
Writing for Visual Communication

William Haust

Communication is the essence of learning. A child communicates with others and interacts with the environment through many languages: through movement, through speech and through visual imagery. The spoken word competes with other forms of communication throughout childhood and, as the word is more universal and a more socially interactive language, speech becomes the language of choice as a child grows and learns. The written word becomes the externalization of speech and becomes an essential means of communication as a child develops an understanding of the structure and organization of writing. Thus, the written word is the primary means to communicate with others and to document our experiences and interactions with the environment. The visual image, often in the form of random marks, was the child's first documentary language and is often pushed aside in favor of the more acceptable and universal languages of communication, speech and writing, which provide the child more encouragement and support from parents and teachers.

A college student who enters an art studio with a lifetime of experience and skill in verbal and written communication often receives the same uncomfortable feelings that one experiences when traveling in a foreign country without an understanding of the native language. It is an experience that initially places a block in the eventual success of a student who desires to communicate through a visual medium. The problem lies with an unfamiliarity of the language of the visual arts and not with a lack of ability or lack of potential to achieve success. For the non-art student, this response becomes a negative experience directly related to this initial

reaction with art, placing a block in the way of future artistic expression and communication. The solution to the problem is a gradual and transitional withdrawal from the dependency on the written word as the only means of communication toward a comfortable familiarity with the language of the visual arts. This goal is achieved through the use of writing to describe the visual creative process.

The procedure to integrate writing into the art curriculum described here was developed for the course titled, "Developing Artistic and Perceptual Awareness," a course required of Elementary Education majors and often elected as a general education Fine Arts Perspective. The basic premise of the course is that art is an essential experience in the education of all young children and that the elementary classroom teacher will become a more effective teacher across the curriculum if the creative processes essential to art are integrated into the academic content areas of the elementary classroom. The course familiarizes the student with the media, techniques, processes, history and vocabulary of the visual arts so that teachers may effectively integrate the visual arts into elementary classroom experiences. Writing, integrated daily into art studio experiences, has proven to be a successful technique to ease the transition from verbal to visual communication, to build confidence, to develop group unity among class members and to emphasize the interrelated nature of all creative forms of communication.

Students entering the studio for class each day find a statement written on the board related to the artistic experience which they will be exploring during class that day. Students are expected to write a reply to the statement during class as they begin to develop a response for the day's problem and its relationship to the posted statement. The length of the statement is insignificant, however; what is important is that during the actual process of creating visual works and writing about the experience, students will begin to see the interrelationships between verbal and visual communication and will begin to develop the ability to transfer their skills from one medium to another.

At the close of the class, students sign their statements and submit them to the instructor. The signature is essential to the experience as it encourages students to make a personal commitment to their own state-

ment and avoids anonymity which would allow students the opportunity to evade their pure involvement with the experience.

The collected statements on the daily topic are typed as a single group statement on the theme, duplicated and returned to the students during the next class. The collected statements of each day's class become a valuable document of the creative visual art process and of the ability of the written word to express the visual experience. The statements are also valuable as an evaluation tool as it can be clearly seen which students fully understand and experience the day's activity and which students need additional work to develop a full understanding.

As this daily experience continues throughout the first several weeks of the semester, students will slowly build confidence in their ability to communicate effectively through visual imagery as well as to understand the relationship between words and their related images. As understanding is gained through this experience over time, the written statements are withdrawn, often without notice.

Writing as a component of the creative, artistic act becomes a record of the experience and the process. One thinks, one imagines, one explores and expresses through many different languages. The visual and written documentation becomes the record which can be analyzed, dissected, studied or exhibited. B.F. Skinner has said that learning is behaving; the record of that behavior, either written or visual, is the path of the exposed ideas unfolding.

Sample Student Statements

What interests me about drawing is...

The way that a person is able to look at something, or formulate a picture in their minds and put it down on paper. When this drawing is seen by a person it will bring feelings and emotions to an individual in either a positive or negative way.

How different people view things. One object can look so different when various people draw it.

The fact that everything that goes down on paper was influenced by the creator, intentionally or not. The ability to draw well means refining abilities and improving flaws: being able to be oneself while working so that intention, style and ability outweigh flaws.

Drawing and Teaching is...

Drawing is an expression, expression is necessary to everyone, student and teacher alike. After something is learned, it usually needs to be expressed and drawing is one of many ways to express it. Drawing can work the other way and be the way of teaching an idea.

Visual thinking is:

Perceiving spatial relationships in everything one does.

Analyzing a problem by creating a mental image of the problem, then seeing yourself solving the problem before actually attempting it.

Perceiving ideas objects or images in the mind which can be expressed through drawing, writing, speaking, etc.

An artist is...

Someone who is mentally, physically and emotionally aware of their environment and can express it in many visual forms.

A person who uses their mind and body to create and conform an idea or feeling into some type of medium.

Someone who can take an idea and turn it into a tangible object.

Anyone who can be creative in portraying their message or image using their given media, be it music, paper, etc.

My vision is...

Two inputs, two views, which when put together in a dynamic world add up to much more than the sum of the two.

Vision is the basis of movement, imagery and perception.

Very different from others. Sometimes it can be simple and other times complex.

William Haust is an assistant professor in the Art Department where he teaches photography and art education courses.