

### *About Seeing*

At the beginning of this semester, I was reading a book called *Finding Your Own North Star* by Dr. Martha Beck. I entered the class during a period in which I was trying to deal with a life change and attempting to make a directional decision. In the book, Beck uses the metaphor of the North Star, that fixed point that can always be used to figure out which way you are headed, to present a creative problem solving approach to making decisions. She contends that we all have a set of internal compasses, physical, emotional, intuitive, that will keep us on the right path toward the North Star if we can just let go of old ways of “seeing” ourselves and the world around us. As I tried to select a creativity project, the ideas in Beck’s book were running in the background.

*Making the Creative Leap Beyond* begins by saying, “Whenever we are confronted with a problem for which we have no learned, practiced, or habitual solution, some degree of creativity is required. We have to go beyond anywhere we have been before.” (Torrance and Safter, p. 1) It occurred to me how often I put my students in this leap position with the first assignment in Communication Applications.

#### Motivational Presentation Assignment

Situation: You have been invited to speak to a group of sixth grade students at the elementary school. You want to share a personal story with the students about “learning from experience” as a basis for your talk. You will use the experience as an example for the theme of your motivational talk.

- A. Write an essay in which you describe a time that you learned from an experience. The experience does not need to be a major, earth shaking moment. It just needs to be an experience that you learned from. Describe the experience in detail, so that the reader can share your emotion. Discuss what you learned from the experience and how the new knowledge affected your life.
- B. Using a storyboard, illustrate your story. Begin with the setting. Show how the experience occurred in a series of frames. Use details and color in your drawings. Use from 9-12 frames to illustrate the story.

C. Scan the storyboard. Use Adobe Photoshop to crop and adjust the color in each frame. Insert the individual frames into PowerPoint to create a simple storybook that will become the audiovisual aide for your talk. Add key text to each slide so that the viewer can follow the idea of your story as you speak. Use simple, easy to understand language.

The immediate response from students is usually, “I can’t think of an experience that I learned from,” but generally after a few minutes most students can come up with the rough beginnings of the essay.

It is the second requirement that startles them. “You mean that I have to draw? I can’t draw!” With a completely straight face, I have said many times, “Anyone can draw. Don’t worry about perfection. Just put down the story in the best way you can.” To my complete amazement, I have seen students draw out the images from their stories and produce some really amazing storybooks. Through drawing, students are able to visualize details and action that would probably not be included in the written composition. Expressing the experience in drawings encourages reflection, and then it enables students to transfer the details into the written composition. Hopefully, the overall impact of the motivational assignment in my Communication Applications class is a Gestalt kind of understanding. The student’s individual experience becomes more than just an isolated event. The storybook is a meaningful way of talking to others about actions and consequences. A memory, the learning experience, becomes a tangible product that can be reflected upon and examined.

At the beginning of the assignment, I tell students that anyone can draw, but the truth about me is, I can’t draw or at least that is what I have been telling myself. I decide to challenge myself to create the same kind of book that I ask my students to draw. One of the books sitting on my bookshelf waiting for the moment that I had time is *Writing With Pictures* by Uri Shulevitz. Using this book as a guide to learning, I embarked on the project.

I took the leap! Shulevitz also says that anyone can draw. He says that the drawings can be simple or complex, but the most important thing is what you have to say. Drawings are another way to tell a story. They are language in a visual form that conveys meaning through seeing. Shulevitz says that the real problem is not in the drawing, but in unclear thinking. The reader must be able to follow the action of the story that must be with the reader's comprehension. The sequence of the story must make sense. A problem is introduced, and the action of the story is only complete when the objective is attained of the problem is solved. The artist must make the characters real. "Only a unique somebody can trigger an emotional response in the reader. You cannot care for a nonentity." (Shulevitz, p. 33)

Shulevitz advises the artist to think about what to draw for as long as it takes to get the image in mind, but to draw resolutely and concentrate on the subject matter once the actual drawing begins. He says that lines are another language to describe or express content. Capture the emotion of the story and give up on the idea of perfection! He says that the ultimate test of a good storybook is not the quality of the drawings, but what happens in the mind of the reader. The readers must be able to see the meaning of the story.

Armed with this advice, I used the storyboard concept presented in the book and began to illustrate a personal story from a seventh grade experience that I use in class as model for the motivational assignment. The storyboard serves as a planning tool for the drawings and allows the writer to view the book as a whole. A review of the storyboard helps to eliminate unnecessary elements and uncover gaps in the story. I made a simple sketch of each drawing in the storybook before I started on the larger drawings that are used to illustrate the storybook. I also wrote the text of the storyboard from the monologue that I had previously written. I tried to pare down the text to a minimum, so that the drawings tell

the story. The drawings were done in chronological order, but that is not really necessary. It is just the process that I used. Looking back at the first drawing, I can see how tentative my strokes and lines were. I feel that I gained in my ability to represent the human form as the drawings progressed. As I drew, I gained confidence and tried to remember what the author said about drawing resolutely, concentrating on the subject matter, and conveying what you want to say. I also discovered that if I just kept trying, I could eventually come up with a pretty good image that said what I wanted the drawing to say. Of course, I had a good art gum eraser! After I completed all the drawings, I used colored pencils to add color to the drawings. I choose the pencils over watercolor or marker pens because that is generally the medium that students prefer. Coloring adds a new dimension to the drawings and allows the artist to demonstrate visible continuity with the color-coding of the characters. When I finished the project, I was generally pleased with my product. The drawings are not perfect, but forcing myself to overcome the fear of taking up the pencil was well worth the effort.

Encouraged by the drawings in my storybook, I reached for another book in my shelf of unread materials, *Drawing on the Artist Within* by Betty Edwards. The author begins by asking the reader to take a new look at “seeing.” She says that the clues to seeing are hidden in our language. The verb to see means more than to view or look at. To see is often used to mean, “I understand” or to indicate a sudden insight as in the story of Archimedes where he exclaimed, “Eureka,” meaning I have found the answer. Edwards juxtaposes the creative process with the skills that are required to draw. She states that drawing is a replication of the creative process. According to the author, anyone can learn to draw. “It is simply a matter of learning basic perceptual skills-the special ways of seeing required for drawing.” (Edwards, p 7) These perceptual skills like language skills or math skills can be used to enhance thinking skills and are deeply involved in the five stages of the creative process. Edwards divides the

five skills into two categories. Saturation and verification are left brained operations and rely on logical analysis, naming and categorizing. The left-brain is verbal and linear and responsible for abstraction, speech, reading, and mathematical functioning. Insight, incubation, and illumination are right brained skills and rely on simultaneous processing of information, seek relationships, and according to Edwards, undaunted by ambiguity or complexity. In opposition to the left hemisphere, the right brain functions in a nonverbal manner and specializes in visual, spatial, perceptual information, Edwards strongly feels that learning to see by learning to draw causes other changes in perception about how an individual views the world. Through a series of exercises, the author leads the reader to see differently, to control the mind-set by forcing a shift from left brained naming and categorizing to the visual and perceptual right mode.

I was particularly intrigued by the authors statements that drawing, a nonverbal, visual language is a parallel language to writing that makes thought visible and that drawings can be read and often reflect what is going on in the artist's mind. Drawings can show relationships that are grasped immediately as a single image, where words are necessarily locked into sequential order. (Edwards, p. 52) Edwards refers to an essay by British writer George Orwell called "New Words" in which Orwell laments the absence of words in the English language adequate to describe what goes on in the human brain. In the essay, Orwell proposes the creation of new words to name the nameless functioning of the mind. "The question is simply finding a way in which one can give thought an objective existence." (New Words, Orwell, 1940)

Equally surprising to me was Edwards contention that humans have an innate structural understanding of the meaning of lines, thick, thin, curves, jagged, soft, harsh. She refers again to Orwell's essay in which he suggests that humans have both an outer and an inner mental life. The outer life is expressed through words, but the inner life is thought or what Orwell was describing as "a stream of nameless things." Edwards's goal is to get the reader

to bring forward this inner life of the mind by using a visual language that will make the inner thoughts visible. An exercise that requires the reader to respond to a series of words through analogue drawings that stand for human emotions such as anger, joy, peacefulness, depression....causes the participant to experience the power and clarity of line as a language. I was personally amazed that I could convey thought just through line and have a pretty clear understanding of the message. According to the author, drawings make subjective thought objective by giving it a visual form.

My mind returned to the words of Paul Torrance in *Making the Creative Leap Beyond* stated in the first paragraph of this paper. “Whenever we are confronted with a problem for which we have no learned, practiced, or habitual solution, some degree of creativity is required. We have to go beyond anywhere we have been before.” I wondered if I could draw images that represent the thinking process that I have been through during the last few months of emotional struggle, drawings that can be read by me and by others without words, but which would make my inner thought visible.

Using a storyboard, I attempted to map out my thoughts. Just as in the analogue exercise, I only tagged the squares of the storyboard with a word or two and then began to draw what came through my mind trying to focus on the power of line to convey message. The series called *Stepping Out of the Frame* was a powerful and purifying personal experience. For me it was truly making thought visible and tangible. I plan to write simple words to accompany the drawings, but I do not want to attach the words to the images, only to show my thought related to the sequence in a verbal format. I want to see if others can actually read the drawing as visual language.

The three books, *Finding Your Own North Star*, *Writing With Pictures*, and *Drawing on the Artist Within* have served as a wonderful base for learning and for confronting my personal hesitation to draw. As a result of the creativity project, I have a new understanding about seeing, both the outer world and the interior world of thought. Certainly the project has caused me to make a leap, to go far beyond where I have even been before.

#### References

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