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Understanding the Challenges in Drawing Proficiency Among Visual Arts Students: A Case Study at St. Thomas Aquinas Senior High School

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Abstract
The study examines the causes of poor drawing abilities among senior high school students in Ghana. While drawing is a strong component of visual arts education in Senior High School, students find difficulty representing objects realistically. Focusing on Form Two Visual Art students at St. Thomas Aquinas SHS and employing a mixed-methods design comprising questionnaires, interviews, and drawings created before the intervention, the findings of this research reveal that some of the key problems centre around 'pedagogical gaps', 'low self-efficacy', and 'over-reliance on copying and tracing'. Results are interpreted as providing strong necessity for systematic reforms in drawing instruction that emphasise developing perceptual and technical drawing skills.

Keywords: Drawing, Drawing Proficiency, Visual Arts

1. Introduction

Drawing is a foundational component in visual arts education, serving as both a cognitive and expressive instrument (Mendelowitz, Wakeham & Faber, 2003). It goes beyond the simple act of mark making to creating marks that convey a visual language shared pictorially through the most immediate means by which artists respond to perception and experience.

Lewis (2005) defines drawing as a form of visual art in which a person uses various drawing instruments to mark paper or another two-dimensional medium. The marks are made from drawing instruments that include graphite pencils, pen and ink, inked brushes, wax-coloured pencils, crayons, charcoal, chalk, pastels, various kinds of erasers, markers, styluses, various metals (such as silverpoint), and electronic drawing tools. According to Nunes (2024), each mark adds to a bigger narrative, which lets people think about and interact with the art more profoundly.

Visual art has been part of the school system in what is now Ghana, then the Gold Coast, since 1908 (Foster, 1967). It appeared in school and college schedules titled 'hand and eye' in an attempt to incorporate practical subjects into the curriculum and move away from a bookish mode of education. "Hand and eye" was a drawing exercise in which students copied shapes and lines in order to foster hand-eye coordination (Edusei, 2004; p. 116).

Over time, the expected outcomes of skills acquisition (draftsmanship) and the development of innovative cognition appear to be lost to mere mark-making attempts. The crucial aspect of acquiring the technical

skills and creative expression needed to replicate objects and forms on a two-dimensional surface seems to be inadequately addressed in most senior high school visual art programmes in Ghana. This has raised concerns about students' inability to develop sufficient drawing skills at the high school level. At St. Thomas Aquinas SHS, anecdotal observations and assessments have indicated that most students find it difficult to draw from observation. This study explores the causes of this issue and suggests interventions aimed at enhancing their drawing proficiency.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Drawing in Visual Arts Education

Traditionally, drawing has been a foundation for teaching in the arts, a means of creativity, observation and communication (Taylor, 2014). Similarly, the introduction of Visual Art Education into schools and colleges in Ghana was intended to foster creativity in students, enabling them to solve problems of national significance with relative ease. This was possible because of the belief that it is largely in the art class that a person thinks, acts and feels creatively (Edusei, 1991 as cited in Sofo, 2018).

Drawing enhances critical observation in students. Tlili (2023) supports this idea and emphasises the importance of observation in drawing, stating that we must learn to look at things so that we can accurately describe what we see. It's a little more challenging than it appears. The difficulty with looking is that we often assume we notice all the important details as soon as we glance at something. However, drawing requires the practitioner to slow down, examine visual information thoroughly, and notice subtle nuances in form, structure, and relation. Fleury et al. (2020), as cited in Abdullah et al. (2024), argue that drawing "is not simply a skill, but a way of seeing" (p. 93). Therefore, drawing is not just seen as a representational practice or a form of critique, but more as a way of developing a deeper vision and perception.

The ability to understand visual information takes up at least half of our brain, with studies showing that human brains can interpret visual images in around 13 milliseconds (Tlili, 2023). This is especially true for kids who scan through hundreds of photographs every day, training their brains to focus on visual signals. Drawing has been asserted as one of the means of developing this cognitive ability, as it enhances creativity and imagination in students (Abdullah et al., 2024). It also encourages imaginative thinking and creative problem-solving, which can boost self-esteem and confidence. Drawing, thus, serves as a means of translating thoughts, emotions and ideas into visual forms.

In addition, the act of drawing helps train students to develop sustained attention and concentration. Due to its cognitively complex nature, drawing promotes a learning state where the individual focuses and maintains attention for extended intervals, makes decisions, and orchestrates motor skills accordingly (Tarricone, 2011). Such immersion brings greater clarity of vision and also teaches the mind to focus and stay focused on something over time, which is a gift of increasing value in a digitally distracted and attention-fragmented world (Chamberlain et al., 2014). Repetitive mark-making engagements train the students to control their thinking, become more perceptively sensitive and better capable of tuning in visually and mentally. In this way, it is not only a technical endeavour or an expressive endeavour, but also a teaching endeavour to gain a clearer mind and focused attention (Winner et al., 2013).

2.2 Defining Drawing Competency

The ability to draw is closely connected to the development of perceptual skills, technical abilities, and artistic confidence. According to Edwards (1982) "drawing is not just a physical act; it is a perceptual one requiring a different kind of thinking: less symbolic and more visual thinking". Students are, therefore, required to see the act of observing and interpreting objects and things during drawing beyond their

symbolic representations (e.g., a "tree" or "face"). They should perceive this act as arrangements of shapes, values, and spatial relationships. Without this perceptual shift, students often remain trapped in a mode of drawing based on pre-learned symbols, which undermines both their accuracy and creative expression. Thus, drawing becomes a cognitive act of observation rather than an automatic recall of imagery.

Observational drawing is one of the robust ways in which students can be encouraged to translate complex things and objects found around them onto a flat two-dimensional surface. This approach requires students to have an attentive eye and deliberate hand to be able to explore and highlight key elements like proportion, light, shade, and perspective (Kovats, 2007). The ability of students to understand forms and relate them to space through sustained practice and critical reflection is important to the development of the skill to coordinate the eye and hand when drawing. Drawing, in this sense, is not a passive activity but one that is inherently analytical and constructive, calling for the integration of technical precision with interpretive decision-making.

However, the absence of proper instruction or guidance when drawing can lead to the excessive use of imagined or banal forms. As Lowenfeld (1964) observed in his studies of children's art development, students often go back to clichéd or iconic representations when they lack confidence or guidance. These commonplace images, like the stick figure or the "sun positioned in the corner", are symptoms of an underdeveloped visual vocabulary. Without interventions that focus on observational skills and serious engagement, learners fail to move beyond these basic forms. It will result in limitations to students' ability to develop in the arts, while reducing their self-belief to undertake creative tasks. The pedagogical implication is that educators must actively cultivate observational sharpness and challenge students to draw what they truly see, rather than what they assume they know.

Therefore, promoting the acquisition of drawing skills demands a comprehensive approach that includes technical instruction, perceptual training, and strategies to build confidence in learners. Drawing should be approached as both a visual and intellectual discipline, where seeing becomes a method of inquiry. Taylor (2014), therefore, argues that combining drawing with regular assessments of actions taken improves students' ability to express themselves artistically and also equips them with critical thinking and problem-solving skills. By shifting the emphasis from natural talent to skills that can be learnt, educational systems can make drawing an accessible and empowering tool for visual communication.

2.3 Factors Affecting Drawing Performance

Several factors inform the ability of students to draw. They include the way they are taught and how they practice drawing. These factors affect their artistic growth. The lack of guidance, limited period to practise life drawing, and insufficient feedback have been identified by Pretorius (2015) as important limitations to students' ability to master drawing as an expression and a form of interpreting or experiencing things through the senses. Instead of practising how to observe this from real life, students are often directly or indirectly encouraged to copy images from books and pre-existing published sources or drawing manuals. This reliance on copying undermines their ability to develop observational sharpness, qualities that are essential to understanding, interpreting, and creating visual messages.

The educational environment's physical and institutional conditions also matter a lot in students' drawing development. Antwi (2002) points out that, in most art classrooms, given the high number of students to one teacher and resources available, it becomes impossible to develop a critique of the subject individually. This is especially problematic in schools lacking funding, space, or priority for visual arts education. Students in these environments get minimal personal feedback and no support, which are crucial components for developing the confidence and progress of an artist. It has also been recently proposed

that creative skill development and independent visual thinking are more conducive in one-on-one mentorship environments, peer critique, and studio conversations (Marshall, 2019). Therefore, curriculum planning can be very sound, but if the structure of the educational institution does not allow for it to develop, it can and will also block the development of drawing ability.

In order to overcome these limitations, an alternative model for the teaching of drawing would be a more flexible and inclusive model that incorporates some elements of observational drawing techniques, offers formative feedback, and endorses differentiation within learning. Teachers need to be equipped, not only technically, but more importantly, pedagogically, to engage students in self-exploration and critical experiences. Also, institutional reforms are needed to help access to the smaller classes and live experiences with drawing that seem to be very conducive to this type of improvement in visual reasoning and hand-eye coordination (Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013). Failing these changes, but drawing education will be more of a dissecting practice than a transformative visual investigation and self-exploratory practice.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

This study employed an action research design based on a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach. Action research was selected due to its open and participatory nature, which aligns with the aim of this study. An iterative process of observation, intervention, reflection, and refinement was relied on to improve the drawing skills of students. According to McNiff (2017), action research is particularly effective in educational contexts as it allows educators to systematically investigate their own teaching practices with the intention of enhancing learning outcomes. In this study, the researchers, also serving as teachers, collaborated with students throughout the process, making it possible to co-construct knowledge in an authentic learning environment.

The choice of a qualitative dominant mixed-methods design stems from the intention of gaining a better contextual understanding of the learners' experiences, alongside some quantitative data that allows for a measure of change and trends. Mixed methods are advantageous in action research, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) say, because the character of mixed methods research, which is to obtain breadth and depth of understanding and to triangulate the data from several different studies, justifies its use and productive nature in that context. In this case, qualitative data comprised observation notes, student reflections, and interviews, while basic quantitative data, including performance scores and progress ratings, supported the qualitative findings. The combination enhances the internal validity of the study and provides a complete picture of the effectiveness of the drawing intervention.

The research purposefully sampled 17 Form Two Visual Arts students at St. Thomas Aquinas Senior High School. This particular sample was suitable as the participants were all involved in hands-on practical art courses, putting them in a position of relevance as important informants on the development of skills for drawing from observation. As Patton (2015) addressed, the use of purposeful sampling plans reflects the intentions of qualitative-dominant research designs, which prioritise specific cases most relevant to the study goals. It was also large enough to be feasible for the type of action research done in a classroom, where interaction, observation, and input in the process of intervention can be quite intensive.

3.2 Instruments

The study's action research design, as well as a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach, led to data collection via questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, observation checklist items, and an examination

of students' pre-intervention drawings. The combination of these instruments allowed for triangulation of the data and was beneficial in enhancing the credibility of the study as well as providing rich and in-depth interpretation of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Though this study was largely qualitative, documenting subjective experience, behaviour, and shifts in learning, structured questionnaires incorporated into the research allowed for some supportive quantitative data to supplement and support the qualitative findings.

This survey was given before the study in order to gather information with which to examine the students' prior experiences in drawing instruction, their self-perceptions of drawing ability, and the strategies for learning that they typically used within visual art situations. The closed and open-ended items in the questionnaire provided preliminary quantitative data on students' involvement with art education, while also providing further narrative data on students' perceptions, struggles, and beliefs of self-efficacy, particularly with drawing. The use of both types of items, as suggested by Bell (2014), supports the diagnostic potential of the instrument and allows for a comprehensive picture of learners' starting points, which is useful in the planning stage of the intervention research cycle.

Methodologically, a questionnaire complements the mixed-methods rationale of obtaining the best of both qualitative and quantitative paradigms to gain better insight (Plano-Clark & Ivankova, 2016). Again, in this instance, the quantitative responses provided the relevant contextual baseline data, which was later triangulated with qualitative responses generated through interviews, observation, and visual analysis. More importantly, the results from the questionnaire provided a comparative starting point to balance any shifts in students' skills, confidence, and engagement that may happen as a result of the intervention from a critical perspective after it had been implemented, an important factor within the "spirals" of action research.

3.3 Data Analysis

Using a qualitative-dominant mixed-method and action research approach, data were analysed visually and textually. In regard to the analysis of pre-intervention drawings, Lowenfeld's stages of artistic development (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1987) were relied on as a framework for identifying students' technical and perceptual skills. Within this framework, the researchers were able to assess the level of representation of each student and recognise trends in spatial awareness, detail and proportionality.

The responses to the questionnaires and the transcripts of the interviews were thematically coded according to the six phases of thematic analysis put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process helped to reveal themes of common experiences, self-efficacy, and learning styles in students' previous experiences with drawing. The codes were developed inductively, while remaining informed by the research questions identified at the outset of the study to remain anchored and purposeful.

The use of both visual analysis and thematic coding provided methodical triangulation, which helped strengthen and add depth to our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It also helped to incorporate both technical developments, as well as students' perspectives in the analysis of the intervention's outcome.

4. Findings and Discussion

4. Findings

The findings presented in this section were derived from a structured classroom-based intervention implemented within an action research framework. The study involved seventeen Form Two Visual Arts students at St. Thomas Aquinas Senior High School, who were guided through a series of observational drawing tasks aimed at assessing and enhancing their drawing proficiency. Over several sessions, students

were engaged in practical exercises focused on drawing from life, using still-life arrangements as reference points. These sessions were designed not only to surface students' perceptual and technical abilities but also to reveal affective barriers such as fear of failure and lack of confidence.

Fig. 1: Students observing and making drawings of a still life composition

The Visual Arts teacher served as a co-researcher and facilitator, keeping a reflective journal to document instructional strategies, classroom interactions, and student responses throughout the process. At the outset, students were asked to produce pre-intervention drawings, which were later evaluated for evidence of developmental stages, use of proportion, and understanding of perspective and shading. These drawing exercises were complemented by responses to structured questionnaires that captured students' prior experiences with drawing, confidence levels, and preferred learning methods. In-depth interviews were also conducted to elicit students' personal insights, challenges, and aspirations related to drawing.

Observation checklists were used systematically during class sessions to record student behaviour, such as hesitation, reliance on copying, or level of engagement with drawing materials. Data gathered from these multiple sources, drawings, surveys, interviews, observations, and teacher reflections were thematically analysed and triangulated to ensure validity and depth. The emergent findings are organised under four key themes: (1) Limited Instruction and Practice, (2) Lack of Confidence and Fear of Mistakes, (3) Absence of Visual Literacy Skills, and (4) Educational Gaps and Curriculum Deficiencies.

4.1 Limited Instruction and Practice

Students' responses indicated that most of them had little formal drawing experience. The field report in Table 1 reveals that 88.2% of the students had no formal training concerning observational drawing, while 11.8% claimed they had been trained to observe and draw from life objects. Furthermore, 53% of the students answered that they trained their drawing skills mainly by copying or by imitating, rather than having some sort of practice experience.

During interviews, one student remarked:

"I normally draw by looking at pictures in books or comics. No one has really taught me how to look at real things and draw them."

This absence of guided practice reflects a broader pedagogical challenge, where drawing is approached as mere reproduction rather than as a skill that requires progressive development through scaffolding and

feedback. Observation records further revealed that, during drawing sessions, students frequently paused to search for images to copy instead of engaging directly with the still-life objects provided.

Table 1: Students' Exposure to Observational Drawing Instruction?

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	2	11.8%
No	15	88.2%

Source: Field report and questionnaire data from Form Two Visual Arts students at St. Thomas Aquinas SHS

4.2 Lack of Confidence and Fear of Mistakes

A prominent theme emerging from the data was the students' pervasive lack of confidence in their drawing abilities. As illustrated in Table 4 of the field data, 64.7% of respondents reported feeling nervous or doubtful about their performance in drawing tasks. This lack of confidence was corroborated during interviews, where one participant remarked:

"I don't like showing my work because I feel it's not good enough. I fear my classmates will laugh at me."

Observational records reinforced this emotional barrier, as several students were seen delaying their engagement with drawing activities until repeatedly prompted by the teacher. One student, in particular, was observed erasing the same portion of their drawing multiple times. This behaviour was later noted in the teacher's journal as an "expression of fear of imperfection."

These findings suggest that the challenge is not only technical but also psychological. Students' fear of criticism, failure, or ridicule undermines their creative risk-taking and willingness to experiment, both of which are essential for artistic growth. Thus, emotional self-efficacy emerges as a critical, yet often overlooked, factor in students' drawing development (Bandura, 1997).

4.3 Absence of Visual Literacy Skills

The analysis of students' pre-intervention drawings revealed a widespread deficiency in foundational visual literacy. Most drawings displayed hallmark signs of developmental arrest: flat and schematic figures, a lack of depth or foreshortening, and misaligned proportions. According to Table 2, 70.6% of students admitted difficulty in translating three-dimensional forms into two-dimensional representations, especially in applying concepts of light, shadow, and scale.

This was further emphasized in an interview where a student confessed:

"I've heard of shading, but I don't know where to start or how to use it to make my drawing look real."

Such remarks align with the teacher's reflective journal, which indicated that students frequently failed to grasp the concepts of tonal value, line variation, and spatial composition. Drawing exercises were often reduced to outline work, with little attention paid to contour, texture, or volume, key elements of perceptual drawing (Gale, 2018).

This deficiency points to a critical gap in students' visual literacy, defined as the ability to read and interpret visual cues and to represent them through informed artistic decision-making (Elkins, 2008). Without this competence, students struggle not only to observe critically but also to convey form, space, and emotion convincingly through their art.

Table 2. Students' Challenges with Representing 3D Objects in Drawing

Drawing Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Difficulty rendering light and shadow	12	70.6%
Struggled with proportion and scale	10	58.8%
Unable to create depth or perspective	9	52.9%
Limited understanding of shading techniques	11	64.7%
Confident in translating 3D to 2D representation	3	17.6%

Source: Field report and questionnaire data from Form Two Visual Arts students at St. Thomas Aquinas SHS

4.4 Educational Gaps and Curriculum Deficiencies

The field study also revealed structural constraints within the educational environment that hinder effective drawing instruction. One of the most pressing concerns was the overcrowded classroom setting, as noted in the teacher's reflections. With over 50 students in a single Visual Arts class, the teacher stated: "Due to the number of students, I can only move around and comment on a few works. Most students do not receive any personal guidance."

This situation is compounded by insufficient instructional time. Practical art sessions were often shared with theory-based lessons, leaving minimal room for hands-on engagement and formative feedback. As one student remarked:

"Even during practicals, we don't get enough time to draw. Sometimes the teacher just gives us a topic, and we are on our own."

These issues point to broader curricular and infrastructural inadequacies. The emphasis on syllabus completion often overrides the need for scaffolded, process-based learning. In such environments, drawing is reduced to product-oriented tasks, and students are denied the conditions necessary for reflective, iterative development. These constraints mirror findings in art education literature, where high student-teacher ratios and limited resources are shown to negatively impact individualised instruction and learner autonomy (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Bamford, 2009).

5. Conclusion

The inability of students at St. Thomas Aquinas SHS to draw well is attributed to a combination of insufficient instructional support, psychological barriers, and curriculum limitations. Drawing instruction must move beyond copying toward a focus on perception and critical observation.

6. Recommendations

Curriculum Reform: Introduce structured observational drawing modules into the SHS curriculum.

Teacher Development: Train teachers in modern drawing pedagogy, including perceptual and right-brain techniques (Edwards, 1982).

Peer and Self-Assessment: Encourage reflective and peer critique practices to build confidence and refine technique.

Diverse Media Exploration: Allow students to experiment with charcoal, pastels, and ink to expand tactile engagement.

Reduced Class Sizes: Facilitate more personalised instruction and feedback.

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