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Drawing into practice

ABSTRACT

This article examines the nature of drawing as a cognitive tool and how the framework of a virtual learning environment can be used to extend its capacity to externalize creative ideas. The preparatory drawings a student makes often remain private, considered secondary to the completed artwork itself. Within such paperwork however, lies evidence of their articulation of thought. This external expression onto paper, can transform the most tentative of possibilities into expansive and refined ideas by entering into cycles of inspection, re-conception and re examination. This paper identifies parallels between this iterative and developmental activity and the social and conversational structures of a website. Specifically, it examines how a community of shared practice can reinforce understanding of the activity of creative thinking itself.

DRAWING INTO PRACTICE

The act of drawing has long been acknowledged as a cognitive tool, that it not only documents ideas but also has the potential to stimulate new ones (Tversky 1998: 93–101). Its role in the design process perhaps offers the most transparent model of this, whereby once ideas are expressed externally onto paper, a cycle of inspection and re examination can take place, expanding and refining ideas (Goel 1995). Teaching this facility within a broader art education however, can be more problematic; as the cycle of idea development, inspection and re-conception often takes place as part of the construction of the final artwork with any notions of pre-design viewed as impeding the flexibility and responsiveness of this approach.

Drawing's capacity as a reflexive tool in the study of fine or applied art subjects needs to be employed differently. For example, if utilized at an earlier stage in the processing of information, it can actually heighten students' perceptual awareness. In these very first stages of creative endeavour, the practice of drawing can enable the exploration and recording of our environment, as a mechanism to extend artists' sensorial experience, providing the means by which to further gather and examine properties. In this role, by virtue of documenting what catches attention, triggers interest, curiosity or pleasure in an artist, it can be used simply to record or even identify artistic traits and preferences of which the artist may previously have been unaware (Goldschmidt 1991: 123–143).

From this initial gathering and recording of stimuli, drawing can then be employed in perhaps the most significant stages of creativity – the selection, reordering or reconfiguring of properties necessary to allow new ideas to emerge and be given form. In terms of creativity, it is these stages of transformation – from perception to concept – that determine the nature of an artwork, as they demand navigation of a complex series of thought processes in order to generate innovative and responsive work (Mayo 2010: 3). Yet, despite the saliency of this transformation, creative thinking – the ability to make connections and associations between values to develop new possibilities – is often taught in an implicit manner, perhaps through fear of stifling or controlling individual development.

This is where the reflexive capabilities of drawing can be most fully utilized. As a supportive discipline to the crafts, drawing is both intimately connected to studio practice and enables an objective distance from which to view ideas. It is uniquely placed, offering a diversity of approaches through which ideas can be examined, akin to 'working out in the margins', without a sense of compromising the students' independent development of the artwork itself. Employed in this role, drawing can be used specifically to develop and hone creative thinking skills. For example, extending the limits of memory by offering a means to off-load, externalizing fleeting thoughts, transient or emergent interests, fixing them in place, making them tangible with the added advantage that those depictions can be inspected, discussed and altered over time (Goldschmidt 1991: 123–143).

Students can be taught drawing as a key means by which to render visible their creative process and moreover, feel empowered in the knowledge that they not only have the facility to make art objects but the predisposition to negotiate problems in a particularly inventive manner. It was in order to harness drawing as a creative thinking tool that the National Centre for Ceramics, Wales created its Visual Studies: Drawing Resource.

THE ROLE OF THE VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The National Centre for Ceramics Wales website, of which the Visual Studies: Drawing Resource is a part, is an ongoing research project that utilizes a virtual learning environment (VLE) to test out and develop creative pedagogies (Mayo and Murphy 2011: 1). The site, containing resources on each body of knowledge taught onto the ceramics programme, is underpinned by a central premise: successful learning and teaching can take place through understanding creative thinking as a shared and collective activity.

Each resource seeks to identify patterns and tendencies in practice from across large numbers of students' work, effective methods that are otherwise

absorbed by individual endeavour. The site is, therefore, almost entirely compiled from students' work, in the belief that if it is to operate as a successful learning tool then it has to extend and reinforce those very activities already, necessarily, taking place. This has led to a wealth of narrative based learning, resources constructed from the documentation of student work, through both sequential imagery and film, illustrating a diverse range of tried and tested ways in which ideas can be developed.

Perhaps more importantly, in addition to housing these examples as static information, the VLE has the capacity to continually record current accounts of student practice through individual student pages. It is through these pages and associated blog sites that the site begins to utilize social and conversational structures as a learning and teaching device. Students have the capacity to upload their own imagery and commentary in response to each body of knowledge taught, to see their own work side by side with the established resources and recognize what contributions, deviations or innovations they may bring to it.

Engendering understanding of how knowledge lies within a continuum, within a wider context of ideas, is fundamental to the pedagogical approach of the site. The VLE offers a situated environment in which knowledge(s) and endeavour(s) can literally be placed, prompting deeper understanding and interpretation of stimulus through vicarious learning; learning from the successes and near failures of others (Vytgostky 1960: 197–198). In this way, students are encouraged to converse openly with their peers, present and defend ideas and question conceptual frameworks and new site-specific knowledge can be continually generated, responsive to current challenges and interests. The associated blog sites further extend this through exposure to the concerns and interests of professional artists, identifying contexts that might not otherwise have been brought into proximity to students and allowing invaluable progression into professional practice.

If this approach is to be fully realized however, the cycle needs to be fed; a culture of understanding must be nurtured, whereby students accept that making developmental work public, as well as completed work, can significantly contribute to their learning – that developmental work can be at the same time private and individual, and part of a community. This often requires a significant shift from outcome driven education, where thinking can be closed, concerned with providing the best or most correct answer, to thinking as questioning, a shared and collective activity, open to multiple perspectives (Harasim 1999: 44).

DESIGNING THE VISUAL STUDIES: DRAWING RESOURCE

The development of the visual studies drawing resource began with student interviews, in order to investigate their existing practices for patterns and tendencies in their use of drawing. These interviews were purposefully non-structured and discursive, in order to allow for strategies previously unrecognized to emerge. Such an approach, however, necessarily encounters questions regarding the authenticity of findings: Did I, the researcher conducting the study, understand what was taking place in the students' work better than the students themselves or risk imposing my viewpoint and lose the students more subtle, nuanced understandings?

It must be acknowledged clearly, therefore, that the resource is a collaboration between student/particular and researcher/universal; it is an amalgamation

of images submitted by students with identifications made by the research team. On their own, the images would not convey the capacity of drawing to develop ideas. The findings had to be 'added up', a meta-analysis conducted, in order to identify essential strategies used by the students across the work. This assimilation of findings is significant, as without it the resource would simply house a collection of unstructured possibilities. It is the identification of phenomena occurring across students' work that translates the images into a pedagogical tool.

DATA ANALYSIS FOR THE VISUAL STUDIES: DRAWING RESOURCE

Over four hundred examples of students' drawings were scanned, some singular but most sequential, in order to demonstrate idea development through stages. These images needed to be compiled in such a way that they did not merely demonstrate '*how-to-do*' exercises but rather, engendered a conceptual understanding of drawing as a developmental tool. We sought to identify shared approaches, commonalities in the use of drawing that are not subject dependent but rather, underpin the activity of investigation. The compilation of these images needed to contribute to a framework of practical research methodologies that could appear open to and adaptable by other possibilities when viewed by students.

In looking across the student work, an unspoken rationale for the use of drawing emerged: 1) that drawing was used at strategic points in the development of an idea – beginning, middle, end, 2) that it was employed to identify and examine the contributing elements of an artwork such as its surface, form, context 3), that properties were often found in two dimensions equivalent to those used in the studio, between material values, gestures/actions and style. These findings informed the resource and the identification of strategies. Eight broad areas were identified:

- Gesture and Line
- Spatial Relationships
- Language of Pattern
- Drawing and Action
- Value of Materials
- Photography
- Series
- Presentation and Curation

The drawing resource compiles these eight approaches. Each approach is taken in turn, and using a series of narrative accounts, their capacity to extend and develop ideas is given emphasis. In this way, each is viewed from a multiplicity of perspectives, treated as situated interpretations, a range of indicative examples that suggest that other alternatives are also possible. In other words, how creativity takes place, how ideas are negotiated and developed is here given as much importance as what is being learnt, placing interpretation at the core of understanding.

The design of the site further consolidates the multiplicity of this approach. Each 'proposition' is constructed in three ways: 1) an **Illustration of indicative work** – single images of student work, offering clear examples, 2) as a **developmental tool** – how it can be used in the exploration of ideas through a series of stages and, 3) **Workshop Exercises** – a formal or step-by-step description of how to begin the approach.

A theoretical premise is also given, from which each approach can be understood, to further situate drawing in the wider field of ideas. For example, the first proposition entitled: 'Gesture and Line' is explored through an introduction to pre-reflexive thought that reads as follows:

> Our experience of an artwork and indeed the development of creative ideas in general can often appear dominated by vision and a conscious articulation of thought. Our pre-conscious mind however, has the capacity to scan experiences, find connections and associations at a far greater speed than the conscious system, as though the body arrives and responds to stimulus before we are even aware of its activity. Our understanding of aesthetic properties therefore, is first governed by our sensory and emotional field, before conscious reasoning. This is of considerable importance to our understanding of the creative process.
>
> The initial workshops in first Proposition attempt to harness this modality quite literally by placing a piece of paper in-between the subject (student) and object (world). The drawings arise from interactions between the two, testimony to the activity of our perception. Utilizing Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology, such exercises generate understanding of synaesthesia the fusion of the senses, as students search for equivalents between marks made on paper and the movement of their body, sounds, smells and noises around them.
>
> Such exercises often lead to conversations about metaphors, one thing standing in place of another and how an artwork can exist in that capacity, giving form to or making tangible intuitive, physical experiences as well as more literal, representational imagery.

A selection of the workshop exercises is also explained through this theoretical perspective and set out in the introductory page:

> **Group drawing**, where individuals work collaboratively can be seen as demonstrating the commonality of our bodily perception and its potential application to an artwork. Students appear to almost collude in silent communication generating a synthesis of thought which drives the work forward.
>
> **Individual Drawings**, where vision is limited by closing the eyes or drawing around the head, slightly out of sight, forces the student to concentrate on other senses and generate more responsive marks unusual to their practice.
>
> **Involvement of Ideas**, can be instated by work/image transfer exercises. A selection of words can be given to the student pertaining to their area of interest and they have to find ways of describing or encompassing these terms without direct representation using previous mark making properties.

CONCLUSION: TEACHING FROM THE RESOURCE

From this study emerged the potential of narrative pedagogy and practices in the teaching of drawing, offering a model of collaborative learning that could keep possibilities open and create a renewable source of contemporary discourse on the subject. If it is to fulfill this potential, however, its

development must be incorporated into the teaching process itself. The information contained in the resource cannot be simply delivered as a lecture (the students can read this for themselves in their own time) but rather, teaching needs to actively explore *how* debate can be engendered and contribute to student learning. Since the inception of the site, two case studies have been developed: firstly, students worked directly to expand the resource itself and secondly, students identified the approaches in their own practice.

In the first case study, students were simply asked to review the resource and add to it further examples of the eight approaches found in their study of professional artists' work and within their own environment, thus compiling a more comprehensive 'Drawing Manifesto' (Mayo 2011). In this way, new trains of thought were added to the resource, demonstrating the potential diversity of their application. The results have now been placed into an associated blog site, providing an extended archive that will be contributed to by students in subsequent years. The only drawback to this method was the tendency to over theorize drawing as a developmental tool rather than give emphasis to students' own practical experiences.

The second case study addressed this problem by embarking on projects that purposefully reconnected students with their own practice and demonstrated patterns and tendencies in the way they used their own drawing to develop ideas. Students were taken on a field study trip and asked to use drawing to document their response to an environment. A video was made of the day, documenting their various approaches and rendering visible commonalities in the way they evidenced their response, including: the simplification of information, identification of patterns or recurrent motifs and an exploration of their physical/sensory response to surroundings. The latter often revealed the dominance of sight, followed by sound, movement and lastly the position or discomfort of their body whilst drawing (Mayo 2011).

The field trip location itself, Nash Point in West Wales, may have influenced the shaping of these shared responses, where high winds and cold temperatures batter the meeting of land and sea. The following year, however, a similar field study trip took place to a very different site, Cardiff city centre, producing similar outcomes; commonalities persisted across and regardless of the terrain. The video recording of the event was used to produce a new learning resource, with text that identifies these shared approaches. The film is now part of the drawing resources' associated blog site.

Film has since become a significant part of the virtual learning environment, extending both the resources and the students' individual pages, a dynamic means by which students can become aware of, and identify traits in their own creative process, aided of course by the ease of mobile phone technology.

The site most actively contributes to the learning and teaching of drawing by adopting such responsive approaches to the identification and recording of practice. New knowledge is not only generated from current challenges and interests but by virtue of it being shared and built upon through the site and by exposure to a wider community of creative thinkers. Here, in essence, lies the greatest parity between the social structures of a website and the employment of drawing as a thinking tool: each reflects the others' ability to enter into cycles of inspection, re-conception and re examination, thereby reinforcing understanding and retention of information. The greatest limitation of this approach will be in the capacity of the site to respond to student demand and their growing interest in collaborating and to attend to this the site will require constant modification and renewal.

All resources contained on the site are open-access: http://ceramics.cardiffmet.ac.uk

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Uncommon Goods

Global Dimensions of the Readymade

By Jaimey Hamilton

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An important contribution to scholarship on readymade art, as well as to the study of materiality, embodiment, and globalization

Since Marcel Duchamp created his 'readymades' a century ago, most famously christening a urinal as Fountain, the practice of incorporating commodity objects into art has become ever more pervasive. Uncommon Goods traces one particularly important aspect developing since the 1990s: artistic concern with the hidden ethical dimensions of global commerce. Art historian and cultural theorist, Jaimey Hamilton discusses the work of Ai Weiwei, Cory Arcangel, Atelier van Lieshout, Christoph Büchel, Tania Bruguera, Paul Chan, Surasi Kusolwong, Thomas Hirschhorn, Santiago Sierra, Yinka Shonibare, and more.

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