

Meaning-Making in Children's Creative Drawing: Community-based Arts Programme in Cambodia

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Abstract

Children are meaning-makers. This study illustrates and shares the results, through examples of children's creative drawing through the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT), analyzing how Cambodian children make meanings and define their creative skills in generating imaginative and exploratory images. The images produced are interpretations and signs which visually represent their social reality. It is thought-provoking to explore how these digital illiterate children living in a rural community create meanings since they live in a relatively isolated, rural community with extremely minimal engagement with technology. In total, 32 Cambodian children ranging from 10 to 14 years of age were involved in the study. The children were given 45 minutes to complete the creative test which measures creativity primarily by discrete, non-judgmental tasks that focuses on fluency of thought, the flexibility of thought, originality of thought, and elaborations of the children's meaning-making. The study discusses the similarities and differences in the variations of meanings represented in each drawing. The findings indicate that the children's drawings represent a limited range of creative visual representations and tend to generate a set of similar images. Most of the drawings are rich visual illustrations yet stereotype images extracted from the culture and the environment (nature, animals, the community) which are direct visual representations of how they see reality. This study provides an understanding of how the children engage in a meaning-making process through creative systematic evidence which is beneficial for the development and growth of the Cambodian children community.

Keywords - Cambodia, Content Analysis, Digital literacy, Drawing, Meaning-making, Torrance Test of Creative Drawing

1. Introduction

Children's creativity is portrayed by the act of meaning-making using drawing as the medium (Wright 2010). Drawing signifies children's imagination, creativity skills, communication and human expression which involves a lot of signs and interpretation. The expressions portrayed through the drawings are a particular way of conveying a message as drawing could be a frame of insights that supports all other shapes of thinking (Cox 2005; Wright 2010). Paine (1997) stated that a drawing is labeled as a creative activity that is 'deeply resonant with an expressive side of personality and feeling, therefore, having the potential for interaction. The definition of drawing can also be defined as construction, interpretation, and communication of meaning through signs and across different modes (Van Leeuwen 1996; Kress and Jewitt 2003; Kress and Kress 2010).

In addition, this is supported by other scholars claiming that the medium of drawing, it helps to develop the children's imagination, emotional responses, personality and communicating meaningful interpretations (Eisner 2013; Hall 2008; Kress 2003).

Drawing and creativity are interrelated. Being creative discovers an individual's creative skills as well as generating novelty ideas that can be seen through their drawings. However, creativity skills vary in each individual as certain individuals might be creative in certain domains only (Gardner 1993). For example, an individual might be creative in the field of art and design but has no creativity in the field of math or science. Recently, scholars have taken an interest in children's drawings as an alternative means of representing and communicating knowledge and understandings. Scholars such as Wright (2007), Pantaleo (2005), and Rabey (2003) studied an analysis on children's meaning-making through drawing based on picture books and visual resources.

The studies revealed that a children's drawing communicates a message, conveys meaningful meanings and through drawings, it helps the children to articulate ideas and understandings in ways verbal language may not offer. However, this study focuses on how Cambodian children express their creativity through the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT) drawings.

The TTCT drawing would be able to discover how these children from Cambodia express their creativity and make meaning based on their imagination and creativity skills. In today's media-driven world, it is thought-provoking how these Cambodian children make meaning since they are not exposed to the digital era, and have extremely minimal engagement with technology. This TTCT drawing would be able to assess their schemata and identify the visuals revealed by these children since children's drawings reflect the nature of their representation of pictured objectives in their memory. The drawings revealed define their creativity skills in generating imaginative and exploratory visuals.

2. Theory

Inspired by Halliday's (1994) theory, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) have developed a visual 'grammar' to analyze the visually specific ways images realize the fundamental ideational meaning, or what an image represents or 'says' about a given phenomenon. The authors make a distinction between narrative, analytical, and classification visual structures. Kress (1997) argues that drawing, like any other meaning-making activity, is a motivated process through which children orientate intentionally towards the world. When studying the children's drawings, we have asked about the interest behind the meaning they convey. Any drawing is the result of its maker's active and creative response towards their experiences. Yet, we also have to consider children's growing control over visual resources and their feeling of confidence in the situation and pay attention to the multimodality of their meaning-making practices.

A drawing affords experiences to be recorded, yet as a still picture, any drawing will inevitably 'arrest' the rapidly changing features of the world as we perceive it. Kress (2003) argues that the visual mode is more suited to 'showing' what the world consists of rather than 'telling' about movements and actions. He suggests that multimodal meaning-making helps children overcome this limitation. Many of the drawings in my study are inspired by narrative texts, making this point particularly relevant to attend to.

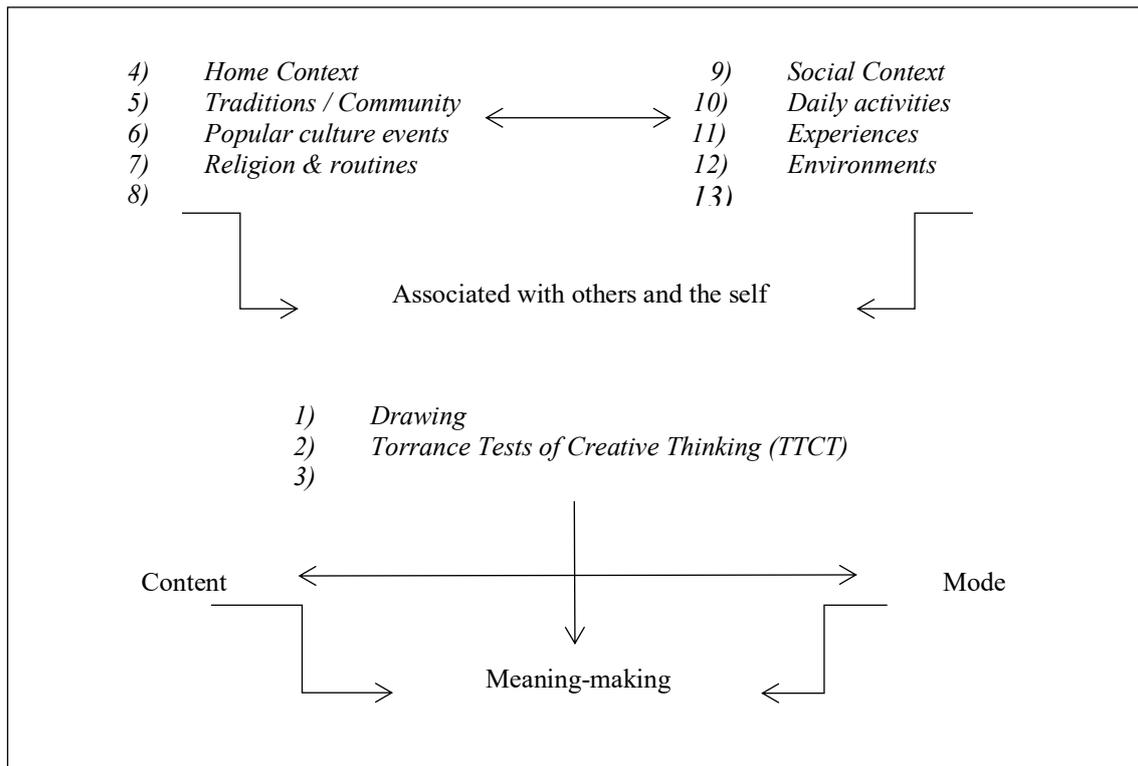


Figure 1. The influence of the socio-cultural context on children drawing

3. Method

This study presents the discussion on the design, procedure, instrument of the study, the selection of the drawings involved in this study. Content analysis is the primary research method used to analyze the drawings in this study. The drawings are analyzed through “contextual drawing analysis” (Frisch 2006) since the drawings are done voluntarily or motivated by adults. The objective of this method is to organize and elicit meaning from the drawings produced by the Cambodian children. Considering drawing as a language of communication, we explored how Cambodian children analyzed the emerging themes and socio-cultural influences that contributed to their unique meanings.

3.1 Instrument

Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT) is a test that measures the creative thinking abilities of an individual. The test discovers the unique responses that require creative skills which need an individual to develop and elaborate novelty ideas. In this study, the children are given several different TTCT templates (Diagram 2) and were given instructions on how to use their creative thinking in producing meanings in the drawings by connecting the lines and shapes provided.

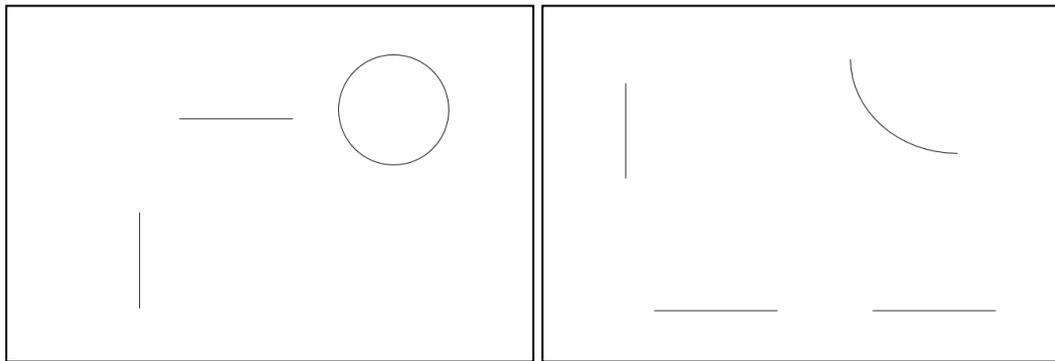


Figure 2. The influence of the socio-cultural context on children drawing

3.2 Sampling & Data Collection Process

Sampling is a process of selecting a subset from the population of interest to achieve a sample with the same characteristics of the population, specifically the features needed to be investigated (Daniel 2011; Thompson 2012). A total of 32 Cambodian children from Kampong Onhdong Chambak, Phnom Penh was chosen randomly, ranging from 10 to 14 years of age were involved in the study. The children in this study involve respondents with lower socioeconomic status. The children were given 45 minutes of duration to complete the TTCT creative test which measures creativity primarily by discrete, non-judgmental tasks that focuses on fluency of thought, the flexibility of thought, originality of thought, and elaborations of the children's meaning-making.

Due to the language barrier, the briefing was made by a local instructor. The test was conducted inside a classroom, complete with a desk and chair. In this task, the children are given random lines and shapes on a sheet of A4 white paper. The children are asked to think of a picture in which the given shape is an integral part. They should add lines with a marker pen to make any novel picture. They have to think of a name for the picture and write it on the back of the paper.

4. Findings & Discussion

This section discusses the findings based on the TTCT creative drawing test and the findings revealed are discussed. Using content analysis, the drawings were analyzed through contextual drawing analysis. From social semiotics perspective, drawings are not only valued as an end-product but also as a complex process of symbolization. All the drawings are analyzed on what is revealed on paper, mainly the content of the visuals. Findings gathered from the drawings are organized and the meanings generated from the drawings are extracted.

4.1 Themes

Based on the drawings, the patterns that occur across the data sets are recorded. The patterns are defined and organized into 'themes' which helps to link with the meaning-making generated from the drawings. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), analyzing the data into themes is mainly described as "a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Table 1 identifies the themes and the number of occurrences based on the drawings.

Table 1. Themes

Themes	Number of occurrences
Nature environment elements (flowers, trees, fruits, leaves, pond, mountain)	30
Animals and other creatures (birds, butterfly, fish, mini-beast)	28
Weather and sky features (sky, sun, rainbow, rain)	23
Man-made objects (houses, road, farm equipment, shoes)	19
Human figure (People, anime)	4
Writing (jawi)	1

Findings from the study also illustrate that they drew a broad range of subjects with people, animals, and weather and sky features featuring prominently. These children preference revealed are leading towards nature and environmental elements surrounding them which includes flora, fauna, fruits, and simplified organic shapes that are easily identifiable. Other than that, the next preference would be man-made objects such as houses, roads, farm equipment, and shoes. Not many of the children tend to draw human figures or generating a visual beyond their imagination.

Drawing is understood to be an enjoyable form of action, which provides children with opportunities to think, remember, gain ideas, observe and record. Figure 1 and 2 are samples of the drawings produced by the Cambodian children. As seen in the visuals, the lines were creatively connected, leading to beautiful shapes and forms. Each piece of drawing is definitely unique in its way even though the theme might be similar.

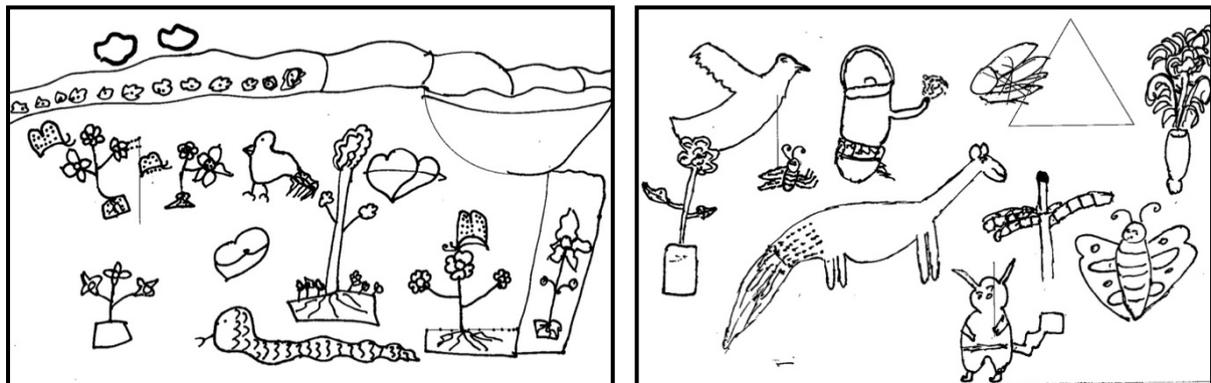


Figure 3. Theme – Nature

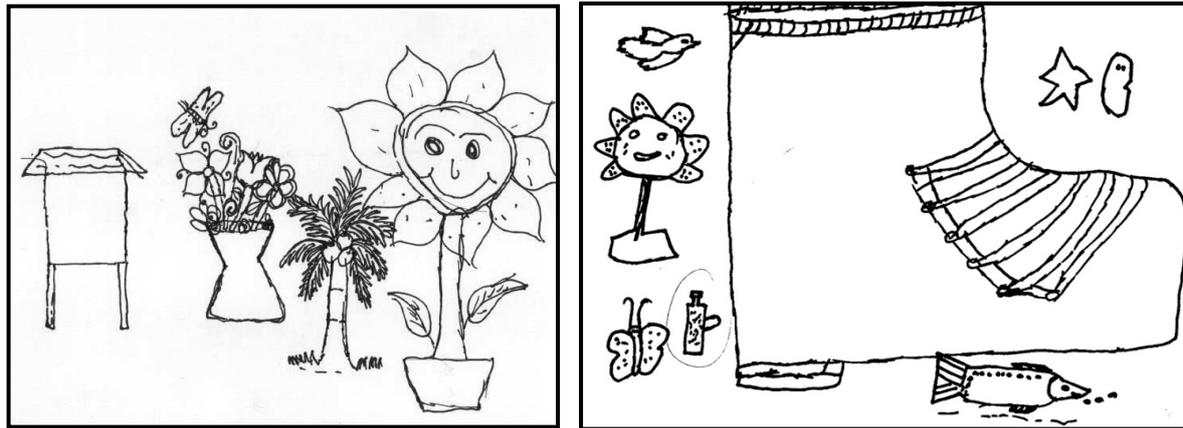


Figure 4. Theme – Nature & Man-made objects

However, from these findings, the choice of the subject matter revealed by the children is very limited. This contradicts the statement by Mavers (2007) saying that a child's subject matter is very wide-ranging. It is thought-provoking why these Cambodian children tend to draw similar visuals since drawings are a medium for them to link their emotions, imaginations, creativity, and inner thoughts to the external world.

It can be concluded that the drawings are mostly similar due to the atmosphere and the environment surrounding them. The drawings are the reflection of the social reality. The drawings portray their cultural spheres and are influenced by the communication and symbol systems around them. This is supported by Jolley, R. P. (2009) and Wright (2010) indicating that children drawing is a representation of personal events and real-life episodes.

From all the themes gathered, all 32 drawings are interrelated. Each drawing has a story and its meaning. On contrary, none of the drawings portray any digital or any relation to technology. It is the 21st century, and everything is digital today. This study has also proven that Cambodian children are digitally illiterate. They have no access to the digital world. The drawings are a reflection of their reality. As the 21st century is set to be conquered by the digital era (Gasinger & Kole 2016), it is not a surprise that technological factors may affect their creativity skills, however, it could not be seen among Cambodian children due to socioeconomic and lifestyle factors.

This study justifies that being digitally literate is important. The role of technologies is needed in developing intellectual communities as literacy, media, and technology help and challenge the individual to understand the current and present digital cultures and how the world is in constant flux (Potter 2015; Poore 2011; Parry et al. 2016). Being able to assess information, communicating information, and creating new knowledge are some of the skills acquired under digital literacy. However, it is not just the skills, but how an individual utilizes technology in their daily lives and are aware of the consequences and values of the technologies implemented.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this study has provided an overview of how Cambodian children are meaning-makers. The skills and ability of the Cambodian children to make an interpretation or construct meaning concerning the TTCT drawing test are identified. To sum up, most of the drawings share similar themes which highly reflect social reality. The meanings extracted from the drawings reflect the social reality. Most of the drawings produced are stereotype images extracted from the culture and the environment (nature, animals, the community).

This study has also proven that the targeted group, which is the Cambodian children consists of a digitally illiterate community since there are no technological factors, signs, or elements of technology portrayed in the drawing. The study justifies that the Cambodian children are digital illiterate and their imagination and exploratory skills are limited since they are confined in their world and are not able to access the digital world and the rapid changes happening in the 21st century today.

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