Graphic-Narrative Play: 
Authoring Through Multiple Texts

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Abstract

This paper describes how 5-to-8 year old children engaged in multi-modal meaning-making through drawing and story-telling to represent ‘the future’. Children crossed between graphic, oral and bodily-kinesthetic modalities to create and communicate meaning, and their ‘voices’ often were powerful, humorous, philosophical and reflective. Many of the children engaged in ‘graphic-narrative play’ to depict their imaginary worlds. They used multiple texts which involved layers of visual and physical action, character development, plot scheme, scenery and running narrative working in harmony, simultaneously.

One boy’s (aged 6.4) work is presented to illustrate his depictions of sequences of interrelated events. Like many other children in the study, his graphic-narrative play demonstrated a rich amalgam of fantasy, science fiction, metaphor, expressive vocal inflection, and gesture. The paper highlights how the children’s open-ended construction of meaning surfaced content that reflected immortal story themes such as good-evil and capturing-defending. The children’s authoring through manifold positionings was strongly linked to the integration of graphics, language and embodiment, and each of these forms of meaning-making and meaning-communication was of equal importance.

This paper reports a segment of a research project which surfaced the ‘voices’ of 108 five-to-eight year old children in their depiction of what the future may be like. Drawing and storytelling were selected as communicative media, as they give children the opportunity to create and share meaning through the multi-modal avenues of visual, verbal, spatial, and bodily-kinesthetic expression. Such cross-domain encoding of information is better comprehended, recalled and elaborated than if only one domain is used (Sadoski, Paivio & Goetz, 1991). In addition, one symbolic domain often will enrich and inform the other (Dyson, 1997; AUTHOR, 2003a).

The study explored children’s construction of imaginative worlds, and how their concepts of Futures were communicated using two intimately connected modes and forms of expression, namely the:

(a) non-verbal: graphic depiction, stemming from imagery and visual-spatial-motor memory; bodily-kinesthetic communication through ‘enaction’ and expressive gesture, and
(b) verbal: story creation, expressive vocalization and the use of sound effects to accompany the artwork.

Hence, children were liberated to mentally manipulate, organize, create and recreate images, ideas and feelings while representing futures. In the process, they used a rich amalgam of fantasy and reality, and both literal and metaphorical communication, to portray life experiences (Wright, 2001).
Theoretical Underpinnings

The assumption that language is a communicational medium which can adequately express anything that we might think, feel, sense, say or write has been criticized by a number of key thinkers throughout history (Kress, 2000a, b; Chandler, 2002). Langer (1924/1971), for example, highlighted that the expression of ideas often are too subtle, too abstract or too complex for verbal language. She argued that ‘non-discursive’ media (i.e. art, music, dance, drama) offer forms of thinking that are particularly well suited for the expression of ideas that defy linguistic communication – they are figurative. For example, visual media, such as drawing, painting or photography have elements such as lines, shapes, proportions, colors, shadings, composition and perspective which are ‘abstractable and combinatorary’ (pp. 86-87). These elements are as complex as combinations of words, yet they have no vocabulary of units with independent meanings. Because of this, the expression and communication of thoughts and feelings through visual media is intricate and multifaceted.

Hence, the predominant form of information processing in the arts is through encoding still and moving images, sound/music, gesture, body language and movement in space (Eisner, 2001; Sweet, 1996; Voloshinov, 1973; Wright, 2003a). Such encoding often is nonverbal, multimodal, and embodied. It involves a special kind of thinking, integrating several forms of understanding – visual-spatial imagery, feelings, sensory modalities and interconnectedness with the body (Kendrick & McKay, 2004; Thompson, 1995; Wright, 2003b).

Participation in art involves meaning-making and meaning-interpretation using representational signs that ‘stand for’ or represent other things. Signs may be words, images, gestures, sounds, music, numbers or anything from which meaning may be generated, and in which multiple ways of knowing may occur. According to Voloshinov (1973), every sign “has some kind of material embodiment, whether in sound, physical mass, colour, movements of the body, or the like” (pp. 10-11).

We form representations by working to a system of signs, which form the basis for creative and critical thought processes (Eco, 1976), and each sign system offers a distinct form of meaning-making (Eisner, 1994). The ‘text’ of drawing, like the texts of films, television or advertising posters can be ‘read’, and in some respects are like ‘languages’(Fiske & Hartley, 1978). These texts are carried by a material medium, which has its own principals of structure (Hodge & Tripp, 1986). Yet we should not impose linguistic models upon media, such as drawing, because the laws that govern the articulation of meaning are different from the laws of syntax that govern language (Langer, 1924/1971).

Semiotics involves studying representations and the processes involved in representational practices (Chandler, 2002). Whether painting a picture, composing music, creating a dance, refining a dramatic enaction, or participating in other forms of artistic expression, representation involves:

a) turning actions into images and/or sounds, and
b) sequencing actions, images and/or sounds in relationships (AUTHOR, 2003a).

Hence, the study of children’s multi-modal understanding involves not only understanding how children differentiate and consolidate the separate meanings of different forms of symbolizing,
but also seeing how children make connections between them. Children learn to move among sign systems in their meaning-making. They choose the system which is most effective for a particular form of communication, and select what and how they want to represent something in a particular context (Kendrick & McKay, 2004; Short, Kauffman & Kahn, 2000). In the process, they invent connections, whereby the content of one sign system is mapped onto the expression plane of another (Siegel, 1995), such as in the union of drawing, storytelling and the use of sound effects or gesture.

In this way, children not only make representations, they also manipulate representations in abstract ways. As such, they become authors of a number of texts, using a range of symbol systems and voices of communication (Eisner, 1994; Kress, 2000a, b; New London Group, 1996; Wright, 2005). Several researchers’ work has been seminal in foregrounding the multimodal and embodied nature of young children’s artistry:

- Dyson’s (1986, 1992, 1997, 2003) writing on children’s symbolic and imaginative worlds features cross-modal expression of young children, particularly in relation to popular culture,
- Kress (1997, 2000a, b) describes the metaphoric and synesthetic nature of young children’s communications,
- Golomb (2004) states that children’s graphic expression discloses more than what a purely verbal account might, and can capture the excitement and pulse of child art, and
- Matthews’ (2003, 2004) focus on infants’ and toddlers’ mark-making foregrounds ‘action representations’, and illustrates how the child’s physical movements, his/her trail of the brush on paper, and the movement of imaginary objects are all compressed into the visual-motor act of creating.

Cross-modal, metaphoric, synesthetic and embodied forms of meaning-making are common not only in infants’ and very young children’s cognition and artistic expression; they continue into children’s later development (Wright, 2005). Athey (1990), for example, after analyzing over 5000 observations collected over two years from 20 children, aged 2-5, demonstrated that there is cognitive continuity between infancy, early education and the first years of primary education. She illustrated the relationship between cognitive form in young children’s drawings and actions and the content of these schemas [e.g. an ‘arc’ or ‘semi-circle’ (content) may represent a ‘smile’, ‘eyebrows’, a ‘bridge’, a ‘peaked cap’, a ‘beard’, or the letter ‘C’ (form)].

The transduction of meaning between form and content, through the integration of motion, vocalization and drawing, also was acknowledged by the Wilsons, who described the ‘visual narratives’ of school-aged children. These depictions on paper involved dramatic action, played out on a seemingly impersonal plane of pictorial fantasy, on which superheroes and archvillains enact their struggles (Wilson, 1974; Wilson & Wilson, 1977, 1979).

As will be illustrated in this paper, similar superhero, play-based themes and integrated modes of communication emerged as children engaged in drawing and storytelling while communicating their concepts of what the future might be like. Enacting, imagery and symbolizing (Bruner, 1986) were significant components of this communication, and key processes included the integration of thought, emotion and action and the turning of actions into representations.
(Bruner, 1996). The children’s representations involved an intimate interplay between story, graphic symbolization and expressive gesture/vocalization, as they engaged in graphic-narrative play.

**Graphic-Narrative Play: Authoring Within Multiple Roles and Fluid Structures**

In many ways, the child’s integration of imagery and the body through drawing/storytelling is similar to how socio-dramatic play unfolds. The child makes and manipulates representations in abstract ways; however, there is no child-to-child interaction in a social sense. There is no need for the child to negotiate with other children to take certain roles, to collaboratively shape the direction and flow of the content, or to work around other socially mandated constraints. Instead, ‘graphic-narrative play’, a term I will use to describe such play encounters, is a personal fantasy-based experience depicted on paper.

The child becomes a ‘cast of one’, taking on multiple roles – author, artist, director, scripter, performer and narrator. The child can become all of the characters, change the plot, layer the action and alter the scenery at will, and select when and how to play with all the available voices offered through the multimodal media (drawing, story, dramatization and movement). Graphic-narrative play involves layers of visual action, character development, plot scheme, scenery and running narrative working in harmony, simultaneously (Dyson, 2003; Wilson, 1974; Wilson & Wilson, 1977, 1979; Wright, 2005).

Children’s feelings and identifications with characters and objects within their representations often shifts throughout a drawing-story, and the sequencing of events does not necessarily follow adult-defined linear structures (Kress, 2000a; Wright, 2005). Indeed, as in play, children often improvise and sometimes deliberately violate graphic and verbal expectations just for the joy of it. Through decision-making, the author infuses personal meaning and makes willful choices about the objects and events within the symbolic depiction of what Bruner (1986) called “possible worlds”.

This paper reveals children’s creations of possible worlds. It reports a segment of the results from a large research project which surfaced the ‘voices’ of children through their drawings and associated stories of what they think the future may be like. When presented with the abstract concept of Futures, children’s consciousness was liberated to roam through an extended present, and to speculate on futures yet to come (Eckersley, 1999; Page, 1994). Through open-ended meaning-making, children’s rich, imaginative worlds were communicated verbally and non-verbally, and their multimodal worlds materialized through the expressive enactments of their artworks-stories.

**Methods**

The children in the study were from two primary schools in rural Queensland, Australia, which were similar in size, structure and socio-economic aspects. 108 five-to-eight year old children were randomly selected from three grade levels:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Mean Age</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Mean Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 5 -
A complete description of the research design is provided in AUTHOR (2005). In brief, on a one-to-one basis (i.e. interviewer-child), each child drew a picture using white A3 paper and a set of colored felt pens. They were encouraged to discuss their drawing while they worked, and also had the choice to tell a story at the completion of their drawing. The interviewer asked open-ended questions, seeking clarification and extension of the child’s images and stories. To elicit the key focus of the content, each child was asked to give his/her work a title.

The sessions, which ranged between about 15-60 minutes in length, were video recorded to capture the children’s words, gestures, body language and facial expressions in relation to their unfolding drawings. The interviewer kept running records summarizing what was said, making rough sketches of the child’s images, and numbering these to note the sequence in which they were drawn. Detailed transcriptions of parallel streams of images and verbal and non-verbal communication were then compiled to form the basis for analysis of the children’s representations.

A developmental semiotics style of analysis was used to interpret the drawings-stories (Athey, 1990; Golomb, 2004; Kress, 1997; Matthews, 2004; Wright, 2005). General classification of emergent codes began with a broad taxonomy that included:

- children’s content in relation to living things, their environments and socio-cultural patterns, and
- children’s forms of verbal and non-verbal communication (image, story, gesture, expressive vocalization, body language and pauses).

Subsequent coding categories and subcategories emerged and became elaborated as additional examples surfaced new concepts. Results revealed that children’s content about Futures was virtually boundless, and the forms of communication they used to execute their topics frequently were embodied, which often resulted in graphic-narrative play.

Two examples from the data are presented in Figures 1 and 2. The first example illustrates how several events were depicted on the same page, and how a number of objects and figures were represented several times to captured the sequences of these events. The second example illustrates how a number of graphic devices were used to illustrate movement and physical connections between objects, and to bring aspects of events ‘alive’.

Repetition of Objects and Figures: Sequences of Events

Figure 1 illustrates Joel’s (aged 6.4 years) depiction of two main events occurring simultaneously in two different parts of the world. On the left-hand side, in the rectangle taking up about one third of the page, Joel drew an Olympic event, with two athletes running around a track. Joel added an unexpected plot scheme of a bomb explosion occurring during the Olympics. A segment of the conversation between the interviewer (I) and child (C) is as follows:
C: This is it here: The Olympics. And that’s where the bomb came.
I: That’s when the bomb went off at the Olympics, is it?
C: Yeah, and that’s all the metal things that came up.
I: Mm hmm. So the red is all where the bomb went off.
C: Yeah. Draws an orange person, then a green person, on the track. Goes over the orange person with a red pen.
I: Mm hmm. And up the top are all the medals are they?
C: Yep... out of the bomb. And the Canadians are coming second, and the Australians are beating the Canadians. Points to the figures on the track.

Joel demonstrated flexibility of thought as he grappled with how to simultaneously illustrate two day-time events on one page. To do so, he creatively dealt with temporal aspects of his depiction by turning the day-time Olympic event into night-time, to then introduce a second plot scheme.

C: And now it’s sun... the sun is shining up here where all the medals are. And it’s dark over here at night time. Points to the right-hand side of the page.

Figure 1. The Bomb Explosion and the Police Place

He then shifted his attention to the right-hand side of the page and drew and described a complicated ‘Police Place’ scene (discussed later in this paper). He began by drawing a yellow sun, with facial features inside it, in the top right-hand corner of the page, and small orange dots between its rays. Shortly thereafter he realized that he had two suns in his drawing, but that the locations of these simultaneous events were on opposite sides of the world – both of these events could not occur during day-light hours; one side of the world must be night.

I: Well that was an interesting way to do the Sun.
C: Mm hmm. Adds four blue clouds at the top centre of the page. Woopsies! I’ve done the Sun at the wrong side [the left side].
I: Did you? Where did you want to do it?
C: Over here. Points to the right-hand side of the page.
I: Over there. Oh, why’s that?
C: Because that’s [left side] the other side of the world, and that’s [right side] the....this side.
I: Oh, right. Well there’s no taking it off now.
C: Who cares. I’ll just draw over it. *Draws a vertical line to divide the Olympics from the Police Place, about a third of the way in from the left-hand side of the page.*
I: So what is the black line for? To show you....
C: To show you which one’s dark and which one’s light.
I: Oh, so one place is um, day time, and one’s the night time, is it?
C: Yeah. *Adds a horizontal line to create a rectangular ‘frame’ for the Olympic event.*
I: Right. *Fills in the left-hand side of the frame with thick, black lines that cover the [original] sun.*

Then Joel returned his attention to the Police Place scene on the right-hand side of the page (described later). As with the Olympic event, it was as if Joel viewed the Police Place event as an ‘episode’, the conclusion of which represented the end of the day. Similar to how film producers show shifts in events within a movie, through techniques such as fade-outs and fade-ins, Joel returned to the Olympic scene, and ‘faded in’ the left-hand side of the page by changing it back into day:

C: *Points to the figures on the track.* And now it’s sun... the sun is shining up here [left side] where all the medals are. And it’s dark over here [right side] at night time. *Adds another yellow sun to the top left-hand corner, squeezing it in between the black scribbled lines and the green metal from the explosion.*
I: So when it’s daytime at the Olympics, it’s night time at the jail, is it?
C: Yep. *Extends the black line right across the top of the page, from the left-hand sun to the right-hand sun, to symbolize the continuity of ‘sky’, and the variability of lightness-darkness at different parts of the world.*

Joel’s re-creation of events and time-space relations within his imagined world contained other, parallel components. For instance, on the right-hand side of the page, he illustrates the same dog in several positions to depict a sequence of movement. Joel draws a slide with a dog at its base. Then he draws a second dog at the top of the ladder, and a third dog sliding down the slide. This repetition of the dog schema represents a police dog in training.

C: Woops! [*Sound effect and gesture to accompany the dog’s sliding down the slide.*]
I: So that’s the dogs training is it?
C: Yeah.
I: And they’re training to...what, run up the ladder are they?
C: Yeah, and go...and run down it.
I: Pretty clever aren’t they to climb up ladders like that?
C: Mmm. *Draws a dark blue stick figure with a hat, left of the dog on the slide.*
I: And is that you is it?
C: Uh huh.
I: That’s, ah... Joel the policeman, is he? Is that the policeman’s hat?
C: Mmm.
I: Oh right. *Picks up brown and adds a detail to the third dog.*
I: What sort of dogs are you training?
C: Ah... German Shepherd cross.
I: OK, and are there three dogs there, or is it the same dog?
C: That’s when it’s going up and that’s when it’s up the top and that’s when it’s going down.
I: OK so there’s only really one dog here. It’s just in different positions. OK.

To the left of the dog-training slide Joel draws a blue rectangular police car with red and blue lights on top. Right of the slide he draws a tall watch tower with a police man standing guard. Then he draws three yellow house-shaped jails, located at the top of the page, above the slide. He draws vertical lines to symbolize the bars of the jail, and adds stick figures in the two larger jails. Once again, Joel repeats images to illustrate a sequence of events, namely a policeman and a police dog capturing and jailing a ‘bad person’.

I: Now that looks a bit like a jail is it, with all the bars?
C: Yep.
I: So who do you keep in there?
C: All the bad people. Draws a green person right of the slide.
I: Oh right. And what did you just draw then? Another person did you?
C: Yeah. Draws another brown dog, left of dog in the top position on the slide. And this is where all the guard dogs are going after the person.
I: Oh, is he sort of running away is he?
C: Yeah. Because he’s the one that’s escaping.
I: Mmm.
C: But here they caught him and put him in jail. Points to the green stick figure near the slide, then draws another green stick figure in the third, small jail to show that he is now captured and put behind bars.

Then Joel depicts the policeman a second time: catching a pig, with the assistance of his police dog, named TJ. He draws a pink pig, left of centre, at the bottom of the page, and adds a brown dog, left of the pig (using the same ‘animal’ schema for both dog and pig).

I: So what have we got, some more dogs have we?
C: No that’s a pig. And it...they’re trying to catch the pig because it keeps on hurting people.
I: Who’s trying to catch it?
C: The dog. And I’ve still got to do the person. Draws a dark blue figure, left of the dog at the bottom of the page.
I: Mmm. Is that...is that T.J. here [referring to the dog Joel has named]?
C: Yeah, that’s T.J. Writes ‘tj’ using purple, just above the dog and writes ‘Joel’ using blue, below the stick figure. Adds a purple dot to the j in ‘tj’.

Finally, Joel illustrates another before-and-after event in his graphic-narration when he is asked what he will do in the future.

I: Now can you just tell me a few things, about, um, yourself? Because you’re grown up [in the future] you said. And before you told me you’ll probably have to leave home... ‘cause you might have to live somewhere else.
C: [nods] But I still couldn’t do [draw] the house [in this drawing].
I: And you weren’t too happy about that were you?
C: No.
I: Are you going to add your house in now, are you?
C: Yeah. Draws a black stylized house in the bottom right-hand corner of the page, with a stick figure standing beside it. This is when I’m leaving home (points to house at the bottom of the page). Draws a thin, stylized house, squeezed in between the blue police car in the centre of page and the rectangular frame of the Olympic event. And here’s where I am... where I’m living now. Points to the small, second house.

The interviewer then attempted to find out what Joel might consider to be the key components of his graphic-narration by inviting him to give his work a title.

C: Um... This is the ‘Bomb Explosion’ and this is the ‘Police Place’. Adds a row of green zigzagging grass line at the base of the page.
I: The Police Place? So it’s “The Bomb Explosion”...
C: Yep. Up behind the police ...
I: And...
C: “The Police Place”.

Ironically, when asked if there was a story that goes with the drawing, Joel’s relating of the 30-minute experience in a truncated story-form bore little resemblance to the richness of characters, objects, events and dual-depiction of world affairs that were drawn, told and enacted through his graphic-narrative play. It was as if Joel ‘fast forwarded’ the story to the concluding event, omitting all of the detail that occurred before it.

I: And is there a story that goes with your drawing?
C: Yeah. This is when I’m an adult, and I’m leaving home. And this is where I’m a... when I’m bigger.

Joel’s truncated story did not feature the multifaceted, subtle communication that occurred throughout his graphic-narrative play. Yet such synopsis versions of children’s stories are what many adults hear when they ask children to talk to them about what they have drawn. Post-hoc tellings of these complex drawing events omit the richness of content that can only be gleaned through careful observing and listening during the child’s enactment of complex drawings. The subtle communication of Joel’s abstract concepts, such as turning the night into day or chasing a criminal and putting him back in jail, remain as ‘invisible’ components of the meaning-making, which are unlikely to be surfaced in the child’s later retelling of the experience.

Joel’s graphic-narrative play was one of about a dozen ‘star’ examples within the total group of participants. It was particularly imaginative and included several subcomponents of embodiment depicted through repetition of content to show sequences of events, and abstract temporal-spatial, light-dark concepts. Yet there were numerous cases of children’s embodiment within the study, albeit at a less elaborate or sophisticated level. These children did not separate their thoughts and feelings from the physical elements of their communication. Embodied representation was characterized by the amalgamation of spatial, visual, oral and bodily-kinesthetic dimensions in
such a way that the combination of authorial devies became more than just the sum of their parts.

**Analysis of Findings**

To summarize key components of graphic-narrative play, three principles will now be reviewed, based on the examples of the Joel’s graphic-narrative play. These trends also were supported by many other examples from the sample of child participants, namely:

1. open-ended construction reflecting immortal story themes;
2. authoring through manifold positionings; and
3. integration of graphics, language and the body.

**Open-Ended Construction Reflecting Immortal Story Themes**

A larger proportion of the boys in the study made embodied connections with their artworks-stories compared to girls, who appeared to make more sensory connections. This result may be linked to many of the boys’ tendency to select action-packed, superhero, Sci-Fi content; a characteristic also noted by Golomb (2004). She found that boys “reveal an intense concern with warfare, acts of violence and destruction, machinery and sports contests, whereas girls tended to depict more tranquil scenes of romance, family life, landscapes and children at play” (p. 160).

Inspired by models of popular media and personal events, the content of many of the boys’ drawings in the study included spacecrafts, missiles, force fields, sporting events, robots, aliens, and characters influence by favourite DVD, TV and digital-game characters. Golomb (2004) also noted that:

Such plots of power, destruction, and victory appeal mostly to boys… Themes of the family and social relations are more typical for girls whose compositions are less action-packed and, by comparison with boys’ drawings, appear more tranquil. In girls’ drawings, ambition may be expressed in themes that touch on stardom, fashion, beauty, fame, and popularity (pp. 162-163).

Golomb noted that girls’ imagery was often derived from fairytales (e.g. kings and queens) and that animals often assumed centre stage. Her trends are not dissimilar to the results of this study, where girls seemed to be more focused on environmental issues and socio-cultural patterns; topics that will be discussed in other publications.

Joel’s and other children’s sequencing of the story and/or picturing of events and objects evolved through an interactive relationship between words, images and gesture. Yet, as mentioned earlier, these did not unfold as a linear sequence of events, nor did they conform to adult-defined sequence structures. Rather, their ideas and depictions shifted in and out of the overall framework, where the complete structure of the graphic-narrative play evolved in bits and pieces. For instance, Joel was frequently one step ahead of the interviewer, explaining the meaning of what they had just drawn while simultaneously drawing a new concept. In addition, he returned
to previous images frequently to elaborate their ideas with visual detail, and extended the storyline in relation to these new concepts. This revisiting of concepts provided the plot thread that is essential to any good story line, and allowed the graphic-narrative play to feature other story qualities, for instance:

- **tension**, such as Joel’s red, zigzag explosion lines to show sharp green pieces of metal bursting from the bomb, and
- **good and evil and the interplay between them**. For example, Joel drew a policeman and police dog chasing a criminal to put him/her back in jail.

Palmer (1986) and Sutton-Smith (1995) have discussed how young children seem to be drawn to stories that tap into the immortal themes that are deeply embedded in children’s folk culture, such as the capturing and defending themes that were depicted in Joel’s graphic-narrative play. Such superhero stories, which contain elements of powerful characters triumphing over evil, often armed with technological tools, have been traced back to nineteenth-century action-adventure stories for children, and many elements of such stories can be found in current science-fiction comics and cartoons today (Kline, 1993). Less documented, albeit less technologically sophisticated versions of such themes, have probably existed for thousands of years.

**Authoring through Manifold Positionings**

Children’s viewing of contemporary media, and their personal creations of similar stories through graphic-narrative play, provide textual spaces in which children can plan, enact and examine imagined worlds from the inside (Friere, 1970; Paley, 1980; Rosen & Rosen, 1974; Wagner, 1991). Children can play and replay these worlds, making a range of authorial choices involving visual action, character development, plot scheme, scenery and running narrative.

As mentioned earlier, the child simultaneously becomes author, artist, director, scripter, performer and narrator and has the power to choose to become some or all the characters, change the plot, layer the action and alter the scenery at will. By deciding how and when to play with the numerous voices available through drawing, story, dramatization and movement, children are empowered to make choices about coherence and disruption, about power and powerlessness, and about a range of other issues (Dyson, 1997; Sutton-Smith, 1995).

**Integration of Graphics, Language and the Body**

Throughout the study, there were numerous examples of the intimate interplay between children’s narration and their graphic depictions of characters, objects, events and feelings. This interplay was clarified and accentuated through strategies such as:

- **announcement of intention**, e.g. many children made comments such as “I’m just going to draw one now” [to illustrate what is being discussed], or “OK, now I’ll tell you what I have just drawn here” [to describe what has been graphically depicted],
- **pointing and gesturing while describing content**, e.g. Joel pointing to the left- and right-hand sides of the page to explain the juxtaposition of light and dark,
graphic devices to symbolize movement, sound and physical forces, e.g. Joel’s zigzag explosion lines arching over the Olympic scene,

labeling to identify objects and actions, e.g. Joel’s labeling of ‘TJ’ the dog, and ‘Joel’ the policeman,

graphic symbols to illustrate connections, e.g. Joel’s black line across the top of the page to connect the darkness of the sky between the two suns,

repetition of graphic content to illustrate multiple roles and actions, e.g. Joel’s repeated depictions of the policeman, the police dog, the escaped-captured criminal and his earlier-then-later house,

classification of content applicable a range of contexts. Sometimes a generic symbol was assumed to be applied to a range of circumstances. For example, in Joel’s graphic-narrative play, although only one dog was shown as chasing the criminal, Joel’s language suggested that the generic schema of ‘dog’ actually included all the dogs: “And this is where all the guard dogs are going after the person”, and

metaphor to express ideas in such a way that a concept from one domain is mapped on to another, e.g. Joel’s dual meaning of the ‘metal’ exploding from the bomb and the Olympic ‘medals’ of the athletes, flying into the sky.

Although the example of and Joel’s highly imaginative graphic-narrative stories was exceptional in that it included many of the elements described above, many children in the study used similar techniques, however generally on a less grand scale. Like Joel’s graphic-narrative play encounter, children depicted many embodied experiences that illustrated movement concepts such as forward, backward, lowering and rising. Their graphic, verbal and gestural clarifications brought these events ‘alive’. In particular, gesture helped many children in the study to clarify their content and enhance aspects of their artwork that might not be depicted easily in a still, 2-D format (Wright, 2001, 2003b, 2005).

Summary

Increased attention is being given to the cognitive functions of imagery and the body as sources or order, which some consider to exceed that of language and logic (Best, 2000; Ross, 2000; Walker, 2000). Images are similar to stopped action frames, or visual impressions of actions. As illustrated in this study, children created and then re-created images during the process of meaning-making and meaning-manipulation. Yet such symbolic representation was not always confined to the paper. Indeed, the boundary between the self and the artwork-story was often blurred. Children appeared to have a compelling need to dramatize or physically demonstrate their ideas, often to clarify the physical characteristics of objects, the actions of characters, the movement of objects and the physical connection between objects. The role of the body seemed deeply imbedded in their meaning-making, helping children come to understand that which was being created.

Like Joel, many of the children in the study also used fantasy and futuristic concepts to depict their imaginary worlds. Those children who engaged in graphic-narrative play enacted multiple roles within fluid structures. These structures often involved the immortal themes commonly found in literature and media, such as good-evil or capturing-defending. The children’s
depictions of such themes encapsulated a range of authorial choices, which often included fantasy.

Most of the children’s ideas were expressed optimistically, such as being able to clone your favorite pet or plant, particularly if it dies, or being able to change the color of your hair by simply thinking about it. However, many also expressed concerns about issues such as global warming, over population, and careless or selfish destruction of the oceans, air and forests (Wright, 2005).

Through such multimodal meaning-making, the children in the study – like most artists – invented their worlds in other-worldly ways. These worlds are rich with integrated graphic, narrative and bodily-kinesthetic forms of symbolic expression. Artistic meaning-making integrates the visual, spatial, aural and physical modes, and includes the worlds of still (and moving) images, sounds, textures, gestures, and many other forms of symbolizing. Through the arts, children have opportunities to engage in unique forms of meaning-making and communicating, through the use of discourses and a range of texts that connect the body, thought and emotion.

**Conclusions and Educational importance**

Graphic-narrative play, metaphor, fantasy, synesthesia and cross-modal meaning-making often can be suppressed in institutionalized education, largely due to the social and cultural dominance of **literal language** and **written** modes of expression (Kress, 2000a, b; Wright, 2003a). In schools and society in general, communication and understanding has traditionally been seen to take place predominantly through language, and words have been considered to be the primary if not only means for doing intellectual work.

Consequently, the curriculum often is word-bound, and oral discourse is considered to be the key method for children to make meaning (e.g. children are often expected to demonstrate their understanding by being asked to “say it in your own words”). Such curriculum practices may be related to the underlying assumptions of a “speech logic” viewpoint – that is, if something is not expressed through language, it is considered to be outside **rational** thought, outside **articulate** feeling.

Yet, as discussed at the beginning of this paper, language as a communicational medium is inadequate for the expression of everything that we think, feel, sense, say or write. Figurative communication through drawing often is too subtle or complex for verbal language; it is intricate and multifaceted. Art offers a distinct form of meaning-making and meaning-communication through the use of signs that ‘stand for’ or represent other things. The elements of lines, shapes, proportions, colors, shadings, composition and perspective are components of the ‘text’ of drawing, which have no vocabulary of units with independent meanings.

The examples of young children’s embodied forms of knowing and communicating featured in this paper illustrate that their multimodal communication and illustration of ideas and feelings are symbolic and frequently metaphoric. It integrates visual-spatial imagery, feelings, sensory modalities and interconnectedness with the body, which often are expressed non-verbally.
Consequently, a multimodal approach to education should encompass a full range of communicative avenues. It should feature gesture, graphic representation, play, music, mime, and dance, where children can use a variety of representative forms of expression, and where all modes of meaning-making can be treated with equal dignity and importance (Eisner, 1994; Goodman, 1984; Luke & Elkins, 1998; Wong, 2001). If we leave these symbolic media and semiotic modes of learning outside the realm of meaning-making and meaning-communication, the arts become relegated to minor roles in the school curriculum, and the social construction of learning continues to privilege the disciplines of literacy and numeracy (Wright, 2005).

Education should provide a central role for symbolic experiences, not only because they provide powerful ways to surface children’s voices, but also because these are more direct, child-oriented forms of knowing and communication. Symbolic, multi-modal communication often moves children, and others – it reaches the deepest part of our interior worlds.

References


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