things they are not supposed to eat so they get sick and die.



Drawing #3

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If parents work with their child's teacher, they can learn how to ask questions to help their child clarify and think about their graphic symbols in different ways.

thinking, the structure of a story, predictions and a summary of what is happening in the story and or the picture. Responses to questions easily lead to a next picture or writing or both. This is just how the series progresses. George Szekely (2006) points out, "Young children start life as full-time artists and collectors. But they become part-time and secret artists as they find little connection between their home and school art. Children continue being artists when their art dreams are supported in school, and the art ideas they bring from home are valued in school."⁸

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Howard Gardner, *Creating minds* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), p. 42.
- ² Anne McKeough, Linda M. Phillips, Vianne Timmons, Judy Lee Lupart, editors, *Understanding literacy development: A global view* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), p. 4.
- ³ Howard Gardner, op.cit., p. 175.
- ⁴ Howard Gardner, op.cit., p. 31.
- ⁵ Joan L. Davidson, "My block and beyond: A documentation of how drawing in conjunction with writing contributes to the thinking process," *Resources in Education* (1996), Microfiche # ED406 300.
- ⁶ Ibid., pp. 43-44.
- ⁷ McKeough, loc.cit., p. 4.
- ⁸ George Szekely, *How children make art. Lessons in creativity from home to school*, (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2006), pp. 3-4.

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