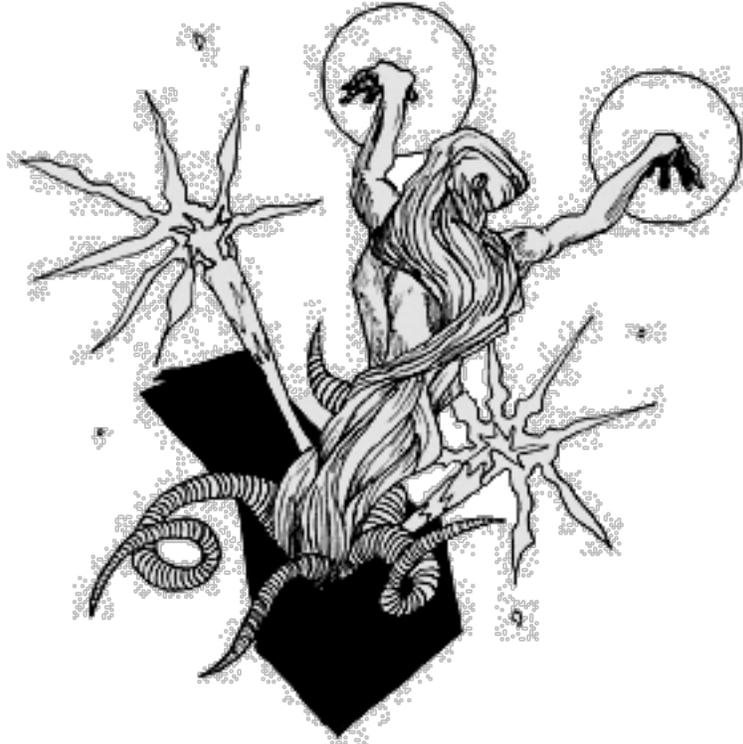


Drawing/Writing and the New Literacy: Where Verbal Meets Visual

The work of a painter, writer, teacher, and mother



Top off the black box, Sam Sheridan, 1997

This book is not pop-neuro-psych. It is a twenty-year effort written by a painter, writer, teacher, and mother which takes into account what we do not know as well as what we do know about the brain and how the brain thinks. It takes a careful, judicious, thorough look at brain science as that body of information is generally available today, and combines that information with information from the history of writing, the history of art, child psychology, art education, regular education, special education, and direct experience as an artist and a writer, and a teacher of English including composition at the middle school level, and of art at the middle school and college levels - as well as experience as a parent of three now-adult children, for the sake of presenting a reasoned, reasonable, field-tested theory and practice of how the human brain learns to think via “marks of significance.” This phrase, marks of significance, includes drawing, and mathematical notation including numbers, and musical notation as well as what we call writing -- which is what we usually mean by literacy.

We know now that there are at least two kinds of literacy: visual and verbal. This book outlines two larger categories of thought - spatial and linguistic - and places drawing and writing within this larger framework. Drawing is placed in the spatial category. Drawing is the act which records what the eye sees, aided by the attentive ability of the brain to select salient details and to winnow out and discard insignificant details. This ability to search for essentials requires training. Some of that training happens naturally through the repeated activity of looking at things in the world, learning what distinguishes them: what makes a chair a chair, for instance. The other training is learned: how can we represent a chair as chair so that it reads as chair not only to us but to others? In short, how do we communicate knowledge once we've got it? We can communicate information or knowledge (that distillate of information) spatially and visually, or linguistically and verbally. The categories are arbitrary and confining but they allow discussion. A drawing is a two-dimensional code for meaning, like writing. It is both spatial and linguistic. So are words arranged on a page; they are both spatial and linguistic. A poem is arranged differently on a page than prose. We recognize it first as a visual pattern.

When we take up the challenge of communication, we have choices: we can represent a chair by drawing it, by writing about it, by explaining it in terms of engineering, science and mathematics, or, we can represent a chair musically, using sound. In a thorough self- and other- explanation, we would provide all of these explanations, using marks. The so-called linguistic/mathematical/musical explanations explain, enhance and extend the visual explanations. As Roland Barthes has observed, writing allows drawings to be read at the right level of analysis. Television watchers in the 21st century are well aware of how crucial a word or two of text on the screen are to reading at the right level the barrage of visual information delivered in television commercials.

This expectation for the mind to be both visual and verbal, literate and artistic, scientific and mathematical and musical - to be all that the brain has evolved to be as a multiliterate organ of thought - will change how we educate ourselves and our children. This book helps us to take that evolved inheritance seriously -- for ourselves and for our children and for our students. It is not so much multiple intelligences that define us as language-users: it is marks of meaning; it is multiple literacies. We are the only language-using creatures who make marks.

This book pushes past art education and English composition courses and literacy training to an integrated, all-purpose approach in which drawing and writing urge each other on toward clearer, deeper, more precise, more eloquent meaning. We live in our brains. This is our true home. As I told my children when they were little, "You

live in your brain. You must make it a lovely place.” I believe this. For me, the fact of living in my brain is a core existential truth. The fact does not preclude having lived at home with my parents, nor having provided a home for my children and husband, nor feeling at home in my farm in Maine. It simply clarifies for me where I truly and only belong. I have a place I can always go to do the kind of work that comforts and restores me. That work is various: I can write, I can paint, I can draw, I can make music, I can play with geometry. I can work with a range of marks that make sense to me and I can carry those marks outside of my brain and show them to other people. In this way, we can think together. In these ways, we bridge the gaps between neurons and the gaps between human beings.

The book is the result of twenty years of reading, thinking, and teaching. It is illustrated by Drawing/Writing students. I am eager to hear your thoughts on the book via traditional mail, electronic mail, or the Drawing/Writing bulletin board. I will respond.