

Creative approaches: Draw-to-learn

Drawing is one of the most under-used learning techniques or academic literacies. Perhaps because most of us stop drawing when we leave primary school, it becomes something that we do not do. Instead of being enjoyable, drawing makes us feel vulnerable, silly, inadequate or foolish. But drawing can be an intellectual activity that helps us analyse, reflect upon, investigate, explore and communicate about the world, our experiences and our studies.

Practical draw-to-learn activities

Here are some ways to use drawing in your studying and learning. As always, try the ideas out and see how useful they are to you in practice.

“When you told me what we’d have to do in your class, I wanted to leave – but it was too late ... I’m so glad it was too late. The creative approaches were a revelation – and the assignment got me my best grade...”

Draw a journey – to success

Draw a story board or timeline that shows how you got to be at university. Put in pictures that represent key moments or turning points in your life. Reflect on your journey to university. Then draw a story board or timeline of how you see yourself succeeding at university. Make this as creative as possible – draw your goals and visions. Pin this picture over your desk to inspire you when you get frustrated or stuck.

Academic pictiography

Choose a word or term or concept from the course you are studying. Instead of explaining that concept to someone else in words, draw a diagram or picture that represents the word for you. Show it to another person and see if they can guess what you were trying to say. Then discuss it.

Draw your notes

After reading a chapter just draw a representation or diagram of all the information that was in there. Use one side of a piece of paper – make that paper any size that you want. Use as many colours as you like and be as imaginative as possible with your images. Reflect on how well you now understand that reading.

“There was this group of students working with young people on a drawing project... and it was so cool because they all used their overalls as their learning logs! They would draw pictures on them. Write notes on them. Paste things onto them. I've been wanting to do that myself ever since.”

Picture your lecture

Go to your next class or lecture and make notes only in pictures – write no words at all. If worried that you will miss important information this way, pair up with a friend and make sure that you compare notes at the end. When we have experimented with this technique, these drawn notes are always the ones that we remember for the longest time.

Collage your project plan

If having trouble getting started on an essay or a project, use creative visualisation techniques. Make a habit of collecting pictures from newspapers and magazines so that you always have a store of images.

When you want to get started on a new project use the images to create a collage (a picture made from sticking other pictures on a surface together). With your topic or question in mind, choose pictures that seem to represent the question, parts of an answer, your own beliefs or thoughts on the topic at that time. Combine the images you have chosen by sticking them onto a large sheet of paper in a way that makes sense to you.

Reflect on the picture you have created and see if it gets you started on your assignment journey. To help here write out or say into a recorder a literal description of what is on the picture; what the collage represents; how the collage ‘answers’ the question.

These processes not only help to unblock you when stuck – they also help you to see things in fresh and energising ways.

Pictorial reflective journal

We have recommended that you keep a reading dossier (Chapter 10) that captures your reflections upon your reading. Either in that journal, or in a separate ‘whole learning’ journal, reflect very visually upon your learning by drawing a picture or creating a collage every day, or at least every week, whilst you study. Annotate with key words if you wish – but definitely form

the pictures first. After a while, think about how this form of reflection has deepened and enriched your understanding of your course.

“At the end of our project we all had to produce one quilt piece that summed up the learning for us. We could sew on the piece – or make a collage on it... We were allowed to stick things on it – whatever we wanted. At the end all our pieces were sewn together into a friendship quilt of the module. It was a great experience – and the quilt is still hanging in the university hall.”

No, no, no – I really can't draw!

If your response to the visualising and drawing ideas suggested above is captured in our sub-heading: no, no, no... then try these one minute drawing tips proposed by Eileen Adams at an Access Art Sketchbook conference (accessart.org.uk, 2011). Remember – the idea is not to be a brilliant technical drawer – it is to liberate your drawing self and to harness that to liberate your creative self. Given that this will get easier with practice, why not try drawing regularly, say for five minutes a day or five minutes a week? You can do this in private if you are self-conscious; but we have found that doing these things with other people is more fun.



Five drawings in five minutes

Read the list below and draw a picture in response to five of the words for one minute each.

Asymmetric, beautiful, colourful, detailed, edge, far away, geometric, hidden, inside, joint, knot, look up, miniscule, number, opening, pattern, quirky, reflection, sensuous, texture, underneath, view through, wall, you choose.

Keep these drawings in a little exercise book and just enjoy them – or see how you can use the drawings in your notemaking, learning and revision practices.

Pauline Ridley from Brighton University and LearnHigher has put together *Drawing to Learn* booklets that can be downloaded from her website. Use these to help you to be more creative and more successful in your studies (or access via the LearnHigher website).



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