

DRAWING ON EXPERIENCE: CONNECTING ART AND LANGUAGE

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Allison, a kindergartner, draws a picture in her journal. It is of a little girl with a broad smile on her face. The little girl wears a blue dress and there is a red ribbon in her stand-up brown hair. The squiggly lines of marker form a green tree in the corner of the page. There is a butterfly, a fat bee, and a tiny ladybug (see Figure 1). She knows that the picture tells her story. Making the picture gives Allison the ideas for the words. She turns the page of her journal and confidently begins to write:

The girl was hunting for flowers. The insects were there. The butterfly flapped her wings. ("The grl wus huntng fr-flawrs the ensecs wr thar the budr floy flapt hr wing.")

Think back to when you were young. Think about how when you made pictures and as you drew, stories went through your mind. You had confidence and probably did not worry if your picture was 'right.' It was good because of your idea. Writers like Allison need that confidence and those ideas. Crayons and markers are such important tools in their literacy. Children read pictures to understand, they make pictures to tell what they mean, and Allison, like her teacher Amy, writes the picture into words.

It is the connection—between teacher and student, art and thinking—that establishes art as a means of expression in the literacy classroom. It is the teacher's experience—her own expanded literacy—that helps her know how to structure this link in kindergarten and beyond. When reading, making, and writing images are connected, literacy is expanded. When drawing is part of the writing and reading

process, it can help give ideas for writing and teach skills of observation, skills that encourage reading the world and reading the image. It can help propel thinking and revising. Perhaps in kindergarten it seemed so natural that we never recognized its power.

How can art continue to be essential in literacy beyond kindergarten and early childhood? How can we make a place for art to extend thinking and expression? How can we provide more entry points for students to find ideas to choose to write about? Draw on your experience—as a child and teacher—and that of the authors as we look together at the role that art can play in language learning and teaching.

Begin with Your Own Experience

Donald Graves suggests that a teacher's best preparation for teaching reading and writing is to read and write. I would add "to draw." Drawing is part of my writing process. I keep a sketch journal, and it is my text for writing and teaching. My journal is like a writer's notebook, but it includes drawings that work in partnership with the thinking that I do in writing. I use it to demonstrate to students and teachers what a picture can be and how I use it in my process of writing.

My journal is a collection. There are pages where I have planned, collected lines from books that I am reading, copied poems that spoke to me, clipped newspaper articles that propelled my thinking, pasted in photos of my house and postcards from friends. There are pages of quotes from kids

and teachers that I've captured as I've asked them questions or listened in on their thinking.

Like many artists, writers, scientists, and teachers, I write more than I draw, and it's important that students understand that I expect more writing than drawing from them in a writing workshop. It is equally important to point out the possible connections between thinking, drawing, and writing.

Allison's teacher, Amy Howland, also keeps a sketch journal. She, like the classroom teachers authoring this issue, has no "formal" art training. As an adult, she started drawing and writing in her journal to understand how this could give her a wider repertoire for seeing and making meaning. Allison holds up her own sketch journal and shows her work in minilessons. Her students see that she uses words to write the thinking that she did while she made a picture. These are not pieces that she does for the purpose of the lesson or ones that she has tried to make look like kindergartners did them. They are an authentic part of her literacy practice, so when she opens the pages, she shows Allison and her other students this way of thinking and writing.

Keeping a sketch journal informs the teacher, instructs the students, and is a tool for making connections between writing, reading, and making pictures. The teachers authoring this issue all keep sketch journals and ground their practice and their classroom structures in their own experiences with this process.

Drawing Gives Ideas for Writing

Writers workshops are focused on children making choices, selecting topics that, as Ralph Fletcher describes, they can dig into (2000). When drawing is part of literacy, it helps us know our subjects and our thinking and encourages us to dig in. Drawing slows us down and helps us notice—important skills for writers. In order to accurately describe a sunset, for example, you

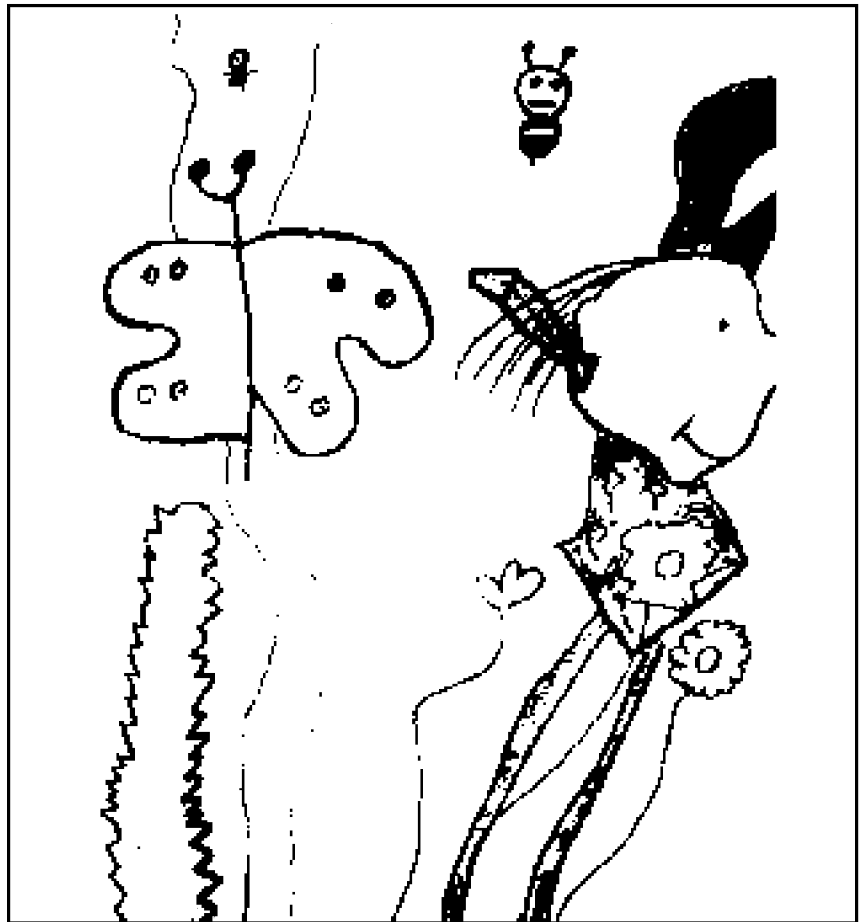


Figure 1. Allison's journal drawing

must observe the sky minute-by-minute at dusk. Time spent observing leads us to think, connect, question, and notice details. Donald Graves tells us that art has a unique capacity to help us take in the world.

In my sketch journal, I draw the woods on a snowy morning. The act of drawing helps me notice and hold onto the tangle of limbs, black and gray against the white land, and the stillness and light of the woods. I use all of my senses as I draw.

The appearance of the picture is not what matters; what I notice as I make the picture is important. When I share this scratchy picture with students, I can teach them that it is the idea, not the appearance, that propels me as a writer.

Jim LaMarche, author and illustrator of *The Raft*, writes, "I discovered the power of drawing and learned that when you draw something, you get closer to it and know it better." Using drawing in the writing process gives me time to question, note what I see, or connect to memories, ideas, and other texts that I have read. I rarely write directly about what I draw, but drawing helps me think and gives me ideas for writing. When I draw a rocking chair in my living room, I think about purchasing it with my mother when I was very young (see Figure 2). Drawing and thinking lead me to write about my mother, her passion for antiques, and how she was such an influence on my own interest in antiques.

Albert Einstein reminds us, "The scientist must have a nature that's inquisitive and he must play." Scientists, artists, and writers have long known that working in a variety of ways keeps them from a rigidity of thought and expression (John-Steiner). As it opens the imagination, drawing is the kind of 'play' or prewriting that writers need. Author Natalie Goldberg found her painting to be a "deep source" of her writing (1997, p. 60). There was rarely a direct corollary between her painting and her writing, but her paintings were a place where she could "let her work flow." Writers like Goldberg, and like the fourth grader who once told me she painted with watercolors to get her imagination going, need productive play, and drawing is an essential component of this play.

Drawing Expands Thinking

Making a picture is a form of thinking. When I drew the rocking chair that led me to write about my mother's antique exper-

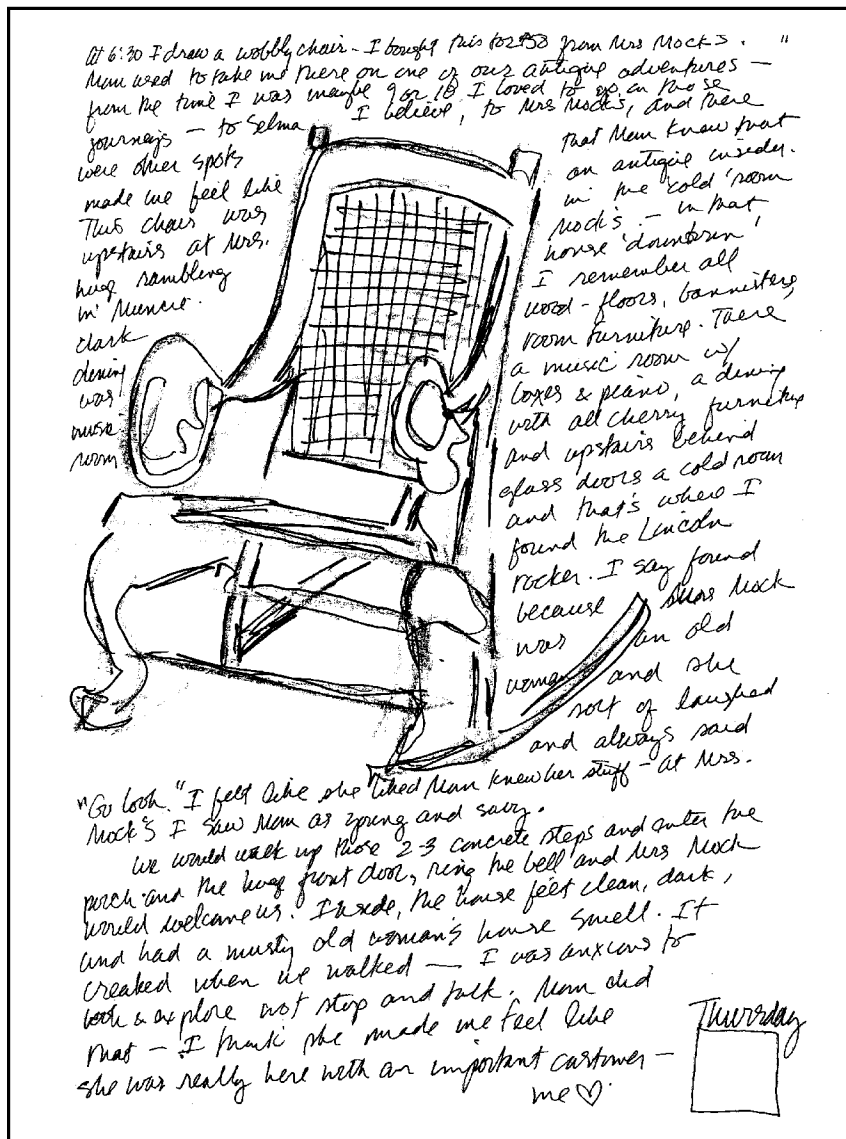


Figure 2. Karen's journal sketch and entry of a favorite rocker