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Initiating Experiences With Clay and Drawing As Dynamic Conversations

Jane Tingle Broderick

Introduction

Educators have long recognized the importance of visual arts experiences in early childhood (Gardner, 1993; Smith, 1983, Wright, 1997). Still, many teachers wonder about how to introduce these early arts experiences in constructivist settings where teachers have varying degrees of the following beliefs:

- Materials should be available for children to create with meaningfully in their own ways.
- Teachers should not set out prescribed art activities.
- The curriculum should emerge from the interests of the children.

Additionally many teachers worry about messes, depletion of materials, and a general concern about how children will build skills with materials if teachers are to leave children on their own to explore.

This article introduces two examples of an approach to materials where the teacher is as keenly aware of the children's interests as she is of the need for teacher provocation. In this way the teacher’s carefully planned interventions become part of a dialogue where learning is negotiated with the children (Forman and Fyfe, 1998; Forman et al, 1998). The first example is a group session with clay and the second is a child-teacher dialogue centered on drawing. An important distinction must be made about the examples that will be presented in this article. Both situations use the arts as a means of furthering the children's already developing thinking in a conceptual domain that is separate from the conceptual domain that includes the properties of arts materials. In this way the materials function as tools for expressing ideas about something else. They follow a tradition of multi-symbolization that encourages children to develop a deeper understanding of their ideas by representing them in a variety of materials (Forman and Fyfe, 1998; Forman et al, 1998). In addition to this approach the author strongly believes that all early childhood classrooms need to have ample sized art centers where children have easy access to a host of materials that they can explore on their own at any given time and there are numerous resources for materials exploration (Topal, 1992; Topal, 1983; Smith, 1983).

The two examples cited in this article are grounded in a socio-constructivist belief that children learn socially through imitation when the ideas being presented are suited to children's already developing knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). The teachers in this discussion know that while children will explore available materials on their own, they also benefit from suggestions, particularly about materials they don't use frequently. Knowledge they gain about the properties and possibilities of materials will lead children to think of working with them in future situations. In this manner the teacher’s suggestions serve as the social conduit through which the children learn. The key is for teachers to present their suggestions in an open-ended manner that encourages children to respond with their own ideas. The introduction of materials then becomes a first step in a dynamic dialogue with the children where ideas with materials are explored and discussed throughout the creative process.

This takes us to another feature of socially constructed learning environments where teachers rely on the “whole class” circle times to extend the thinking of a small group through the sharing of ideas. The clay presentation is an example of this approach that can be broken down into an eight-step process:
1) Teachers document the observations of children.

2) Teachers note that a number of children are developing play that is organized around certain lines of thought (ideas in first example: fencing in farm animals, exhausting the set of animals by trying to fit them all inside the fence, categorizing animals by size, color, number and kind).

3) Teachers choose a material that they believe will help the children explore the many ideas as a means of learning which ideas seem most significant to the children.

4) One teacher presents ideas with materials using dialogue related to the material use and the ideas of the children's play with farm animals and fences.

5) Children respond in the circle with verbal ideas.

6) A team teacher writes the ensuing teacher-child dialogue on a large easel that is visible to the children, letting the children know that their ideas are being translated into valued records.

7) The children are then invited to work with the materials at small group tables where they talk out their ideas as they work.

8) Teachers interact with the children as they work, responding to their ideas and documenting the process.

The second example illustrates how drawing is the basis for a dialogue between an individual child and her teacher, and how their interaction draws others into the conversation.

THE CLAY DEMONSTRATION: BACKGROUND
This journey with clay has a lot of children's play and teacher planning behind it. It took place early in the school year after numerous teacher observations revealed that children (3.5 - 4.5) were creating small enclosures for animals in the block area as well as in the art area. It seemed as if children were interested in fitting as many animals as they could into an enclosed structure and categorizing these animals according to size, color, number, and kind. As one enclosure became filled another fenced in area would emerge for children to fill with the rest of the animals, and this would continue until the set of available animals was exhausted.

The organization of animals was usually attached to a farm theme and the fences were built with blocks in the block area or some of the many collage materials (beads, corn kernels, wood pieces) that children glued onto paper in the art area. There were many plastic animals to work with in the block area and a number of foam animal shapes in the art area that were inevitably glued inside the fences children created.

The farm theme and the child's knowledge that farms have fenced in animals made the teachers wonder if the children were most interested in thinking about farms or thinking about sets of animals and enclosures. They wondered if children might share more information about their interests if these ideas were presented in relation to explorations with a new material. Clay seemed a good choice because it provided the three-dimensional properties of the materials children were already using and the flexibility for children to adapt the material to suit new ideas that might emerge.

The children had previous experiences with play dough where the preference seemed to evolve into a desire manipulate the play dough with the many tools available in the art area that included a garlic press, a rolling pin, clay knives and cookie cutter shapes. Teachers rarely saw children opt to manipulate play dough with their hands as the primary tool and they wondered if children had enough examples of how to do this. Thus, the teachers' plan to introduce clay had two purposes:

- to explore the ideas children had been thinking about
- to reintroduce the idea of using hands as clay tools by presenting some possibilities.

One teacher was designated to present the materials to the children at a "whole class" circle meeting and another was responsible for documenting the discussion. The presenter was careful to use language specifically related to the materials that allowed the children to insert their own terms for the things she was possibly creating. This sets up a provocative dynamic that relies on children to wonder and make predictions.

The Demonstration

Picture 1: The teacher demonstrates how to make a clay coil by rolling it between her hands.
The teacher is demonstrating how to make a clay coil by rolling it between her hands.

Teacher: I'm making coils.

Child: You could call it a worm!

The child is thinking of a living thing. It is not farm related but it may be associated with animals in the child's developing schema. The teacher forms a circle with the coil, rolls another coil into a circle and layers one on top of the other.

Teacher: I'm building something a little bit high.

Ellie: Like a wall.

Lisa: Or maybe something where the animals go.

Teacher: I was thinking of that too.

Nathan: I was thinking maybe it could be a necklace.

Teacher: It's so wet and sticky.

Clara: Maybe if it dries.

Teacher: If it dries it could be a necklace.

Clara: Or a pot.

Teacher: A pot with food in it?

She remembers this pot idea for later in the demonstration. Meanwhile she sticks to her plan to build a small animal out of clay using a pinching method. She holds the clay up high so all the children can see her pinching the clay to form little protrusions.

Teacher: What does it look like?

Karl: A small animal

The teacher places the animal inside the circular coil enclosure and makes a second animal.

Picture 3: The teacher asks the children, "How many animals will fit in?"

Teacher: I wonder how many animals will fit in?

Lisa: I think three.

Children: So many children chime in with answers that it is impossible to clearly understand them on the video documentation. It is clear that they are actively engaged in the dialogue.

Her estimates reflect an understanding of the relation between the size of the animals and the available space. This line of thinking is a possible new direction for future curriculum development with other materials.
The teacher pinches the clay in another manner, pushing in with her thumbs to form a small pot. She is revisiting Claire's thinking from earlier in the dialogue. Claire picks up on this immediately.

Claire: Maybe that could be its food!
Nathan: Maybe it could be a water place!
Teacher: I wonder how much food will fit in.

She is inserting language based on her classroom observations of children “fitting animals into” enclosures and combining that with the children’s developing language.

Lisa: Maybe broccoli.
Teacher: I’ll make little stems with the tree like tops that broccoli have.

At this point the teacher tells the children that they can each work with the clay at the many tables in the classroom where there is plenty of clay set up for each child. She says that she and her co-teacher will be visiting all the tables because they are interested in seeing and hearing about what the children will be making with clay. The tables are set up with a ball of clay at each seat. The tables provide a good clay surface so no boards are set out. The teachers decided that trays might constrict the children’s ability to spread clay out or collaborate if they choose to do so. Clay tools and a bag of extra clay are set in baskets in the center of each table. You will note that the teacher did not use clay tools in her demonstration but she also did not talk about using hands. She merely modeled the process of using hands to manipulate the clay and then presented the option of using tools that children were already familiar with by placing them at the tables. In this way she is adding to the children’s existing repertoire.

The Children’s Responses

Lisa: I’m makin’ a driveway.

The notion of a driveway is evident in the linear, flat, quality of Lisa’s clay structure. She understands the squishing and flattening properties of clay, yet she cannot manipulate the material without the support of an attached surface. Is her content limited and guided by her physical knowledge of the material? It seems valuable to offer her the opportunity to expand her knowledge through her own interactions and what she observes others doing with clay.

Randy: I’m gonna make a door so the animals can go out.

Randy’s imagination leads him to create a barn enclosure that is an imitation of his teacher’s with an important new feature. He has added a clay base, which reveals a number of possible theories. One might be that barns have floors. Another might be that it is easier to support and carry a clay object that has a bottom. A third might be that the coil structures will be more secure if they are attached to a clay base. His door idea reveals more physical knowledge about barns.
Mark is rolling more coils for a fence to go around his seal.

Mark: I’m gonna make a fence with a little seal.

Mark is motivated to make things that use the coil technique he observed in the teacher’s demonstration. He transfers his ideas onto his creations adapting the material to suit his own interests.

Missy makes all the cat’s legs an equal length.

Missy has asked for help in making a cat. The teacher says that she will make one while Missy makes one. She rolled a coil leg of a different length than the one her teacher rolls and she stops working to watch her teacher.

Teacher: Should the legs be the same or different lengths?

Missy responds by pointing to the shorter coils. She is carefully watching her teacher handle the clay so that she may mirror her use in order to learn the physical properties of clay while successfully constructing a cat. Her teacher inserts dialogue to reflect what she thinks she might be questioning about the process.

Missy reworks hers to make them all the same length. The process of constructing an animal with clay is providing her a map of her abilities with clay to contrast with her thoughts about the structure of a cat. When she finished the cat she was able to make another one by herself while explaining the process to some interested peers.

**Thoughts On The Clay Interactions**

The data shows that the clay supports the children’s thinking about animals and the features of their homes (barns or fences) or needs (food or physical attributes). The idea of fitting it in did not carry over into this exercise. You can see that the demonstration and the material encouraged children to merge their developing understanding of the properties of clay with a diverse body of ideas about animals attributes (seals columnar proportions, cats leg lengths) and structures (flat driveways, barns with floors and doors). With more clay opportunities and ongoing dialogue of emerging ideas we can generate more in-depth dialogues that may lead to investigations with other materials. In this classroom the children continued to build farms as well as zoos. As their structures expanded they began to discuss the organization of these environments, how they functioned for the animals and the roles of the caretakers. These details go beyond the scope of this article, which focus on introducing and initiating interactions with materials as discourse. The next example of a one-on-one teacher-child interaction reveals the way that a dialogue can help the teacher understand what the child is thinking.

**DRAWING A HERMIT CRAB: BACKGROUND**

Initially the children in this 2 / 3 year-old classroom were talking a lot about their pet hermit crab during a number of circle time discussions. The teachers wanted to learn more about what the children knew about hermit crabs so they invited the children to draw what they saw when looking at the hermit crab in his large fish tank. It is important to note that these teachers, who I will refer to as teacher apprentices, were new to the idea of using drawing as a means of learning what children think. They didn’t really think that these young children had the skill to draw a hermit crab successfully and were entering this experience based on their trust in my suggestion that it would help them. In the dialogue I will refer to myself as “Teacher.”

The teacher apprentices set up the fish tank on a low table where children could have a surface to draw on while looking at the hermit crab. I was visiting the classroom on this particular
morning and heard the invitation of the teacher apprentices, "Can you draw the hermit crab and tell us what you know about him?" A number of children went to the table and talked a bit about the hermit crab. Here they seemed to be responding to the request to "tell what they know."

Cathy: He's not crawling.
Pat: Sometimes he goes so fast.
Liam: He's hiding. He likes to hide in here (points to a log)
Mary: Sometimes he is prickly.
Cathy: And scary.
Teacher Apprentice: Can you draw him?

The children begin to draw but they seem to be making random marks unrelated to ideas about the hermit crab. The teacher apprentices really think that the children don't have the ability to draw something so complex. I disagree. I think that in this instance, their question is not related to what the children are talking about and it seems a complex idea for the children when the hermit crab isn't visible. A child eventually asks if he can take the hermit crab out. This makes a lot of sense. He wants to see it in order to draw it.

The Drawing Dialogue

Still, the children seem to be making random marks on their papers. I think it is time to insert an idea that can serve as a catalyst. I take a piece of paper and put it near another child's paper and I take a pencil in my hand. I am joining into the activity as a cohort.

Teacher: If I were going to draw a hermit crab I think I'd start by drawing the body. I draw a circle on my paper. Mary imitates me. This tells me that she is already learning about drawing. I place my pencil at the edge of this circle and say the following.

Before I can say, "legs next" Mary has drawn a complete leg on her paper that extends out from the circle she has made. She continues to make four more lines that almost touch the circular body. I draw four lines imitating her lines. Liam and Mason are now looking on.

Liam: What about the eye ringers? When you crawl you have eye ringers.

Mason squints and Mary draws two more lines that extend vertically up from the body. These are placed in relation to the crab's extending antennae that the children are confusing with eyes. I draw two lines opposite the four legs on my crab to imitate Mary's process and Liam gets a book on hermit crabs, opens to a page and points to the antennae.

Liam: See, eye ringers.

Teacher: They help him to cry?

She heard him talk about crawling and associating the antennae with the crawling and seeing functions so she added a word specific to eyes to challenge his thinking.

Liam: Crawl.

He is clearly associating the antennae with crawling, perhaps as a support. This is an idea that can be further explored in many ways with many possible materials. Wondering how a crawling support can also see is intriguing. While sitting here drawing I think about another drawing session in the future to revisit Mary's pictures and encourage other children to tell us how the eye ringers work. They may need to draw and act out a lot of thinking to discuss that idea. They may even choose other types of materials to support their thinking. Meanwhile, Mary has continued to draw. She made a second picture and tells me about it.
Thoughts On The Drawing Dialogue

The data reveals that Mary does have drawing skills and that directed dialogue can serve as a provocation for her to develop those skills. In the process the dialogue functions as a vehicle for developing other children’s ideas, which are related to the purpose of the antennae in this situation. The whole experience portrays children as researchers who know the importance of investigating real data (“bring the real crab out for us to see it”) and researching new sources of information (seeking out a book on hermit crabs) in the process of trying to communicate what they know. We see that their knowledge is not static, but developing along a continuum.

Conclusion

These two examples represent the beginnings of conversations that may lead children and teachers in a number of possible directions over time. The goal of this article was to provide information about initiating conversations with children involving the presentation of materials or skills with materials in the context of discourse. This discussion reflects the importance of treating interactions with materials as extended dialogues where spoken thoughts can influence the manipulation of the material and vice versa. When considering children’s material explorations as dynamic conversations, teachers can begin to discover ways to enter into the dialogue as a cohort. In this way they share information that may lead to skill building and idea development.

References


