learning through drawing: developing visual literacy

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I’m participating in a Twitter Draw-a-Thon that was kicked off last week by Blair Rorani. (read his original blog post or search #everybodydrawnow.) Aside from having great fun, I’ve met some new Twitter peeps and learned how to use a cool + free iPad app called Paper from FiftyThree along the way.

Learning something new is always a good thing, but it also got me thinking about how drawing engages the brain in different ways, and how this could be useful for corporate learning programs.

We live in a world of ‘big data’ that requires deep analysis and interpretation, and creative visualisations can help us to make sense of it. Even for less complex topics, images and visual media are increasingly being used to tell a complete story via traditional and digital communication platforms.

An important 21\textsuperscript{st} Century skillset is being ‘visually literate’ – described by the Association of College and Research Libraries as being able to ‘critically view, use and produce visual content to engage capably in a visually oriented society.’

What the research tells us

In a study on visual literacy skills of college-age students, published in The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Justine Bell found that students who learned material through drawing had significantly higher grades on an initial quiz than students who learned the same material by computer.

In their research on integrating visual art, language arts and science for The Journal for Learning through the Arts, Monique Poldberg, Guy Trainin and Nancy Andrzejczak found that the use of an integrated curriculum that included visual arts reduced performance gaps in the classroom.

In an article on using spatial thinking as a teaching method in American Educator, Nora Newcombe proposes that ‘active sketching enhances engagement, deepens understanding, requires reasoning, forces ideas to be made explicit, and supports communication in work groups.’

Tytler and Hubber, writing for Australasian Science, also propose that drawing enhances engagement, representation, reasoning and communication skills, and can help organise and integrate knowledge and understanding.
Reimagining corporate learning programs to incorporate activities that develop visual literacy skills

As with all learning program design, we should start with the end in mind – what outcomes are you trying to achieve? Drawing could easily be incorporated in many programs, but will be of most impact if it’s thoughtfully integrated with other activities that will improve understanding and application, and get learners interacting with each other, and the content, in meaningful ways.

As a starting point, using drawing or visual representation of information could be used in getting-to-know you activities. Instead of a ‘let’s go around the room’ introduction activity, give people the option of drawing a picture or diagram that best represents them in that moment.

An activity to create a mind map could build a bridge between art and language, as they can use images as well as words to represent meaning. Topics for mind maps are limited only by the imagination, and can be used to explore and create anything from a personal story, concept or project planning, to organisational strategy development.

Similarly, a visual flow chart could be a simple way to introduce some creativity if your program is related to a process-based topic. While standard flow charts are a form of visualisation, encouraging people to add some graphics or drawings might help aid understanding and engagement with the content.

Collaborative drawing is another option to use if your program involves building a collective understanding of a concept. A group exercise could start with a basic framework of whatever the concept is, that is then built upon by individuals adding elements to help flesh it out. Using post it notes or smaller items that can be rearranged might help with those people who aren’t confident enough to directly draw or sketch on the group project.

This kind of collaborative activity could also work well to create an infographic – graphic visual representations of information, data or knowledge intended to present complex information quickly and clearly. Most, if not all, organisations would have internal processes, or data sets, that would be great topics for infographics. Using a group-based activity to create these would engage people in both the concept, and the process of creating a visual representation. And the output could then be used to communicate the information and help others understand it – the gift that keeps on giving!
“But I can’t draw!!”

Look inside any daycare, kindergarten or primary school classroom, and you’ll find kids of all ages doodling, drawing, painting and sculpting with no inhibitions or concerns. Creativity of expression is actively encouraged in our younger years, but somewhere between childhood and adulthood, many people lose confidence in their artistic abilities.

Art as a disconnected and ‘graded’ activity in the later years of schooling might have something to do with this, along with the perception that it has no place in the serious world of work (and learning). If you’re looking to incorporate drawing and visual creativity into your workplace learning programs, you will definitely need to be prepared to help people to overcome their fears.

Drawing doesn’t need to be hard, and our drawings don’t need to look like ‘real life’ to be useful. I don’t know about you, but my favourite business drawings are usually based on simple stick figures. And pen-on-paper drawing needn’t be the only creative visual process you introduce into your programs. Providing a choice of artistic medium will encourage people to try different things - blackboards, whiteboards, windows or glass walls with chalk pens, flip charts, graph paper, post-it-notes, cut-out pictures, stickers, tablets with a stylus, digital drawing programs – the possibilities are endless.

The most important thing is to encourage a safe space to experiment, and continually reinforce the bigger picture – we’re not looking for an art-gallery-ready masterpieces – the power is in the process, and the self- and other-generated meaning derived from it. There are no rules, and no right answers, and if people want to add contextual language and labels to what they’ve created later on, then that’s OK.

If you need ideas or help from the experts

Maybe you want to think more about this and see some examples of what is possible? Or maybe you have a really complex program topic that you think would be made more impactful by incorporating drawing or a creative visualisation process? If so, and you don’t know where to start, don’t despair. There are many individuals and organisations who specialise in surfacing, talking about or solving problems through visualisations that have some great resources for you to explore. Here are just a few I’ve found:

- In Australia, Fever Pictures illustrates conversations, systems and stories. Check out their Twitter Feed - @FeverPicture - for some excellent illustrations of archived TED Talks.

- Dave Gray, founder of Xplane, has a personal site where he shares his thoughts and some wonderful videos on unleashing your artistic creativity. Check out the XPlane site too if you’re looking for some paid professional help with a project.

- Dan Roam, author of ‘The back of the napkin’, ‘Blah, blah, blah: what to do when words don’t work’, and ‘Show and Tell: how everyone can make extraordinary presentations’, has a great site with lots of information on using pictures to learn and solve problems.
The Toledo Museum of Art has an excellent site focused on visual literacy, with some inspiring examples and videos exploring the themes of creativity, critical thinking, education, empathy and technology.

Developing visual literacy

If your organisation has prioritised visual literacy as a skill that needs improvement, or you want to concentrate on developing your own abilities, then you’re in luck! The Association of College and Research Libraries in the US has developed a comprehensive set of visual literacy competency standards for Higher Ed, complete with learning outcomes, that has transferability and application for the workplace sector. Check it out here.

Have some ideas?

Please share your thoughts below and contact Open Access Learning if you’d like to explore the opportunities for developing visual literacy, or improving understanding, knowledge retention and engagement through incorporating drawing in learning programs. I’m no expert, but I am happy to go on a creative learning journey with you!

Further reading


