



“WE CAN TALK AND DRAW AT THE SAME TIME!”

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Field Notes June 2023

We circled up inside the children’s classroom for introductions. All the children gave hugs. They said “I remember you” to myself and Lucy. They did not know the other two educators but were just as excited to see them too. They knew we were going to go on a field trip inside the cARTie art museum bus. Naturally, our introductions touched upon what the children remembered about their last cARTie museum field trip (we already visited four other times this school year – each visit building upon the last). Sarah exclaimed that when we go inside “we can talk and draw at the same time!”

The above extract is taken from field notes that I wrote following a visit with the art museum bus that I co-founded and continue to lead called cARTie. This particular day we were visiting a preschool in an inner city in Connecticut with limited access to museums, and working with a class of 14 three- and four-year-old students. cARTie had visited this preschool four times earlier that school year and three times the school year before. Most of the students came from families with lower income, with the private preschool offering partial and full scholarships as needed. There were three teachers present and we brought four cARTie educators, myself included.

Through cARTie, we aim to make museum experiences meaningful for children of all backgrounds, needs and abilities. We develop a series of two-nine museum field trips for each of our 27 and counting school partners every year. Driving our art museum bus to these partner schools, we see more than 5,000 PreK-2nd grade students on an annual basis. We take inspiration from promising practices in early childhood and museum education; namely the Reggio Emilia Approach, Studio Habits of Mind, Artful Thinking, Mindfulness Education and other inclusive practices. We specialize in serving PreK-2nd grade students; in fact our whole museum is designed with/by/for children. The art on display is created by secondary school students across Connecticut for view by children, and the annual juried show is curated such that all children in the state can see themselves represented and reflected in the student-artists whose works of art are on display. The jury selects works of art from those submitted to cARTie’s annual call for student art based on the degree of mastery exhibited, relation to the annual theme (which is decided on by our Student Advisory Board), familiarity/relevance to young audiences, and student-artist diversity. Once works are selected, the curatorial process is a careful one, every year involving different student interns and

community members. Student interns apply for a summer internship whereby they gain first-hand knowledge and understanding about art/museum nonprofit work, and two interns are selected each year who demonstrate a commitment to arts equity and come from diverse backgrounds. Community members are consulted during free summer pop-up programming as the exhibition is developed hand-in-hand with student interns. There are manipulatives and other sensory/interactive engagements set out to support children's explorations of the space and the museum exhibition. Ideally – whether it's by offering children magnifying glasses to look closely at works of art for hidden messages or inviting them to walk around with different art materials trying to notice which works of art were made with which materials – we try to get children to linger in front of works of art.

Discussion is a great way to support individuals' lingering in front of works of art. It makes sense that discussion would support children's slowing down to recount and imagine stories behind works of art, given their proclivity toward stories in art (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007; Mendelowitz, 1953; Winner, 1982). However, we have come to realize that discussion can be limiting as well. This is especially true when we consider children's variety of needs and abilities. The problem as we see it is that discussions about works of art tend to presume all children are fully hearing and do not have any kind of developmental disability; cARTie's "drawing-discussions" – which we define as multimodal child-centered and co-directed conversations about works of art with a supporting museum educator who is trained in a mix of inclusive practices, early childhood education promising practices, teaching critical and creative thinking through art and studio habits of mind – are intended to provide children multiple entry points into discussion, as well as multiple ways to sustain their attention and engagement. Children may speak, listen, and/or draw.

Bringing together work that looks at the role of drawing in child development (Martins, 2017; Matthews, 1984; Picard & Gauthier, 2012; Rosenblatt & Winner, 1988) and methodologies that support investigations into children's wayfinding and making-meaning (Lingwood et al., 2015; Wright, 2010; Wright, 2015; Yang & Merrill, 2022), along with considerations of children's "one hundred languages" (Malaguzzi, 1987), this article explores the potential of "drawing-discussions" for supporting children's making connection to one another, to works of art and to larger discussions about their world in museum settings. In particular, the importance of expanding our conception of what constitutes a museum discussion is considered.

CHILDREN, ART, AND CONNECTION

Children do not connect by verbal discussion alone. Dewey (1934) provided seminal scholarship on the role of art in individual's lives, especially as pertains to children's ability to forge connections. He theorized that art brings individuals "heightened vitality" (p.18) through "active and alert commerce with the world" (p.18) which moves them beyond merely understanding the marks on a page to understanding how art functions to connect people, places, and events. As Dewey (1934) pointed out "when excitement about subject matter goes deep, it stirs up a store of attitudes and meanings derived from prior

experience” (p.68). Using art to connect with the content of artworks as well as others is the subject of a small subset of literature (Vahter, 2016). It is grounded in an assertion that Blank (2012) makes clear; the “powerful educative value [of encountering the unfamiliar, say in art] is not in their potential to provide ways of knowing the unfamiliar (too easily situated as ‘other’), but rather is in their potential to provoke a heightened awareness of what is closest” (p.50). Research in this field suggests that when children create art, they are naturally drawn to discuss their own as well as others’ art. Once they find themselves discussing their art and/or others’ art, they have a tangible experience with which they can make important “connections with previous knowledge” (Vahter, 2016 p.63). This provides children an opportunity to forge connection more directly with peers and other individuals involved.

CHILDREN AND MUSEUM SETTINGS

Discussion in museums does not typically involve multimodal engagements such as drawing while talking. Instead, most museums prioritize verbal/spoken exchanges (Shaffer, 2016). This is particularly true in museums that laud lectures and docent tours. Where and when museums offer programming for children, discussion and art-making are often discrete activities; museums tend to have strict rules about what art materials may be used in gallery spaces and prefer to have art-making classroom space outside the galleries which further separates discursive and tactile engagements. How might museum experiences that combine discussion and art-making support children’s potential for making connection?

“DRAWING-DISCUSSIONS”

Through cARTie, we have developed an approach to museum discussion that activates evidence of art-making supporting children’s potential to connect and engages children’s “one hundred languages” (Malaguzzi, 1987) in dynamic and collaborative ways. The approach we take involves facilitating “drawing-discussions,” or conversations about particular works of art on view that seemingly interest the children we are working with through spoken, written and drawn exchanges. Oftentimes, a “drawing-discussion” begins when a museum educator notices a group of children gravitating toward a particular work of art on view and asks “I notice you are looking at this work of art; I’m curious what you notice. Can you share with me?” As children share and conversation unfolds, the educator brings out a large sheet of paper that the group sits around and uses for note-taking and doodling as a form of thinking through the things they see, think, wonder, and more.

Reflecting on their work with children on the art museum bus, our museum educators suggest that “drawing-discussions” are a viable method for early childhood art museum education. This article presents some examples of ways in which children connect with one another, works of art, and larger discussions about their world through “drawing-discussions” in our unique museum setting.

THE STUDY

The museum where the above actions take place is housed within a bus that drives across the state of Connecticut. It is the state's first and only nonprofit art museum bus working to bridge inequities in education and arts access. It has been recognized by local, national and international press for its innovative, future-facing approach to museum education; focusing on children and their rights to museum experiences. There is just one gallery inside the bus, which itself changes every year in response to the annual call for an art and juried art exhibition of secondary student art. The bus is always designed with children's input and co-curated with secondary school students as well. The exhibition includes interactive stations and has plentiful sensorial engagements paired with the different art displays. Children can touch everything, and play is encouraged as a way for children to become comfortable in the environment. All programs for children involve time for exploration, discussion and creation. Lessons adapt 'The cARTie Curriculum', which finds inspiration in the Reggio Emilia Approach, Studio Habits of Mind, Artful Thinking, Mindfulness-Based Education and other inclusive practices. Beginning with a theatrical introduction that integrates moments of mindfulness and movement, cARTie educators explain that the cARTie art museum bus is a museum meant for them – the children – and that the purpose of the present visit is for the children to get to know the museum, the exhibition, and the student-artists more so that they may find inspiration themselves. cARTie educators give the children something tangible to explore with first; at the beginning of the year they may give the students a scavenger hunt or reproduced parts of a larger work of art to find and subsequently put together, whereas toward the end of the year they may give the students paintbrushes or other art instruments to experiment how different artists used different media. They engage with these introductory materials and prompts for exploration for as long as their individual attention spans allow; with increasing comfort in the space, they then may turn to other works of art or interactives. After children have time to engage directly with the environment and make meaning through their own choice of play, making, and other explorations, all children are invited to collaborate in a group discussion that is fueled both by verbal, social exchange, as well as drawn marks and notes about works of art on view and the ideas that come to children in their response. We refer to these discussions as "drawing-discussions."

The study adopted an ethnographic approach, focusing on the experiences of fourteen children visiting the museum over the course of a year, and in particular paid attention to their "drawing-discussions" aboard. Given that the ways in which a child might visit a museum as unique as cARTie – which is intentionally designed to resemble home/school environments – may differ from how they might visit another more traditional art museum, the methodological choice to study a subset of children's experiences within cARTie over the course of the year within an ethnographic framework made sense. In addition, ethnography is recognized as a particularly effective method to uncover alternative perspectives (Hackett, 2012; Heath and Street, 2008), not to mention emphasize the voices of children (Davis et al., 2008; Christensen, 2004).

All fourteen children included in this study spent time over the course of the 2022-2023 school year exploring what it means to visit a museum and engaging in a “drawing-discussion” on each of our five visits to the school. They and their parents, consented to participating in all museum activities. Their director knew about our curiosity to continuously improve our approach to “drawing-discussions” as well.

PARTICIPANTS IN MUSEUM VISITS

- 14 students from a private preschool in an inner-city in Connecticut with limited access to the arts and museums (low income families, range of ethnicities and races)
- Four educators (including myself)
- Three school teachers

All names (except my own) are pseudonyms.

During the five museum visits, I took part as a participant-observer. My identity during the visits was as both educator and researcher. This undoubtedly affected how the other participants behaved during the visits and my own perceptions of what each visit was like. By being both researcher and educator, I was able to build rapport with the children that I might not have been able to establish as a researcher alone. My being involved as an educator however, did complicate my reading of interactions between children and the art; it certainly made me more wishful of certain outcomes in discussion.

The data collected included field notes and photographs from the children’s documentation during each “drawing-discussion” aboard. I did not have capacity to take video footage while conducting these discussions, and I recognize that as a limitation to the study. That said, my field notes are extensive, and each photograph is accompanied with contextual clues and notes from conversation.

DATASET

The data used for this paper were collected during and following five museum visits to one preschool in an inner-city in Connecticut between November 2022 and June 2023. They include:

1. Five sets of field notes (prepared directly after each museum-school visit) written by me. Each set was about 1,000 words long.
2. Five sets of full-length floorbook page documentation created by the children (and their teachers on occasion) aboard cARTie (one from each museum-school visit), with accompanying notes and contextual clues written by me.

3. Five sets of close-up photos of specific exchanges between children (and their teachers on occasion) during the “drawing-discussions” aboard over the course of the school year. Methods for collecting this data were ethically set out to accommodate the needs and abilities of children with adult support. Assent of the children to participate was obtained on a moment-by-moment basis, based on the verbal and nonverbal cues they gave and as interpreted by myself and the other adults. Pseudonyms were randomly assigned to each participant.

EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN CONNECTING THROUGH “DRAWING-DISCUSSIONS” IN THE MUSEUM

In this next section, I present three examples of children’s “drawing-discussions” from my dataset to further elaborate on the ways in which they support children’s making connection to one another, to works of art and to larger discussions about their world in museum settings.

Example 1: Recognizing ideas and points of connection

As the value of drawing during discussion began to emerge repeatedly in my field notes, I began thinking about the way in which drawing helps children – inclusive of all different backgrounds, needs and interests – slow down and articulate their ideas, shifting the whole discussion toward deeper conversation and connection. Recurringly, I noticed a switch in the children’s behaviors and energy the moment I invited them to join me in articulating something they saw or wondered about the work of art we were discussing on the large floorbook paper. Prior to inviting a child to draw on the floorbook paper, I would ask open-ended questions about what the children saw, thought about, or wondered about the work of art we had been gravitating toward. I would listen closely to each child, making sure to model a listening disposition. Then I would mirror back to the children what I heard them sharing and then ask a follow up question to go deeper and build upon their critical and creative thinking. I am reminded of the struggle children felt trying to articulate elements of their thinking in the following vignette.

Field Notes March 2023

It felt like something magical happened once I gave Luke a marker to show me (and all of his classmates) what he saw in the ball. He lit up... I noticed him looking up at the piece of art again once he drew the circle of the ball. He was studying it. He was looking up at the piece of art then down at the paper and back and forth. He turned to me and asked “can I have an orange marker?” to which I responded “absolutely”. I wanted to know what he was going to use the orange marker for though and so he began describing that he now thought there was a fish in the ball. His classmate, Julia, saw what he was doing and said she thought it might be a goldfish. I asked her what did she see that made her say that...

In this vignette, Luke is captivated by the object the central figure is holding in a particular work of art entitled 'Blub blub and fish'. At first, he raises his hand to verbally share the "alien is holding a ball." He struggles to explain what about the object the alien is holding reminds him of a ball, but is able to break down the parts of that object by drawing them on the large floorbook paper. I ask him if he would like to show me what he sees, and guide him to start with the shape of the object. He lights up and holds his marker with a confidence I had not seen in him earlier. With his marker in hand, he draws a circle. Then he looks up at the work of art again and asks, "can I have an orange marker?". I respond "absolutely" and ask him to share what he sees that is orange. He is again encouraged to have an art instrument in hand and draws – while talking and explaining that he sees – something now that looks like a fish. Another classmate adds that it might be a goldfish. Our conversation continues and we all start adding to Luke's drawing. Naturally, the conversation extends to the person – or alien – who is holding the goldfish in a ball and our collaborative drawing mirrors that expansive turn in the conversation, beginning to take up more of the floorbook page.

I consider the moment Luke had a marker in his hand an important turn in the conversation. It unlocked a unique opportunity for the whole group to collaborate and not just verbally. It also offered Luke an important entryway into deeper critical and creative thinking. It helped slow down his brain and gave him the gift of time to look, and think, look again, and think again. The whole exchange reminded me that sharing about the things we see, think about and wonder in works of art takes time.

Example 2: Noticing overlap

When the children at this preschool sat around our floorbook paper to discuss and draw, they recognized they were working all together. The paper was large enough for each child to have space in front of them, but not so large that they forgot they were sharing the same paper. They noticed me starting each "drawing-discussion" by making a few marks or notes of comments they were sharing. For instance, one day in May we were discussing a work of art that had a lot of faces in it. I had asked the children what interested them in the piece, and "faces" was one of their first comments. It felt like an opportune launching off point for our conversation and so I wrote the word "faces" down then invited the children to tell me more about the faces they saw and how they knew there were so many faces. They continued to explain the faces had eyes, and noses, and mouths. They pointed the faces out to me, and we saw there was one face that looked more real than the others. I asked them what they meant and they struggled to explain what a real face was as compared to the spray-painted faces. I asked if I drew a circle here and a circle there, could we work together to think about how the faces were different. They let out an excited cheer that they indeed could work together to think about the faces they saw.

Field Notes May 2023

Asking them if they could work together to study these faces wound up being an important question to ask. Of course they could, but to have them respond so energetically reaffirmed that they were in fact going to work together. I suspect if I had not asked that question, they might not have made comments later like “Laura, look we can mix our colours and create some skin” or “John, can you help me colour this in?”

After the children worked together to create different faces, we took a step back to see how the real and less real faces compared. We had a conversation about what we noticed in and between the faces we drew as well as those in the original work of art. What I found most striking when we did this was how the faces the children had drawn showed their lines and marks intersecting, coming together, and literally connecting to create a whole image of their making sense of this particular work of art, what it stands for to them and how it brought them together. The children knew the faces they drew were collaborative representations. In conversation, they referred to the faces using the pronoun “we” and it seemed to give them some extra confidence knowing they were part of something bigger than themselves.

Field Notes May 2023

Joe was interested to see “the face we drew looks like that face because of the curly hair” and Angelica liked how “we mixed a lot of colours to get that colour” on another face. The children saw their art on par with the art on display and were able to make comparisons with confidence. They had participated in the art-making and now felt they had insights and important comments to share. I’ll say it again; they exuded confidence.

None of the children were upset to be sharing the same piece of paper. Moreover, they were not bothered when another child’s lines intersected or went over their own. We set the tone from the outset this floorbook page was a space/place for simply making sense of the art. One child’s marks were going to meet and connect with the next child’s marks.

Example 3: All are welcome to engage

While the value of “drawing-discussions” was alluded to in my field notes, I began thinking about the unique invitation that drawing during discussion offers, particularly for those children who are less verbal. I reviewed field notes for evidence of repeated observations and found one exchange to be especially emblematic of the ways in which children with different needs, abilities, and backgrounds can engage.

Field Notes October, 2022

I love seeing and hearing the children we work with express their excitement about going on an art museum adventure. I noticed with this group there were two children who did not squeal or speak about their excitement. They were much more reserved. I remember saying to myself I want to convince them they will enjoy themselves. I remember preparing myself to get those children talking. But as I got to know Julia and Logan, I learned they were very shy children. I learned they were not very verbal in class, and the director warned me they might not participate much. Sure enough, neither Julia nor Logan were quite talkative when we got on the bus. Once we were sitting as a whole group on the floor with our floorbook paper, I noticed Julia's eyes looking toward the jar of markers I was holding. I noticed Logan looking down. I tried to bring the whole group's attention to the work of art entitled, 'Shades of Life'. I asked the children to pull out their imaginary tracing fingers to trace the different coloured parts of the piece and talk about what they were noticing. Julia reluctantly pulled out her tracing finger. Logan did not. Neither spoke. But as Joe piped in about the long orange shape that reminded him of a squiggly line and Luke mentioned he saw a bright blue ball, I began handing out markers to the children to make notes/marks of what they saw. I made sure to hand one to Julia and Logan, even though they had not verbally shared. Immediately, they got engrossed in making marks. While I was still facilitating discussion with the talkative children, I kept a quiet eye on Julia and Logan. They were looking up at the piece of art, then down on the paper, then up, then down. They were really studying what they saw. From where I was sitting their marks appeared upside down, so I later made my way over to Julia and Logan and expressed with an excited facial sign how impressed I was by their marks. I made eye contact with both children and saw them smile back. We knew we had had a meaningful moment with this work of art.

In this example, Julia and Logan were not likely to engage in discussion alone. They became engrossed in the act of mark making, but while studying the task at hand. They took the discussion in their own directions, each still making meaning and connecting with the work of art before them. I consider their absorption in drawing a sign that they were engaged during their time on the museum bus. While it was difficult to study their full experience (because I was also facilitating more verbal discussions too), I noticed a strong potential in "drawing-discussions" for meeting the variety of needs, abilities, and backgrounds of groups of children.

DISCUSSION

In presenting some of my emerging thinking over the past year with cARTie, working with children across the state of Connecticut who have limited access to the arts and education, I have identified a strong

potential of “drawing-discussions” in museum settings for fostering senses of connection. Just as drawing has been identified as a crucial component of every child’s early years education, “drawing-discussions” extend the bounds of early years education to include museum visits. If drawing is “a unique mental tool” that is critical to children’s “construction and development of knowledge” (Brooks, 2005 p.80), then drawing ought to be considered a necessary medium in museum conversations. I consider “drawing-discussions” valuable given the ways in which they help children slow down, connect, collaborate and engage regardless of needs, abilities and/or backgrounds.

Firstly, the way in which drawing during discussion helps children slow down and get in touch with their thoughts and ideas about works of art reminds me of a statement by Ann Pelo (2007): “children’s ideas – like adults”, are often vaguely formed, not fully defined or clearly articulated. Sometimes, children’s work is anchored in intuition or instinct; they aren’t so much thinking about what they’re doing as simply doing it. A child can give an idea form by drawing it. In doing so, she can begin to clarify her ideas; she considers details and wrestles with inconsistencies. When her idea is visible, other children and adults can engage with it, thinking with her about its nuances and complexities, its gaps and incongruities” (p.110). Like Pelo (2007), I have found myself inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education and recognize the impact the Approach has had on founding The cARTie Curriculum, as well as the protocol for “drawing-discussions.” As an approach to art and art museum-based discussion, “drawing-discussions” are rooted in a lineage of work and research affirming the value of drawing. This lineage is emphasized in Brooks (2005), as well as tied to the work of Cathy Malchiodi (1998), who recognized drawing as a significant way in which children express their emotions, reflect on their inner worlds and explore new concepts. It is also connected to Christine Alford’s (2015) work advocating for seeing art – drawing in particular – as a necessary means of communication in the early childhood setting. The Reggio Emilia Approach concurs that art can be used to advance thinking and make learning experiences visible.

By taking seriously the role of drawing in discussion as part of children’s museum experiences, we support a culture of connecting and collaborating outside the classroom and in the real world. Given that children’s early learning experiences occur beyond the classroom (Bentley, 2012), it is important to bring children into spaces where they can practice cooperation, collaboration and connection-building. The museum setting is a valuable space for children, but historically has not been equipped with the resources, flexibility, nor attitudes that welcome children and their methods of wayfinding and meaning making (Lingwood et al., 2015; Wright, 2010; Wright, 2015; Yang & Merrill, 2022). The exclamation Sarah made that “we can talk and draw at the same time!” in the cARTie art museum is a testament to the reimagining of museum experiences that “drawing-discussions” offer. Recalling the energetic responses of children to those “drawing-discussions,” this research suggests that while museums are special places already, they can be made more alive with the introduction of “drawing-discussions.” Children can also feel more confident and surer of themselves participating when offered a drawing instrument as well as a chance to speak. This research makes a case for introducing drawing as an integral part of discussion in museum spaces such that children can activate their own learning processes and connect along the way.

Drawing as part of discussion invites those children who may be less inclined or able to communicate verbally to fully engage and participate. In the classroom setting, drawing is linked with helping children regulate their emotions (Drake & Winner, 2013), as well as being an authentic tool for collecting research with children (Bland, 2018; Yuen, 2004). This research applies extant learnings around the ways in which drawing supports children who may be reluctant to share their ideas or speak in general to the context of the museum. As in the last example, drawing opens doors that might otherwise be closed during regular conversation. This is true not just for nonverbal children, but for children who are shy and/or reluctant to share for whatever reason.

Further research, and video footage, will help refine the learnings and promising practices involved in “drawing-discussions.” Moreover, applying and adapting “drawing-discussions” across a variety of cultural backdrops is important. The current research cannot be generalized from its current form, yet it stimulates the field to go deeper into studying the potential of “drawing-discussions.”

CONCLUSION

This paper argues for greater attention to the value of drawing as part of discussion with young children in museum settings. First, I have emphasized how children slow down and engage in lengthy conversations when equipped with drawing instruments. I have also demonstrated how children work together and connect themselves in the process of drawing whilst discussing. And third, I have proposed that drawing as part of discussion is key to involving and engaging children of all needs, abilities and background.

This builds upon extant literature documenting the importance of drawing in early childhood. By focusing on the value of drawing during discussion in museum settings, this research spreads the scope of scholarship focusing on children and their drawing. It motivates further research across contexts and cultural backdrops as well; further research will help refine “drawing-discussions” in important ways. It is encouraging to know that collaborative “drawing-discussions” have the potential to extend children’s thinking and connecting over works of art, their world, and themselves. By taking seriously the potential of “drawing-discussions,” we can make museum experiences more meaningful and riper with opportunities to forge and nurture connection for children moving forward.

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