International Journal of Education & the Arts

Editors

Drawing, Dialog, Rapunzels, Rain . . . Dialogic Exchanges in Children's Drawing and the Work of Dr. Christine Thompson

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Abstract

Thompson's prolific body of work on the performative, socio-cultural aspects of children's drawing and talk, ongoing engagement with popular culture and tensions between children and adult expectations of children at home and school transformed my early thinking about drawing and how it works for children. Much of her work, like the work of Dyson, Corsaro, and Paley puts the reader in the research site with children. In this paper I connect Thompson's research on children's drawing and talk with Bakhtin's dialogized heteroglossia, the notion that language simultaneously echoes the voices of others and talks back. I use excerpts from Thompson's analytic vignettes to illustrate how her theories on drawing and talk have informed my own research with children's drawing in a kindergarten writer's workshop.

Introduction

> Left to his own devices, Jeffrey was content to work toward the perfection of his rendering of the human figure, his preoccupation of the moment. Yet, when his friend Madeline was available and willing to model her own more advanced and eclectic ways of drawing, Jeffrey abandoned his own interests to follow hers. The challenge inherent in the activity of drawing bees was greater for Jeffrey than it was for Madeline, and he continued to rehearse his newly-acquired facility long after Madeline had gone on to other things . . . He turned to watch as Madeline suspended red clouds above the house she had completed earlier that morning. Madeline commented to a student teacher seated nearby, "Jeffrey copied me," gesturing toward his drawing of the bees. Although the situation was worthy of comment, it was just as clearly a matter of some pride for Madeline that Jeffrey had chosen to emulate and learn from her. (Thompson, 2003, p. 139-140)

In the vignette above, Thompson details a complex interaction between two children enrolled in a Saturday art school, one in which drawing is acknowledged as a valuable skill, children's interests are central, and copying is perceived as a pursuit worthy of attention. This brief glimpse into children's classroom drawing illustrates everything I admire about Christine Thompson's research and writing: the rich, detailed narrative, the seriousness and integrity with which she looks at children's pursuits and interests, the care she takes in her role as researcher, and the perspective that when considering children's image-making, *drawing* is as important as *drawings*.

Thompson's prolific body of work on the performative, socio-cultural aspects of children's drawing and talk (1991, 2002), ongoing engagement with popular culture (1999, 2003, 2006b), and tensions between children and adult expectations of children at home and school (2009) transformed my early thinking about drawing and how it works for children. Much of her work, like the work of Dyson (1997), Corsaro (2003), and Paley (2006, 2007) puts the reader in the research site with children. It is Thompson's ability to theorize through her observations of children's drawing and talk, expertly connecting theory with history, culture, and observable events, that allowed me to first begin to consider children's drawing as something other than an artifact to be analyzed.

For me, an artist originally trained to value product over process, her work opened a window into thinking differently about drawings and drawing, as well as about children and their exchanges with culture and each other. Her work of the last two decades offers a wealthy body of knowledge with which to consider children's drawing as events in which many post-structural theories of language, discourse, materiality and the body play out.

Thompson's vibrant narrative accounts, woven with contemporary theories, and framed within the history of research on children's drawing has allowed me to consider children's drawing as a form of dialogic exchange, a back and forth between children and their local and global cultures. In this paper I connect Thompson's research on children's drawing and talk with Bakhtin's (1981) dialogized heteroglossia, the notion that language simultaneously echoes the voices of others and talks back. I use excerpts from Thompson's analytic vignettes to illustrate how her theories on drawing and talk have informed my research with children's drawing in a kindergarten language arts curriculum.

Drawing Together

Thompson (1999, 2006a) and others (Ivashkevich, 2006; Pearson, 2001) have long argued that the issue with much prior research on children's drawing has been that drawings have been analyzed out of context as artifacts rather than as events that include drawing and talk. In a year long study 4-6 year olds, Thompson and Bales (1991) addressed the deficit of research on children's drawing in peer groups and classroom settings, arguing that teachers need to understand as much about children working side by side as they do about children working alone: "they need to know, in particular, that the talk that emerges around classroom art centers may well be more than idle chatter: It may be the sound of children thinking . . . "(p. 44). Working against a traditional view of educational research in which social experience is viewed as peripheral to learning, they found that both egocentric and social speech generated collaborative experiences in drawing and that conversations were more sustained in groups of three or more. They highlight a particular exchange amongst a group of kindergartners:

> Jason initiated a collaborative venture the morning after a particularly dramatic storm. "I'm gonna make a tornado . . . a number of how many have been here. I've never been in a tornado, or probably I wasn't born." As Jason chalked spiraling marks and improbable numbers across the mural paper, Brian followed suit. " Look at my tornado," he urged. Curt squealed, scribbling wildly. "Look at our tornado. Tornado! (p. 50)

 Many themes come to mind in this interaction; ways children interpret and process events in their lives, the inextricable nature of language, image and the body for young children, the material and performative aspects of drawing, the contagious nature of images, etc., but for the purposes of this paper, more important to point out is the idea that images are inherently citable, that children copy one another in drawing, in talk, in gesture, easily and with lightning speed and in those exchanges, collaborate to produce things that may seem similar on the surface but on closer inspection, always possesses attributes uniquely one's own. This exchange and others documented in Thompson's work has been instrumental to my interest in and understanding of peer exchanges in children's drawing and ideas developed in my

dissertation work; those of drawing as dialogic.

Dialogized Heteroglossia

In the early twentieth century, Bakhtin (1981) and his contemporaries' forwarded a theory of language based on studies of the novel; the notion of heteroglossia or double voiced speech. Bakhtin suggests that when we speak or write, the words we use are only half ours as we are speaking with the utterances of our historically social worlds. A heteroglossic utterance becomes dialogic when individuals transform the words of others via their own specific usage and context: "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (Bahktin, 1981, p. 293). It is the becoming one's own that puts language into dialogue. This idea is relevant to children's drawing in the idea that the images they borrow, copy, or appropriate are always transformed, however subtly, into one's own via a specific context, such as a particular style, technology, or relationship in a narrative. Thinking about children's drawings as heteroglossic utterances referencing both local and global culture, allows me to theorize how drawing conventions are translated and transmitted, how images of local and global culture infiltrate children's drawing, and what these images do for children. Thinking about children's drawing as dialogic, allows me to theorize that children are agentic in their selection and transformation of particular images.

Copying, Citation, Transformation

> It is not uncommon for children in Saturday classes to spend time simply watching other children draw, and they undoubtedly learn a great deal by doing so. Occasionally, they may try another child's imagery on for size, or even solicit a tutorial from an admired peer, or adopt the kind of subject matter that appears to be favored by the liveliest, and most vocal, members of the group. (Thompson, 1999, p. 160)

Much of Thompson's work (1999, 2002, 2003) suggests that copying as a form of children's image making is not the conventionally held assumption of rote repetition, but that copying includes a measure of agency in graphic translation and can be a productive and generative exercise for children. She holds that copying is a valid and accessible way for children to address and engage their immediate culture. Thompson & Bales (1991) offer the example of a four year old mimicking the work of her six-year-old brother and others in the class; "Copying the work of older children, Allison ventured into realms of imagery and organization far more complex than those she explored on her own" (p. 51). Copying, whether it be from a classroom poster, book cover, video game box, or a peer, can be interpreted as a visual form

of citation, the appropriation, whether mimicked, parodied or glorified, of words, phrases or ideas that others have used before (Tobin, 2000). Though citation is more often discussed within the context of writing and talk (for example Goodman, Tomlinson, & Richland, 2014; Tobin 2000) it can also be extended into the visual, verbal, and embodied world of children's drawing. As Thompson's work illustrates, children constantly cite cultural images, ideas, or events in their drawings in visual, verbal and performative ways (1999, 2003, 2006a). As they cite, children transform culture in drawing, re-making it, however subtly, into their own. Micro-analyzing citations in children's drawing can map the transformations that occur when children appropriate images and ideas. For example, Thompson (2002) describes the manner in which one child, Kevin, appropriates NinjaTurtles from another child:

> In the weeks that followed, Kevin interspersed drawings of Ninja Turtles among other drawings of volcanic eruptions and X-men in his sketchbook. But these Ninja Turtles were clearly drawn by Kevin, modified to fit the star-shaped bodies that had become his schema for humans and humanoids alike. (p.131)

What Thompson acknowledges here is that something often happens when children borrow or appropriate images; they change, however subtly, become rearticulated from the original. In the vignette above, Thompson notes Kevin's transformation of Ninja Turtles copied from a peer into star-shaped bodies more suited to his personal aesthetic. I see this transformation as a dialogic event, a making Ninja Turtles (already also translated by another) one's own. Kevin populates borrowed images with his own intention, his own accent.

Dialogs: Drawing Together

Thompson (2002) points out that the last two decades have shown a radical shift in assumptions about children's development: "Primary among those assumptions was the Piagetian concept of the young child as egocentric, pre-occupied with the world of objects and substances, unable to interact with others or to learn from interaction with them" (p. 131). She argues that Vygotsky's notions of intersubjective experience do much to help articulate the social aspects of development and that "the informal and unintentional teaching that occurs as children observe and participate in activities valued by those around them is a potent source of learning, particularly for young children" (p.133). For example, Thompson & Bales (1991) describe a scene in which two children engage in a brief dialog about a particular drawing;

> Lawrence watched as Evan drew a scene featuring the Ghostbusters. 'Make a P.K. E. meter,' Lawrence advised. Evan pointed to the page before him, indicating that the essential piece of ghostbusting equipment had been included. Lawrence insisted, 'It doesn't look like a P. K. E. meter. It's not big enough'" (p. 51).

This short exchange offered me an example of the highly specific nature of children's visual citations and generated the idea of children's image making as a collaborative event in which visual and narrative directions shift and change according to interaction and that exchanges might occur not only between children but between children and their own images. Thompson's ideas about copying and collaboration influenced my own research with children and drawing in a kindergarten language arts curriculum. In a year-long ethnographic case study, I found that children's classroom drawing and talk offered rich examples of the back and forth between children and both their local classroom and global popular cultures. In the vignettes below, I highlight the exchanges between two table-mates in which a drawing about a chameleon evolves into an exploration of girls and girlhood and another in which one child engages in a non-verbal, embodied dialog with another via drawing.

> It's noon on Friday and the class of 22 kindergartners is buzzing with barely contained energy. They've been asked to compose and illustrate a story in their writing journals featuring a chameleon, a character from a reading earlier in the week. Kayla works determinedly, if not quietly, at a low, six-person table. As do most others in the class, she's started with the drawing. In addition to chameleons, she's drawn a yellow sun, a blue swatch of sky, green grass with black weeds, three pink and purple clouds, assorted flowers and a single figure with an orange ruffled dress. She holds the drawing up to show Allie, her tablemate and regular conspirator, taps the figure, "That's me." Allie looks at the drawing then looks back up at Kayla, troubled, "Am I in your story? You said you'd make me in the story." Kayla taps her neck with her pencil, answers quickly, "Can't because . . . it's about a chameleon." Allie shakes her head, "A fiction story has people in it. It's a fiction story so people can be in it." Kayla frowns, "I know but I didn't have room because I had to do some weeds and two flowers and a tree and some clouds . . . so I didn't have enough space. I'll . . . I'll write your name down here ok? And make you right there . . ." A few minutes later, Kayla stares at the two figures in the drawing . . . "I'm gonna make long hair for us." As Kayla traces out long strands of pink hair, Allie looks alarmed, "I don't really need long hair. I don't need long hair. I have short hair. So please don't, please don't give me, uuuuuuuuuh, I have short hair!" Kayla, focused on the drawing, raises her shoulder, tilts her head and strokes a lock of imaginary hair, "It looks so fancy." Allie shakes her head, perturbed, " I don't think it's fancy cause I have long hair and I normally have short hair." Kayla gestures excitedly at the drawing, "But look, we look like Rapunzel!"

Started as an official classroom assignment with the requisite features of character and setting, Kayla transforms her drawing into an unofficial theater in which she plays with elements of girlhood and glamour (Ivashkevich, 2009; Paley, 2007). Kayla cites official classroom drawing conventions, sun, horizon line, figure, and transforms then with her own accents,

adding her friend to the chameleon story and the silky tresses of the 10th Disney princess. Her drawing is a dialogic event in which she talks back via imagery to her table-mate, to popular culture, and to the drawing itself. Though the images appear conventional, on closer inspection, they operate as vehicles for experiences in constructing narratives, negotiating social interactions and practicing cultural literacy.

On other days, other, less verbal exchanges occur in the classroom:

> It's writing time. Today, I'm observing Matteo, a slight five year old with a killer smile. He is well into the details of a drawing loosely structured around a family project. Matteo sits back, ponders his drawing; two figures, a structure, a dog and a mouse. He crosses his arms, gently rocks back and forth in his chair. A sharp tapping comes from the left. His tablemate, Jennifer, dots her paper with a thick green crayon. Though she taps loudly, the crayon barely registers. It is unclear whether she is tapping in order to make specific marks or because she likes the sound and feel of the materials. Whatever the purpose, the tapping sparks something in Matteo's mind. He picks up a crayon and taps his paper-- one, two, three fast taps, then stops. The tapping does not work for him. Perhaps the marks are not dark enough or too small? Within seconds he traces out a series of fat raindrops, some hanging from clouds, some falling independently from the sky. He fills them in with a deep blue. He stares at the drawing a moment, then adds at the bottom in pencil, *It rad.*

In this exchange, Matteo cites the technique of a peer, mimics it, transforms it into graphic form with his own accent. I see this a form of embodied dialog in that Matteo repeats Jennifer's taps, answers them with his own translation: rain. These are small moves in children's drawing, open to different interpretations. But in the bigger picture of early childhood education, locating and micro-analyzing citations in children's drawing, whether visual, verbal, or embodied, helps me theorize how information might travel in the classroom, how peers interact and learn from one another and how, as Thompson's work continues to illustrate, children are agential in their decision making.

Conclusion

As illustrated in the vignettes above, much of my theory and writing style are adopted and adapted from Thompson's established body of work. I borrow her ideas about the collaborative, socio-cultural performative aspects of children's drawing and rework them into my own ideas of visual citation and dialogic gesture. I use the vignette, as she does, to focus on phenomena that are often too fast or subtle to catch in a busy classroom. Her analytic style, ability to make connections between theory and everyday experience, and understanding of the scope of children and drawing has allowed me to theorize relationships between

children, images, and culture in ways I would not have been drawn to otherwise. Thompson weaves writing and analysis in seamless ways, a skill that makes her writing accessible and a pleasure to read. I cite her work constantly both in the literal and figurative sense. In this essay my own dialogic exchange emerges; a talking back with and through Dr. Thompson's work, an accented translation of her ideas and experience with children's image making, citations of her theories and research becoming my own.

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Leslie Rech holds a MFA in studio art and a PhD in early childhood education. She has engaged in a wide range of scholarly presentations, publications, and exhibits of her artwork. The majority of her work over the last five years addresses children's drawing as a site of material, embodied, and socio-cultural exchanges. She is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia.