Drawing Art into the Discussion of Writing Assessment

In compliance with Race to the Top legislation, and to the dismay of many New York State teachers and administrators, policymakers are asking us to determine whether teachers are “effective” through an amalgam of students’ high-stakes test scores, administrators’ formal and unannounced classroom observations, and teachers’ actual, versus predicted, measurements of students’ growth and development.

For this latter category, secondary teachers are charged to select a band of students whom they pre-test in September and post-test in the late spring. Some teachers describe how they are learning to manipulate or “game” this evaluation of their “performance.” Some set achievable goals so that they will not inadvertently penalize themselves or their schools on this aspect of their “teacher effectiveness” score. Other teachers report having given year-end final exams in September to demonstrate students’ dramatic increases by May. New York State principals describe the corrosive effects that the reform is having on student learning and within their school communities (see, for instance, Burris).

I will leave it to others to provide the justified critique of Race to the Top—such as the costs of time, hope, and the diversion of public funding to corporate entities. One feature of this mandate that I find interesting, though, is the effort to mandate beginning-of-the-year, baseline assessments. What do my students know now? What can they do today? How can I figure this out? How will this compare to what I hope that my students will learn this year? These are not new or particularly easy questions. Deborah Ball, a math educator, once described this tension: “With my ears to the ground, listening to my students, my eyes are focused on the mathematical horizon” (376). In other words, in the classroom we always try to reconcile where we are now with where we hope we will arrive come June.

I am reminded of my third year of teaching English, when having come to the conclusion that students and teachers were tracked in my high school, I asked my department chair to let me teach “general” students. I had been expressly hired to teach within the “honors” track. My department chair warned “You better figure out what you’re up against” and put a diagnostic reading test in my hand. “I’ll help you make sense of the results.” During the first week of school, I gave my new students the timed test, a collection of dubious comprehension questions about isolated reading passages that they didn’t care about. Out of the class of 18 boys and 2 girls, the lowest score—2.8—translated to second grade, eighth month. The majority of my ninth-grade students were supposedly reading at an upper elementary level. One student, Jason, smiled and announced, “We’re the dumb kids, you know.”

How would I teach this class? What would represent reasonable development? Out of the classroom, I sought help from expert colleagues: the lead special education and ESL teachers. In the
classroom, I felt compelled to push back against the reading results. On some level, I didn’t trust the bubble-sheet scanner and the easy precision of the numbers—such as 2.8—that it spit out. Following my preferences for visual learning and expression, within the first week of school I asked students to draw themselves as readers. Their drawings complicated the diagnostic, baseline reading assessment. The drawings hinted at the students’ reading interests, artistic capacities, and attitudes. Jason drew himself carrying a stack of books that nearly reached the ceiling and an exasperated librarian exclaiming, “Phew he’s gone.” Abel, using precise pencil drawings, depicted an astronaut underneath the caption, “discovery of space.” I saved those first drawings because they reminded me that the measurement of human beings and their aspirations—taking stock—is not so easy.

In this article, I share what happened years later when a team of us asked young people of various ages to draw themselves as writers. Several examples of students’ work are coupled with a discussion and a rationale for integrating drawing into the assessment process. In the context of a summer writing program evaluation, we collected student drawings to complement our classroom observations and the summative, on-demand writing assessments. Our work with students’ drawings evolved; however, it was grounded in our beliefs that art is a way of making and expressing understanding, and that students ought to be considered “informants” rather than solely as “objects” of educational assessment (Burton).

How Effective Are Our Classrooms?

Working within the constellation of National Writing Project sites, our team sought to evaluate the impact of a summer youth writing program originally designed for bilingual English language learners (ELLs).

Our analysis of student surveys revealed that students liked the program; their attendance was nearly perfect. Our frequent classroom observations showed students making progress as writers and language learners. We believed that the writers were becoming more fluent as they practiced daily writing; they also were learning and using language related to the work of writing—words such as draft, feedback, sensory details, and editing. Writing included in the end-of-program anthologies regularly addressed meaningful topics and was well developed.

When we sent the National Writing Project de-identified, pre- and post-program, on-demand writing samples, only writing produced in English was scored. The scores were all 1s and 2s on a 6-point, holistic scale. The low scores penalized the undeveloped, simple writing that was replete with conventional errors. Was the program that ineffective? One explanation for the low scores was that the bilingual writers wrote in a second language, English, an accomplishment that could not be measured. Another explanation was that our program emphasized writing as a process rather than writing on-demand (Meyer, Young, and Lieberstein-Solera).

Frustrated by the mismatch between our data and our beliefs about the program’s effectiveness, we asked the students to draw, write, and talk about their experience in the program. In making the decision to incorporate art into our program evaluation, we were drawn to a variety of theorists and researchers in the art education field. Elliot W. Eisner urges educators to remember that learning cannot be solely measured by words. He laments the “long philosophic tradition in the West that promotes the view that knowing anything requires some formulation of what we know in words” and that we “know more than we can tell [or write]” (7).

In schools, drawing holds a lower status than other forms of more conventional representations such as letter and number formations (Anning); art is seen as a type of decoration to finalize projects rather than as a fundamental springboard for thinking (daSilva). In reality, drawing and writing go hand in hand in the composition and thinking process, opening access to how we know and experience the world. Karen Gallas explains that the arts permitted her students’ access to what she was trying to teach and that their art become another medium for her students to learn from each other. Essentially, the teacher is never the sole teacher and art making and expression is “for both children and teacher, [an] opportunit[y] for reflection upon the content and the process of learning; and [the arts] foster a deeper level of communication about what knowledge is and who is truly in control of the learning process” (104–05).
Given the ELL population in our summer program, integrating art into our program evaluation made sense. Karen A. Carrier advocates that teachers invite ELLs to use various modalities to demonstrate what they understand. Carrier explains, "ELLs can use . . . drawings to show their understanding of academic concepts. Performance based assessments, in which students demonstrate their procedural knowledge (what they know how to do), are ideal for assessing ELLs" (7).

We were optimistic about collecting and studying students’ drawings about writing. Kathleen Black studied drawings generated by 187 college-age students to better understand their procedures for writing a paper. In two studies, Maureen Kendrick and Roberta McKay asked children in grades 1–3 to generate a drawing of reading or writing in school or outside school. Results from these studies suggested that drawings provided valuable information about students’ perceptions of writing, students’ approaches to writing tasks, and generally about the nature of literacy development. Further, the drawings provided insights about cultural and contextual influences that are not evident in other, more typical literacy measures.

**Drawing Effective Learning Environments**

We asked students to draw themselves as writers in their “regular school classrooms” at the beginning of the program; at the conclusion of that first summer, we asked students to draw themselves as writers in the “summer writing program.” We thought comparing the pre- and post-program drawings would help us understand the students’ experience of the program’s learning context.

Judith Burton speculates that the process of representation—drawing—allows both the artist and the viewer to understand the artists’ sensory and emotional relationship to a given context. Indeed, when we collected students’ drawings we saw the learning context through the artists’ eye. For instance, in Figure 1, we thought we saw a writer (with a dark pigtail) who appeared to be smiling as she approached a math problem in the company of others. We noticed that the writer held a writing implement in a classroom context that included icons of writing on the walls; the artist depicted a setting where writing was a social rather than an isolated act. We thought we saw another student and a smiling teacher, sitting at another desk, engaged in writing, too. This particular drawing pleased those of us who evaluated the program. We had hoped that students would enjoy and benefit from learning in a setting where writing instruction incorporated choice, talk, and collaboration; we purposefully worked with the teachers to use models to teach writing and to write in front of the students as an additional type of modeling. That summer, we emphasized writing across the subject areas.

In many ways, peeking at teaching through students’ drawings was enlightening. At the same time, though, we had a measurement problem. We were better equipped to describe what we thought we saw in any given drawing than we were to interpret what individual students meant to draw. We continued to collect drawings; however, in subsequent summers, we asked students to write about their drawings. In some cases, we also interviewed students about their drawings.
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Drawing + Writing on Students’ Experience as Writers

In collecting these data, we believed two things: that students were equipped to draw and write about learning in regular school and the summer program and that in those expressions, we could learn from them. Put simply, we trusted students to represent their experience through visual art and writing. We continued to ask students to draw and within minutes, we asked them to write in response to a prompt: “As you look at my picture, here is what you should know about what I drew and how I feel about myself as a writer.” With this prompt, we hoped that the writer would use his or her authority to explore and explain the depiction.

Students illustrated and wrote about their dispositions toward writing, often reflecting on what they understood about their writing processes and, in many cases, their knowledge of writing. The sets of data produced by upper elementary, middle school, and high school students often allowed us to assess their writing skills as well. The point here is that writing and drawing, together, often afforded us a more robust understanding of students’ learning and observations of learning environments than had we collected one without the other.

In Figure 2, an eleven-year-old middle school writer describes her drawing of writing within the summer program (see Figure 3). We learn about her staged process for generating writing: “Before I write, I stare into space and ‘dream something up.’ Then, I visualize it on paper.” We learn that her writing process moves from thought to writing “on (real) paper” and then “change.” From this short piece of writing, we can also do a spot assessment of the writing itself. This writing piece demonstrates sentence variety, careful word usage, and clarity. The prepositional phrase is interesting; the use of quotation marks and a parenthetical provide added details. Although the student’s writing is articulate, her drawing (see Figure 3) elaborates her writing process even further. We see a writer planning or “visualizing” writing as represented within a thought bubble. Perhaps, the writer’s process involves sketching pictures and ideas before generating writing; in this case, we see a representation of a flip-flop sandal.

This writer’s drawing and written reflection illustrate Karen Ernst daSilva’s theory of drawing “as a form of thinking. . . . Drawing is part of the process of writing, [and] the picture becomes [something] . . . the author can use it to see her thinking, write the details and descriptions, and [eventually] revise both thinking and writing” (5). As this writer ruminates about flip-flops, she considers the difference between “sole” and “soul.” The writer seeks precise language, monitoring her word usage when she strikes certain words. For instance, she opts to describe the floor as “cold” rather than “cool” and as “linoleum” rather than “hard wood.”

This particular drawing and writing set pleased us given our belief that students under-
standing their own writing processes could leave the program with more strategic control of writing. We reasoned that middle school writers, in this case, were old enough and developmentally ready to monitor their own learning—to be metacognitive. We treated writers as “authors” with authority to select topics, generate drafts, and pursue revisions all while aligning their vision of how they produced writing with the actual process.

**Drawing + Writing + Talk**
**Paints a Fuller Portrait of Learning**

Authorizing students to draw, write, and talk about their experience provides the most robust portraits of learning. Although our work mainly involved understanding our summer writing program, the drawings and writing sets revealed students’ feelings about the “regular” classroom learning environments and the writing instruction there. In some cases, we conducted ten-minute interviews with individual students asking them to talk about their drawing in relation to these feelings at the beginning and end of the program. While the results were inconclusive, they often revealed the difficulties that students and their teachers encounter with writing instruction in regular school settings.

In Figure 4, a middle school student draws herself as a writer in school. When first viewing this drawing, we saw a writer sitting alone, underneath a table upon which sat a writing implement and an icon of a piece of writing. When studying further, though, it was difficult to know what the writer intended to convey about herself and her relationship to writing and the learning context—her regular school. Why had she drawn herself under the table? Could it be that she simply didn’t know how to draw herself at the table?

Although the drawing omitted people, her accompanying piece of writing (see Figure 5) provides a portrait of peers who mock, “There she goes again, trying to sound like she [is] actually writing something good.” These data lead us to imagine a classroom culture in which this student felt vulnerable, unsure, and unsafe when “kids [make] fun of my writing.” In our early summer interview, the same middle school writer described the classroom setting further: “Well, as a writer in school I’m not embarrassed to share my writing, or I used to not be; but I guess the children just don’t like if your writing is good or if the teacher smiles at it and they just don’t care about their writing and they just roll their eyes or don’t write anything. And if I write something with feeling or whatever and read it, they just kind of brush it off.” If this student’s observations are accurate, some of her peers are resistant writers who may as well be telling their teacher, “I won’t learn from you; I won’t write; and I don’t want anyone else to either.”

Eventually, in an end-of-summer interview, the same writer contrasts school and summer program writing instruction. In the summer setting she values the opportunity to choose her writing topic and genre; she also appreciates the feedback offered by her summer teachers and peers as contrasted with the lack of substantive feedback provided by her regular school teacher.

**Student:** Usually at the beginning of the year [at school] it’s: “OK kids you can write what you want about your summer.” But besides that they [tell] us what we’re supposed to...
write about: one thing. You know, essays. We never get to write what we want I guess. And here (at the summer program) it’s like I get to write what I want and also I get to write (about) anything. You get better feedback . . . instead of just a grade.

**Interviewer:** How do you get better feedback here (in the summer program)? Like, what’s the difference in feedback?

**Student:** It’s always . . . what they like, what could change, what needs improvement. In school . . . you just hand your paper in. We don’t have an author’s chair. We don’t get to sit there and share with the other kids. You hand your paper in. You get it back. There’s one grade on it . . . the teacher sometimes looks over your rough draft and gives comments [about] how to change, but you just feel like you’re not getting as much feedback. You kind of have one opportunity to do stuff. And . . . here I feel like I’m more interested in the feedback because it’s not like you’re getting graded. [Or if] your punctuation is perfect. . . . It’s just about your writing itself, not like the silly little details.

Through talk, this young writer contrasts her experience in two writing instruction contexts. Her school teacher grades writing and comments almost exclusively on “silly little details” and “punctuation”; in the summer setting, the teacher explains “how to change” the writing and sets up an environment where students “share with the other kids” and provides an “author’s chair” for students to read their writing aloud. While she emphasizes the importance of choice and the nature of feedback, what she has not said is that the summer program includes self-selected participants as well as a student to teacher ratio of 10:1. Her description also misses another distinguishing feature: time. This particular program lasted two weeks, Monday through Friday, with three hours of dedicated writing instruction in contrast with the yearlong stretch of crowded, 42-minute classes.

**Beyond Simple Scores: Redrawing the Lines Involves Honest Dialogue**

Brent Wilson reminds us that in our study of child art, we are studying ourselves, too: “The work of child art [represents] children’s interests and values and . . . [w]hen we study children’s art, we must look at what the child has represented and expressed, at the conditions under which child art is made, and at ourselves and others in the act of studying it” (156). A challenge, then, is to reframe the conversations about who is effective and instead to simply ask about what is happening in our classrooms. What is promising? What could be better? For whom? When and why? While assessment can be constructive and informative for everyone involved, absent honest dialogues, there are limits to how “effective” any of us can be.

There are many reasons to redraw the lines about effectiveness and to incorporate art into the assessment process—art supports thinking, writing, and, potentially, learning for everyone involved. Asking students to draw, write, and talk about their experience learning acknowledges students as stakeholders in education who have a deep-seated knowledge and interest in the conditions of school and aspirations for their own educational progress. Students can easily inform us about their experience and hopes of learning. Too often, as Burton suggests, “We have treated young people as the objects of education [and assessment] rather than as participants in a shared enterprise, involving exchanges between young and old, experienced and inexperienced” (330).

The assessment process described here is not time-consuming and may provide secondary English teachers with important perspectives on their students’ conceptions of writing and how they might develop over the course of instruction. It is easy to ask new students to draw and write about their drawings during the first week of school and to repeat the process later in the year. By studying this information we can begin to establish what our new students know about writing; we can also learn about what they are able to produce in short, one-draft sittings where they use drawing as a prewriting tool to organize their thinking.

Measuring effectiveness puts a premium on the “ideal” and often misses a range of students’ accomplishments and regularly ignores the subjective meaning of learning. Students’ drawing and writing can portray a variety of feelings, including the pain of learning. The middle school student huddled under the desk (Figures 4 and 5) and products like
these provide opportunities to broach conversations with colleagues and with students about the kind of teachers and learners we want to be and the type of classrooms in which we want to learn. Within our Writing Project, when examining de-identified work, we use various protocols that begin with descriptive review and move to reflective conversations. We defer simple evaluations about effectiveness and generally work from these or similar questions: What do you see in the drawing(s)/writing? What do you wonder? What is the drawer/writer on the verge of accomplishing? What could come next? What do the drawings/writing make you wish for yourself? For your classroom? For your school? For schools in our region? These conversations help us think about and name learning accomplishments, while also describing and speculating about productive writing classrooms.

“Effectiveness,” or the lack thereof, is situated within a variety of contexts and within a non-static culture and competing values about learning, assessment, and school. The goal of this work is to redraw the lines on effectiveness and question the validity of any one type of data when measuring academic accomplishments. Baseline assessments are formative in nature and permit constructive conversations about where we are now and where we hope to go. Drawing, writing, and talk are tools that we can use to make our way toward an education horizon without punishment or gaming.

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Works Cited


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READWRTETHINK CONNECTION

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In the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Graffiti Wall: Discussing and Responding to Literature Using Graphics,” students, using symbols, drawings, shapes, and colors, alongside words and quotations, construct a graphic of their section of the novel with an online tool and on newsprint or butcher paper with crayons or markers. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/graffiti-wall-discussing-responding-208.html