Stability and flexibility in the artistic toolbox of children’s Formal Drawing Style

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Children’s drawings have a “signature” quality (Hartley, J. L. et al., 1982, Pufall & Pesonen, 2001, and Somerville, 1982). We have identified formal aspects of drawing that constitute formal drawing styles (FDS) that are relatively constant even as children alter the content or purpose of their drawings (Berth-Rogiers, Bernstein & Pufall, 2004).

Formal drawing styles are not rigid programs of action, but dynamic systems organized about aspects of drawing or tools of mark making that are exploited in different ways as children vary their drawings to convey different meaning. We have identified nine aspects of drawing – the dynamic constituents of FDS – that are grouped into the higher order nodes of line, object, composition and decorative detail.

Our analysis of children’s drawings of a house within different Genre (signature, illustration and aesthetic images) indicate that aspects of line and composition anchor a child’s FDS and did not distinguish among the genre. By contrast, shape and form were perceived to be similar across the drawings and to distinctions among genre.

This pattern was constant between 2nd and 6th grade. It suggests that the stability of FDS is anchored in properties of line and composition, while other aspects’ contributions to style vary as a function of what children draw and why they draw it.

The two studies reported here test predictions implied in this model of FDS. In the Action Study, children drew three images of human actions, and in the Content Study, they drew three formally different objects.

**Method**

**Action study**

**Participants:** Twenty 4-, 5-, 6-, 8- and 10-year-old children attending a private day school associated with a private college participated in the study.

**Procedure:** Children were tested individually. They drew a child, a child playing ball and a child pushing a wagon on an 8.5 by 5.5 inch paper with a number 2 lead pencil. The order of the drawings was varied systematically across children.

**Rating Aspects of Drawings:** College-aged female judges rated the three drawings of each child. One third of the judges rated the extent to which each Aspect of Drawing (Table 1) was similar across drawings (**Vividness of Style**), one third rated the extent to which differences in each Aspect differentiated the actions (**Meaningful Differences**), and the last third rated the extent to which there were random variations in each Across the three drawings (**Unmeaningful Differences**). They used a four-point scale with 0 representing no similarity or difference and 3 significant similarity or difference that conveyed meaning or difference per se.

Agreement was defined as making the same rating or a rating differing by one scale value. The judges agreed on over 85% of their ratings.

**Content Study**

**Participants:** Fifteen 8-, ten 10-, and ten 12-year-old children, attending the same private day school as the children in the Action study, participated in this study. None of the children participated in both studies.

**Procedure:** The children were tested in groups of between 6 to 10 of their peers. In a random order they each drew a dog, tree or house with a number 2 lead pencil.

**Rating Aspects of Drawings:** Following the same procedures used in the Action study, two experimenters have done preliminary ratings. Judges agreed on 80% of their ratings.

**Results**

The ratings in the Action (Figure 1) and Content (Figure 2) study were analyzed separately by a mixed model ANOVA. Age and sex of the children were between group variables; aspects of representation was the within subject variable.

Within each study the three instruction conditions (similarity, differences that convey meaning, and differences as random variations) were analyzed separately. There were no significant differences in the ratings of similarity ratings across ages in either study; however, ratings of random and meaningful variations were higher for the older children (4th and 6th grade) than the younger ones. That is, older children vary their drawings to a greater extent than the younger ones do.

As in the Genre study, there were differences among Aspects of Drawing; however, Grade Level did not interact with Aspects of Drawing. That is, the pattern of the relative contribution of each aspect to similarity (style) and difference were invariant over the grade school years.

**Conclusions**

**Formal Drawing Style** is developmentally paradoxical. The formal style of a 5-year-old will not look like his style at age 10. Yet our research indicates that FDS is continuously crafted out of the same artistic tools or aspects of drawing.

The tools of style are dynamic; they serve the dual functions of preserving style and creating meaningful differences. Tools that craft the *lines* or *composition* picture the emphasis similar style, their *duality* is weak or unbalanced.

By contrast, tools that *shape* and *texture* objects reveal a strong duality. The balance of style and meaning can swing from one extreme to another depending on the content and purpose of drawing.

The studies we have done have revealed but not tested the limits of these dualities; indeed each study suggests a new partitioning of the tools of style, *e.g., form and density* appear to be weak dualities that may complement line and composition as anchors of formal drawing style.