

Making Sense of Children’s Drawings and Semiotic Explorations

Young artists use signs to stand for or to represent something other than themselves. Learn how children invest signs with meaning as they draw and write.

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Picture books constitute the first format through which most children experience literature. Young readers respond positively to the visual images and written language of picture books that tell a story (Goodwin, 2009). While offered primarily for the pleasure of an implied child viewer, “reading picture books aloud can be an important contribution to children’s development of literacy, especially visual literacy” (Mjor, 2010, p. 179). In the process of listening to picture storybooks, children build up knowledge about semiotics, defined as systems of representation (including signs and symbols), as they observe how authors and artists share ways of making meaning.

activities, “meanings are made, distributed, received, interpreted and remade through many representational communicative modes – not just through language – whether as speech or writing” (Jewitt, 2009, p. 14). Within this multimodal ensemble, the freedom to blend drawing, writing and telling puts children in a position to select those features across modes that interest them and to extend opportunities for communicating meaning (Mavers, 2011).

Principles derived from the field of semiotics provide another useful framework for understanding children’s drawings in relation to their ideas and feelings. Semiotics is defined as “the science that studies signs and their use in representation” (Danesi, 2007). Social semiotics draws attention to the ways in which meaning is constituted within the context of social relations and processes. When a multimodal social semiotic theory is applied to the work of children, researchers can view how signs and messages are situated within the context of social environments and in social interactions (Kress, 2010).

Both theoretical positions view children as sign-makers who utilize the resources available to them in their respective socio-cultural environment. When children draw they are doing far more than producing graphics (Anning, 1997): they are purposely investing signs with meaning. Children experiment with basic visual signifiers – artistic elements of design (line, color, shape, and texture), layout, and choosing one design over another – when creating visual texts (Danesi, 2007). Young artists use signs to stand for or to represent something other than themselves. A line that zigzags might act as a signifier to express ‘lightning’. Several lines that zigzag may be a child’s way of indicating many bolts of lightning or a storm that’s growing in intensity. Meaning

Definitions

- **Semiotics:** the science that studies signs and their use in representation
- **Modality:** the way in which signs are transmitted (oral, gesture, written)
- **Mode:** method

Multimodalities and Semiotics

Children experience “multimodalities” in literacy, combining talk, drawing, gesture, writing, and dramatic play in multiple ways as they make meaning (Gallas, 1994; Kress, 1997; Kress, 2010). In some circumstances, meanings can be made from a single mode. But most children, when given the opportunity, tend to create multimodal texts. As young artists apply a multiplicity of modes to their representation and communication

The Classroom in Action

Leo the Lightning Bug

In this study, *Leo the Lightning Bug* is one of ten themed books chosen for a one-week unit on storms. After a teacher-led discussion about Leo's adventures, children participate in drawing a picture of the storm on the night that Leo got tossed by the wind and splashed by the rain. Within minutes of finishing the read-aloud and story discussion, the classroom hums with voices and laughter as children draw, gesture, and talk about storm related experiences. These children quickly transform a blank drawing space into scenes reflecting their interpretations and ideas about storms. Olivia, one of the participants, dramatically vocalizes what was on her mind, "CRAAACKKKK!!! Look, the entire sky lights up like daylight and there is a CRASH BOOM RIP-PING sound!" She alternately slaps her hands up and down on the table top, increasing the intensity, to imitate the sounds made by the rumbling of thunder. She proceeds to draw cloudbursts and a lightning bolt that traverses the entire length of the drawing space. Olivia uses curved lines to create loops and spirals to show wind-like characteristics. She also draws narrow lines of rain streaming down from the dark clouds. The rain is depicted in straight lines, according to Olivia's written text, because it is raining very hard.

Katie and Austin, two classmates seated at Olivia's table, create storm images and weave in written text features and storytelling to support their drawings. Katie enhances the fury of the storm by overlaying the words 'Whoosh' and 'Boom' in heavy black letters across the image



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Rich understandings of the artwork and the artist arises when teachers learn to observe the child's verbal, visual, spatial, and other forms of representation as they unfold.

can also be made by the positioning of elements in space as well as by elements of color or texture (Kress, 2010). Raindrops on one side of the page may suggest that a storm is approaching and a red door might signal a prominent point of entry. Children purposely shape and order their experience by choosing available visual-graphic forms to make intended meaning (Tutchell, 2014).

In the classroom featured below, children are involved in the interpretation of text and pictures as they listen to the two different picture books. During read-aloud sessions with *Leo the Lightning Bug* (Drachman, 2001), children are exposed to

multimodal forms of expression that draw upon written language, visual image and graphic design to tell the story. This experience with multiple means of communication uniquely positions children with a framework for drawing and writing in response to literature.

Reading picture books aloud can support children's development of literacy.

in her drawing. She increases the font size from the left to right side of the page and capitalizes the initial letters to give increased salience to these key words. Austin produces a glaring white streak of lightning and surrounds it in a threatening dark night sky as he tells a personal experience in the form of a story:

“One time me and my dad went to get ice cream, and there was a storm with lightning and thunder. It came out of nowhere! I stopped eating my ice cream like this. (He dramatically gestures a scared facial expression and repeatedly reenacts a pulling away motion of the ice cream cone from his mouth, then returning the cone to his lips, but never getting close enough to eat the ice cream). I say “Daaaaddddddd, let’s go home . . . NOW!”

For many children, meaning-making within the medium of drawing is an active, playful experience, one in which talk, movement, and writing are closely linked. When children

are seated in small groups in close proximity, what is drawn or written is observed by or shared with others. Their different dialogues co-exist and seep into the drawing event. Sometimes exchanges of ideas occur solely through the images appearing on another child’s drawing. At other times, a child’s written response sparks opportunities for communication between children. When working in collaboration on drawings, “Children are regarded as meaning-makers, in that they pull on a diverse collection of ideas, experiences, imaginings, and information to form their opinions, learning and relationships with the world” (Knight, 2013, p. 23). In any given instance, however, only some aspects of the meaning potential are selected for signification.

During the drawing event, each child works alongside, but not identically with the other drawers. Children choose the defining attributes they want to include in their artworks (Mavers, 2011). When young artists use drawing as a way of

conceptualizing an idea, they often select different symbols and decide where to locate the image on the page. One child might focus more on artistic elements as he draws trees bending in the wind, while another might work diligently to position a lightning bolt diagonally across the page. But as all children observe and participate in image and text making activities, they engage in multimodal communication. With every encounter with artwork over time, young children build knowledge, add to their schema about storms, and develop assumptions about the world (Albers, 2008). Within this rich context, children can work on producing visual and linguistic text of what they each think about storms.

Careful observations give rise to teachable moments.

Educators are beginning to understand that children’s drawings can be regarded as a process for thinking and communicating. But there is a clear need to provide early educators with an understanding of how children navigate their rich and multi-layered visual-textual worlds. In this article drawing is presented as part of children’s broader, intentional, meaning-making activity. In order to reach a far wider variety of intentions than could be inferred from the finished drawings themselves, the author relies on both end products and field notes from the work in progress as important sources of information. The main objectives are to show teachers how to use a semiotic perspective to gain access to children’s multiple modes of think-



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Children experiment with basic visual signifiers – artistic elements of design (line, color, shape, and texture), layout, and choosing one design over another – when creating visual texts.

ing and to acquire insights that will help them to understand and support children's visual and linguistic modes of learning.

The Bears in the Bed and the Great Big Storm

After showing the cover page and announcing the title and author, practicum students read *The Bears in the Bed and the Great Big Storm* (Bright, 2008). Students conducted a brief post discussion of the story using the same three questions they co-developed about the character's adventures during the storm. Following the post discussion, students invited children to draw, write, and talk about thunderstorms. The pre-service teachers observed closely and took notes on drawing, writing and talking behaviors. Their notes included simultaneous talk during the drawing event as well as talk about their drawing after completion.

After analyzing the data, the researcher identified two contrasting styles of artwork to serve as exemplars for showing how meaning is communicated through a mixed-media of language, image-making, and writing. Each work of art is presented below as a separate analysis in order to highlight important components of the visual and verbal meaning-making systems found in the respective child's multimodal productions. The goal is to focus on each multimodal ensemble (combination of speech, gesture or action, and writing) by studying the dynamic interplay between creating images on the page and related interactions with others during the process of production.

The Children's Work

The following interpretative analysis contains a brief description of the

content, a glimpse of the rich and multilayered visual-textual meanings, and a concise identification of some compelling features. The use of art elements, as well as the content in vocalizations and written language, is examined as part of the semiotics of the total event.

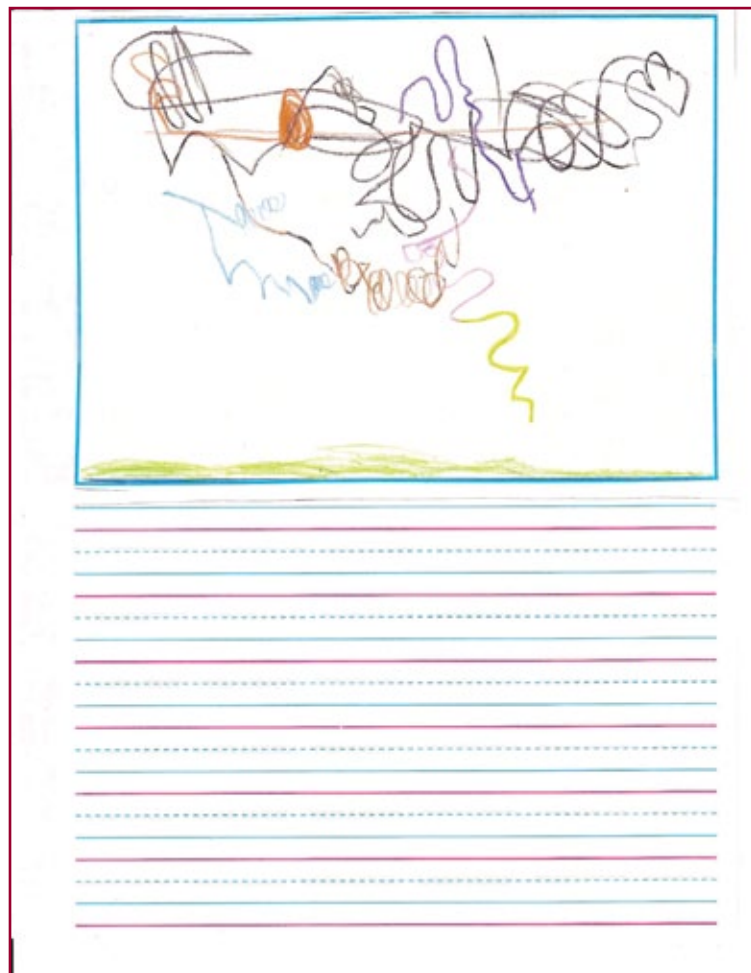
First Drawing – Tristan

Tristan, a 4-year-old, listens to an oral reading of *The Bears in the Bed and the Great Big Storm*. After the post-discussion, Tristan's preservice teacher specifies the reader-response task by asking the three children in her small group to draw and write about the storm. As Tristan sets to work, he chooses a black and brown colored pencil. This young child conveys the effect of swirling winds with a tangled web of curving lines.

Thunder is depicted with an orange circular shape and lightning appears as a yellow curving line that descends diagonally into open space on the right hand side of the page. Tristan then picks up the green crayon and says, "I am going to put in grass." Having already selected the most significant features of the event, Tristan completes his drawing by signifying the storm's location in reference to the ground (*Figure 1*)

The majority of Tristan's message is carried by the structure of the composition and the selection of visual referents associated with storms. Using a limited range of graphic schema, Tristan invents his own way of representing the disturbances in the upper atmosphere, characterized by howling winds, a crash of thunder and a flash of lightning. He selects

Figure 1



attributes that serve as apt bearers of meaning. Equally important, he uses the top of the drawing space, the thematic part of the text, to demonstrate a point of interest, i.e., the dynamics of the wind. In the process of rendering lines, colors, and shapes and fusing them into the spatiality of the page, he creates a unified composition.

The beginnings of symbolic language are well underway. This child is learning to arrange elements such as lines, shapes and colors in a visual composition, attending to how the component parts combine, and how the emergent representational forms communicate meaning. Although the finished product lacks photographic or true-to-life representation, Tristan demonstrates knowledge of visual signs to signify the actions and elements of the storm. When the context is known, the viewer can begin to see this child's link with visual referents in the environment. Tristan's image, while representationally constrained, is a meaningful piece of art and a unique form of expression.

The sources of inspiration for this drawing are not apparent and it's unknown whether Tristan invests his image with the power of the wind and taps into his considerable knowledge of storms from picture books and life experiences as he adds yet another attribute to his storm picture. From an adult perspective, the compelling feature of this visual piece is the suggestive power, a layer of meaning that exists beyond the young artist's immediate realm of awareness. Tristan is not likely to be cognizant that his composition is not visually symmetrical, and that the lack of pattern clearly reflects the irregular rhythms of a storm and its own way of occupying

space. Such deep levels of possible meaning will remain invisible in a child's early work, but may surface again in later productions of storms and warrant discussion.

To view this artwork as merely representative of a child with undeveloped, fine motor movements would be a gross misunderstanding of the semiotic work Tristan invests in this drawing. His response includes sufficient visual information to communicate his ideas, albeit with far fewer and simpler conventional symbols and contextual features than older children. Furthermore, it's no surprise that Tristan chooses not to write about his drawing. He will be ready to engage in writing and exploration of an elementary plot level within a couple of years. For now, talking about a drawing with an

adult is a far more developmentally appropriate way to communicate. Even though Tristan uses a short, repetitive speech pattern for labeling items in the picture space, "This is the wind, this is the lightning." as he points to each respective entity on the page, his verbalizations allow him to share the most significant features of the event. The entire process, especially his work with early semiotic representation, is already intensely purposeful and personal.

Second Drawing – Jenna

Jenna, a 7-year-old, responds to the same structured protocol as Tristan. After listening to *The Bears in the Bed and the Great Big Storm* and participating in a post-discussion, Jenna begins to draw. She creates shapes and forms as she

Figure 2



utilizes the entire sheet of paper to prepare a contextualized setting for the storm (*Figure 2*). The various images in Jenna's illustration are instantly recognizable and readily interpreted. Bear's house is nestled serenely between two towering trees, each depicted with a brown trunk and green top. Two large bolts of lightning streak down the page; the one on the left side seems in close proximity to the house huddled low to the ground. The other bolt of lightning appears on the far right, positioned beside three columns of pouring rain. Seven dark clouds frame the top of the page and complete the composition.

Jenna's art is pleasing to the eye in terms of its color, line, composition and balance. The young artist applies her schema for trees and elements associated with a storm. Dark clouds, heavy rain and bolts of lightning provide a contrast to the otherwise peaceful and aesthetically pleasing scene. Jenna depicts the strength of the downpour by designing a vertical alignment of oblong shapes in a dense formation. She creates jagged bolts of lightning that suggest tension in the image and allude to the storm's power. Jenna, like many 7-year-olds, employs her own style of conceptual organization and utilization of symbols to express meaning.

At first glance, the door and window on the house seem to be a type of formula driven representation. But with closer examination, the viewer sees Jenna pushing the parameters of meaning as she adapts her established schema for drawing houses for people to one more appropriate for a bear family. She forms a cave-like shape for Bear's house and chooses attributes that she considers to be the most essential

features. Jenna may be experimenting with conscious decisions on how best to portray bear's habitat. But it is unknown whether the red door reflects meaning potentials often associated with colors. Knowingly or not, Jenna may have colored the door red to indicate energy, activity, danger or even the sense of fear Papa Bear felt when a knock was heard at the door. Undoubtedly, some aspects of deeper meaning will always remain invisible, but with older children, such areas of inquiry can generate talking points for further exploration.

Drawing is highly significant as a meaning-making medium.

Jenna links pre-existing images or ideas about what she wants to express with an intuitive sense about art and story making. This first grader balances the demands of visual and verbal tasks quite well. Jenna composes two written sentences that refer to the bedtime activity featured in the picture book, *"Mama Bear, Baby Bear and Little Bear and Young Bear were sleeping. Bear was awake."* She also becomes highly engaged in a spontaneous conversation with others at her table. *"Look,"* said Jenna, *"my storm is not scary. My pictures always have happy endings."* She combines both her narrative abilities and her depicting powers of pictures to bring about an illusion of calm after the storm.

Within this collaborative context, anchored within the setting of the story, Jenna's picture becomes more than a "here and now" moment with

her peers. Through active, playful speculation, the children work together to create a different ending to the story. Using a touch of mental imaging and poetic language, they verbally transform Jenna's storm setting into one in which the lightning is reduced to a dim flicker, the downpour slows to a drizzle and the bolts of lightning are replaced with shafts of sunlight streaming into the forest. As the children are pulled into joint narrating opportunities, they practice vocabulary and build hypothetical relationships between one picture and page in the text to the next, all valuable skills that may find their way into future compositions.

Discussion

For Tristan, and for many other emergent literacy learners, there is often more to their simple drawings than meets the eye. With the help of verbal mediation, this child succeeds in sharing his mental representations with symbols that were familiar to him (semiotics). Jenna brings her growing cognitive, linguistic and world knowledge to the reader-response task—a truly multimodal approach. Her stronger technical repertoire and verbal language competencies help turn her experience with this reader-response activity into more than just making a picture of the storm. The event becomes an important opportunity for connecting with friends on a topic of mutual interest. She actively experiments with the fittingness of other concepts as they innovate on the events in the picture book and her drawing to create a new ending. The spontaneous discussion provides a meeting place for children to play out alternative ideas, to invent future possibilities, and to provide a satisfying level of challenge.

To gain access to deeper meanings, teachers must witness the creation of children's drawings and spend more time tuning in as meaning is channeled through talk, gestures, and writing. The marks children make on paper hold all types of meaning and "listening to what they have to say about their artwork can give teachers insights into children's thoughts and feelings" (Tomlinson & Hyson, 2009, p. 177). If teachers are to fully understand the meanings produced, they must observe the interrelated way in which the visual, verbal, spatial, and other forms of representation unfold. Careful observations offer teachers that rare, but powerful opportunity to dialogue in ways that build new understandings of the topic being studied and to discover the life experiences from which children mine resources for their artwork. Careful observations give rise to teachable moments related to a child's drawing and the collaborative spirit that surrounds the creation of this joint activity.

Final Points

This study demonstrates how drawing is highly significant as an aesthetic, creative, meaning-making medium. Even when drawing in response to the same teacher directed prompt, the two children in this study experiment with very different meaning potentials in their choice and combination of resources. Each child invents his or her own way of representing ideas by mixing and melding picture book information, lived experiences, and a touch of imagination. The combination of image, linguistic expression, and interactions around drawing and writing in the two ensembles demonstrates, both poignantly and powerfully, the richness and complexity

Dimensions of Early Childhood



Photo by Elisabeth Nichols

Children combine talk, drawing, gesture, writing, and dramatic play in multiple ways as they make meaning.

of children's ability to identify and select signifying features.

Viewing children's drawings from multi-modal and semiotic perspectives helps all early educators think more deeply about the unique texts children produce and the ways in which they weave principles of selection and arrangement, the semiotics of the total event. Being present during the drawing event promotes insights into this complex orchestration of meaning by providing traces of the semiotic work in which children are engaged. Future research and practice need to recognize that rich understandings of the artwork and the artist arises when teachers learn to observe the child's verbal, visual, spatial, and other forms of representation as they unfold.

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preschool teacher and later became an elementary classroom teacher and reading specialist. Her research focuses on early literacy development and visual literacy. She is currently serving as the principal investigator for the Jumpstart Philadelphia Project – Temple University.

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