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Creating a Culture of Critique

School: Edward Devotion School, Brookline, MA

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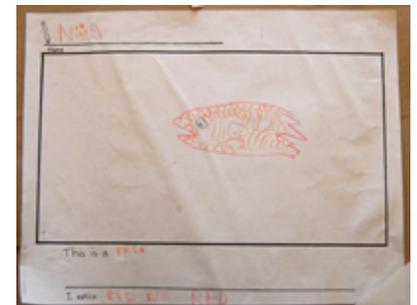
1. Perch drawing



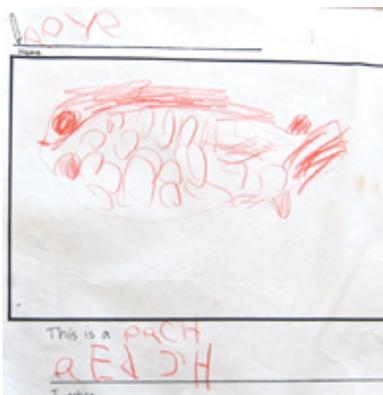
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As part of our study of ocean life, each child made an observational, or scientific, drawing of an ocean perch given to us by Mr. Wulf, the local fish monger. I noticed in working with small groups that even though the children had developed a good vocabulary of fish body parts, they needed many reminders to look at the fish. I continuously pointed out details to include in their drawings. In fact, some children approached the table with the fish on it and immediately began drawing from their previous knowledge base and imaginations, not even looking at the fish. Although the drawings they produced looked impressive to colleagues, I knew that I wanted them to be able to do this more successfully without me pushing them along at every pencil mark.

I had a hunch that with practice the children could help each other. In fact, I anticipated that the children could be much more effective in prompting one another than I could in my attempts to prompt each student. It would require of me guiding their observations and their comments toward collaboration, not competitive comparison, so that they could build a habit of positive critique. I did not want to hear them say, "I like this drawing." **I wanted them to develop a shared vocabulary that would help them provoke each other toward more satisfying representational experiences.**



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We gathered for a group meeting to look at the drawings. **Asking the right questions was essential.**

What do you notice in a drawing that reminds you of exactly how the fish looked?

What details did someone include that are very important?

Is there something in someone else's drawing that you wish you had included in your own?

The conversation was lively, highly respectful and productive. Children spoke carefully to describe various aspects of the fish drawings and how they related to what they remembered the real fish to look like. Not having a photograph of the fish there, children were not comparing drawings to the real thing, but were using the drawings to bring the fish forward in their minds; **they used each other's documentation to revisit the experience of studying the fish.** As one child remembered, *"It was hard to draw with this hand because I was holding my nose with this one."* This exercise made their efforts more relevant: drawing a fish wasn't just a task the teacher required; it moved the children toward exciting new understandings.



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2. Squid Drawing



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Children then set off to make another drawing, this time of a squid. **They used the immediate experience of examining and talking about their fish drawings to approach their drawings of the squid.** Although a teacher was seated at the table with them, the children were already using a new vocabulary of observation and discussing with each other their ideas about drawing the squid. **The teacher had already become a less potent force for prompting attention to detail as the children took on this role with each other,** talking aloud about their observations as they worked.

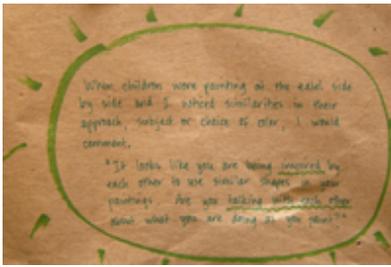
In subsequent preparation for parent-child-teacher conferences, many children chose their squid drawings as examples of their best work.



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3. Underwater Collage

Inspired by the illustrations in a book called Octopus Oyster Hermit Crab Snail, children worked on paper collage pictures of underwater life. After several days, some children had finished their work; some had just gotten started. Because the collage seemed to be a difficult task for many children, **I wanted them to share some ideas with each other** about how they went about making the various shapes in the pictures.



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I gathered the whole group together a morning meeting to look at the finished pictures spread on the floor. We remembered looking at their work in this way before, and **I suggested that one reason their earlier squid drawings were so satisfying was that they had shared their ideas about the fish drawings beforehand.** I told them that, similarly, we would be looking at their ocean collage pictures to make observations and ask questions about how the artists worked. This might help children who were still working with ideas about how to proceed. After this discussion, **some children who had previously considered their work finished decided to go back and work some more in order to try new techniques.**



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4. Bulletin Board



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At this point, I prepared a bulletin board for parents, colleagues and other students. Our class took a field trip? to the space just outside our classroom to see what other people would be seeing of the children's work. I shared some thoughts about how they had been helping each other to work, and they asked me to read aloud every bit of text. Each child was represented by one picture. Along with being pleased to see their work displayed, they saw the connections from one piece to another.

They began to understand each discreet effort as a piece of developing a larger body of community work, their individual contributions as part of a larger whole.

Emily: How did Evelyn make the octopus?

Evelyn: I drew it then I cut it out, and I glued it on the side where the pencil was so you don't see the pencil.

Ms. Tonachel: When Myasia used a pencil and then cut it out, she decided that she wanted the pencil lines to show. I see pencil lines on lots of pictures. Evelyn thought, if I flip it over, the pencil lines won't show.

Myasia: And that's what I did! Cause there were pencil lines on there, so actually when I was not listening, I put it on the wrong side and that looks like I didn't draw any lines.



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Juliette: How did Myasia make the seaweed?



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Myasia: This one, I only cutted it out, and then the other one, I only used a pencil then I cut it out.

Ebony: I want to know how Myasia made that long, skinny shape.

Myasia: I made it because I wanted an eel. First, I drew the picture on the paper, the white piece of paper, then I cut it out.

Ms. Tonachel: So, Evelyn just used scissors, and Myasia used a pencil first and then used scissors.

Myasia: Yeah.

Emily: I wonder how Alison made that clownfish.

Alison: How I made the clownfish? The clownfish that I made was that I cut out the orange fish out of orange paper and then I cut out some white stripes, and then I glued the white stripes onto the orange fish, then I glued the orange fish onto the paper. And then I decided to make the bubbles another day, that were light blue.

Winston: Or another way you could do it is you could cut the face, cut that [section], cut that [section], and then you could leave them so white paper could?you could use the white paper as the white stripes.



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5. Ladybugs



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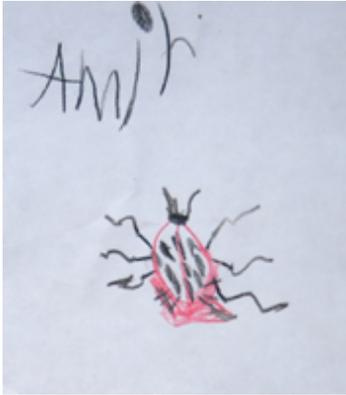
Some weeks later, we had some live ladybugs captive in our classroom as part of a study on insects. We had opportunities to observe the insects over a span of days, and we had a whole group discussion about what we were noticing about them. Children worked in small groups to observe, discuss and draw the ladybugs. During this time, teachers recorded children's discoveries about the ladybugs. We continued to observe the ladybugs closely, including during their release into a nearby garden.

Once the drawings were posted on a bulletin board, we met in small groups to look at them. We still had a few dead ladybugs and magnifiers to use for reference. First, the group looked at all the drawings posted on the wall and then turned their attention to their own, individual drawings. Children were invited to make observations about their own work; other group members then suggested possibilities for improving the drawings. These comments often referenced their own work or that of other children.

I suspect that this conversation would have been very risky had we not already built important experiences of and vocabulary for looking at each other's work.



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One group's conversation follows:

Ms. Tonachel: Let's look at one picture at a time. The artist will talk first and then other people can say what they think. **Is there anything you'd like to change about your drawing to make it look even more like a real ladybug?**

Amir: I want to put some red in the place where the dots are and then put a black line in the middle.

Allison: Make the legs straight.

Amir: I made it that way because I noticed the legs have a lot of joints and the antennas.

Winston: Make the dots more darker.

Amir: I saw one of them had lighter dots.

Allison: [I would change] nothing.

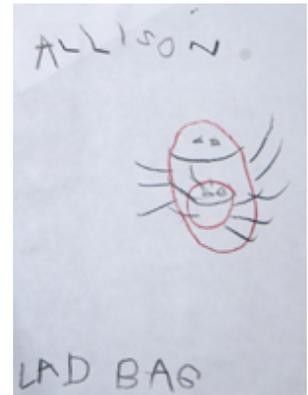
Amir: A black line in the middle.

Alison K.: Maybe you could color the head black because look at these the head is black.

Allison: Okay.

Evelyn: Maybe you should add some antennas so it would look more like a real ladybug because the real ladybugs had them.

Allison: Okay.



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Winston: I got all the details.

Alison K.: These [real ones] look really round and yours looks skinny, so maybe change it to round.

Allison: Maybe color the tips clear.

Winston: I can't color it clear.

Allison: Maybe keep it a little bit white.

Winston: Maybe the antennas should go straight up.

Evelyn: I thought I should put some white over it to try to make new ones because they

look kind of lopsided.

Allison: I think you should do the same thing.

Amir: On the antennas I think you shouldn't put any dots.

Winston: I think you should put a little wing.

Evelyn: I didn't want to, like you didn't want to.



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Alison K.: I could change it to erase these antennas because I can't really see them. The reason why one is all black is because it's the bottom, the backside.

Amir: You should connect those two legs.

Alison K.: I don't want to take that advice because I couldn't really see them.

6. Reflections About Critique



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What shared language emerges?

I was inspired by...

I notice...

Another way you could do it is...

I wonder...

Maybe...

How did you...

What if...

What habits began to form?

Asking for advice

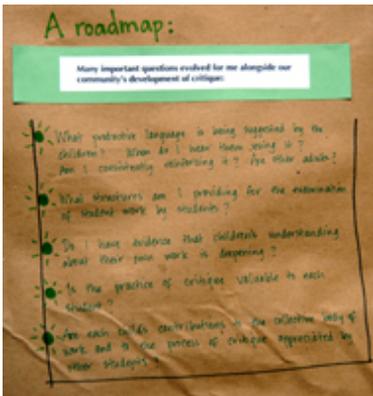
Sharing observations

Sharing ideas

Copying is acceptable

Referencing past experiences





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It seemed important to begin establishing this culture of critique explicitly and intensely, to keep the conversation constant and to consistently reinforce the vocabulary we were developing together. When children were painting at the easel side by side and I noticed similarities in their approach, color, or subject, I would comment: *It looks like you are being inspired by each other to use similar shapes in your paintings. Are you talking with each other about what you are doing as you paint?*

Some further thoughts about critique

Critique gives both the artist (writer, block builder, mathematician) and the observer something else to go on, a suggestion for a new turn in thinking and action.

If we are successful at changing the lens of comparison, subjectivity, and favoritism through new language and attitudes, and if we make clear that every child's every effort has value towards learning, then children are encouraged to develop a habit of expansiveness in their thinking.

The idea that "copying" is being inspired by someone else's work is a positive learning tool can be an uncomfortable one. Parents, too, in looking at their children's products, need to know that in a culture of collaboration, the sharing ideas, working from each other's beginnings, and offering suggestions, are welcome parts of any individual's learning. We can all ask children, "Where did that idea come from?" and "How did you learn to do that?" thereby encouraging children to reference their own past experiences and the contributions of others to their own thinking and discovery.

When children are engaged in looking carefully at each other's work, their ideas expand. They regard other people's work as resource, and so discover new paths of thought to pursue, new techniques and strategies to try. They enter another realm of imagination; that is, through the ideas of others and through the very effort of expressing their ideas about another's work they imagine and explore unfamiliar ways of expressing themselves.



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