Writers Draw Visual Hooks: Children’s Inquiry into Writing

What are you noticing about yourself as a writer?” I ask.

There is a long pause.

After a moment, the video camera captures seven-year-old Ashley (all names are pseudonyms) sitting up straight.

“I’m noticing that when I draw,” explains Ashley, “I respond with awe. I see things. I always get the words from the picture, so I can write words I feel in my heart.”

In this 12-week qualitative study, I sought to understand how students in second grade used drawing to drive writing and thinking about writing. Specifically, I wondered: what types of drawing/writing signs do children use when responding to picturebook read-alouds? In this article, I focus on how children used drawing to visualize their thinking in three ways: the bubble hook, the zoom hook, and the group hook—all examples of what can happen when children have authentic opportunities to respond to and talk about illustrators’ images and the decisions they made when illustrating stories.

These three visual hooks do two things at once. They 1) serve as devices that create visual interest for readers and bring them into a story, and 2) serve as a form of visual note taking for securing initial ideas before students begin to write. Hooks are important because they offer students a visual way to think about story by carefully using color, line, and space, and they also provide visual support in extending ideas for writing stories that accompany their pictures.

Devices That Hook (the Eye)

Parallels can be drawn between artists and writers in how they use devices to hook viewers/readers into visual and verbal texts. Writers, for example, use carefully chosen quotes, dialogue, description, and compelling narrative voice to lure readers into their texts and make them want to learn more (Atwell, 1987). Written devices are important because they can mean the difference between readers staying engaged in a book or closing it. What makes writing memorable and often enviable (e.g., How can I write like that?) is how writers use author’s craft. Defined simply, craft refers to a repertoire of techniques authors use to make writing engaging. By using the literature of master writers to show and model examples of author’s craft, teachers can help students recognize techniques that make writing strong and practice it in their own writing (Ray, 2010).

In the same way that writers use literary devices to draw readers into the story, illustrators use visual devices to draw viewers into pictures. Color, for example, can conjure up emotion (Hope, 2008; Hubbard, 1989). Line can evoke mood and tone; for example, thickness of line can convey power or a sense of foreboding, circular lines can convey energy, unity, and warmth, and parallel lines can convey balance or resistance (Bang, 2000; MacKenzie, 1988). Similarly, composition and layout can stir thinking about ideas presented visually (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The level of detail in illustration can also influence reader attachment (Ray, 2010). What makes pictures memorable is how artists create images through strategic use of art elements and principles of design, such as dot, line, shape, value, texture, color, space, and movement. Teachers can help students recognize how illustrators use different artistic devices to convey meaning and draw the eye toward particular spaces, making their pictures engaging and compelling. Then students can use them as models to practice the devices in their own drawings.
**Visual Literacy: A Theoretical Lens**

As society embraces a more visually aware culture, schools are called to accept broader definitions and practices of literacy (Crafton, Brennan, & Silvers, 2007). This call, argues Felten (2008), requires teachers to provide their students with visual literacy instruction. Visual literacy looks at how objects mean and how visual texts work (Albers, 2007, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Students need opportunities to explore art elements and principles of design in illustration so that they can critique and reflect on visual ideas presented and apply them to their own image making. While students participate in creating visual content on their own through the use of the Internet and social media, they need to be shown how to read visual texts critically as a process of understanding how meaning is constructed in unique ways. “Living in an image-rich world . . . does not mean students naturally possess sophisticated visual literacy skills, just as continually listening to an iPod does not teach a person to critically analyze or create music” (Felten, 2008, p. 60). Put another way, awareness does not automatically lead to sophisticated performance.

Engaging students in rich art talks offers them one way to move beyond awareness by first discussing what they know about how objects mean, applying their understandings to a variety of images, and then looking closely at the visual content decisions illustrators make to convey ideas and emotion. The Artist/Writer Workshop model (Ernst, 1994; Olshansky, 2006), influenced by writer’s workshops (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983), identifies the importance of having art talks with students in order to help them develop power of expression in their writing by using visual details to write descriptively and vividly. Ray’s (2010) recent work on illustration study strengthens the workshop model by showing...

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**VISUAL HOOKS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM**

S. Rebecca Leigh notes in her article that “awareness does not automatically lead to sophisticated performance.” She argues that visual hooks interest readers and support them in extending their thinking and writing. This piqued interest often leads to deeper thinking about reading: the more thought put into the reading, the more a child notices about what he or she is reading, which leads to more sophisticated performance.

Visual hooks have become an important part of my second-grade classroom in all subject areas, not just language arts! They are a huge hit when using them with Shel Silverstein poetry. My students love to create an image that helps explain why the poem is funny. Then they share what they drew and why.

I also use the hooks for responding to reading selections. I provide my students with stacks of sticky notes of varying sizes. They write “I wonder . . .” statements, questions, connections, or (the most popular choice) draw a quick sketch to help explain their thinking. We get together with a partner or the group to discuss our reading, and these stickies help further the discussion and cut down on “I forgot” and “I don’t know” responses. The stickies are also a nonthreatening form of response—students do not worry that the artwork has to be “good” because it isn’t always shared and it is small and easily concealed. As one of my students said earlier this year, “No one can see it unless I show it to them.” Later, my students use these visual hooks to expand their writing. After we talk or write, I collect the stickies and affix them to a blank sheet of paper with the child’s name, the book title, and the date. I file this to use when assessing students’ work and during conferences.

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teachers how to teach children to notice how things are drawn in picturebook illustrations and how to take what they notice and envision it as a possibility for their own pictures.

**Overview of the Study**

In 2006–2007, I collaborated with a second-grade teacher named Regi in my dissertation study. During this time, she was in her second year of teaching. In this collaborative work, we set out to study what happens when art and language have equal importance in the classroom from four different shares (i.e., group, guided, table, and independent) (Cibic, 2007). Children shared their responses with their peers, asked each other questions and provided feedback, talked with each other during the response process at their tables, talked about their responses with Regi and me, and talked privately and individually into a tape recorder about their work.

Regi and I kept in touch after the study as well, in spite of Regi’s transfer to an inner-city, arts-integrated, magnet public school and my long-distance move. With our shared interest in examining children’s drawings more closely than we had done in the year-long study, I applied for a research grant that would allow me to travel to her school to begin this additional work with her. In this 2008 study on visual hooks, Regi and I set out to study more closely how children used their drawings to extend their writing.

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The group of children with whom we worked was ethnically diverse, mostly monolingual (two children were bilingual), and had experiences working with art in both Regi’s classroom and within the school. There were 11 African American children, two Hispanic children, and one European American child in Regi’s classroom. The student population at the school is predominantly African American.

Once a week, the seven-year-old children in Regi’s class used both drawing and writing to respond to a picturebook read-aloud in their response journals. These journals were folders with lined and unlined paper, giving children a choice in their ways of responding. This choice in paper was important. For example, Regi used terms like *portrait* and *landscape* in describing the orientation of a page; she talked about how illustrators use space on a page or *paper plane*, choosing to cover a little or a lot of a paper’s surface; she drew attention to size of objects or characters in relation to other details in a picture, helping children to understand abstract terms like *perspective*; she took notice of how illustrators use color and line to capture *emotion*, *mood*, and *tone*. She also encouraged discussion on how use of space, for example, can affect emotion and tone in writing. Since some students wrote first and drew later while others drew and then wrote, this kind of art talk nurtured decision making on how to position a page, whether to use a two-page spread, and whether to use lines or plain paper. Thus, response journals needed to work with children’s ways of meaning making.

During Regi’s read-alouds, children sometimes brought their response journals and one or two writing/drawing tools to the carpet, allowing them to record their ideas as they occurred while listening to the story. The purpose of the journals was to encourage children to capture their own interests from each read-aloud. As a way of encouraging students to go beyond responding to their favorite part in the story, Regi asked questions that invited students to ponder and wonder about aspects of the story before responding. For example: What are some of our reactions to this story? What do we notice about the illustrations, the writing? What kind of connections can we make? What is the tone of this story? What kind of content decisions did the illustrator make? As illustrators ourselves, what decisions might we make in our response journals?

Regi also asked questions that address a sense of self as meaning maker: how does this story help us as writers/artists? Imposing a wait time of approximately three minutes before responding on paper gave children time to reflect on their answers, think about what they wanted to respond to on paper, and how they wanted to show their thinking. The wait time also communicated to students the importance...
of reflection. “Visualize your ideas,” she would say, “and begin when you are ready.” Children were free to respond from their desks or to find a comfortable place in the classroom. No matter their chosen spot, it was important that they find a place where they could relax, focus, and feel inspired to create both visually and verbally on the page.

Children had three separate opportunities to share their journals with the whole class. The context was a discussion about the picturebook and how their visual response connected to it. Children talked about how they responded to the text, pointing to particular areas in their responses and answering questions from their peers.

The Study

Regi and I: Growing Artists

Regi does not have an art background, but she has read and continues to read professional texts that advocate for arts-based literacy. Together, we have toured elementary schools with art-infused curricula to learn up close what it means to offer demonstrations that support art as a way of knowing. In my days as a high school French teacher, I valued art as a way of knowing in my classroom, even though I had no formal education in art. My own personal experiences with art in childhood and adolescence led me to believe that through art and drama, students who are learning a second language could discover joy in learning by expanding their communication potential. As a literacy professor and self-made watercolorist, I research ways of knowing because I am interested in the generative potential for learning that the arts can provide. My role in this study was to analyze the data to understand how children were using drawing to extend their ideas in writing.

Methods

At the end of each month for three consecutive months (September, October, and November), I traveled to the school for several days and interviewed all 14 children (nine girls, five boys). Each month, students self-selected from their journals one visual response they wanted to talk about in-depth from a possible four responses. (See an example in Figure 1.) I photographed 162 visual responses of which 42 were shared and discussed in interviews. All children visually and verbally responded to the read-alouds. At the end of the 12 weeks, each child had been interviewed three times (sometimes more in the months of October and November to member check with individual students). Regi also videotaped group share engagements where children talked about how they were visually responding to text. All students responded visually to the read-alouds, pointing to particular areas in their responses and answering questions from their peers. They also wrote accompanying text to complement their illustrations, and many read their writing to the class.

Interviews and group shares were videotaped, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. I analyzed the data using the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and Albers’s (2007) types of visual text structures. In this study, students created narrative texts in which artwork tells a story. Schematic texts, where visual relationships can be explicit or implicit, and descriptive texts, where a single visual idea is captured, are two kinds of

Figure 1. Donte’s wide-angle drawing of President Barack Obama in response to Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope (Grimes, 2008)
narrative texts that our students used. These texts involve studying relationships among elements found within visual texts and talking with students about their intentions in creating them.

For the purposes of this manuscript, I focus on the work of three children: Donte, Ashley, and Joshua. Their reflections on drawing and writing were representative of other participants’ attitudes about responding to picturebook read-alouds. Findings suggest that children created three different visual hooks—the bubble, zoom, and group hooks. I examine these hooks in the following sections with selected examples from these three students.

The Bubble Hook

Children in this class used bubble drawings, or speech-bubbles that were added to their images. Children used circles and other different kinds of shape connectors (McCloud, 1994) to frame their words, including boxes, rectangles, or wobbly shapes. The purpose behind these bubbles was to give characters voice in pictures. Students used this hook to show a character’s thinking and bring the viewer into a character’s story. Children also used some or all of the writing in the bubble to extend narrative writing that accompanied the picture. Viewed this way, the bubble hook was more than just a quote used in a bubble to draw reader interest; it was also what children in this study used as support for extending their narrative writing.

In response to Bunting’s Smokey Night (1999), a story inspired by the Los Angeles riots of the early 1990s that addresses urban violence, Donte creates a bubble hook about his mother and him (see Fig. 2). It is an example of a schematic text, a kind of narrative text (Albers, 2007) in which Donte organizes visual information about himself and his mother through two bubbles. In this visual text structure, connections and relationships can be either explicit or implicit. The story between the face (i.e., Donte’s mother) and the male figure (i.e., Donte), though unclear, works schematically because the bubble hook communicates a connection between the two people.

In an interview, Donte reads his drawn bubbles to me: “I love you” and “Wah.” I study the picture, not concerned with what looks right or good. Rather, I am more interested in the thinking behind these bubbles. “Talk to me about this person,” I ask, pointing to the bubbles that emanate from a person’s mouth. “This is my momma,” he says. “How did you decide to create a speech bubble for your momma?” I ask. “Because I made a connection.” Donte explains how during and after the read-aloud, the class discussed how people were fighting in the street, scared and frightened. He adds, “She had catch food on fire. I was scared I lose my momma.” Donte makes a connection between the fires in the riots to the fire in his mother’s kitchen and the fear that develops because of it. I cover up the bubbles with a piece of paper. He smiles a half smile. “I like it better with,” he says. “How does your response change if I cover them up?” I ask. He takes a moment to think of how to respond to this...
rather challenging question and clarifies: “When I make a bubble, I think about the person I’m drawing. They jump out at me.”

As the interview continues, our talk turns to how the story in Smokey Night is told with enclosed boxes. Donte explains, “I like how he [illustrator Diaz] puts words in a box. I like how the words look in the box. It looks different.” Indeed, most text in picturebooks is not contained in formed shapes.

In another interview, we pick up the conversation about using bubbles in drawing as a way of making characters stand out. “I got the idea because I was thinking flexibly,” he explains, referring to one of the thinking dispositions or habits of mind (Costa & Kallick, 2008) that Regi’s school promotes and encourages. “That sounds interesting to me, Donte. How were you thinking flexibly?” Opening his folder of other drawings shared and discussed in interviews, he leafs through and points to some examples of using bubble hooks in his drawings, explaining, “When I write, I get ideas from them.” I realized that Donte uses bubble hooks as a resource for what to write.

On another visit, I notice he has written a few lines that support his picture:

She caught food on fire. She threw salt on the fire. In the story, the little kid lost his cat. I was scared to lose my momma and I cried. She cried, too. She said I love you.

Without lines or arrows to guide us in the schematic drawing, the writing shows how Donte uses the bubbles “I love you” and the emotional, infantile cry of “Wah” to develop the experience of the kitchen fire. Though the writing is short, the bubbles help Donte to stay focused on his story and help him to think reflectively about why he chose to circle those words and how to use them in his writing. Thus, the tone of the writing is honest because the fire experience is real for Donte and draws us closer to his drawing.

In creating bubble drawings, children are called to think about their characters in very clear and precise ways by circling talk that is authentic and meaningful. Children apply these bubbles in their writing to organize their thoughts about their characters. The bubble hook challenges children to think about how to incorporate these words in their writing as meaningful devices for planning and developing a story.

The Zoom Hook

We also worked with the children to create zoom drawings—aerial, close up, and distant views that organize the visual field by drawing a clear vanishing point, often using a two-page spread. This visual approach is not uncommon to many picturebook illustrators. The purpose behind these unique viewpoints is to magnify details. Students use this hook to make the viewer pay attention to ideas.

In response to Wiesner’s (1997) nearly wordless picturebook Tuesday, an imaginative story about frogs that fly one Tuesday evening, Ashley created a two-page spread zoom hook from an aerial view (see Fig. 3). It is an example of a descriptive text, a kind of narrative text (Albers, 2007) that can stand alone because it describes a scene.

In this drawing, a girl stands on top of a building looking down against a bright blue sky and radiant sun. The overall effect is dramatic. “This view makes it more interesting,” she says, “You have to look.” She explains, “I’m on top of the building and the helicopter is above me. This is my most fav, fav, fav response because I imagined a person inside the helicopter looking down at me and I’m looking down, too. You can see my thinking!” Ashley’s explanation is noteworthy because she knows how to use this hook to make the viewer pay attention to ideas.

Figure 3. Ashley’s response to Tuesday.
to use visual content to communicate perspective, an artistic concept challenging for many young children. Ashley draws from Wiesner’s language, “On Tuesday around eight,” to start her own narrative on the back of her picture:

On Wednesday around lunch I can hear chop, chop, chop the helicopter!

It is above me! I want to jump! I’m scared!

She demonstrates a connection between drawing converging lines to show height and writing about a fear of jumping because of said height. She also uses repetition (e.g., chop, chop, chop) to create the sound of helicopter blades moving above her. By engaging the class in discussions on how Wiesner uses line to create distance, Regi helps Ashley to visualize and practice her own understanding of perspective and apply those visual details to her writing. The perspective drawings in Tuesday catch her attention and motivate her to create her own. The form helps her to see a story idea, thus demonstrating what Eisner (2002) means when he says form influences what we think about.

Zoom drawings allow children to experiment with angles and viewpoints as visual devices for exploring detail that is magnified. This exploration is important in helping students focus on specific details that they can use as support in their written narratives.

The Group Hook

When drawing group hooks, Regi’s children organize their pictures into sections where each piece connects to another to help communicate story. Students organize a sequence of ideas, emotion, or passage of time, sometimes separating images with circles or lines. The purpose behind these grouped drawings is to tell a lot of story at once. Rather than drawing one image that tells a story, students use this hook to show the viewer important aspects of a story through more than one image.

In response to Woodson’s (2002) Visiting Day, a story about a young girl who visits her father in prison, Joshua creates a group hook about his dad (see Fig. 4). This drawing represents a schematic text, a kind of narrative text (Albers, 2007) in which Joshua organizes a story about his father through three separate images: two clouds, a bird, and a truck. The three grouped images define a tiered and horizontal structure for expressing story. In an interview, Joshua points to the clouds and explains how they make him think about “freedom”; the bird suggests how “they can just fly and go where they want”; and the truck makes him think about the memories he has of riding with his dad in his truck. From this drawing, Joshua communicates more than one story idea. As a writer, he must choose which direction to take.

He chooses to focus on the bird drawing. On a separate piece of paper, paper-clipped to the illustration, he writes:

It makes me think about my dad. He died. I visited him at the funeral.

He’s in heaven. I want to be a bird so I can go see him.

Joshua makes a connection to the young girl in Visiting Day who visits her father in prison; he wished he could visit his father in heaven. There is a longing for freedom in his writing, which is in keeping with Woodson’s theme and tone in Visit-
First, students visualized their story ideas to extend ideas for writing. By visualizing their ideas through drawing hooks, Regi’s children were able to make personal connections to picturebook read-alouds and write authentic, short narratives that connected to stories shared. Teacher-researchers who study drawing/writing relationships, like Dyson (1986, 1988) and Olshansky (2006, 2008), remind us that visualizing through pictures has a place in the writer’s workshop; it can fuel decision making in writing that is descriptive and vivid.

Second, students attended to detail in picturebook illustration by looking carefully at how illustrators use art elements and principles of design, applying these elements and principles to their own visual responses. Through meaningful talk about how pictures mean and how to apply visual concepts and skills in their own work, Regi’s children were able to visually capture ideas and use these visual details to fully express details in their writing.

Third, students experienced joy in writing. The richness of process that Ashley describes in the opening of this article, the notion of experiencing awe from seeing words in pictures and therefore being able to write authentically, speaks to the positive effect students in this study experienced when drawing was encouraged with writing.

Finally, teachers of writing should pay attention to visual information in texts as a pathway to support students like Donte, Ashley, and Joshua in their writing pursuits. There are resources (see Albers, 2007; Bang, 2000; Ray, 2010) that show teachers how to read texts critically, how to identify craft in picturebooks, and how to create their own simple yet powerful drawings. These texts are particularly valuable for teachers who may not know the importance of visual inquiry, what skills to teach, or how to effectively assess students’ understandings (Callow, 2008). Taking a book club approach, teachers can read these texts with colleagues and then begin
conversations with their students about ways of showing thinking visually.

Regi, for example, did not study art but saw art as important and created her own inquiry into it. This inquiry led her to talk about art and her children’s active experiences with it. These discussions were invaluable to Regi because she, like many teachers, did not have experiences with drawing (Horn & Giacobbe, 2007) and thus looked to her students for ways of using color, line, and space meaningfully. These rich conversations provided opportunities for both student and teacher to envision what to compose visually and how to organize these ideas in ways that were meaningful to the child as artist and writer.

References

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