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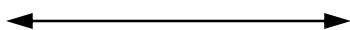
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There is a picture of a toothpick  
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Can you find it? To enter this issue's  
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hiding in this issue and send in your entry by

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# How To Teach Drawing

By Marvin Bartel

**T**his essay was inspired by an Australian mother whose son, age eight, was feeling discouraged and wanted help in learning to draw better. She wanted to know how to help him. Observation drawing provides the method of choice. Of course observation drawing is not the only form of good drawing practice, but it is often the best way to develop drawing skills. Drawing from remembered experiences and drawing based on imagination are good to develop those aspects of thinking. Copy work drawing is not encouraged, but only tolerated if it is self initiated. Many self-taught artists have learned by copying because it was all they knew. However, copywork is not a good way to learn to draw actual objects, animals, scenes, and people.

## DRAWING and CHILDREN

Children who know me sometimes ask me how to draw better. Many children do not know that artists have learned to draw by doing observation drawing practice. They often assume that you can draw or you can't. Of course this is true, but it is also true that nearly anybody can learn to draw at any age. Many children feel inferior about their own ability to draw. Too often no teacher or adult has ever helped them learn to make a proper observation. Most teachers have not been educated about teaching drawing. Some generalist teachers even say, "That's okay, I can't draw either." This is the opposite of good motivation. They would never dare say, "That's okay, I can't read and write. I just don't have the talent for it."

I explain that drawing ability comes from practice. I call it "practice" so it isn't as intimidating as final products. This essay explains some practice processes that lead to better drawing skills. Sometimes children want to develop their practice into more elaborate finished work. I encourage their desire to finish some works, but I also affirm

the need to do lots of practice that does not have to be finished work. I explain it by using music analogies. We practice piano a long time to learn some pieces. We don't worry too much about mistakes while we are learning, but eventually it is good to play a recital.

### **I never draw to show a child how to draw do something.**

If I would show a child how something is drawn, the child would get the idea that my drawing is the answer. The child would think that her job is to copy my drawing. That is a very poor way to learn to see for yourself.

I go over to the thing being observed and run my finger slowly along the edge of the thing. While doing this, I encourage the child to begin drawing in the air as preliminary practice following the edge contour slowly as my finger moves. After practicing in the air, the child practices on paper with a slow deliberate contour while NOT looking at the paper.

I never draw on the child's paper. Learning to see is done by studying the thing, animal, or person being drawn - not by getting the teacher to correct the work. The student should own the whole process and product.

I never ask a child to copy a picture made by me, by another artist, or by a camera. I have them practice from actual objects or models. When children do copy work for fun on their own, I do not condemn them for this, but I do withhold compliments and I withhold all encouragement related to copy work. I ask them to observe from actual objects - never working from pictures.

### **Eliciting a careful description from the student**

We cannot draw what we do not notice. Before starting I take extra time to discuss some details of a small area where the student will start. This gives focus, familiarity, and confidence.

*Homeschooling Horizons*



I give instruction in the form of open questions rather than directions. "How much of this edge is straight and how much is curved?" "How much longer is this side than the top edge?" "What are the different lengths you get when you extend your arm and measure by holding the pencil across it in the air?" "How do the lengths compare?" "Isn't this a silly line? Can you see how it wiggles?" If I use questions, it implies that the teacher will not be needed in the future. Once the student knows the questions, the student can practice

practice all the lines of the edges without concern for making a picture. This practice session is their preparation prior to drawing a picture on another paper or elsewhere on the paper.

#### Viewfinders as framing helpers

A viewfinder which can be a simple 2x2 inch empty slide frame is useful to view the scene. For drawing, the viewfinder can be a piece of 8x10 inch cardboard with a rectangle cut out as a window about 3x4 inches.



(Left) This student is using a viewfinder taped on a stick placed to frame some sunflowers. (Right) She is adding tomatoes seen from her position as she looks through the viewfinder window.

alone. If I give commands, the student might not feel empowered to work alone. Sometimes we start with a small part of something that would otherwise seem too complex. Adding a bit at a time, some elaborate drawings often develop.

In blind contour (drawing the outer edge of objects without looking at the paper) line I let them know that I do not expect a line to end up at the right place when it comes around to where it started. If it meets, it means the child peeked at the paper (treat with humour). "Blind" contour drawing means drawing without looking at the paper, but only looking at the object.

#### Blinders as drawing helpers

I use a large blinder card on our pencil so we cannot see what is being drawn. I generally allow looking when the pencil is stopped and when it is placed to start a new line. While the pencil moves, I do not allow looking at the paper, but only look at the object being observed. It is good to move the pencil very slowly and deliberately so that each little change of direction, notch, bump, zigzag, etc. can be included. Not every drawing experience needs to be blind contour practice, but some regular practice using blind contour is a good way to discipline the mind to develop the skill of observation.

With young children I often encourage them to use the blinder helper while they

This can be held at arms length or closer to help the student decide what to include in the drawing. We use it the same way you would frame a picture with a camera viewfinder. It can zoom closer (bending the arm) to give a wide angle or zoom out to create a telephoto framing (holding it with an extended arm). The window in the viewfinder (also called isolator) helps the student decide on what to include, how to arrange things, and how large to make things in a drawing. A more advanced viewfinder might have black thread taped across the window to form a grid through which to view the scene, still life, animal, or person that is being observed.

#### Mistakes

Most of us need to get more comfortable with mistakes. I do not point out mistakes because the effect is not helpful. It works better to emphasize the things that are working well. However, children often notice mistakes themselves. I believe it is helpful for children to learn that the mistakes they see in their drawing are useful for learning and for getting new ideas. I tell children it is okay to erase and fix major mistakes, but I make a point to explain that I like to learn new things from my mistakes. I tell them that I often leave my mistakes until I am nearly finished with the whole thing. I first add the corrections until I figure it out. Sometimes the mistakes add

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## Coming in the April Issue

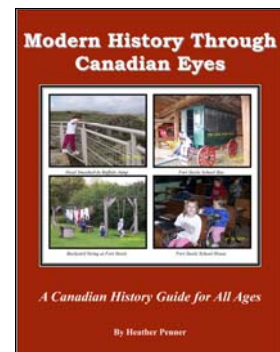
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Marilyn Howshall, Wisdom's Way of Learning

(Continued from page 9)

some interest and expressive qualities that are hard to appreciate at first. There are often several ways to fix a mistake. Typical mistakes help keep us challenged and often lead to creative ideas that we would otherwise have missed. When we approach this like we approach playing a game, we can even learn to enjoy it. This principle works for drawing and it works for teaching mistakes as well.

To make it easier, artists often practice with small sketches when they are planning the arrangement for a major work. Once they have decided on the layout, artists often practice details by making sketches that are about the actual size needed. Preliminary practice makes the final drawing easier to do.

### How to respond

I look for some places where the lines or shapes work well. I enthusiastically affirm improvements and successes. I know that most children will stop drawing if I make any negative comments or tell them that they need to make corrections. Practice and learning only happens when there is a fair amount of satisfaction. I look for improvement - not perfection. I use positive comments and questions that remind them of things to notice - not judgment. Instead of judging, I learn more about the thinking of children when I ask them to verbally elaborate about an area in their work. It helps me understand where they are in their perception of what they are observing. With observation questions I may be able to help them move to the next level.

Fear of drawing makes things come out smaller. I accept whatever size they produce, but I will encourage them to see if they can draw small things extra big. A child's shoe might be drawn large enough for a grown man. Sometimes I simply say, "How big do you need to draw it in order to fill the paper with this?" or "How big do you need it to fill the framed area with this?"

### MORE ADVANCED LEVELS?

#### Shading

From contour drawing, we often move to **shading**. When doing this I make sure the lighting is fairly dramatic. I ask the child to find several levels of shaded tone on the thing being observed. I ask the student to identify the lightest places and we name those "highlights". The highlights are very lightly framed and they generally remain totally white. I ask the student to find the darkest places. In most cases the shadows at the base of objects are the darkest part of a shaded drawing.

For variety and fun, I sometimes have them start with a light pencil outline sketch and then shade by stippling the drawing with the points of small colored markers, inter-mixing colors. When the stippling is dry we

erase all the pencil to show only pointillist form and color without line. Stippling is easy and does not ruin the picture if the child has a chance to practice it first in very small practice samples. I encourage them to practice always combining several colors together making very close dots for darker tones and less frequent dots for lighter tones.

#### Gesture drawing

Gesture drawing is an opposite form of observation drawing. While blind contour drawing begins with edges and requires slow deliberate drawing, gesture drawing starts in the center and the drawing tool very rapidly fills (coloring in) the body of the object with no outline, but tries to follow the form of what is being observed. Gesture drawing is fast and expressive while contour drawing (outline observation) is very deliberate. Where blind contour drawing is slow, **gesture drawing** is intuitive and very, very fast. Alternating sessions of gesture drawing with sessions of blind contour drawing will add greatly to the expressive quality of a child's work. Eventually, both styles can be combined to create some very effective, moving, and expressive outcomes.

#### WHAT TO DRAW?

Gesture drawing is good for people, animals, and objects that are active and in motion, or for content that is charged with emotional quality. Models are posed as though they are in action, playing in sports, or doing something with emotional content.

For all observation drawing, both contour drawing and gesture drawing, I want things to draw that are not part of the child's previously learned symbol set. A new observation requires more careful looking rather than drawing a remembered shape or symbol. A new observation employs a different part of the brain than drawing something that has been memorized. It helps to select something interesting to the child. Children can be encouraged to find toys, pets, and things around the house and garden that they have not used for drawings before. If it looks too simple, turn it a different or move to a different position to make it a little challenging to draw. Sometimes I turn the thing upside down to make it new again.

We start with things that are not very complex, but also include a bit of uniqueness. As I write this I am having a snack. An apple with a bite removed is better than a plain apple. An apple that still has a leaf on the stem is more unique. An apple that is not all the same color is better. A deformed apple is great. A half eaten snack is good. Taste,



touch, sound, and smell are all great multi-sensory motivational enhancements. Eat some. Draw what is left. Eat what you drew.

Some of the best subject matter comes from everyday common experiences such as the food we eat, our homes, our toys, our families, the neat stuff we collect, our friends, our games, our work, our animals, our neighbourhoods, a trip to a zoo, a trip to a farmyard, and so on.

#### NOT EVERY DRAWING IS FROM OBSERVATION

Children also learn some great thinking skills by working from **imagination**, from inventing, from designing, and so on. Children are often interested in creating persuasive work related to social causes such as wild life protection, peace and justice, poverty, drug abuse, and so on. Some children love to design houses, machines, boats, cars, etc. and illustrate imagined stories. Imagined things are excellent for development of their creative thinking ability.

Creative work is not all practical or utilitarian. Arranging color in an abstract beautiful way is very enjoyable and expressive for most children. Musicians also use the word "play" when they "perform" with an instrument. We like the words "play around" when we are exploring and making thumbnail sketches for an idea in drawing or when designing something. Some people make word lists to get ideas.

Children often use drawings to tell stories from **memories**. With young children, use lots of questions to get them to think of more memories related to the subject. If they are overly self-critical of their ability to do this, encourage the use of mirrors, models, and objects to work from to practice the parts of the compositions needed to tell or illustrate the stories. Artists often combine observation and invention.



### Transfer of drawing skills

An important type of creativity is the ability to transfer what we have learned in one situation to a appropriate application in another situation. We do not expect what is learned in observation drawing to immediately and naturally transfer and be reflected while drawing from imagination and experiences. Teachers are frequently disappointed to see children who can do impressive observation studies revert to simplified stereotype representations when they do not have something there to observe. What is achieved in observation drawing takes time and practice to be remembered and called up from memory when there is nothing to observe. It is natural for children fall into old habits and forget that they have learned a new way to represent something.

A sensitive adult can ask them, "Do you remember when you drew that while you were looking at it? Do you remember the shape of it? Do you remember how the lighting changed the way it looked?" In some cases, when remembering to remember, the child will show significant changes in approach. Transfer of learning from one kind of drawing (observation) to other kinds of drawing (imagination and experience) can probably be improved by questions that create an expectation of transfer. Remembering new ways to represent while being imaginative and expressive may be a lot to ask, but many children are quite capable of multitasking when they enjoy learning and if they are gently reminded of their own new skills. Developing habits of thinking that facilitate transfer of learning can be an important way to foster creative thinking.

A three-year-old who was drawing a picture of herself. When she was working on the fingers I noticed that she was typical in that she made multiple fingers without any concern for how many she drew. I asked her: "Do you like to count the fingers as you draw them?" Without answering my question she started counting the fingers on her real hand, then after several attempts at counting the fingers in her drawing, she found that she had put six fingers on the hand. She reassuringly told herself, "Oh, that's okay." I told her that I agreed. I thought she had a wonderful attitude. When she drew the other hand, she naturally counted and made five digits. This one simple question asked in a neutral way may have helped her transfer knowledge. She started to use what she knew about numbers counting. Now to her drawings from imagination helped her develop greater awareness of numbers and math--making her these things easier latter in school.



### HOW TO RELATE TO THE WORK OF OTHER ARTISTS

Even though the work of other artists may be very inspirational and very educational, I avoid showing the work of other artists as an introduction to doing artwork. I feel the suggestive power of the work may prevent them from doing as much of their own observing, thinking, imagining, remembering, etc. I feel it may lead them to feel their own work is not good enough to measure up. I believe that we as a species are programmed by instinct to imitate. This is a powerful instinct in all children.

To encourage children to learn innovation and original observation may be a challenge, but the life-long benefits are well worth the effort. They will still learn many important things by imitation - but unless they are encouraged, many will not learn the joy, thinking habits, and rewards they get by learning the methods of thinking used in innovation.

Art history shows the heights to which artists have aspired. It exemplifies high quality and it helps us learn about other cultures we can scarcely imagine. Art history reminds us of the many important purposes for art. I teach art history, museum visits, and so on after children have done similar work, or we do these activities completely independent of creative work. By studying the other artist's work as an independent activity or after doing the media work we do not diminish the importance of their own experience as being foremost as content for their own art.

During the viewing of art history

exemplars, I use lots of open questions phrased to help children look for more things in the historic work. If I want them to do related work, they do their own related artwork first (based on their own observations, experiences, or imaginations). This provides an immediate and relevant frame of reference for the other artist's work. The same questions used during their work can be asked while viewing the historical work. Even though they are doing media work prior to the study of art history, I often see influences from other artists in their work if they have had positive museum and art history experiences in the past. This is ideal so long as their primary thinking is based on their own observations, imaginations, and experiences.

### WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR CHILD'S COMPLETED WORK

I suggest saving it in a folder in order to keep a record. Periodically, look back to see progress. Point out and affirm progress to the child. I try to make specific points when using compliments or praise.

Connect it to some specific qualities that are explained to the student. When children are very young, I simply invite them to tell me about their drawings. I feel that the story telling is very good practice for them. Even children who are only two and are simply scribbling are able to tell me a story about their drawings.

Be sensitive about exhibiting the work. In a school setting it is better to display all or none of the work of an assignment. Teachers should put the lesson objectives with the displays. Student artwork may have some artistic merits, but learning is the main purpose of it.

So far as exhibiting things at home, some feel that exhibiting something that is particularly strong could create fear in the child. The child might fear that it is too hard to always do as well as the one that was selected. I would be sensitive to this, but I also think it is encouraging when children see the work being displayed.

In my experience, most parents need to be more affirmative and less critical of their children's drawings. Correcting a child's drawing mistakes can easily stop their interest in drawing. Children who get affirmation often continue to practice much more on their own.

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Dr. Bartel has master's and doctor's degrees in art education. He has taught courses in art education, ceramics, photography, and drafting/architectural design. He continues to be an active artist, writer, traveler, part-time art teacher.