

Seeing Eye to I: Perceptual Development and Sense of Self

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Abstract

This paper is a commentary on current views of early development in art and argues for a theory which emphasizes a more active role of the learner in the refinement of perceptual ability, particularly in drawing development. Independent perception is presented as a primary source of children's visual imagery; and inference and problem solving, rather than imitation, are seen to characterize the drawing process as well as to indicate proper methods of instruction. Discussion also considers the shift away from inquiry in this area.

How is drawing ability developed? How do the various psychological and cultural factors affecting development operate and interact? Are some of the variables more decisive? What are optimal conditions for drawing development?

Current writing in art education has generally shifted away from such concerns. These queries echo from the art education literature of two and three decades ago when Read, Lowenfeld, McFee, Arnheim, and others engaged in preliminary work in this area. Such developmental factors as sensory-motor coordination, perceptual acuity, cognition, technical skill acquisition, and cultural influence were identified, defined, and debated by these authors who approached the problem from various theoretical frameworks. For instance, McFee (1961), in her Perception-Delineation theory, summarized and catalogued various factors thought to be operative such as perception, psychological and cultural environment, intellectual-organizational skills, and transformation-communication skills, assigning each of these factors more or less equal weight. A more recent version of the theory (McFee & Degge, 1977) favors

cultural and personal factors over cognitive developmental variables. Arnheim, alternatively, was less eclectic and far more critical of prior attempts to explain the genesis of drawing development, considering active, individual perception to be the primary factor.

In essence, this was art education's version of the nature-nurture controversy. This paper is an unabashed extension of that debate, focusing on the subject of drawing development. A conception of perceptual development as active, refined common sense (referred to here as Eye) is seen to be linked inextricably to development of a student's sense of self (I). A conception of the development of Eye and I is considered in terms of instructional conditions affecting the development of drawing ability.

A Shift from Theory to Practice

In recent years, the subject of early drawing development, once central to art education research, has been more or less set aside. Attention has shifted to discipline based curricula. To explain these changes, some would point to the recognition that artistic development entails more than the acquisition of drawing skills. Correspondingly, conceptions of the art curriculum have been expanded to include the study of art history, art appreciation, and aesthetics as well as art production. But despite these developments in the field, the shift has been away from theoretical concerns and toward curriculum implementation and instructional practice. It has been argued (Efland, 1964; Wieder, 1975) that the suspension of theory in a field of study can have dire consequences, such as a loss of means of assessing curricular recommendations, of verifying research findings, and of checking the directions of research efforts. What is at stake is the possibility of extending and refining the work of our predecessors. Any such cessation of critical inquiry limits theoretical advancement.

Eye/I and Drawing Development

One of the writers in the field today doing work in the area of drawing development in relation to art education theory is Brent Wilson (1984). His efforts have helped to keep alive the idea that pictorial imagery is indispensable to art education, and his work has presented an

alternative to the shallow kind of formalism that has tended to dominate art education curricula and thus diminish its educational and social significance.

Wilson's view of drawing/artistic development emphasizes culture and denies the role of personal meaning and individual value. In "Children's Drawings in Egypt: Cultural Style Acquisition as Graphic Development" (1984), Wilson equivocates cultural assimilation with educational development. The term cultural style is used to refer to "aspects of style that one finds in the advertisements, how-to-draw books and illustrated [comic] books" (p. 14). His conception of graphic development is not one of individual achievement but as cultural residue--as fleeting fashion and fast-food recipe. Even the traditional references to schools of art such as Cubism or Impressionism, or references to such cultural geographic art styles as German Gothic and Ancient Egyptian are considered by Wilson to be unconnected to human perception, cognition, and affection (see note). The sense of style as personal idiom is absent. Contrary to Wilson's position of cultural determinism another position is that culture is itself rooted in the minds and works of individuals (Spindler, 1963).

To be sure, even in the freest of societies, many persons are inclined to follow the fashions and shift with the popular currents, merely making adaptations from popular conventions. But by contrast, Maxine Greene (1979) holds that "the activities of interpretation, the processes of sense making are our intentional activities, and that what is interpreted (or perceived, or understood) is...a function of our seeing, our being in the world" (p. 635). There are, after all, designers as well as those who simply follow the latest trends. And in a very basic educational sense, each and every one of us can be the designers and the creators of our lifestyles and characters. This self-making or self-expression requires the skill, the confidence, and the freedom to exercise critical choice, to selectively sort through our particular social environment and cultural legacy. This working one's way through the traditions and the folk-lore, casting out the superstitions and bad habits of thought, is what gives our lives personal meaning and a sense of direction.

An endless diversity of drawing approaches can range from simple, linear, cartoon narratives to intricate, richly textured, experientially based, sensual and expressive styles. Like painting, sculpture and other visual art forms, drawing involves design and composition as well as craftsmanship and style. Most significantly, though, like all human conceptual learning, drawing development is not based primarily on imitation or cultural assimilation, but rather upon the integration of percepts (Eye) and the assigning of personal meaning (I).

In his emphasis on the primacy of culture in educational development, Wilson (1984) speaks of the need to "overcome various intrinsic biases or initial preferences [for the sake of simplicity and clarity of meaning]" (p. 20). Yet such so-called biases are at the very core of human nature, and consist of the educational-biological efforts by persons to grasp and to make sense of the world. Indeed, as Wilson astutely notes, there may at times be "a tension between [an individual's] intrinsic biases or preferred forms and culturally preferred forms" (p. 22). This tension has long been a central feature of art, particularly forms of romantic art, which has pitted hostile forces against admirable persons, often called heroes, who dare to stand in defiance of convention, idols, fashions, and the like. Rather than take up sides in this ideological drama, the authors challenge the historical belief of adversity between individuals and society or between individuals and culture.

All persons own their ideas and images in the classical, liberal sense of self-ownership. That individuals are capable of developing and refining this self-property and thereby of taking pride of ownership is not a new theory. Putting the point as Jefferson, Paine, Locke, and other classical liberals have: by our very nature as human beings, all of us can be the owners of our ideas and our thought processes if we are free to choose our beliefs and truths on the basis of our understanding. Thus, when a child's perceptions, meanings, judgments, and choices are respected, the educational-psychological foundation is in place for pride of ownership.

The eighteenth century idea of individual rights based upon self-ownership and the nineteenth century idea that children are persons were

truly iconoclastic ideas. These ideas contributed to the American revolution and, later, to an educational revolution called the child study movement. These revolutions continue today. Indeed, we see our efforts here as a part of that vigilance described by Thomas Jefferson as necessary to the cause of liberty.

Our position, then, can be stated as follows:

- 1) Personal experiences (I) and percepts (Eye) are the foundation from which children generate the visual symbols of their graphic imagery. Prevailing visual formulas are a part of the child's experience of the world. The educational effect of these conventional devices can be positive or negative. Normally, they have relatively little influence on the child's early graphic statements. Moreover, far more than imitation or modeling is involved. A chain of inferences, generalizations, and rule implementation is entailed in even the earliest representational drawings.
- 2) As children interact with their environment and attempt to come to grips with and communicate their experiences, they have the capacity to begin looking and studying more critically and experimentally in a problem solving manner.
- 3) While some children respond to this challenge by relying primarily on the combination of existing visual devices, others are more selective. These self-actualizing youngsters critically compare conventional devices and integrate these with symbols of their own. In such cases, the process of adoption is selective, albeit implicit more often than not.
- 4) With a visual vocabulary comprised of some invented symbols and selected conventions that have been mastered and integrated into his/her dictionary of visual images, a child will be able to refine and further develop the system, occasionally modifying some of the symbols, intuitively checking their effectiveness against personal purposes and new percepts.
- 5) Once a child has acquired a functional set of visual symbols, that set represents a method of looking, of selecting, and of rendering meanings. Subsequent drawings and meanings are affected. The process can continue to be inventive or cease to be, which occurs when problem solving subsides.

Concluding Discussion

The ideas of Arnheim, McFee, and other early theorists writing on child development are not new; nor is the revolutionary rhetoric of Thomas Jefferson. Indeed, even the idea of the title of this article, that the eye is a window to the human mind, is rooted in ancient Mesopotamian imagery. Nor is it uncommon for practitioners, including curriculum designers, to get caught up in new methodologies without taking the time to ask basic value questions such as whether human minds are capable of self-programming--of problem finding, problem solving, and problem checking.

The position taken in this paper is not a new one; however, we have only begun to make the case that personal experience and active perception are the epistemic base from which children generate visual symbols; that a chain of inferences and rule implementation is entailed in even the earliest graphic depictions; that problem solving comes into play as children interact with their environment and attempt to make sense of and communicate their experiences of the world; and, that children can be helped to become more critical in sorting through the prevalent visual conventions, and selectively incorporating these with their own learned and invented symbols. We challenge art educators to join in our concerns.

Notes

1. In earlier correspondence and public as well as published debate, Wilson has contended that "personality is itself a cultural bi-product," that "no amount of being-in-the-world has much direct effect upon drawing programs," and that "all children learn to draw...primarily from their exposure to the drawings of others" (1977, p. 31, emphasis added).
2. A version of this paper was reported at the Seminar for Research in Art Education, National Art Education Association Conference, Dallas, 1985. The study was funded in part by the Appalachian State University Graduate Studies and Research Office. Win Faulkner, ASU art education graduate student, provided research assistance.

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