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a sheet of large white drawing paper

I am at primary school. It is the last hour of the day on Friday afternoon and we are having art. My teacher has provided every student with a sheet of white drawing paper. “Take out your crayons and draw a picture,” she says. We are given some suggestions but the teacher makes it clear that the choice is ours. At first I am calm, certain that an idea will come. But as the minutes escape, I begin to panic. Everyone else seems to be absorbed in drawing. Am I the only one who isn’t drawing something? I have always enjoyed writing stories. However, I would rather take a history test than draw a picture. Why? Because I’m not an artistic sort of person. Oh no . . . the period is almost over. My paper, like my mind, is blank. The teacher will wonder . . . Should I simply draw a few quick mountains, add some clouds, and stick a sun up in the corner? It’s not something I’d want to share with anyone but at least I’ll be finished.

visual thinking and visual art — a vital connection

The arts are neglected because they are based on perception, and perception is disdained because it is not assumed to involve thought. In fact, educators and administrators cannot justify giving the arts an important position in the curriculum unless they understand that the arts are the most powerful means of strengthening the perceptual component without which productive thinking is impossible in every field of academic study.

What is most needed is not more aesthetics or more esoteric manuals of art education but a convincing case made for visual thinking quite in general. Once we understand in theory we might try to heal in practice the unwholesome split which cripples the training of reasoning power.

Rudolf Arnheim
Visual Thinking

visual atrophy

During primary and secondary school, I had many other uncomfortable experiences with large white drawing paper. In year four I was given a low mark on my report in art. The teacher wrote that I lacked creativity and motivation. This comment disturbed me a great deal and I came to the conclusion that it would be best to leave art to those with talent. For many years that is just what I did.

Later it became clear that I was not the only person on this planet who felt ill at ease with art. Many if not most of the classroom teachers I meet are insecure about their ability to draw and provide art instruction in the classroom. As one year five teacher told me, "When I was a student, we spent the entire day studying academic subjects so that we would be able to do well at university. I don't think anyone felt that learning how to draw or take part in art activities would help us to be successful as adults. Also, I'm not sure that any of my teachers ever learned how to draw when they were at school." This statement brings to the surface two important questions. Is it necessary for every student to learn how to draw? And, how important is art instruction in a child's education?

While reading *Experiences In Visual Thinking* by Robert McKim, I encountered the term visual atrophy.¹ These two words became a neon sign in my mind. As a veteran classroom teacher, I have observed a kind of visual atrophy which occurs when students are provided with a one-sided education in the 3 R's. Taught always to name what they see, many students attach a label to the visual stimulus before they really see it. For example, word-dependent learners rarely see trees in all their many shades of green. They fail to notice the shape of a limb and the feel of the bark. Nor do they observe the complex relationship of the trunk, bark, limb, twig, and leaf. When asked to draw a tree, students whose visual perception has atrophied struggle unsuccessfully to draw a lifelike tree or instead choose to simply draw a roundish green circle with a brown stick for a trunk. Their inability to draw one of the most common life forms on our planet is a symptom of an educational system that focuses almost entirely on secondhand reality encoded in words and numbers.

I am certain that one major reason many educators view art instruction as a frill is because they are not aware that thinking can occur in other than verbal and mathematical modes. To better understand the importance of visual modes of thought, it is worth considering two notable scientific discoveries, both of which are cited in McKim's book.

Penicillin. Sir Alexander Flemming had been working with some plates of staphylococci. After opening the plates several times they became contaminated. He observed that staphylococci around one particular colony had died. This observation by itself was not particularly remarkable since it had long been known that some bacteria interfere with the growth of others. Flemming, however, went on to discover penicillin. He saw the possible significance of what had occurred because he possessed an ability to see things from a new, fresh perspective. He didn't look and then sit down to think, he used his active eyes and mind together.