

Middle School Observational Drawing Field Research

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Introduction

Research Question: How can a teacher stimulate motivate active and effective observation of an object?

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School Site and class: Loch Raven Technical Academy, 7th grade & 8th grade

Context: The school for our third case study is Loch Raven Technical Academy (LRTA) which is a Baltimore County Public Middle School located in the North of Baltimore. Loch Raven Technical Academy is a community in which each student learns the skills, habits and values necessary to achieve goals and seize opportunities for a healthy and productive life in a global society. It is a place of excellence where they are ethical and caring citizens, engages in rigorous academic and magnet curricula, communicates well with others, works together as a team, and integrate technology. In LRTA's Visual Art Program, there are three teachers' responses to each grade. Students are engaged in creating personal expressions in the art using a variety of media. By looking at a wide variety of art forms and artists, students will develop an understanding and appreciation of the artistic achievements of people from different times, places, and cultures. They also have Visual Art Magnet Program, which is a rigorous curriculum designed to prepare students for high school visual arts magnet programs.

Methodology: My team designed a “memorized drawing” activity as a drawing challenge, and we used the pre-visualization and inquiry-based strategies. By using this challenge and strategy, We planned to find out what the differences between memorized drawing and observational drawing are? What are the differences between these two graders? How did students deal with

these two tasks? What are their own drawing strategies? What did they think when they face a challenging task?

For our “sequencing for complexity,” we started with our introduction. Based on the last experience, we did not only introduce our name but also where we come from and our major to build a relationship more closely. And then, we discussed the objects we brought as our motivational dialogue. The motivational prompts are, do you like drawing? Do you draw outside of school? Does anybody have any similar objects at home? Can you recognize the objects? Explain why you chose this object. We tried to let them get the hang of it quickly by having these conversations. After that, we gave them 2 minutes to look at the objects they chose closely and memorize them carefully, then, we put all the objects into our bags and gave about 5-10 minutes to draw that objects from their memories. When they finished it, we returned objects, and they started the observational drawing for 20 minutes. Finally, after they all finished, we put all the drawings (both tasks) in the center of the table, and into reflection time. We brought some questions, for instance, What did you prefer? Memory or observation? Why? What are the differences between both drawing? What did you like about your drawings and your peers? Would you change your item, if you could?

We want students to learn to look at and understand the objects. We hope the first memorized drawing can help them to accomplish the second observational drawing by discovering their own observation strategies and translating them into drawings.

Findings:

8th grade: In our lesson, there are four main parts– the introduction, prompts, drawing and reflection. In the beginning, almost everyone was timid, but when I introduced myself, I come

from China, and Darian said he comes from Maryland, everyone laughed, and each of them began to say where they come from, even though some of them are local. I felt they became more engaged and open at that point. After we put the objects on the desk, we were into the motivational dialogue section. We had a conversation about drawing, and nobody took extra drawing class, but they preferred to choose to do some sports. Zion told us if they had sport skills, they could get into college easily. I was so surprised that middle school students' thoughts are so mature and far along. When we asked them to talk about the objects they could not recognize or were not familiar with, all of them were curious about the octopus hanging dryer. They wanted to know more about it, but no one wanted to choose it to draw because of its complexity. The objects they chose were things they liked and though which were easy to draw. For example, Keliyah likes cooking, so she picked whisk; Zion was ambivalent that he could not choose his object, and he chose the rubber duck first but changed to the monkey toy last. I think our question about explaining why you chose this object made them feel and talk more, which was useful for the memorized drawing. They could remember some dialogue/voice/scene, which helps them to recall the memory of the object during the first task. In the reflection part, everyone preferred observational drawing instead of memory drawing since they felt they could not remember when the objects took away. All of them, except North, would change the object if they could because they thought others much easier theirs. North was really into his object (clown), and he even drew the different perspectives of the clown in observational drawing. For the most engaged moment, I think it was the beginning of the observational drawing because they felt uncomfortable with memorized drawing, they could not wait to see their objects and to check features and details they did not catch. For the loss of interest, Keliyah, who chose the

whisk, had a hard time to draw the top part of the whisk in observational drawing. I saw that there were a lot of eraser crumbs on her desk because she could not figure out how to draw the cross and complex lines of the whisk. I prompted her to look at one line from the beginning to the end and to draw like this way one by one, so she was so smart and found out the solution finally. Comparing with 7th grade, the completeness of the memorized drawing was higher, and they were easier/quicker to find their own observational strategies and translate on paper.

7th grade: We asked 7th graders, “Do you like to draw?” as an icebreaker question in the beginning. There were a few of them like drawing, including Alex. He said he likes and also has extra drawing class after school. I felt this made him more confident facing the drawing tasks. However, Shawn was the only one who did not answer, and he was shy and seemed afraid of drawing. After they picked their objects, they were not very engaged with the observation part. I thought they did not know how to observe and what to see, so we asked them to explain why they chose that object. Cameron picked wrench because he likes it, and he used it to fix his bike several times. Alex chose a rubber duck since it was the most familiar object for him. Anthony had never seen top before, so he wanted to draw the top. Even though everyone talked about their items, they felt that they forgot everything after we hid those objects, so they almost stuck there and could not finish their drawings. Especially Alex, he only drew the bottom of the rubber duck and did not know how to continue. I felt he put too much pressure at the beginning, so when he knew they would have the second observational drawing, he said, “That’s so embarrassing.” Carlos was the only one that completed his memorized drawing. His object was a hand, so he looked at his own hand at the memorized drawing. For others, the most engaged

moment was when we returned the objects. Through the first task, they realized so many details they did not catch. They became more serious in their second drawing. In the 20 minutes of observational drawing, I found students who lacked observation ability drew very fast. For instance, Anthony drew a top the same as in the memorized drawing, so I asked him to touch all angles of this top and to feel the movement of the edge. He tried another two tops, which had more details on them. By contrast, Alex studies art after school. He took his time and drew carefully. He used his fingers to smear on the paper, which is a technique he studied after school. In the reflection part, 7th graders had the same reaction with 8th graders. Most of them wanted to change their objects if they could. Comparing with 8th graders, they were lack of observational ability and had difficulty concentrating on the task.

Conclusion

Analysis Section: I felt these two classes were very successful. I improved our lesson plan from Case Study #2. Our students were well engaged, which helped us to experiment with some prompts and gain explicit feedback to find out some new strategies.

My research question was, “How can a teacher stimulate active and effective observation of an object?” My first impression is that lower middle schoolers have less active and effective observation than upper middle schoolers. 7th graders did not know how to observe even though I asked them to look at the features and try to remember them. However, from the memorized drawings of 8th graders, most of them were able to recall the features of their objects. Another conclusion I made is that they were able to draw more details in their observational drawings. In other words, students can observe better when they look at their objects. Finally, I observed that students become more active in their second observation after the memorized drawing. In the beginning, they felt that they were already familiar with the object, so they did not know what and how to observe. After the memorized drawing, their observations became more active and effective because they had specific parts in mind to look for.

Our experiences had a strong connection with our readings. The readings provided theories that gave us language and knowledge to work from. The observational drawing task our teacher picked is suitable for early adolescents. As Kerlavage (1997) notes, “11-14 years old children prefer to draw from observation rather than from imagination, and they like to have examples and models from which to work” (p.54). All our students felt uncomfortable and unconfident during the memorized drawing and preferred observational drawing. Some of them even tried to trace the edge of the object in observational drawing. The task suits early

adolescents' development and they feel challenged during both memorized and observational drawings. One student changed his object during the drawing, and most of them wanted to change their objects if they could do it over. Nancy Smith (Smith) mentions observational drawing is hard, but it is a good way to improve students' thinking and recording abilities. She states, "The challenges of observational drawing engage children's thinking in concrete ways. Grappling with those challenges stimulates cognitive growth. Careful observation entails attending to detail and gathering and recording salient information" (p.108). Anthony is an example. After I asked him to feel the form of the top, his drawings became more specific and had more details.

During the class, we used different strategies to help our students based on their varying interests and abilities, and tried to bring some exciting objects to motivate students' interests. According to Nancy Smith (1994), "No two classroom situations are alike and children generally thrive in an atmosphere that is flexible and adaptive to their individual interests" (p.19). Both North in the 8th grade and Shawn in the 7th grade were interested in the clown. Since North had the better observational ability and the approach of translating his observations onto paper than Shawn, we encouraged North to draw different aspects of the clown, adjusting the perspective, and asked Shawn to find more details on the clown and record them. The artwork students made during this time was not significantly different from the work that the upper elementary school students created last time. My personal experience is that many people who do not like artmaking or have a chance to make art stop at this stage. Many educators have the same feeling and even consider that early adolescents is a period of declining artistic ability (Burton, 1980). Judith Burton (1980) solves our question. She claims that the truth is that early adolescents lack

expressiveness. In other words, they struggle to organize their thoughts and feelings and lack the skills to manipulate materials to their satisfaction.

Recommendations and Additional Ideas for Related Activities

I highly recommend to teachers who want to do observational drawing to find some interesting and complex objects for students, and avoid simple form objects because, as Art critic John Ruskin writes, “It is far more difficult to be simple than to be complicated” (p. 16). For lower middle schoolers or students who are not good at observing, try to ask them more questions about the object, and stimulate them to find some details by themselves. As an afterthought, I feel our students’ artwork was too simple. I mean we only have an object on the paper. Sometimes students may feel frustrated and bored when they only had one object to draw, so I think we could ask them to combine two objects, add a scene or zoom in on one part of the object and design something inside.

Reference:

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