



Slow looking

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Introduction

My interest in the practice of looking slowly was fired by a Project Zero conference in Washington some years ago. Shari Tishman spoke about the profound benefits of "taking the time to carefully observe more than meets the eye at first glance". Keen to implement what I had learnt on my return to Sevenoaks, I soon realised that in the busy hurly burly of life in the Art Department, we are always trying to race to meet a deadline, finish a painting before an exhibition or sign off a piece of coursework; the last thing on our minds was doing anything slowly. I came to realise that the benefits may be more keenly felt in two areas: wellbeing and academic recall. Whilst of course my approach has been largely informed by my experience as an art teacher, I am more interested in how slow looking can be embraced to enhance these other areas.

What is slow looking?

At the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts, a group of medical residents gathers in front of a large painting. Their purpose is to develop their observation skills through looking at art. A museum guide tells them to look closely at the painting and talk about what they see. As the conversation unfolds, the residents are surprised to discover how differently they each interpret the painting, even though they are all drawing on the same visual clues. The experience causes them to think anew about their own clinical practices.

Tishman (2018) uses this example of an exercise in looking slowly. Other examples, in a school context could be:

- Isolating small areas of an image to encourage students to notice and recall visual information.
- Making students carefully draw and label an anatomical diagram rather than simply supplying them with one.
- Providing a scaffolded approach to responding to an image or text. Students are required to make notes in response to an image/text under a variety of categories.
- An alternative to the above, Tishman suggests (p. 13) open inventories as a way of encouraging an "encyclopaedic-like" approach, where students document everything they notice in an image or document.
- Looking at objects through a microscope "forces" slow looking.
- Tishman (p.24) suggests juxtaposition as a strategy where the objects are contrasted and slow comparison reveals meaningful information. For example, plant specimens can be juxtaposed to reveal differences and similarities between species.

Slow looking drawing classes

Scheduled for the summer term, The Royal Drawing School (RDS) have been collaborating in the conception of a series of life classes, with an emphasis on slow observation of the human form. Now scheduled for the Michaelmas term, the idea is to offer these classes to both staff and students, specifically to those with little or no experience of drawing. During the period of remote learning in the summer term, as a preamble to this, I offered a series of short lunchtime sessions to a group of staff. Diverse in terms of subject, the group of teaching and support staff undertook a range of looking activities. Drawing was the primary medium of recording the response to observation but the process and emphasis was on looking slowly and carefully.



The digital format was unfamiliar and perhaps some of the benefit felt was in the human contact in our shared remoteness. I set no aim for the sessions other than the hope that they would be a pleasant activity. Informal feedback was very positive, with one participant describing the sessions as a "lifeline" during the term. It is hoped that a similarly diverse body will attend the RDS sessions and that more formal feedback can be obtained in order to create a body of evidence.

Wellbeing

I hesitate to make any claims in this area. I am cautious of any theory that gushes about a link between visual self expression and wellbeing. However, having spent long hours myself drawing, I know that the intense concentration and sustained observation required when drawing from life are enough to distract and take the mind into an area that is some form of retreat from the worries and concerns of everyday life. Is it helpful to go beyond that to attempt to prove so scientifically? Perhaps and perhaps not. I suppose it depends who one is trying to convince. When I teach a drawing class as part of an IB course, I have no doubt that it is one of the most demanding aspects of the process; the students are very aware that their output will be judged and ultimately assessed. This surely is not to occupy a comfortably cosy wellbeing-oriented state; they may even find it stressful! Does that mean that the process must be private and with no "stake" involved? Possibly; I certainly agonised with the remote staff sessions about whether the group should "share" the drawings at the end.

There have been studies into the mental health benefits of making art. Drake, Hastedt and James (2016) contrasted two approaches to drawing. One was as a means of self expression and releasing feelings whilst the other concentrated on intense observation, which seems to me a parallel to slowness. It found that the latter approach achieved a higher reported sense of improved mood. This would suggest that a structured, scaffolded approach to looking and recording those observations through drawing offer some form of positive release.

Academic

I am also intrigued by the notion that looking slowly might have practical applications in other subjects. Informal conversations with colleagues suggest that careful redrafting of a factual illustration such as an anatomical drawing in a biology lesson might help retention of specialist vocabulary more solidly than if the illustration is simply supplied to the student.

A project has been undertaken in a school that explores the potential of doodling alongside classnotes to support retention, "Pupils can draw on the power of doodles to aid memory" (Woolcock 2020). Tests on memorising lists of words suggested that a simple drawing of the word was more effective than simply repeatedly writing it down to memorise it. The quality of the drawing was not relevant. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that this approach to slow looking, whilst distinct in its aims, is certainly worthy of future investigation and experiment.

Future steps

Looking ahead, I am hoping to sustain my investigation into both the wellbeing and memory retention potential of looking slowly. I hope to be able to gather persuasive evidence of the practical benefits of both approaches to present to colleagues and students in the hope that looking slowly becomes a natural part of their approach to school life.

References

Drake, J. E., Hastedt, I., & James, C. (2016). Drawing to distract: Examining the psychological benefits of drawing over time. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 10(3), 325–331. Available here: <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000064> [accessed 28 June 2020]

Woolcock N (2020) Pupils can draw on the power of doodles to aid memory, *The Times*, 4 April

Tishman S (2018) *Slow Looking, The art and practice of learning through observation*, Routledge

