Debunking teacher's resistant to teaching children to draw

—a companion to citizenship for the future

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The hegemonic position of verbal text in formal education is in this article questioned. The increasing need for competence related to complex visual communication is seen in relation to the education of youngster to develop citizenship for future challenges. Traditions and attitudes in education of children and youngsters (aged 6-12) is discussed in perspective of a teacher attitude I have chosen to call "Resistance to Teaching Drawing" (RTTD). This RTTD-attitude is seen as a hindrance for the development of design literacy for the future. By articulating the ideas of which this RTTD-attitude is grounded, the position of the attitude might be reduced in practical education of children and youngsters.
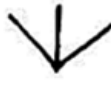
Keywords: drawing, design literacy, Resistance to Teaching Drawing (RTTD), RTTD-attitude.

Introduction

In both private and professional settings, more and more decisions are made on the basis of pictorial representations. So why is formal education for youngsters still so focused on verbal text as we know it from the last two hundred years? Why has this hegemonic position of verbal text in formal education not been challenged from the perspective of developing skills and reflections to engage with the increasing use of complex visual communication? Our capacity to visualise our own ideas and to use them for fruitful communication for the creation of artefacts, solutions and plans, represents a potential not yet implemented in practical formal education of children and youngsters (6-12) (Nielsen 2000, 2013). Design literacy promotes competencies that include both visual and material skills and knowledge (Nielsen & Brænne, 2013), which influence the lives we live and the choices we make. In this article, some aspects of a western philosophy of drawing will be used as a point of departure to discuss why the obvious advantages of learning to draw have not yet been included as a basic skill in primary and lower secondary education. To begin it is useful to reflect some thoughts on our collective symbolic field as a driver of common understanding and communication.

Collective symbolic fields

Around the world there exist plural systems of spoken language and verbal texts. In Europe and the US, verbal text is built on the Latin alphabet, which differs from other sign systems such as Arabic, Cyrillic and Chinese. Each of these is a collective symbolic field within different regions, and must be learned in the form of speaking, reading and writing. We know, but pay little attention to, the historic legacy of letters, starting as pictograms derived from images. The illustration below illustrates how the letters K, N and O we know today has derived from the hand, the snake and the eye (Sacks, 2008, p.26).

Egyptian Hieroglyph 2000 B.C.	Sinai Alphabet 17500 B.C.	Phoenician Alphabet 1000 B. C.	Phoenican Alphabet 800 B. C.	Today
hand	*kaph,* "hand"			K
snake	*nun,* "fish" (= eel?)			N
eye	*ayin,* "eye"			O

Figure 1: The evolution of the letter shapes of K, N and O is traced in this sampling of their ancient forms. The first column shows the Egyptian writing picture from which the letter's shape was copied; the second column shows an early form of the letter itself; subsequent shapes follow. The letters began their lives as careful renderings but steadily morphed toward simplicity and abstraction (Sacks 2008, p.26).

Historically, the importance of verbal text is indisputable for the formation of communities. The importance of Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1455 is also clear, playing a crucial and lasting role in the distribution of meaning in the years to follow. With the development of technologies like television, computers and cell phones, the use of images has increased in our everyday life, giving rise to a *visual turn* (Pauwels, 2000; Joyce, 2006; Schönborn, 2006) in which verbal and spoken texts are intertwined with images. This tendency has been apparent for a long time in commercial settings such as the fashion industry, where garments and accessories are communicated and linked to lifestyles through images.


Figure 2: Description of fashion is today unthinkable without images where information about the garment is communicated along with lifestyle and values. (Photo Linda Cartridge for Tjubi).

The visual turn is also seen in other professional settings, including medicine and engineering. In medicine, X-rays have been used to visualise invisible parts of the human body and have developed as a diagnostic tool since they were first identified by Röntgen in 1895. In combination with advanced computed tomography (CT), slices from the invisible parts of our body can be visualised. So can also activity in the brain, using so called PET scanning. This visual information is very complex and it has afforded researchers the opportunity to understand and describe some of the complexity of the human brain. Within engineering, the visualisation of solutions has been central ever since the emergence of tools for drawing. Until recently, verbal text has occupied a central position in engineers' descriptions of the "hard facts" of their solutions for a road or a building. Here as well, advanced technical computer software has been developed to visually describe more and more complex solutions, to the extent that the visual dimension of such project descriptions has become more detailed and more efficient than a verbal text. This, again, is part of the *visual turn*.

Figure 3: Advanced computer software can visualise future solution for a road which can be shown as an animation where different times and seasons of the year can be illustrated. Such visualisations give both professionals and the general public a background for dialogue and decisions. (Image: Hjellnes Consult)
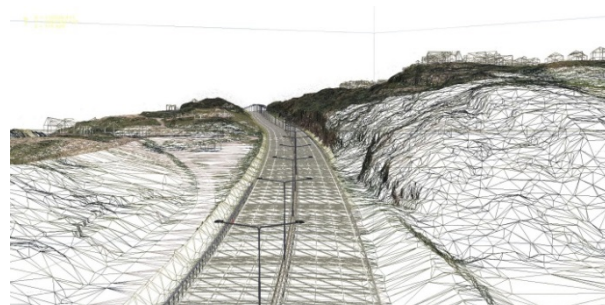
Figure 4: Different layers in the software can visualise specific information of great value for the involvement and cooperation of different professional groups. (Image: Hjellnes Consult)

Verbal text and images in education

Learning the skills of reading and writing verbal texts continues to occupy a dominant position in formal education. These skills are of undoubted importance in educating young people to become part of a democratic community. This educational focus on verbal text has, however, influenced our attitude to images. The following story serves to illustrate how this hierarchy also persists in professional settings.

Some years ago, the Norwegian journalist Catrine Aspaas wrote a pamphlet in the most influential Norwegian newspaper, *Aftenposten*. Beneath the title, *Images for children, verbal text for grownups?* (*Bilder for barn, tekst for voksne?*), she wrote the following story. While she was doing a feature for an article, she was sitting at her desk in the office, watching a film on her computer. Her chief editor passed by, and she felt obliged to comment on her film-watching activity so that her editor would not suspect her of misusing time at work for her own amusement. She explained immediately to him that the film was of relevance to her feature. In her pamphlet, she reflected upon her own reaction—why did she feel it necessary to explain why she was watching a film during working hours? Would she have done the same if she had been reading a verbal text? Probably not, she concluded (Aspaas, 2007). As the title of her pamphlet indicates, she questions why verbal text is looked upon as serious while

images are seen as amusements. And further, why are images looked upon as something intuitively understood just because they are understood by children who have not yet learn to read and write verbal text? We all know that the interpretation of images can be immediate and intuitive, but that does not make the interpretation less complex—rather, the opposite.

There is however, another inference to be drawn from the pamphlet by Aspaas. While the skills of reading and writing verbal text are strongly *connected* as two aspects of the same skill, our common understanding of the connection between the making and interpretation of images is low. Children make drawings, but adults have a tendency to say "I cannot draw", implying that drawing is for the few. Why is this so? Let us seek some possible explanations in the legacy of drawing in education, with particular reference to the assumption that drawing capabilities play a basic role in the development of youngster's ability to become design literate (Nielsen, 2013).

Quoting Picasso

Most children enter compulsory schooling with sufficient skills to use drawing as a medium for communication, expression and pleasure. Their enthusiasm for drawing is admirable, and their capacity for making drawings with original solutions is charming—so charming that even the twentieth century's greatest painter, Picasso, admired their expressiveness. When he visited an exhibition of children's drawings in London together with Herbert Read in 1956, he proclaimed: "When I was the age of these children I could draw like Raphael: it took me many years to learn how to draw like these children" (Read, 1956). Picasso's words, as documented by Read, have been quoted time and again in the literature on drawing (e.g. Penrose, 1958; Aston, 1972; Gardner, 1980; Korzenik, 1995; Pariser, 1999). Why have these words been quoted so often? And what practice has this recurring quotation promoted? It is not unthinkable that teachers have asked themselves, "Why should I teach a child to draw differently than he/she does when entering school, when even the greatest artist of our century aims to draw like a child?" It was, of course, easy for Picasso to make his comment; he already had his classic, academic art education and was free and able to use different concepts of drawing for different purposes. He could choose to adopt the style of a child, but a child could *not* choose to adopt the style of Picasso's blue period.

When Picasso made his comment in 1956, a movement for the promotion of "child art" was already established in Europe and the US. Lowenfeld had written his book, *Creativity and mental health* (1947), which was widely distributed and translated (Nielsen, 2000). Lowenfeld's field of expertise was not art but education. In his writings on art education for children, he advised grownups *not* to take an active role in teaching children different concepts of drawing (Lowenfeld, 1973). Jessica Davis has made her contribution to this "child art" movement by describing how children's drawings express a peak of artistry at the age of five, and how most children lose their artistry between the ages of eight and eleven (Davis, 1997). Her definition of artistry is, of course, related to time, culture and ideology. This philosophy of not teaching artistic skills to children is a very special construction, especially as the philosophy is linked to drawing but not to other similar areas such as sculpture, knitting or sewing.

Education mirrors culture

Whether the criterion for artistry is linked to mimesis, linear perspective or expression, it reminds us that those with cultural power often also exert an influence on education. Children grow into different cultures, and their drawings reflect this in one way or another (Wilson & Wilson, 1977; Wilson, 2004). How different cultures in education influence youngsters' drawings can be illustrated by reference to an account from the 1970s when a Norwegian professor visited a Soviet art school for youngsters with colleagues and students from a Norwegian teacher training college. The Norwegian group was critical when they saw how the Soviet youngsters were educated in classical drawing and painting, including

the use of linear perspective. They asked the Soviet teachers to explain why the juveniles drew in such an academic and adult style and not in the way children naturally drew and painted. The Soviet teachers commented that they always got that question from Scandinavian visitors, and the answer was always the same: we teach the youngsters to master the Western visual tradition (Nielsen, 2000).

In Japan, children are taught drawing step-by-step in school, and Japanese pupils have textbooks in art and craft for each year (Wilson, 1997). In his research on Japanese culture, Wilson was interested in studying youngsters' drawings done outside school, particularly the *manga* drawings—a special style of cartooning. He found a living drawing culture among these youngsters, as they copied and developed the style of the manga figures, drawn with big eyes quite unlike their own (Wilson, 1997). This shows how their drawings were influenced by pictures rather than by real life; it also shows that the manga style is quite unlike the art style they learned in school. Wilson does not elaborate on the transfer from school activity to manga drawing. Although the manga style is unlike the style taught in school, the youngsters seemed able to transfer what they had learned in school about overlapping, diminution and perspective to their manga drawings. In short, Japanese juveniles seemed to continue their drawing activity in connection with an activity, meaningful to them, outside of school.

Resistance to teaching drawing

The ideas by Lowenfeld has influenced Norwegian teacher training since the 1970s (Nielsen, 2000). We have reason to believe that these teachers have not given priority to the enabling of youngsters (6-12) to master the Western common symbolic order of drawing. Let us call this ideology of not teaching youngsters to draw "Resistance to Teaching Drawing" (RTTD). This RTTD attitude has nothing to do with a lack of good intentions from teachers. It is based upon an assumption of promoting creativity and "artistic" self-expression. The question is if this RTTD attitude really promotes creativity and the youngster's ability to become visual literate. No serious study has supported non-education in drawing as a sustainable path to visual literacy. Good intentions are not enough when it comes to the education of future generations. The RTTD-attitude might even promote social differences and hinder visual pluralism.

In my study "Draw92/97", I found that youngsters at the age of 13 claimed that they had learned little about drawing in school. Their drawings confirmed that they had learned little about the western common symbolic order of visualisation. Those youngsters in the study who expressed themselves visually through different concepts of drawing, more often mentioned help from parents, siblings or friend at home. In contrast, those youngsters without such social resources had limited possibilities to choose different drawing concepts when asked to draw (Nielsen, 2000). On this perspective, compulsory school has for a period failed to offer children equal opportunities to become visually literate beyond "artistic" self-expression.

A Swedish study from 1989 illustrates something of the same culture. When classroom teachers were asked about their attitude to children's drawing, they answered that they avoided correcting a child's drawing, and that teaching could cause the child to lose faith in their own abilities (Pettersson & Åsén, 1989). Pettersson and Åsén also exposed an assumption that all children had an equal chance of succeeding in the making of drawings on a free and imaginative topic. Opposite, such free drawing activity seemed to increase the differences between children from different social groups rather than opening up new worlds for those who did not already have access to different visual codes at home (Pettersson & Åsén, 1989).

The RTTD attitude has also sneaked into designer education at college level in Norway. A male student with a background in carpentry—let us call him Henry—entered college some years ago to be educated as a designer. During the first year, he followed classes in different studios for pottery, woodwork and drawing. The teachers in the different studios had quite different concepts of teaching. In the pottery studio, he was taught about the quality of different clays, their characteristics before and after burning and what he needed to do to avoid cracking of his product. All this was new to Henry, and he appreciated every instruction that made him better able to handle the clay and his product. During his time in the woodwork studio, his teacher understood that he was already well-educated in the properties of different types of wood and in the use of advanced machinery. His teacher even asked him to help with the teaching of fellow students to differentiate between beech, pine and oak and their characteristics, and how to use the machinery. It was quite different in the drawing studio, however. All students had been asked to purchase different drawing pencils and different types of paper. Without any instruction, the students were given an assignment where they were told to draw different kinds of knobs for different purposes. Henry tried his best and hoped for help from his drawing teacher, who was an artist, at his scheduled supervision lasting 20 minutes. He was quite surprised when the artist started with a brutal critique of his drawing, saying it looked like samples of clouds. When Henry asked his supervisor for help to improve his drawing, the drawing teacher said: "I am not here to teach you how to draw. I am here to inspire you." Henry was also told to find out by himself how to draw better. He experienced the so-called supervision as rather patronising, and left his supervisor before the end of his scheduled 20 minutes.

The differences between the teaching and supervision in the three studios revealed different teaching cultures, and unfortunately, these examples are not unique. For Henry, it was choking to experience how his lack of competence in drawing was dealt with by his artist teacher. It seemed unfair that his fellow students received helpful supervision in order to learn how to handle advanced machines and material qualities within the woodwork studio, which he already knew, while he was met by an arrogant attitude when asking for help to draw better. Luckily for Henry, he had connections outside college who could help him with some elements and principles of drawing. Here again, the RTTD attitude contributed to maintaining differences in respect of drawing—unlike the situation in the other studios, where the teachers efforts were directed to involving as many students as possible in the skills and knowledge of the field.

Plural concepts of drawing

Youngsters are fully capable of using different drawing concepts when they learn the underlying principles. Below is a drawing of a stock car at the planning stage, made by an eleven-year-old boy. This drawing was done with pleasure and joy, and he could choose to use the drawing concept that fit his purpose. The ideological contradictions between visualising an artefact in the way it is seen, which Plato criticised, or visualising an artefact with true angles and measurements, as Plato preferred, is a matter of history (Plato, 1992; Nielsen, 2013). Today, any youngster can benefit from the different concepts developed, and use them for their own purposes. It can be concepts of representing the world as it appears, with overlapping, diminution and linear perspective or concepts of representing the world and new ideas by projections, with plan and frontal/profile elevations.
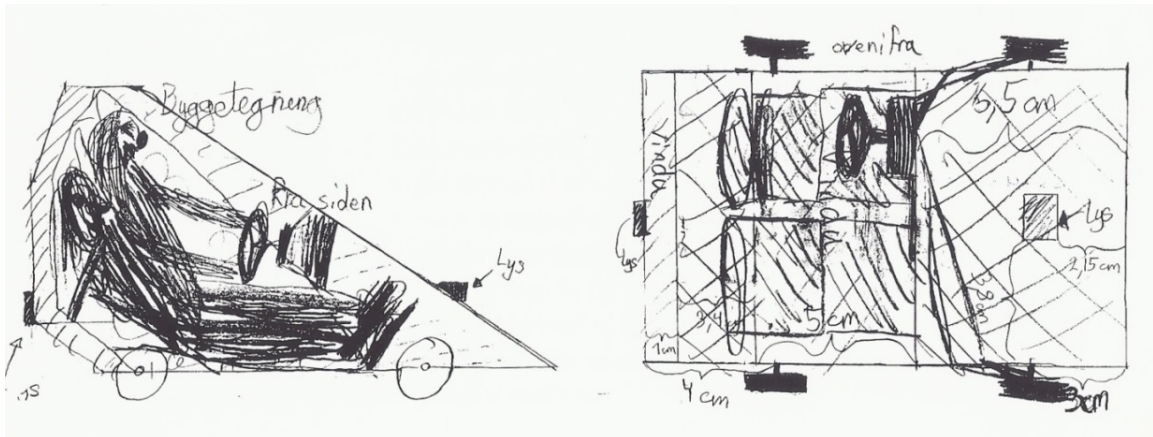
Figure 5: This working drawing for a stock car was made by an eleven-year-old boy. He has chosen to use the drawing concepts of profile elevation and plan in order to fit the purpose of his project. The stock car was made home at his spare time. (Image: private)

Figure 6: During the process of building the car, he discovered that it was difficult to fit two persons in the front because it made the car too wide. As both the designer and the builder, he could easily modify the project to be a stock car with a hanger for two. (Photo: Linda Cartridge)

This boy was combining drawing and making, probably because he had seen such practise at home. The drawing served as a point of departure and was modified during the process—not unlike professional processes. Such training of visualisation skills through simple challenges to more complex ones is a way of learning to master more and more advanced visualisation tools. For most of us, this starts with pencil and paper. It is neither expensive nor difficult to develop drawing skills as a base for the development of design literacy, where both the visualisation of ideas and their transfer into appropriate materials is essential.

Citizenship for the future
In more and more fields of knowledge, increasing use is made of visualisation of complex matters, as illustrated above in the cases of fashion and engineering. As a main objective for education is to

empower youngsters to become active participants in developing our future, visual communication and drawing was strengthened in the Norwegian curriculum *Knowledge Promotion* in 2006 (Kunnskapsløftet, 2006). In the subject Art and Crafts (A&C), the focus was on following four areas: Visual Communication, Design, Art and Architecture. Implementation of the curriculum has not, however, been satisfactory yet. The RTTD attitude among teachers may serve as one explanation of this gap between the formal and the operationalised curricula, as this RTTD- attitude has its fundament in the ideological curricula (Goodlad, 1979; Nielsen, 2009). The RTTD attitude has not helped to develop the education of youngsters to engage with multiple visual challenges in the future. In this context, I am thinking especially of the design literacy of future generations.

I am sure that there are many instances like that of the eleven year old boy making drawings to build his stock car—so simple and still so complex, playful and yet very serious. It gathers the now and the future, and it goes to the very core of the education of future generations. For far too many years our planet has been troubled by an excessive consumer culture and increasing waste and pollution. We need new generations who can create new solutions—design-literate youngsters with the ability to create a better future. Debunking the RTTD attitude would be one small but significant step towards that education and that future.

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