Mother and child sharing through drawing: Intergenerational collaborative processes for making artworks

Linda Knight
University of Canberra

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a preliminary study into collaborated processes for art-making, undertaken by a young child and an adult. The study explores collaborative drawing in the context of sociocultural research into early childhood education. The study particularly examines whether childhood techniques for making marks, creative processing and art-making could be 're-learned' by the adult, while new opportunities for expanding on extant repertoire could be available to the child. In this context the child teaches and learns from the adult, and the adult teaches and learns from the child.

The study utilised video-data-recording to facilitate microanalysis of the researchers in action, enabling the adult researcher to present a discourse into the dynamics of how the visual, mark-making repertoires of an adult and child can be co-developed. Preliminary findings help contribute to the various discourses available into sociocultural research that supports processes for exploring and making art, and which allows a challenge to the role of the adult educator as a provider or director of what is learned.

Sociocultural Research

I am a practising artist who has often been involved in community-based visual art, working with children between 3 – 14 years of age in inner-city areas of England. Through this engagement I realised the value of giving children the opportunity to experience good quality arts activities. Since that experience I have continued to be involved in bringing arts to children. My work in teacher education is now based in Australia. I currently explore my research interests into arts education via the traditional methods of written dissemination, plus through practice-led research via painting and drawing. This mix of research modes is best analysed methodologically through reflexive, autoethnographic narrative, which "usually involves personal

narratives of the author's life experiences within a particular cultural setting" (Grbich, 2004, p. 64). Acknowledgement that a researcher is never totally removed from what is being researched (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 43) helps to facilitate ethnographic, critical reflection on visual and written work, and also helps to inform understandings of sociocultural teaching practices. The role of 'the researcher', who is 'observing' inevitably interprets whatever is being researched through their own personal history and understanding.

The presence of the reflexive in research interpretation supports the sociocultural position from which recent research into early childhood (established here as the study of children aged 0-8 years) emerges. Sociocultural research, particularly in the field of education, has grown substantially, evolving predominantly from the writings of the Russian philosopher Lev Vygotsky (Brooks, 2004; Greenfield, 1984; Hedegaard, 2005; Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff, 2003; Wertsch & Tulviste, 2005).

Vygotsky's works have informed educational research in various ways. Greenfield's (1984) study into educational processes of individual activity to individual accomplishment focused on Vygotsky's concept "that intra-individual skills have their origin in interindividual activity" (p. 117); Brooks' (2004) investigation into children's drawing processes examined "A Vygotskian social constructionist framework for drawing" (p. 42); and Rogoff's (1990) research into cognitive development in social context aimed to "extend the concept of the zone of proximal development by stressing the interrelatedness of the roles of children and their caregivers and other companions" (p. 16).

Adopting a sociocultural research lens acknowledges that a child's induction into its culture is mediated through the semiotic tools of that culture (Palinscar, 2005) and that those tools, including drawing tools, are often introduced (Brooks, 2004; Cole, 2005; Rogoff, 2003) and their use modelled (Matthews 1999; Rogoff 2003) by the caregivers most often in contact with the child, usually the mother.

Collaboration/Exchange

A significant aspect of sociocultural research also examines, critiques and employs collaboration in various contexts (Brooks, 2004; Goodfellow, 2005; Greenfield, 1984; Matthews, 1999; Palinscar, 2005; Rogoff 1990; Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü & Mosier, 1993). Such collaborative contexts and definitions differ from researcher to researcher, from Rogoff's (2003) horizontal, multiparty model (p. 9) and Matthews' (1999) shared field of discourse between an adult and child (p. 159), to Engeström's (2005) comparative analysis of contemporary approaches to school learning (pp. 7-8). Goodfellow's (2005) review of practitioner research articles published in the Australian Journal of Early Childhood focuses on examining and promoting collaborative inquiry between researchers and early childhood practitioners. She reveals that "only a small number" (p. 48) of the articles detailed this type of research. Goodfellow recognises collaborative inquiry as being important, although she asserts that "the nature of collaboration" "requires further clarification" (p. 55).

In her review on "Social constructivist perspectives on teaching and learning" (pp.

285-314), Palinscar (2005) details how her prior research into reciprocal teaching ()
"urged teachers to cede control... ...by asking [the children] to take turns leading the
discussion" (p. 287). The research explored how well children were able to analyse a
text to aid their comprehension skills. Her approach engaged students and teachers in
collective learning by calling on their multiple ways of knowing (p. 288). In this instance
when the teacher and students rotated their control of the learning, the engagement
became more enriching for both teacher and students, as it more closely resembled
peer engagement, with boundary lines blurred between the 'teacher' and the 'learner'.

Working collaboratively with children to make artworks challenges more product-
driven teaching practices that "can lead to shallow understanding" (Beghetto & Plucker,
2006, p. 322), and learning that is "pitched at the most trivial level" (Matthews, 1999, p.
161). Working together collaboratively provides an important opportunity to expand
on more prescriptive, product-driven ways of teaching that do not fully serve the child
intellectually.

I collaborated with my daughter, Hannah who was 21 months old at the time of
the investigation. I developed a collaborative, rotational method of working for this
study and used drawing and painting as our expressive vehicles. I was interested
to see whether both of us actually experienced a rotating exchange of leadership
when creating the work, given our extreme differences in age and experiences of
art practices. I fully acknowledge that a truly collaborative experience may not be
achievable, but I wanted to see if it was possible, by shaking off as many temptations
(certainly on my part) to 'lead' the learning, for us both to "acquire new strategies and
knowledge of the world and culture" (Palinscar, 2005, p. 290).

Working together collaboratively on art production is certainly unpredictable. The
child and the adult are free to continuously make leading decisions about the work's
development. This method can work well however if the adult is prepared to revisit
childhood mark-making repertoires instead of prescribing drawing schemas to the
child (Beghetto & Plucker, 2006, p. 316).

The overall aim of this preliminary study was to contribute to the debate that supports
the need for informed arts education in children's lives (Burnaford, Aprill, & Weiss,
2001; Hickman, 2005; Rostan 2006). The aim is to encourage teachers to revisit their
creative childhoods and use those formative, visual repertoires once again as a way of
communicating with the children in their classes when making artworks.

It is important to assert that the research does not try to accelerate a child's nascent
visual representational repertoire, or attempt to have children draw more 'realistically'
or 'better'. It does however focus on how adults and children might be transformed by
the experience of working collaboratively. As Rogoff (2003, p. 237) states:

Cognitive development consists of individuals changing their ways of understanding,
perceiving, noticing, thinking, remembering, classifying, reflecting, problem setting and
solving, planning, and so on – in shared endeavors with other people building on the
cultural practices and traditions of communities. Cognitive development is an aspect of
the transformation of people's participation in sociocultural activities.

Rogoff focuses on the transformation of the child in terms of attainment of

enculturated knowledge. This can also apply to adults who are able to "transform by accommodating the shared information" (Runco, 1996, p. 12) when they work alongside children. Particularly, when creating art "professional artists transform their experiences into their work." (p. 11). Even if the art producer is not a professional artist but an educator, personal history and culture still inform those artworks. If adults and children work collaboratively on an artwork, they each gain something new by that experience.

Although there was a great difference between my daughter and I in terms of our life experience, communication skills and art-making skills, the study allowed for both of us to learn and share and thus be transformed by the experience of collaborative art-making.

It is possible that the collaborations with Hannah involved some level of guided participation. Rogoff (2003) asserts that children learn when others "provide guidance during joint activity" (p. 69), such as the Guatemalan mothers who "assist their daughters in learning how to weave by segmenting the process into steps" (p. 69). Although it is inevitable that some guided participation occurred in our art-making episodes, I was interested in producing drawings whereby the child and adult each had some directional role. Matthews' (1999, p. 23) assertion that "the child enters domains of media use which are constructed, physically and conceptually, by adults" suggests that the very physicality (the size, shape, density etc.) of the material is predetermined before the child uses it. I assisted in constructing Hannah's media use by making suggestions that included washing water over the pastels and choosing the paper quality and size for the drawings. Although I desired that Hannah and I should be placed in equal positions to learn, teach and to transform skills, experiences and make choices about the direction of the art works, I ultimately guided our drawing to some degree. This was most obvious through choices of drawing surface. When we drew together Hannah and I drew within the parameters of the paper, but when totally left to her own drawing choices, she often chose to draw on anything but the paper, choosing instead walls, floors, furniture and so on.

In this study, I considered Hannah and I were working collaboratively when:

- we seemed to be working in harmony with each other, rather than separately from each other;

- we each looked at what the other was doing and responded to it;

- there was an active dialogue going on – spoken, visual, or demonstrated;

- each seemed to be learning from the other;

- each seemed to have freedom to make decisions about the work, which was then explored by both;

- there was a sharing and exchanging of skills.

Methodology

Commonly, qualitative, sociocultural research projects employ video recording as an ethnographic research tool for microanalysis (Billman & Sherman, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Fletcher & Whitehead, 2003; Mills, 2003; Sanders-Bustle 2003; Swadener & Marsh, 1995; Zirpoli, 1995). Video proved to be extremely useful in this study for "recording in naturally occurring situations of informal learning" (Greenfield, 1984, p. 120). Examining video provided evidence of subtle gestures, glances, the artwork, the use of materials, and the ability to listen to any dialogue that was spoken during the construction of the artworks.

Each time Hannah and I began a new artwork I set up the camera on a tripod quite near to us, and let it run while we concentrated on being creative. I alternated the places we worked between outside and inside my house. When we worked outside we did so on a low table, and when inside, on the floor on a large piece of cardboard. Generally this worked very well for the recording process. Also, because we were the only people in the house the video recordings provide a very clear and audible record of our actions and dialogues.

Using qualitative research methods in early childhood education studies is highly effective in managing and obtaining data and findings, as it allows for "systematic enquiry in naturalistic settings" (McGee-Brown, 1995, p. 191). Despite the flexibility of the methodology however, this study contains problematic factors. Firstly, I worked with one child only, and the same child for all the artworks. This did not present a wide enough example of how young children might benefit from working collaboratively with an adult. Some children may not want to or enjoy working in this way, so further research needs to be undertaken in environments with different personality types and age ranges. Secondly, I worked with a child of a certain age. The maturation range of children aged between 0 – 8 is enormous! A wider range of data is needed to be able to critically analyse the potential success of the project. Thirdly, the time-frame for producing works was very short. This project was undertaken in the space of a month, so more research time is needed to critically explore theories. This paper prompts many questions in relation to the potential success of collaborative working. Lastly, because Hannah is my daughter I am sure I was able to work with her in a way I may not be able to with other children. They may respond to me differently, or the dialogue may change. A wider study is needed to explore this.

Although what is presented here is not conclusive, the preliminary study was a necessary part of the research process. The study, while problematic, provided valuable information on where to go next with the investigation.

Creation and Appraisal of Works

I have chosen to use a narrative rather than formal style of reporting, as it allows me to disseminate more effectively how I have experimented with my ideas. Lalik's (2003) poetic description of her use of photographs as a teaching tool demonstrates how reflexive, auto-ethnographic reporting enables an author to convey the deep emotions

felt when working with young people in creative ways.

I began by making reflexive, auto-ethnographic dialogue during the video recordings. I worked on the artworks and simultaneously talked about my observations and thoughts. Other dialogues also occurred during the recordings, including my spoken dialogue to the video recorder/Hannah; Hannah's spoken dialogue to me; Hannah's demonstrated dialogue to me/herself; my demonstrated dialogue to me/her; and our visual, collaborating practice dialogue.

Hannah's age meant she had a very small spoken vocabulary. Despite this she contributed a spoken dialogue that was also reflexive and autoethnographic, in that she connected her personal extant experience to the cultural, expansive experience of collaborating. I would anticipate that a larger research project with older children could provide a larger volume of highly potent dialogue. These multiple dialogues provide a rich source of information and help to build on explorations and understandings of collaborative art-making in early childhood art education.

Only a small number of artworks (4) were made prior to writing this paper, and this was mainly due to time constraints. We worked using a variety of wet and dry media: acrylic paints, water-soluble oil pastels, graphite pencils, soft pastels, masking tape, water, water-based textas and charcoal. These were worked onto Fabriano super-white cartridge paper that was cut to various sizes. I chose a range of media for each of the four artworks but within that I did not aim to control which of the available media was used at any one time. I aimed to take as much of a cue from Hannah as she was hopefully taking from me. I took still images of the completed works Figures 1-4).

I was interested in offering Hannah the opportunity to revisit artworks, so I encouraged situations whereby we could look at our previous efforts and cover or re-work what was already there. This revisiting, particularly if the artwork had originally been worked in wet media, allowed for continued or prolonged development. This process enabled us to explore different media in one work, which helped to expand Hannah's practice repertoire. Dry media could be worked over wet, or vice versa. This presented a new process experience for Hannah, as she had previously created artworks that were not revisited. This revisiting process also initiated the transforming exchange for us in that Hannah was presented with different ways of working, and I repeatedly used a reduced vocabulary of marks that I had observed her working with. It was a visualising process I had not used for a long time, so effectively it also expanded my visual repertoire in that it took me back to my own childhood mark-making.

An important aspect of our collaborations involved a rotating exchange of leadership. I followed Hannah's lead and she followed mine via a constant examining of each other's practice followed by experimentation with our own practices. Importantly, I did not try to control her mark-making or where she chose to put the media, even when sometimes she preferred to paint herself, the carpet, or the table. I carried on working on the paper when this was happening. This sustained interest on my part encouraged Hannah to return to marking the paper as well as to explore surfaces on her own terms. I became more interested in the random or repetitive marks Hannah made and tried to mirror those as time went on. What I learned from Hannah was to repeat the same system of mark-making, the same pattern of turning the tool in one direction and changing between lines and dots and arcs, what Matthews (1999) refers to as "First

Generation Structures" (p. 15).

Figure 1. Artwork 1, 445 x 625mm, acrylic, soft pastel on Fabriano paper

What Hannah appeared to learn from me was to persist in working on one work rather than making a few marks before moving onto another sheet of paper. The collaborative process emerged through us sometimes working together, sometimes in turns. I certainly did not try to adopt a formal or rigorous system of always following a set pattern of working, and this flexibility worked well for us. Rather than describe each work in turn I will highlight key moments of our collaborations.

The first of the four artworks involved doing a painting outside on a low table. Initially Hannah simply enjoyed the experience of using paint, being quite preoccupied with mixing colours in the palette (Figure 1). When I started painting she became interested in what was happening on the paper and began then to paint on the paper also. The other three artworks were made mostly by using dry media (pencils, textas, chalk, pastel etc.) and small amounts of water. These artworks were created inside the house, with paper being taped to a large sheet of cardboard and laid on the floor with art materials placed alongside. When materials were presented in this way Hannah was immediately interested and wanted to work with all of them quickly, often sitting directly on the paper and working around her body space.

Figure 2. Artwork 2, 560 x 735mm, soft pastel, water-based texta, water-soluble oil pastel on Fabriano paper

Within each of the artworks Hannah explored her nascent visual repertoire fully. In the first she made wide arcs, rapid zigzags and dots with her paintbrush, and later she used the same marks to wash paint-water over the acrylic, creating a paring back effect. When revisiting this work she used soft pastels, employing a wider range of mark-making: circular movements, arced scribbles, long lines and dots.

This repertoire formed the basis of many of our collaborations. I 'travelled' to Hannah's developmental visual skill position and used her repertoire, manipulating them a little rather than drawing pictures of 'things'. In one instance I began to draw oval shapes that Hannah observed then copied, drawing them in a different direction (working from the inside of the body to the outside) that I then adopted also. I repeated the same marks Hannah made, but slowed down the rapidity of the mark-making to a more deliberate effect. At other times I traced over some of Hannah's drawn lines to judge her reaction. In many instances she observed what I did, reacting by wanting to use the tool that I was using. This happened often, possibly because she thought the tool controlled the marks being made, i.e. if she got to use that tool she could draw like that also. As Hannah learned that this was not the case, she often continued to want to swap tools with me, but resorted to her established repertoire and worked intensively over the areas I had just worked on.

I often praised Hannah for her individual drawn marks via comments such as "ooh" or "beautiful", and this encouraged her to continue working on that same spot of the artwork. She also seemed to enjoy the process of working with me as she maintained an interest in working for extended periods of time – approx. 30 minutes being the longest period. Hannah also demonstrated a continued interest in working on the paper with all the materials during the sessions.

Further evidence of collaboration occurred via the multiple dialogues exchanged during working, including a reflexive, autoethnographic spoken commentary, the simultaneous, spoken, appraising dialogue I had with Hannah about her work and the responsive, spoken dialogue in which both of us engaged.

Figure 3. Artwork 3, 580 x 775mm, water-based texta, masking tape on Fabriano paper

The most potent dialogues in this study were demonstrated rather than spoken, most evident through our observations of what the other was doing and how we used those observations to inform our mark-making. In artwork 2 for example I introduced 20 coloured textas sometime after we had begun working. Hannah observed me taking the lid off a texta and using the texta to draw (Figure 2). She then proceeded to take the lids off all the textas before using many of them in quick succession. I observed her doing this and then continued to use the textas in quick succession also. In artwork 4 I suddenly focused in and drew some very tiny marks that Hannah then adapted into her mark-making (Figure 4).

Although Hannah was exposed to some tool use, she preferred on many occasions to continue working with her chosen tool until some later time, when she then began experimenting with the materials I was using. She looked to me for prompts on how to use art materials, new or familiar, because of our familial relationship (Trevarthen, referenced in Matthews, 1999, p. 16). This relationship impacts on the artworks produced even though I did not draw in the way I would in my own artwork. I consciously used Hannah's visual mark-making repertoire, as I attempted to utilise her visual repertoire instead of expecting her to use mine.

Figure 4. Artwork 4, 580 x 730mm, soft pastel, water-based texta, water-soluble oil pastel, Progresso, charcoal, on Fabriano paper

Hannah's mark-making choices demonstrate a sociocultural response to art-making in the sense that I (a white, female, European enculturated adult) equipped her with some techniques and certain art materials available and widely used in Westernised society (Rogoff et al., 1993, p. 7). However, I praised her autonomous efforts to minimise the guided participation approach. Many times when new visual media were introduced the objective was not to structure "meaning making through the 'laying down' of rites, routines and rituals" (Ring, 2006, p. 74), but to give Hannah opportunities to explore ways of working with unfamiliar art materials.

I did not have any expectations about how the work would or should 'look' at the

point of completion, and neither, I am sure, did Hannah. We each entered into the art-making episodes without really knowing what we would produce. This in itself did not determine evidence of collaborative art-making taking place, it was the willingness of each of us to enter into and participate together in the creation of artworks, as equally as possible, through a process of rotating leadership, that suggests it did occur.

Conclusions

The four artworks demonstrate that we expanded our visualising repertoires. I revisited my childhood repertoire by repeatedly using a reduced caché of marks, of choosing colours in quick succession and of working into one area of the paper. Hannah had the experience of working with new media and she explored, on her own terms in a sociocultural context, how to use that media.

Beyond the experience of collaborating on artworks, the wider learning that took place included me being aware that I appraised many things in the works that were not necessarily aesthetic, and that this was easier for me to do as I am an abstract painter who enjoys producing and appreciating images that are not overly representational.

Collaborative practice may provide a way for the adult and child to become familiar with new art media and to expand on personal repertoire. It may also encourage collaborators to focus on the use of material and colour rather than what may happen at the end, enabling children and adults to explore their mark-making repertoires more effectively. The sociocultural nature of the research positively provides an enriching process for adults as well as children as each participant benefits educationally from the experience.

The objective of the study was to enrich a child's experience of art-making, and to see what happens when a child is given freedom to create, when there is no intended outcome apart from collaborating and exploring. Although this paper is a preliminary study it indicates what can happen when an adult and child work together, rather than when a child is left alone to create, or when the adult has schematic or product-driven outcomes. Further research may help to establish it as a valuable and interesting teaching model for early childhood educators, not just for the benefit of the children, but as an expansion on their own art-making.

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About the Author: Linda Knight

Dr Linda Knight is a Senior Lecturer in Arts Education at the University of Canberra, Australia. Her interest in intergenerational collaborative drawing came about through having to combine the roles of motherhood, visual artist and early childhood teacher educator. In 2008 two pilot studies into intergenerational collaborative drawing were conducted, which produced over 250 drawings. Currently Linda is developing further research into drawing practices in collaboration with the National Gallery of Australia and the National Portrait Gallery.