This paper has emerged from my interest in contemporary drawing practices and the role of observational drawing. In the secondary curriculum in the UK the latter is positioned within a pedagogical concept of art education that combines particular forms of representation with the assessment of skill and technical accomplishment. A concern with this has resulted in my current doctoral study which is based on the ways in which drawing from direct observation is experienced by pupils as part of their art and design education. Of further significance to the study are concepts of skill, dexterity and coordination since the participants in the study are described as dyspraxic.

Dyspraxia, alternatively referred to as Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) and associated with the ‘clumsy’ child (Kaplan, Crawford, Cantell, Kooistra, Dewey, 2006), is a term that identifies difficulties with the development of physical coordination related to sensory processing. However, it could be argued that factors used in determining whether a child is identified as dyspraxic are subject to complex social, cultural and more specifically educational contexts. The larger study, referred to here, seeks to critique the creation of the dyspraxic subject and drawing from observation by exploring the point at which the ‘dyspraxic ideal’ derived from, or created by, the literature intersects with participants’ experiences of compulsory art education. It is not the purpose of this paper to explore these complex issues yet this forms the context for the use and development of the drawings in the sketchbooks discussed in this paper.

Here I consider the role of my own drawing practice and sketchbook use in response to some of the emerging themes from this research. Although the empirical research for my thesis involves a qualitative narrative methodology (Riessman, 1993) my own drawing has continued to influence the ways in which my understanding of ‘traditional’ elements of qualitative inquiry have evolved through drawing practice. Here, I offer some reflections on the role that personal drawings in my sketchbook have played in this process of inquiry.

Until recently most of my sketchbook pages have been based on drawing or painting from direct observations of objects and landscapes, as well as collections of materials that have been used to collage layered mixed media work. These pages have been heavily time dependent worked and re-worked over extended periods. In more recent practice, I have attempted to force a departure from developing this busy mixed media
sketchbook aesthetic in an aim to force drawings that offer a space to play with some of the theoretical aspects of my research. I have also resisted a compulsion to draw from direct observation and have instead tried to respond to the physical act of drawing, the marks we make in and on the world rather than the marks we make of it (Dexter, 2005:6).
The focus of my recent research relates to drawing from observation, which I describe here as a heavy, distinct and purposeful line pursued via qualitative research in the formal and authorised setting of doctoral study. An ‘other’ line of visual inquiry found a place in my sketchbook pages and I describe this as ‘other’ in that it had an unauthorised role in personal responses that were tangential to the main study. These drawings are explorations without fixed ideas or direction and are both visual and tactile, exploring not only visual experimentation, relating to the image, but also random acts and shifts in the level of coordination, control and technical dexterity employed and a heavy handed line. They have been produced in response to my initial inquiry but have also contributed to the development of ideas by providing alternative modes of thought that have then re-emerged and eventually contributed to the writing process. This sketchbook has provided a specific focus on the nature and role of drawing.

The sketchbook, comprising 48 small-scale ‘free drawings’, reflect play and visual explorations of ideas related to my recent research into the role of observational drawing in compulsory art and design education. Informed by Peter Elbow’s discussion of the potential of ‘free writing’ as a means of freeing up exploratory rough writing, I adopted a similar approach in these drawings. Elbow (2000: 85) emphasises the conditions of free writing (a process by which you respond immediately and directly in written form without the constraints of an audience or the usual technical conventions of writing) which provide ‘a vacuum of unusual safety’. There are obvious connections here with the automatic drawings produced by the surrealists, with an emphasis on the accidental mark, yet I am more concerned with the affective dimension of the possibilities of creating a productive environment for drawing than the surrealist ambition to reconcile the ‘subjective and objective’ selves via a state of ‘harmony with the unconscious’ (Conley, 2008:8). I am also concerned here with the comparatively ‘low stakes’ environment that can be created by the sketchbook format as a ‘safe’ environment for such approaches. Although continually erased as tangential and potentially irrelevant to my thesis, my own drawing practice has remained a space for play and experimentation, a space to experience the ‘feel’ of these theoretical, and at times intangible, reflections with a sketchbook format providing a space for continuity and familiarity.

I started to draw by responding directly by making marks based on thoughts, reflections and recent experiences. I aimed at immediate, uncontrolled and heavy handed drawings working for approximately two minutes at a time before turning the page and beginning another rapid drawing. After working in this way for a few pages, I would turn back and draw into the images again, sometimes erasing the hard marks and working with whatever was left, working with the ghosts of these drawings.
In exploring some experiences of drawing from observation via personal narratives as part of my research, observational drawing has emerged, for some, as a dominant discourse in defining their own and others’ perceptions of ability in art and design. A further aspect of this study has centred on the connection between observation, representation and an emphasis on ‘the skilful hand’ (Carline, 1975). The description of the dyspraxic ‘clumsy’ and ‘immature’ drawing provides an opportunity for an interrogation of such assumptions about definitions of skill. Bourdieu’s (1984) aesthetic dualities described as ‘antagonistic adjectives’ have provided a theoretical framework for discussing aspects of these narratives emphasising a preoccupation with particular concepts of skill and idealised representation. Bourdieu describes these antagonistic adjectives as:

_The network of oppositions between high (sublime, elevated, pure) and low (vulgar, low modest), spiritual and material, fine (refined, elegant) and coarse (heavy, fat, crude, brutal), light (subtle, lively, sharp, adroit) and heavy (slow thick, blunt, laborious, clumsy) free and forced, broad and narrow, or, in another dimension, between unique (rare, different, distinguished, exclusive, exceptional, singular, novel) and common (ordinary, banal, commonplace, trivial, routine), brilliant (intelligent) and dull (obscure, grey, mediocre), is the matrix of all the commonplaces which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies the whole social order._ (Bourdieu, 1984:468)
The drawings produced in this sketchbook are personal responses to the ways in which such aesthetic properties become associated with definitions of drawing ability (drawing with a light, sensitive, accurate hand for example). Within this discussion, Bourdieu offers light, subtle and lively characteristics as a preferred aesthetic to the thick, heavy and clumsy mark. This also resonates with Ruskin’s earlier preoccupation with delicacy and refinement in *The Elements of Drawing* (Ruskin, 2007 [1857]).

In addition to these considerations of the historical and cultural formation of the aesthetic for *good* drawing, I have also been intrigued by the implications that such judgements may have on the potential for drawing as a vehicle for learning. Craig-Martin (1995:9) offers a view of drawing with the potential for:

- spontaneity, creative speculation, experimentation, directness, simplicity, abbreviation, expressiveness, immediacy, personal vision, technical diversity, modesty of means, rawness, fragmentation, discontinuity, unfinishedness, open-endedness.

The definitions that he uses here for drawing, which could as easily be applied to the use of a sketchbook, appears to offer the potential for both to be used as vehicles to promote learning by prioritising amongst other ideas, individual learning, risk-taking and a range of different approaches to drawing. The sketchbook appears a sympathetic environment for such activity compared to other public, open and finished formats. However, this may run contrary to the ways in which drawing (and the sketchbook) might be employed as technologies for assessment within compulsory education.

I remain convinced of the sympathetic relationship between art production and qualitative research outlined by Eisner (2003). Drawing more specifically can represent the uncertainty of undetermined conclusions, acknowledging what we do not know. What is ambiguous, intuitive, irrational, illogical, fictional and imagined has a place in drawing, researching and learning. In the context of this work, these drawings, although sitting outside of the research project, have re-confirmed the role that drawing can have for me as a tool for exploring, experimenting, and thinking. The sketchbook has created a risk-free space for playing and mistake-making. There is always a space to act and create. Drawing and responding in an intuitive way can create spaces for experiencing, thinking and learning where ‘not knowing’ can be a desirable place to be. Some might argue that it is an essential starting point for learning to take place (Poerksen, 2005).

**References:**


