
The Drawing Sketchbook Revisited

Robert Morton

I recently had the pleasure of sharing my article, "Iconology: An Alternate Form of Writing" (published in the first *Plymouth State College Writing Across the Curriculum* journal in the fall of '89) with Terry Downs, a colleague in my department. This article, which described an artist's sketchbook as a journal and its importance in the development of visual literacy, impressed Terry because he, too, has always required a sketchbook in his classes. At the beginning of each semester, Terry and I each show the students in our classes some pages from our sketchbooks as a model for how sketchbooks have worked for us in our art. A sample fragment of Terry's sketchbook and my sketchbook are displayed on the following pages.

Terry and I had never talked formally about our similar requirement, and I found it reassuring that my theory and personal experience could be of use to another faculty member. Terry wanted his students to read and reflect about the iconology article. So, I gathered for him from Mary Lou Hinman, the Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at PSC, ten copies of the WAC journal to give to his students. Below are examples of some of the students' responses to the journal article and some of Terry's replies to their reflections.





Student Journal Responses

- S. - "The sketchbook is a catalog of ideas. I go back to old drawings all the time—it's my 'library to draw from.'"
- P. - "My ideas do come mostly from my sketchbook."
- D. - "A sketchbook can be a valuable asset for myself or any other artist."
- K. - "I realize how important a sketchbook is and I enjoy working in my sketchbook."
- E. - "My sketchbook hits the reflection of my mind at different points of drawing, writing, etc. The point of my sketchbook is to draw many or as many needed sketches to come to a conclusion in my head."

Student Responses and Terry's Replies

- H. - "The problem with me is that when I come up with one good idea, it is hard for me to expand on it."
- Terry - "You did this with your last print. Realize that the good ideas can bear revision and expansion. They stop only when you say stop."
- L. - "I've been brainstorming more and having more creative ideas."
- Terry - "They go hand in hand."
- K. - "From reading this, I have realized that I should incorporate drawings everyday to go along with my writings."
- Terry - "You have the motivation to do it."
- J. - "So far sketches were very important in developing ideas for my

embossing project because of the exactness (on my part) of the intended result. . . . Sometimes, for me, I need to get the feeling for the individual project, materials, etc., before a sketch is desired (needed?).”

Terry - “These were ‘sketches’ created in the same spirit.”

K. - “Doodling, to me, is the best way to get my frustrations out. I can tell by my drawings if I was in a good or bad mood. The pencil marks on a piece of paper say something. And if you can read what it says, then you can get many of your thoughts and ideas from your old sketches, and make new ones.”

Terry - “The more marks you make, the more you say.”

J. - “Robert Frost carried a pen and paper and Bob Morton carries a pen and paper and each one uses it for communication. . . I think of my sketchbook as a personal reference. Maybe that’s being selfish but these are my thoughts, feelings, and emotions.”

Terry - “The artist *must* be selfish so as to share *more*.”

A. - “I enjoy working in my sketchbook. But I believe that many of the teachers think that we students only have one class—their class.”

Terry - “You mean you have another!?”

W. - “I have numerous drawings in my sketchbook, mostly figures. But I want my work to say something about me; something universal—like love. . . Until I can find a way to say these things, my sketchbook isn’t any good to me.”

Terry - “Don’t separate your sketchbook from your art.”

The Multi-Demensional Learning Tool

In looking over these comments, one can see an exchange system in operation here beginning with my sketchbook article, then Terry’s assign-

ment of it for reading and review, the students' written reflections on my article and their own sketchbook, Terry's responses to their reflections, and finally my own reflections on teaching and learning. In any other subject, this interchange would probably be typical of a journal assignment. What makes this situation unique is that in art, this dialogue started with the visual language of the sketchbook. The visual literacy aspects of the sketchbook created linkages to other language processes of listening, speaking, and reading. One can see in Terry's comments the personal and sensitive attention he gave to his students, as well as his wit and sense of humor.

My Reflections

I was very pleased to read the students' responses Terry shared with me. I felt it made the effort of writing the article worthwhile. The responses were all very positive, except for one which talked about my methods as a teacher. The journal entry and Terry's reply are listed below.

K. - "I feel that my sketchbooks are lacking, though I already knew that before I read this iconology article. Having Bob as a teacher, you learn how you are supposed to keep a sketchbook—which seems to be his way. Sure his ideas are good, but he expects you to do things the way he does. I know that I need help in my sketchbook. But I feel someday my flow of sketches will come."

Terry - "Start now."

The student's very significant reaction of avoidance to criticism speaks for itself. This one negative comment by a student who disagreed with me caused me the most reflection. It forced me to question the value of my system. I am somewhat particular about the development of good habits in the production of works of art, and I consider the sketchbook a vital part of that generation and development of ideas. A Zen master once said, "We teach best what we most need to learn," and I thought

maybe this truth was connected to my method. After rereading the journal entry several times, I went beyond being defensive and realized that the student agreed with the maintenance of the sketchbook. The student was objecting to the fact that she believed I expected her to do what I do. Now I had a handle on the problem.

I do have an idea of what the ideal, well-kept sketchbook should contain. I also know that a volume of work produces a flow of ideas or what I call thematic material. Yes, the sketchbook is of value to me, but was it something peculiar to my way of working or did other artists find similar efforts meaningful? I had seen the Da Vinci sketchbooks in Windsor Castle in England, so I did have an "art historical" defense of my requirement. But somehow, I still was not really at ease with this student's comment.

An Awakening

I was still pondering this one negative comment when I recently traveled to Washington, D.C., for a conference on sculpture. One of the morning lectures was held at the new Sackler Gallery of Eastern Art, and it was during my exploration of the collection of Indian works that I put my sketchbook problem to rest.

In one of the gallery rooms, I came across two cases containing accordion folded sheets of exquisite drawings that were Indian equivalents of sketchbooks! The sketches were obviously meant to be kept together and were a plan of some kind for a larger, more formal work. I now had my justification for my sketchbook requirement. The Indian artist was from a different time and culture with a completely different aesthetic. Yet, I recognized his method of storing ideas as so very similar to mine; and of course to DaVinci's as well. The application of the design of the sketchbook is where an artist's display of thinking is revealed. I now understood that I had never told that student that her sketchbook had to be my way. I had shown my sketchbook as *one* way. But I had asked that

the sketchbook be *a way* of thinking for the generation and production of art.

To that student whose comment was so provocative— thank you. I would like to offer that student this advice: “In the absence of a sketchbook method that works for you, take what is offered. You are in good company with many of the greats of the art world.”

Robert Morton is Chair of the Art Department where he teaches courses in sculpture and design. This is his second article for the Plymouth State College Journal on Writing Across the Curriculum.