The Writing behind Drawing: Lessons learned from my Kindergarten Class

WING-YEE HUI

Abstract
A traditional view of writing focuses on print as the ultimate mode, but a growing body of research finds that children can acquire and develop writing skills using other modes, such as drawing and multimedia. In this study, kindergarten students were asked to draw (as a mode of writing) in order to test and observe their process. As a result, the students were able to see themselves as meaning makers, demonstrated knowledge of and skill in creating texts, and became a “community of learners”. The study confirms drawing as an alternative mode for successfully teaching writing at the kindergarten level. The findings also support a multi-modal view of literacy and highlight the significance of social aspects and the artistic element in the success of the program.

Introduction
Reading and writing of print continue to dominate as the primary forms of communication in the education system. A growing body of research, however, challenges how we define and teach “writing”. In fact, with technological advances, children are growing up in a society where they will be required to be multi-literate in order to take part in an adaptive and innovative workforce. Print may no longer play a primary role in written communication that increasingly employs visual images to convey meaning (e.g. advertisements, magazines, manga).

The narrow, traditional view of literacy within the boundaries of reading and writing print can be broadened to one that is based on the learner’s ability to communicate and comprehend knowledge (Leigh & Heid, 2008). This broader view is also justified by research indicating that often the same literary elements are involved when working in other modes such as drawing or multimedia. For instance, early representations that children create are often labelled “scribbles” and these writings are not celebrated because they do not sufficiently approximate the conventional code (the printed alphabet) (Kress, 1997). As unrecognizable as these shapes and pictures may be to adults, however, these visual images are often purposeful efforts. Kindergarten children are already experienced in making meaning and making signs by using whatever is at their disposal to represent meaning (Kress, 1997). They readily see this as their mode or code of telling a story (Leigh & Heid, 2008).

Furthermore, although children’s initial markings more often represent objects, not letters, this activity serves as a scaffold for later writing (Leigh & Heid, 2008). Their drawings go beyond the composition of lines and colours to one that includes language as well; children are symbol weavers with a natural capacity to discover how language works (Dyson, 1986). In
these activities, they apply the patterns of communication (Kress, 1997), take risks and use their knowledge about writing, just as they have done in the acquisition of oral language (Wood & Glover, 2008). For kindergarteners, a multimedia approach has been found to not only help prepare them for conventional writing but also to provide valuable insights for adults about their thinking (Kendrick & McKay, 2004; Thompson, 2005).

Arts based educational approaches have been more apt to take an inclusive view of literacy. The Reggio Emilia approach values the art languages that children create, as the way that children make their thinking visible. Art is seen as a tool for thinking, taking new perspectives, representing and exploring emotions, studying the properties of the physical world and deepening relationship with others (Pelo, 2007). Furthermore, young children naturally take to arts activities – for example, Calkins and Mermelstein (2003) found that students left to their own devices often began a writing workshop by drawing a picture and then creating a story around that picture. Finally, the arts and creative motivation provide value for teaching all children, but can be especially helpful for connecting children “at risk” in school (Olshansky, 2008; Sidelnick & Svoboda, 2000).

Thus, this study was conducted to test the use of drawings as a primary text form in the kindergarten classroom. Given that research indicates that kindergarten students already understand that their drawings carry meaning, we should be able to observe an emerging mastery of elements of written communication (e.g. narrative form). Furthermore, if the students, freed from the frustration of trying to master the code expected by adults (print), can see their drawings as relevant written expressions, the hope is that they could be more motivated and more successful in constructing and communicating meaning. This activity would also reveal to us, as observers, their knowledge of what the writing process entails.

**Literacy through a new lens: The ‘art’ of writing in kindergarten**

In redefining literacy instruction for kindergarten, one needs to employ modes that are suitable for this age level. Olshansky (2008) notes that young children intuitively understand the meaning of pictures long before they master reading and writing of words on paper. Therefore, in joining the language of art with the language of words, learners can expand their capacity to think in two languages in which they can generate, develop and express ideas. In fact, Olshansky’s *Artist/Writer Workshops* integrated visual images at every stage of the writing process. Kress (1997) also found that children were able to construct meaning easily and naturally using multi-modal symbols: “Children see this as ‘telling a story’, and as they have no difficulty at all with this, it seems that visual display combined with verbal narrative is a perfectly proper mode to them” (p.143).

In addition, acknowledgement and feedback are needed to support the children’s learning and development. Children’s markings need to be validated as meaningful. It is equally important for children to explain those meanings (Shagoury, 2009) so they can practice the ‘elements of craft’ (Giacobbe & Horn, 2007). An environment that nurtures instructional strategies that acknowledge the way in which children create their own unique literary paths are more likely to encourage them to participate and be satisfied about their accomplishments (Sidelnick & Svoboda, 2000). In addition, children can receive feedback from peers who look at their pictures and read them for meaning (Olshansky, 2008).
Finally, as with any program change, on-going observation and improvements are needed. From the children themselves, we can come to understand the many ways that they test the boundaries of the written language (Wood & Glover, 2008) and come to better understand how they are teaching themselves to write.

Setting the stage

The setting for this study was a half-day (morning) kindergarten class with 20 students (4 to 6 year olds) made up of 13 seniors (5 girls and 8 boys) and 7 juniors (4 girls and 3 boys). Many of the senior students were at an emergent writing stage and capable of some encoding using letter-sound associations while junior students were at a beginning stage of letter-sound correspondence. The study took place over an 8-week period during the spring term. Pictures of students’ work and the teacher’s notes were captured in a visual journal format. All children’s names are pseudonyms.

The students in this class had already been exposed to the arts as a medium of expression and been given mini-lessons on how to draw. Essentially, instructions were provided about how to draw in the same way we teach how to write words, boosting drawing skills as well as improving self-confidence and the willingness to share their drawings. Drawing lessons are not meant to turn the children into artists, just as teaching grammar does not mean that they would turn into Shakespeare (Moore & Clarke, 1998). The emphasis was on the process and progression over time as a result of experimentation and practice. Drawing helps children to learn to use their eyes so that they can see more intensely. This allows them to know the subject matter better and consequently to better represent it on paper, first through their drawing and eventually through their words (Richardson, Sacks & Ayers, 2003).

Approximating the artist/writer workshop of Olshansky (2008), a non-fiction book was read to the class, relating to a science lesson, for example, followed by a short drawing lesson / demonstration. The students would then draw their own pictures and be asked to briefly describe their picture upon completion. Students’ work was typically displayed on bulletin boards for general viewing and appreciation. To facilitate the weaving of pictures into words, students were then invited the following day to narrate a story from their drawings. Their stories were recorded on paper by the teacher and displayed alongside their drawings.

A picture is worth a thousand words: Observations from bat drawings

The first topic presented was bats, which began with the teacher reading the book Bats (Wood, 2001) to the class, after which the children produced bat drawings.

During the following day, the story-telling activity generated great interest from the whole class. Students lined up eager to tell the teacher their bat stories (see Figure 1, Figure 2 & Figure 3), which notably were all narratives and contained little or no connection to the factual content of the book that had been read to them. Instead students somehow found a voice through their drawings and were able to give a description and sequence of events from their own drawings.
“The bat is trying to get the bug. He is catching it with his teeth. He eated it. And then he eated the other one. And then he flew away.”

Figure 1. Bat picture & narrative - "The bat is trying to get the bug ...."

“The bat was flying. He saw a sun that was going down so he went out. He saw 4 mosquitoes and he flew down to them. He dropped his wings and he ate the 4 mosquitoes and he went back home.”

Figure 2. Bat picture & narrative - "The bat was flying...."
“There was a man and then a bat bit him and then he became Batman. And then a goopy orange guy flipped him over. Batman threwed him on the ceiling and broke him.”

Figure 3. Bat picture & narrative - "There was a man and then a bat bit him ...."

Though each student had drawn a bat figure, it became a character in a story with a sequence of ideas and a theme. These narratives provided a glimpse into each child’s world and told us something that was significant for each individual. Through this activity, the kindergarten students were able to make public their thinking about a particular topic and thereby unfold their thinking to an audience that needs to understand (Horn & Giacobbe, 2007).

As the artist/writer workshop lessons continued, and the students narrated more stories, they became more skilful in thinking out loud, organizing their information, and selecting the text for an audience – they were developing their skills in the craft of writing. The kindergarteners also began to shift in the way they think, speaking of themselves as ‘real’ writers and discussing elements of the writing process. They had made a connection, or bridge between drawing and writing (Sidelnick & Svoboda, 2000). Each of them had also developed a desire to learn to write.

The aspect in this activity that brought the most joy to the children, however, was the sharing of the finished stories and drawings afterwards. They cheered for each other, commented on the drawings and asked questions regarding each other’s pictures and storylines. They wanted to hear the stories again and once their drawings were hung up, they proudly brought their families to see their work.

The children’s visual stories were also found to help parents make valuable connections in understanding their children’s capabilities and growth. In parent-teacher interviews, several parents identified themes and content in their children’s work that had originated in previous experiences. In seeing their children as successful meaning makers even though the primary text was drawings, not print, the parents had effectively adopted a multi-modal view of literacy.
A community of learners

Aside from the writing lessons with the teacher, a significant change was also brought about in classroom dynamics. Over the days following the bat writing activity, an increasing number of students began to congregate at the writing centre during free choice time. They were interested not just in working with the writing utensils (e.g. markers and paper), but they also experimented and fed off one another in using other materials that had previously been overlooked (e.g. popsicle sticks, pompoms, paper bags, booklets). What was taking place here was the growth of a kindergarten writing community.

It became a customary routine that students would continue to draw their own stories during unstructured time. For instance, some of the senior boys began to collaborate on stories together and negotiated about the sequence and plot of the story that they would create together. If stories were unfinished, they would make efforts to continue them the following day. Girls often created similar books and stories in parallel, all the while busily discussing and sharing with one another what they were thinking. There were those who drew stories with recurring themes (e.g. super hero stories) while others decided to experiment with different writing styles (personal narratives, poetry).

Without any guidance, students demonstrated understanding of how written stories can be formatted, organized and represented. They not only used paper and stapled them, but some began to use other materials such as paper bags to represent monster catchers, while others used stamps, glue and hole punches to make pop-up books or puppet stories. Kress (1997) refers to this as multi-modal forms of communication (multimedia drawing, speech, writing). The children created stories and situations using materials that were available to them. Although they did not often use the conventional writing format to make their stories, the children used objects to represent a complex set of thought processes and communicated that to an audience. They showed a broad understanding of what writing represents to them and because of that, they were not at this stage necessarily bound to the thinking required by the adult world (Thompson, 2005). The students’ work illustrated their knowledge of written works and their ability to engage in the writing process.

Gigi’s story: (No title)

One of the first of independent books created by the students after the study began was a storybook initiated and completed by Gigi), a junior kindergarten student, without any assistance (See Figure 4). Completing a project independently was not typical in nature for her, as she usually preferred some adult assistance, even in drawing, for fear of making mistakes.
Gigi came to the teacher to narrate her story but declined to have it scribed, satisfied with her graphic representation. While telling the story, she stopped to edit the last page to add some brown hair, demonstrating the same process that writers encounter while looking over a first draft.

For Gigi, at this point, art was her means to communicate her thoughts. It was her preferred code of expressing herself but there is a logical sequence and organization to the storyline and each individual is represented uniquely and clearly based on how Gigi sees them (e.g. Her choice of heart-shaped faces suggests her love for her family.) Most importantly, Gigi saw herself as a meaning maker and was willing to embark on the journey of becoming a writer.

For the teacher observer, this also provided an opportunity to gain information about the student, the themes that interest her and her personal writing (storytelling) style.
Adison’s chapter book:  *Cats and Dogs*

One day Adison announced with great excitement that she had written her own chapter book and was so eager to share it with her classmates. Although she wrote and drew a title page, she chose to represent the words in the book with a series of lines. She labelled her three pages at the top left corner (See *Figure 5*) to correspond to chapters. She then narrated her storybook, with each chapter containing a new topic.

![Figure 5. Adison's Chapter Book](image)

**Chapter 1:** Dogs are nice but some dogs are mean. I have two dogs. One is named Belle. One is named Dakota. I think that dogs are great.

**Chapter 2:** Cats can run and eat birds too. They can run and jump and chase dogs too.

**Chapter 3:** Fish can be mean. Fish can be kind. Fish are swim creature that lives on ocean or lake or a river. And I like cats. I like dogs. I like fish as sweet as you.

The story contained flow, sequence, organization of thought and content, and a proper ending. Although she used her own symbols to represent the text, her story conveyed her deeper understanding of the types of literary genres that are available to audiences (picture books vs. chapter books, as well as information text vs. stories). She successfully reproduced the patterns of communication using a mode that makes sense to her.

**The impact of acknowledgement**

Another significant development in the kindergarteners was that, through the exchange of stories with one another, there grew an appreciation and respect for one another as writers, whatever their level of expertise. As writers, they enjoyed the acknowledgement of an audience and, as an audience, the children valued the stories that were created for them purposefully.
Bram’s story: Grandpa’s Farm

Bram (), who usually preferred to build rather than doing table work, sat down and busily drew this story. It is a recount of what happened when he visited his grandfather.

Page 1: My Grandpa was going out of the farm. All of a sudden he stopped, and then he looked and then he went back to the farm. And then, he took his engine out. And then he put it in a bag. And then he went off in his truck.

Page 2: He got his truck and went off on the road (pointed to the road). And that’s it. The end.

Figure 6. Bram’s Story

When Bram shared his story with his classmates, they celebrated him as an artist. He went home that day to announce to his family that he was indeed an artist. Since then, his demeanour changed. He saw himself as an expert and offered to help his peers with drawing. His willingness to participate in class activities increased.

Bram’s mother also noted changes in his behaviour. At home, he began spending time drawing on a whiteboard and would frequently tell his family members stories. She also noted intricate details in his drawings, intricacies that went beyond what one would articulate in print. She felt that the change was a breakthrough development because, prior to these exercises, Bram had struggled to get ideas down on paper using conventional print (through letter sound association).

For Bram, drawing allowed him to express his thoughts and ideas and it became a language in which he could encode his experience. Consequently, he gained confidence and
became engaged in story writing using a format that allowed him to ‘bridge’ the visual to the spoken and written word (Sidelnick & Svoboda, 2000).

Artistic expression can enable children to translate what they know into another modality so that they can express meaning and, from this, teachers can gain insights about what their students understand (Sidelnick & Svoboda, 2000). Often, knowledge of the world cannot be expressed solely in language, or then there would be no need to draw, dance, or sing. Educators need to be encouraged to use art as a form of knowing so learners can express their knowledge, understanding, and, ultimately, their own selves. (Leigh & Heid, 2008)

**Conclusion**

The implementation of the artist/writer workshop for this study demonstrated the effectiveness of drawing as a literary mode in several ways. Firstly, drawing provided the kindergarten students with a mode and context that they could master much more easily than print, yet express their thoughts and ideas on paper and thereby develop their skills as writers and meaning makers. This observation supports the view that literacy is multi-modal (Kress, 1997) and that children could be more successful at this stage using art to represent their thoughts and ideas. Drawing was shown to be very much on the same plane as writing; the learners made inferences and constructed meaning outwardly using a form of representation. Other elements of writing were also observed, including improved skill in the craft over time (organizing and presenting content), identification with audience and revision of stories (writing process), and recognition of genres (non-fiction, chapter book formats).

The classroom culture where the students became actively engaged in bookmaking and the social process of sharing their stories seemed to be significant factors in success of the program. Peers provided critical validation that motivates children to continue to write for various purposes. Children can often come to know that their writing is an exchange of ideas, a conversation of sorts that they can compose on paper. Talk provides an opportunity to make their thinking public (Giacoble & Horn, 2007) and these exchanges allow them to understand that writing eventually ends with reading.

The value of the artistic element in drawing was supported in the results. Writing uses the word as its nucleus to make contents of our thoughts public or conscious (Leigh & Heid, 2008); drawing also fulfilled that criterion but could also get there more easily in that meaning in a picture could be comprehended by them in a single glance. Pictures can give added meaning to words and can evoke imagery, mood and feelings more accessibly than print (Johnson, 1993). Thus, drawing should not be portrayed as a ‘crutch’ that will be outgrown once the writing process takes hold. Such a view ignores the significance that drawing brings to writing. Drawing is thinking and simply another way to make a meaningful mark on the page (Shagoury, 2009).

Furthermore, as Jensen (2001) points out, education is not an either-or situation; it’s not the arts versus a rigorous, demanding program. Learning in itself should be challenging, vigorous and integrated. Furthermore, arts should not be a path for alternative learners or for those who would otherwise fail, any more than math is an easy path for those who can’t do arts.
Children enter kindergarten already equipped to express themselves in a variety of modes. These modes often require adults to rethink and broaden their own views of what it means to be literate. Much can be gained – by students, educators, and parents alike – from simply enabling, supporting and observing the alternative ways that children are able to communicate meaning.

References


**Children’s Literature Used**


**Author Biography**

Wing-Yee Hui is a teacher at the Toronto District School Board and recently completed Master of Education studies in Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE / University of Toronto. She has a special interest is the early years and she is an advocate of arts integration across the curriculum.