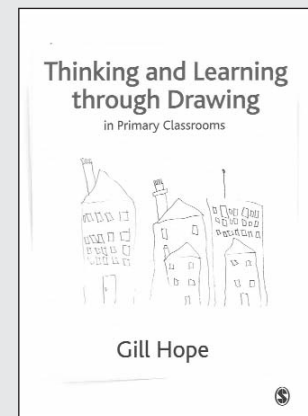


Review

Thinking and Learning Through Drawing: In Primary Classrooms

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This is an ambitious book which aims to redress an area of significant recent neglect within the English education system at least. It is clearly essentially targeted towards English readers in that the language of that particular system is used to designate the developmental stages of children (Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2 etc) and the discussion of 'Drawing to Design' is situated in the context of England's evolving design and technology National Curriculum. The book does have things to say to international readers, although much of the evidence base is derived from English sources and the author might well have been wise not to phrase its claims in more general terms. In the author's words:

As this book has explained, drawing is a powerful means of learning and thinking, not just as a product of thought, but as a process of thought. It is so powerful that educators may be severely limiting children's ability to think and model complex relationships by not teaching them to draw. The increased pressure on children to be proficient users of written language rather than any other form of communication may be hampering children's ability to think, imagine and reason for themselves. Drawing can provide the tools for thinking, modelling and communicating ideas, concepts, understanding and emotion. It can do so swiftly and efficiently. It can be assigned meaning yet remain open and ready for change. It can make comment through humour, irony and satire. It can move, inspire, speak to the innermost thoughts and feelings. It can model abstract mathematical relationships and communicate complex scientific ideas. To deny children access to this power, simply through neglect, is to deny them a means to contribute to the ongoing creation of human innovation (p.175).

Such a thesis would attract much current support and indeed, aspects of it have been pursued by researchers in the past. In the 1970s, researchers in geography education (e.g. Balchin, Boardman) pursued the concept of 'graphicacy' and its importance for learning. This has been followed by research in several countries relating to the importance of graphicacy in particular areas like mathematics and science education, and more generally in the curriculum (e.g. Wilmott in RSA), but I believe these largely concerned children beyond the 'primary stage'. However, it is possible that not all educators, everywhere, are neglecting the importance of graphicacy (...using Balchin's term for want of a better word). Certainly, the introduction of the National Curriculum in England has been responsible for some unusual priorities and areas of neglect, and there is no doubt that the importance of graphicacy is an emerging research area of great national and international importance at all levels of education. This book certainly raises many issues and provides a number of starting points.

The book is structured around six 'Dimensions of Drawing': 'Drawing to Play'; 'Drawing to Mean'; 'Drawing to Feel'; 'Drawing to See'; 'Drawing to Know'; and 'Drawing to Design'. This is a loose-fit organisation as the author describes.

The six dimensions of drawing are not, strictly speaking, sequential, since each overlap and contributes to the other. Indeed, it is hard to distinguish one from the other, and several of the examples of children's work have been referred to in more than one dimension. However, there is a suggestion of progression, in that no progress can be made towards effective communication of meaning without previous experimentation, play, with materials and

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techniques. The playing can be satisfying, leading to the exploration of pattern and form, and the process of drawing, as well as its product may be expressive of deep feeling. This may be purposeful, part of the intended meaning, or it may be a contiguous result of the process.

Meaning, feeling and seeing (and knowing) are inextricably linked, woven together and often unable to be separated or teased out ... (p. 171-172)

Of course, this indicates the difficulty with the structure that the author chose for this book. In the author's words, the expectation would appear to have been that "(d)rawing to design' drew these threads together' (p.172), but, in reality, they were only very loosely separated to start with.

For me, the strongest chapter in the book is 'Drawing to Design'. This could be because this is the area where I am most familiar with the issues, but it also the chapter most closely focused on the author's doctoral research. The drawing as 'Container/Journey' metaphor is discussed extensively in the book, but in my view, it relates most effectively to this chapter where it emerged as an aspect of the pedagogy developed for the PhD research programme. The chapter begins with the rather sorry story of the revisions to the English National Curriculum at the start of the 1990s, and this context is essential in order to understand why this metaphor was such an appropriate response to it.

... (In relation to the Focus Class) Using drawing to make ideas explicit encourages such meta-cognition by making the ideas public and open to view, review and questioning as to whether the ideas can work, crystallising thought and confirming or disallowing innovative possibilities.

This was in stark contrast to the Comparison Class who frequently drew their ideas in near silence. In the Assessment Activities they tended to simply draw one idea and then ask to make it, as if the drawing were a permission ticket to start the real activity of designing through making. Their finished products were less likely to address the needs of the user or the demands of the task they had been set. Interestingly, they also showed a less creative range of solutions, despite having demonstrated more inventiveness in activities at the beginning of the programme (Design a Pizza and the Snowman's Shopping Problem) that were used to establish the comparative capabilities of the two classes. (p.162)

I would very much like to have seen visual evidence relating to all the claims in the second paragraph. Surely in a book about drawing, some of these less and more creative outcomes could (should) have been shown, as well as some of the responses to the Design a Pizza and the Snowman's Shopping Problem and their analyses that were used to establish the comparative capabilities. No doubt, the reader could go back to the author's PhD thesis or other publications, but this indicates the opportunities that there were for the book to be more generously illustrated. A quick count indicates 17 examples of pupils' work in the book.

This book concerns an important area both for practice and research, and Gill Hope has made a valuable contribution to the emerging agendas. Her enthusiasm for the topic and extensive teaching and research experience are evident throughout and the book is likely to interest all those with an interest in graphicacy (or graphical literacy or however else it is known) in primary classrooms.