

Drawing in the workplace.

In this paper we set out our thoughts on the power of drawing as an activity which can challenge our perceived limitations and encourage thinking in a new, non-linear way.

This can have particular value in a business setting. Starting with some consideration of the context in which drawing may be a powerful activity, we set out some of the ways in which Creative Shift can introduce drawing into the workplace. Finally we provide some details on two distinct drawing based activities – drawing from direct observation and drawing inspired by thoughts and feelings. Both have different applications and outcomes. This paper aims to give you some insights into both and some tools to try yourself.

The fear of being wrong

Sir Ken Robinson talks about the ways in which our public education system, among its many failures, conditions us to think that the worst thing that we can be as adults is “wrong”. This contributes to an unwillingness to take chances and prevents us from asking interesting questions and therefore coming up with original ideas. Clearly your organisation needs highly motivated individuals with high personal standards and an urge to succeed. You want people who are confident in their opinions and in their ability to make decisions and have good ideas. These people are no doubt educated to a high level and know what is required in their industry and in your organisation. So why on earth would you encourage them to spend time learning to draw?

“The wrong answer is the right answer in search of a different question. Collect wrong answers as part of the process. Ask different questions.”

Bruce Mau¹

More than marks

Giving professionals a chance to engage with an activity in which they are actively encouraged to make mistakes and take risks again in the workplace can lead to a more dynamic atmosphere in your organisation. Drawing is about so much more than making marks on paper.

“As his most famous statement had it, Klee took a line for a walk. It snaked, looped, wandered off, and turned back on itself as it made its fitful journey through the worlds of his invention. A line can run dead straight, be wildly crooked, nervously wobbly, make sensuous curves or aggressive angles. It can meander, wander, track or trace. Be a scribble, doodle, scratch, hatched, dashed, dribbled or trickled. It can be precise or fuzzy, hard or soft, firm or gentle, thin or thick. It can be smudged,

¹ Bruce Mau, Design Manifesto 1998, www.brucemaudesign.com

smear, erased – or just fade away. You can push a line, drag it, manipulate and manoeuvre it, make it delineate, accentuate, attenuate, emphasize. A line may be imperious or modest, authoritative or servile, brutal or seductive, passive or active, weak or strong, thick or thin. A line is born, and dies, in a point.”²

Learning to draw can unlock a non linear way of thinking that encompasses a wider variety of modes of intelligence. This allows people to think more dynamically, take risks and ask more interesting questions. This in turn leads to more interesting solutions.

“Learning how to ask relevant and interesting questions is an essential feature of a curious and enquiring mind, and should be at the centre of everyone’s educational experience.”

M.Maslam³

What We Do

Creative Shift’s Artist Advisor Dean Melbourne has been involved in the practise of these drawing methods both as a student and an educator for 20 years. His system of teaching cherry picks from both traditional and contemporary thinking on the subject. He has modified these techniques and concepts that are often designed for a art students to find the most effective exercises for adults engaging with drawing either after a break or for the first time. In short for those that would say “I can’t draw”.

His use of drawing as a tool in the workplace falls into two distinct activities. The first of these is to re-engage participants with formal drawing training from direct observation. This process can lead to profound personal revelations as well as improving team communication, performance and personal confidence by challenging assumptions. The second approach is to use automatic drawing or doodling as a tool to give a fresh perspective in the resolution of challenges and issues for individuals, teams and companies.

The fantastically simple and lowest tech act of making marks on a surface with an implement can, with the right focus be a revelation for an adult who has not engaged with drawing since adolescence.

Some of the benefits that can be derived from engaging with drawing are:

- A new way to see your world, a **fresh perspective**, new eyes to see with
- Personal **limitations are challenged** and overcome

²Alan Fletcher, “The Art of Looking Sideways”

³ Mick Maslam, “Drawing Project”

- You will become **more aware** of your environment
- Drawing improves the ability to transition between logical, linear thinking (Doing Mode) and a **more creative** non linear pattern (Being mode)
- Trust in **intuition may increase**
- The meditative nature of drawing can also leave you feeling more **centred and focused**
- Your memory can improve.
- It produces an overall state of **increased alertness** that will have knock on benefits for all of your thinking.

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes".

Marcel Proust

"Unfortunately most adults' drawing skills do not develop beyond those of the young adolescents who gave up drawing. The world is full of educated people who, it is assumed, see the as sophisticated adults, but draw like adolescent."

Maslam and Southern, Drawing Projects⁴

We can take a team through this process as a together and demonstrate even greater results. The team will be supported to take on what can at first seem to be a nerve wracking and awkward-feeling challenge. This is not a simulated "pressure task". There is nothing staged about the feelings of challenge. As a result of going beyond the genuine fear of looking foolish your team will learn to empathise, to critique responsibly and to challenge notions of ownership and value of work.

The freedom to try

Results for participants and teams are often surprising. After often tentative beginnings participants tell us that they become engrossed in their progress and look forward to following sessions.

Participants often make much quicker progress than they expect to and this gives a great satisfaction and teams become a very supportive unit when faced with the same fear.

Teams are encouraged to develop critiquing skills and discuss each others drawings. Giving and receiving feedback responsibly is a skill that groups are often surprised by.

⁴ Maslam & Southern "Drawing Projects"



Managers have reports that the sessions have changed the way that an entire company communicated. Stating that the team “barely spoke” to each other before hand despite being in an open plan office.

Being faced with instructions that often that allow for interpretation often professionals who are usually sure footed find themselves having to take a chance. It is surprising just how terrified a group of adults can be when asked to take a leap of faith. The rewards and learning in those circumstances can change an entire team dynamic.

Our sessions are always open to ALL staff. We encourage senior leaders and support staff alike to take part. This level playing field gives everyone a chance to shed presumptions and preconceptions that they hold about themselves and the team.

One particular example saw a office manager in a creative company (who felt very reticent about taking part as she was “not a creative”) take massive strides and become a shining light during the process. Her confidence and communication with designers benefited enormously. These benefits echoed throughout the company.

Drawing from Direct Observation.

Drawing what you see sounds like a simple enough task. In reality it is in equal parts a rewarding, frustrating, beguiling, relaxing, exhausting activity to engage with.

The first job for an adult who is re engaging with drawing after a long break is to re-define his or her idea of what drawing is, or might be. It is often a result of a misunderstanding that lead to them disengaging in the first place.

When we learn to draw from direct observation it requires that we make a shift in consciousness. Which can take a considerable amount of unlearning of habits and preconceptions.

Creative shift’s session provide the appropriate conditions and guidance, leaving the participants mind free from the correcting influence of the left brain hemisphere’s logical mode.

We use a mode of learning that has been used and adapted by schools of art for hundreds of years but takes into consideration the latest thinking on brain function and creativity.

We begin with an exploration of line and contour. This is the perfect way to reset the way that we look and to challenge our hand eye co-ordination. While engaged in these initial “problems” it is possible for participants to gain insight into the way in which their brain has become accustomed to thinking and how it feel when that is challenged.

We provoke and challenge the brain in a number of ways by setting tasks that would seem to be unnecessarily difficult. The results are often surprising for the participant in terms of the drawings that they make and the way that they feel as they do so.

In taking part in this process information is taken in through the eyes, and other senses, examined, and restructured in the language and materials of drawing it offers participants the chance to really look at the forms, structures, spaces and surfaces of the world in which live, and thereby gaining a greater understanding of them and express their own particular point of view.

For professional who are required to “know” and awful lot it can be a real challenge to be in a situation where we challenge the value of knowledge. In learning to draw what we see and not what we know we take a small step towards a more open and mindful relationship with our surroundings and the people that inhabit them.

Try it for yourself

Find a quiet space, a piece of paper and a pencil. No need to be fussy about what you draw with but the quiet bit is essential.

Screw up a piece of paper into a ball and place it on another piece that is flat on a desk.

Focus your attention on the balled paper and spend a moment bringing you gaze to the combination of lines, contours, shadows and forms. Take it in.

This drawing exercise is all about letting your hand follow your eye around the object. Imaging that your eye is a lazer pointer tracing its way around the object.

The aim is for your hand to follow the route exactly of your eye. If your eye goes up and left so does your hand.

The most important and difficult aspect of this task is that you focus on the balled paper and not on your drawing. If you can avoid looking at your drawing at all that is great. If you do want to look lift your pencil from the paper. Avoid the temptation to draw when you are not focused on the object.

The drawing you make will be perhaps a little odd in appearance. Things may not join up and the scale and shape may appear to be “wrong”.

Good drawing is in the intention and the intention here is to look and follow the eye.

Draw for at least 5 minutes. Afterwards look at your drawing to see if you can match at least parts of it with the object.

Take an internal weather check. Has your state changed at all?

Free association drawing (doodling).

This is the kind of drawing you do when you are in a meeting (and should be paying attention) or waiting in a telephone queue. It is the stuff that when we relax or zone out just tumbles from our brain and exits through our hands.

Drawing in this way but with your attention gently bought to a particular aspect of your life, business or specific challenge you face can be really useful in helping you understand what is going on in your subconscious. Interpreting these thoughts and drawings in a similar way to the way handwriting can be analysed can be revealing and give you clues as to possible behaviour patterns or give you a new perspective of the issues that you face.

This is not about divining the future, we are not reading tea leaves and unlike a “psychic” its not about making guesses about a person’s life or personality. We are simply observing what the mind chooses to select and the way in which it represents or omits.

Try it for yourself

Think of an idea, issue or challenge (personal or business). We will call this your “issue”.

Hold the issue in your mind’s eye and begin to draw. Don’t focus on the issue itself, relax and allow yourself to “doodle” freely.

If you notice that your issue is no longer centre stage in your attention, gently bring your attention back to it and continue to doodle or embellish.

When you have finished, put the pencil down.

Making the Drawing

It's important when making your doodle to spend enough time for your brain to make the switch from analytical thinking to a more open state. This can take a while especially if you spend most of your life problem solving and thinking logically.

You will feel it happen though.

The act of drawing may feel sticky and difficult; you may even feel a resistance to doing it. This is because your logical brain thinks it is a waste of time and pointless.

You will find that eventually you will stop thinking and get lost in your doodling. This is good and means that you subconscious is now expressing itself.

What to look for in your drawing.

1) The type of drawing

Did you draw a pictorial representation of your issue? Or did you draw a diagram of the way things connect? Did you draw a machine like doodle that shows the time-based process you go through? This very basic decision of how to represent your issue says something of how you think about it.

You might think "Well yes, but I knew that already, so what?". So a more interesting thought is what would it mean if I thought about my business a differently. What am I missing? Why did you not choose the myriad of other option available?

2) Area of attention

You may notice looking back that some elements of your drawing draws you in and you give them a little more care than others. This could indicate attachment or a level of priority. This area could reveal something about your values or simply what is on your mind right now.

3) Look at the negative space.

It is as revealing to look at the space around "objects" in your arrangement. Are things anchored or floating? Have you squashed your drawing into one bit of the paper? What could have gone into that space that you chose not to draw?

4) Lines

Lines can be a so many things. Hard or soft lines are interesting; they can show strength of commitment to the statement. The speed of lines is often overlooked. Fast lines are drawn quickly and can be read by the eye quickly. They indicate certainty or the desire to move on. They guide our eye around to the next element. Slow lines take time to draw and also to read. They are like the line of the coast on map. They are complex and uncertain. Of course there is a huge variation of speed of line. A wavy line may indicate some lack of certainty.

5) What would you change?

A really useful question to ask yourself particularly when looking at a challenge or problem is what change would you make to your drawing to make it feel better? Maybe move an element from inside a box to outside? Connect two elements that are separate together. Move people around or even erase an aspect. Of course you may want to add something that you missed.

6) Make that change.



Draw in the missing element, connect, edit, erase and see how it looked. What could you interpret about this action for the real life challenge?

This position paper list was brought to you by boutique consultancy Creative Shift. Our tools and techniques harness improbable connections, promote intelligent activities to bring about inspiring results. If you want to talk to us about using drawing to develop strategy that sticks and high-performance teams in your business, please get in touch using the details below. For more details check out www.creativeshift.uk.com.

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