

DrawingSound: Media Literacy and the Creative Process

Mike Kirby
Lanier Middle School

INTRODUCTION

DrawingSound is a class project that concentrates students' attention on sound, in what is often considered a visual culture. Using *GarageBand*, an inexpensive sound editing software, DrawingSound encourages students to create and organize diverse sounds for aesthetic, experimental, or narrative purposes. Although this unit teaches students about relationships between visual images and sound, its central purpose is to explore the power of sound and raise aural awareness.

Throughout history sound was heard live. This changed in the late 1800s, when Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, a device that could record live sounds for playback ("Phonograph"). An increasingly influential force in society, reproducible sound should not be taken for granted. Like the invention of photography, mechanical reproduction of sound is of great consequence. Walter Benjamin, in his seminal essay entitled "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," is a fundamental source of information on the subject. Advances in technology have fundamentally changed the way our world is represented, delivered and imagined. These remarkable developments are clearly relevant to public education. In today's classroom, powerful and accessible computer software, such as *GarageBand*, allow students to gain insight into the arrangement, meaning, consequences, and potential of sound design.

The "Art of Noises," Luigi Russolo's 19th century Futurist Manifesto about the sounds of the industrial revolution, has made its way to the forefront of American culture. Today, we are beyond the clanking and screeching of emergent machinery. In the movies, the emotional charge of a well-placed soundtrack can enhance, or overpower, the visual message. Highly constructed and purposeful sounds permeate television commercials, and carefully-edited sound effects undoubtedly influence the experience of "watching" the nightly news. While increasingly common in contemporary culture, it can be argued that sound (especially in connection with the visual image) is the essential force in mass media.

In the broad theater of media literacy, DrawingSound encourages students to take a closer look at the role sound plays in their lives. All media are important tools of communication. Our culture favors the eye to the ear, however. Perhaps this is because visual representation has been around since the cave era, while reproducible sound has only been around for about 100 years. Additionally, sound is more abstract than visual representation. Most importantly, the reason sound is underestimated is that visual art is generally considered a part of a well-rounded and "practical" education, favored over aural considerations. However, because technology is more readily available in today's classroom, we can explore the nature of sound in innovative, encouraging, and productive ways.

In addition to inspiring students to produce art, DrawingSound is designed to help answer an important question: "What is the most powerful form of representation: words, visual images or sound?" Much of my interest and expertise in dealing with this question is the result of my studies in the Masters program in Visual Arts from the Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City.

Because I was born in Connecticut and my mother tongue is English, the experience of learning in a second language opened my eyes and ears for art and language in unexpected, and I think, healthy ways. In general, this experience obliged me not to take language and art for granted. Much like travel abroad, DrawingSound is meant to be an education into symbolic foreign lands.

I teach at Lanier Middle School, a diverse and energetic community of learners located in Houston, Texas. The student demographic is a combination of Vanguard (66%) and General population (34%), and therefore is a diverse mix of students who bring different perspectives. The racial mixture is diverse, as well (Caucasian 44%, Latino 33%, African 22%, and Asian 11%). I have been working at Lanier for the past four years with the aim of developing an innovative Visual and Media Arts Program. Fortunately, the school's administrative team supports our efforts and believes the Visual and Media Arts Program is a valuable part our student's overall educational goals, which, in large part, is to awaken the intelligence of our middle students by teaching them to recognize relationships between school subjects and the world outside.

OBJECTIVES

Through investigation, planning, producing and evaluation, the “design cycle,” students develop their projects and are encouraged to reflect about the mediated world we live in, to transform it and to make it their own.

As technology continues to open new possibilities for young students, DrawingSound offers many opportunities for students to accomplish the required State of Texas standards in fun and occasionally unconventional ways. These standards include four general components:

- **Perception:** The student develops and organizes ideas from the environment.
- **Creative expression:** The student expresses ideas through original artworks using a variety of media with appropriate skill.
- **Cultural heritage:** The student demonstrates an understanding of art history and culture as records of human achievement.
- **Critical evaluation:** The student makes informed judgments about personal artworks and the artworks of others.

These components are addressed and achieved through the design cycle. Students are provided opportunities to incorporate their own experiences, imagination, and memories. They will also learn about the history of communication and be able to identify consequences related to personal, social, political, and environmental themes.

As indicated above, DrawingSound requires *GarageBand*, which is a built-in sound editing software that now comes standard with Apple computers. Using multiple sources of sound such as the spoken word, sound from the environment, sound effects, and sound samples from borrowed sources, students are able to explore and access the power of sound in imaginative and innovative ways.

DrawingSound is part of a broader media literacy curriculum. Unlike pop music, or the Billboard Top 40, media literacy encourages people to look deeper into the way our society is represented, and in this case, to take notice of the highly constructed “noises” and purposeful sounds so commonplace in our culture. DrawingSound discourages students from treating the media environment as if it were natural — like the air. In addition to educating students about media in general, DrawingSound encourages students to uncover the often-overlooked phenomenon of sound design, and teaches them to become creative producers.

RATIONALE

The Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) defines the media literacy movement as education that empowers people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of an

increasingly wide range of messages using language, image and sound. Media Literacy is a valuable “tool” that helps people navigate everyday life. It helps people understand the way the world is presented to us and, thus, helps us make more informed decisions. As our society faces a bombardment of media messages, it is vital that young people better understand the power and importance of media representation in the 21st century. Best of all, it’s fun for students to be producers of their own media.

In contrast to the invention of the alphabet, which transformed communication from the spoken to the written (visual) word, and photography, which did more of the same, an audio recording device fundamentally reinvigorates aural culture. The ability to record sound for playback is of great consequence. It is very significant that we can design sound and save it. Movies, television, and radio (not to mention, iPods, cell phones, and YouTube) would be very different, or would not exist at all without this technology. This is a true revolution in communication that continues to change our environment, how it is represented, and how we conceive of it. The technology of today allows us to juxtapose sound and create new aural relationships relatively easily. While many take the sound environment for granted, DrawingSound aims to awaken students’ insight about the untapped potential reproducible sound.

In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan declared, “The medium is the message.” Each medium of communication has its own rules of engagement that influence the way we “see” the world. For example, consider the difference between hearing a storyteller read and reading the story yourself; or reading a novel as opposed to its film version. Each is unique and engaging in its own way. There are no visual images in a work of literature other than the ones readers imagine in their heads. The movie version of a book never matches the images the mind creates. The written words, as imagined by the reader, don’t match up with the ones that end up on the screen. The medium through which a message is delivered is often more influential than the message itself.

While the relationship between sound and vision is most often interdependent, there are significant differences between the two. Unlike the photographic image, the natural properties of sound are time based. Whereas the visual image (the eye) is of a spatial nature, sound (the ear) develops over time. Visual images are imitative and sound is abstract — sound is its own thing. Looking goes “out” and hearing comes “in.” Sound is constantly changing, whereas pictures and printed words are frozen in time.

I often ask my students their opinions about the greater of the two, sound and vision. They initially prefer vision, but after further examination, many students change their minds. To paraphrase some of my students’ reflections, consider this observation:

Think about the world without sound. You couldn’t talk to anyone. The only way that you could communicate with people is through the written word and through visual signs. If a glass shattered you wouldn’t hear it. The world without sound would be like living in a glass case. You could see everything but nothing seems real.

It is certain that each medium inherently speaks in its own way. The written word is not communicated as the spoken word. Furthermore, reading, hearing and watching a speech on television offer three very different experiences. By the movement from one sign system (medium) to another, there are consequences. Which will be remembered? Which will have the greater impact? As the senses are called upon in different ways, each medium suggests a different reading because it is experienced (literally) as a different substance. DrawingSound emphasizes that.

Each medium promotes its own sense of involvement, for both the intended audience and the artist or producer of a media message. Each form of representation has consequences regarding the way that the world is likely to be imagined and presented. Elliot Eisner, the distinguished

professor from Stanford University, points out that our conception of the world depends in large measure upon the forms of representation that we are accustomed to: “The choice of a form of representation is a choice in the way the world will be conceived, as well as in the way that it will be publicly represented” (42).

Different media allow for different perceptions and affect conception. By focusing on sound, as opposed to sight, the same environment will be experienced differently. In other words, our experiences are unique depending on what our senses have access to and how well we are able to use them. What is often overlooked is the fact that working with one form of representation versus another form of representation affects cognition. More than *working* with different forms of representation, different forms of art allow opportunities to explore the creative process and *think* differently.

The ultimate proposal of media literacy education is that citizens of a democratic society should be able to recognize the influential nature of different media, and thus make better-informed decisions. Students must be educated in media literacy in the information age and DrawingSound is a step toward this goal.

UNIT BACKGROUND

In light of the creative process, DrawingSound draws heavily upon the concept of montage. The montage concept will provide a theoretical framework and will be central to the production of an “Audio Montage,” as well as an “Audible Picture Show,” which will be discussed below.

The word montage comes from the French word *monter*, meaning to set together or mount. While the following definitions don’t specifically mention sound, they can be adapted to sound. According to the *Encarta Internet Dictionary*, a montage is:

- A picture or other work of art composed by assembling, overlaying, and overlapping many different materials or pieces collected from different sources...
- A style of moviemaking that makes extensive use of cuts, camera movements, and changes of camera position, particularly to set up new meanings not conveyed by the filmed action itself.

The idea of montage is not new; however, new technologies easily allow for and encourage new ways of representing reality, and montage is a natural fit. Technology makes us relate to the world differently by presenting the world to us in new ways. By bringing together otherwise unrelated material, montage is a form of communication that we have come to relate to, and it makes sense to us in a contemporary and conventional way. It is part of the textual weave of day-to-day experience, and as unnatural as it is, it is what we’re accustomed to. Our students take it for granted and are assimilated to this worldview; however, assimilation is not the same as awareness or recognition.

Montage was introduced into the visual arts as an alternative to illusionist renaissance perspective and proposes a new way to represent or “see” the world. For example, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque invented cubism, a style of art in which the subject matter is simultaneously portrayed from multiple angles. A good example can be seen in Pablo Picasso’s painting, “Three Musicians.” The shapes are simplified and arranged in rhythmic patterns. This type of representation breaks down form, and “recreates” it, showing different viewpoints and perspectives. The center-position of man in his environment is exchanged for a more fragmented (illusory) way of experiencing the world. Cubism is about movement, and it captures the energy of the industrial age and beyond (“Cubism”).

Another term that is useful for the Audioscape unit is *pastiche*, which our seminar leader, Joseph Kotarba, describes as a mixing and matching of otherwise disparate cultural elements from borrowed sources. It is a piece of art that is a mixture of things borrowed from other times

and places. A prime example of a pastiche is Walt Disney's Main Street, which is an imaginary creation of a place that never existed. Main Street is its own place, a virtual world, and a nostalgic re-creation of an imaginary past. Montage and pastiche are a framework for DrawingSound in that they both encourage the repurposing of source material, for the creation of new meanings and environments.

The ability to record sound, like the ability to print books and reproduce visual images by means of mechanical reproduction, has consequences. While montage captures the speed, energy and abstract contradictions of contemporary life, it is also, according to Neil Postman, in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a direct challenge to the kind of thinking that is associated with the written word. In place of linear exposition, montage favors simultaneous multiple forms of representation common to movies and advertising campaigns. Unlike Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, which promoted a linear (beginning, middle, and end) view of reality, the world of digital technology promotes a non-linear *montage*. Furthermore, montage reveals the inherent tension between different modes of communication and challenges the question of meaning altogether.

In its way, our world itself has become a montage. What is perhaps more true than ever is the possibility of virtual worlds, superficial worlds in which perception rivals reality. We are accustomed to montage through the arts and, more profoundly, through mass media. In the extreme case, we ourselves are constituted by montage. The contemporary theorist, Frederic Jameson, in *Postmodernism*, likens western contemporary culture to a sort of fragmented nervous system bordering on schizophrenia. Fast-paced urban culture has lost its linear feel, replaced by pattern recognition and simultaneous multiple viewpoints (and attention deficit disorder). Everywhere, options. Our capacity to perceive is being "rewired."

The problematic character of montage is its great power. Students should be aware and recognize the way media is packaged, not only consume it. One way to address this goal is through a project such as DrawingSound. The distinguished art historian, Ernst Gombrich, in *Art and Illusion*, once remarked that sometimes it is better to notice than to only look. Our students take it for granted and are assimilated to this montage worldview; however, as mentioned above, assimilation is not the same as awareness or recognition. That is the aim of DrawingSound: encourage students to reach beyond the role of consumers and be producers, to move from consumption to production. Through the design cycle, my aim is to help students to become more media literate so they can discover their own productive roles in society.

An Audible Picture Show

We have all been to the movies and felt the powerful effect that sound plays in relation to what is seen, and we know how sound can influence a scene. In the fall of 2006, Aurora Picture Show, an independent movie theatre located in Houston, Texas, held a screening of Audible Picture Shows, where the audience settled back and watched movies. However, as Matt Hulse, the guest artist and curator of the Audible Picture Show reminded the audience, "There will be no pictures other than the ones you create." It is a movie without pictures. "People bring their own pictures into the show — they have them in their minds." The point is to stimulate imagination, and to enhance the audience's ability to listen. Like reading a book of sounds, the result is that the "viewer" imagines a story and makes up their own images in their head.

An Audible Picture show can be an abstract collage of sound or can tell a story. The level of narration is up to the creator. The production quality, as well as medium of production, is open. For our purposes, my students are expected to mix different audio media, such as spoken word, sound effects and samples from other sources. All audio files are edited and arranged in *GarageBand*.

A question remains, Why are Audible Picture Shows shown in a cinematic environment? Mr. Hulse, from the United Kingdom, makes the following observation:

It's about the darkened cinema, because the way people are conditioned to behave in a cinema is different from a concert. People are more inclined to try something unusual like sitting in the dark listening to abstract sound in a cinema rather than a hall or gallery. People are relaxed in a cinema and they surrender to being in the dark quite happily ("Elissa Wagman Review." [www. audiblepictureshow.org.uk](http://www.audiblepictureshow.org.uk)).

This statement raises another point, which is: the environment in which we are "mediated" obviously has an effect on the message. There is no correct answer with DrawingSound, but there are examples to follow, and students are expected to follow provided criteria to discover solutions for themselves through a process of trial and error. Samples of Audible Picture Shows for the classroom can be found at audiblepictureshow.org.uk, and are an excellent introduction for the DrawingSound unit.

The digital media landscape is a dynamic montage of media messages, and ironically, the mesmerizing seduction of sophisticated media messages is rarely even explored in schools. Media literacy and the creative process is a vital part of education in a democracy, and it is encouraging that the subject is increasingly being taken up in school curricula around the country. Students gaining a deeper appreciation, awareness, and understanding of sound is a good thing. I hope others can take up the subject and move it further.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan 1

Guiding Questions: What is imagination? Is it possible to draw something that is invisible?

Objectives: 117.35. Art, Grade 7.

- Identify the power of multiple forms of representation. (2C)
- Compare and contrast the use of art elements and principles, using vocabulary accurately. (1B)
- Create artworks from direct observations, personal experience, and imagination. (2A)
- Analyze selected original artworks by peers and others to form conclusions about formal properties (4A,B)

Introduction: How do I look?

This assignment focuses on "drawing sound," in this case creating visual representations of sound. Human beings have invented ways to represent non-visual ideas and concepts in a visual way. An obvious example of something non-visual is "nothing"; another is sound. Our first activity will be to "draw sound." We will begin talking about some of the differences between words, pictures and sound, and explore the question, "Which is the most powerful?" Students will also learn vocabulary common to both visual images and sound.

Activities

Drawing Sound: (draw a picture of "sound")

Drawing Seeing: How do I look? (draw a picture of "seeing")

Neil Postman description exercise, from "Teaching as Subversive Activity" (175)

Words, Pictures, sound table worksheet (see appendix 1)

Vocabulary

DrawingSound

Vocabulary: This vocabulary was chosen to analyze and form generalizations about the interdependence of the visual and aural arts. Define the words within the “equalizer” below, as related to the arts of drawing and sound.



Didactic Resources

Imagination, what is it? (See artist, Paul Klee’s “Twittering Machine” which is a visual representation of sound; and drawings from *The Little Prince*)

Words, Pictures, Sound table (Appendix 1)

Assessment

Students create and critique artworks.

Vocabulary: student take test on above vocabulary

Materials

Paper and drawing material

Lesson Plan 2

Guiding Question: Is our media environment primarily based visual or aural representation?

Objectives: 117.35. Art, Grade 7.

- Create a sound track for a given emotion (2A)
- Transcode from aural media to visual media (2A)
- Analyze selected original artworks by peers and others to form conclusions about formal properties (4A)
- identify career and ad vocational choices in art. (3C)

Introduction

Introduction to new media vs. old media. For most of the world’s history, all sound was heard live, in real time. All this changed in the late 1800s when Thomas Edison invented the first device that could record live sounds for playback. Today, the intricate beauty of recorded sound is now so commonplace in media that it can easily be taken for granted (for example, those we see on television). Most often, these sounds are not accompanied by natural sound, but rather by highly constructed and purposeful sounds. Some people say that our culture is increasingly a visual one; others like the founder of media studies, Marshall McLuhan, argue that our culture is

primarily an acoustic (sound) space. We examine the question and begin to test the sound vs. visual image argument.

Activities

Introduction to *GarageBand* Software

Make an aural “soundtrack” of a visual representation, “transcode” from vision to sound. Choose a 15 second sound clip that describes a mood or emotion and draw it.

Didactic Resources

Mac computer with GarageBand

DVD: Scanning Television

DrawingSound (video and booklet) contact mkirby@houstonisd.org for more info.

Assessment

Reflections from Scanning Television Series, “Sacred Noise” and “Track Stars”

Class critique of audio works as related to moods and their relation to visual representation

Materials

Macintosh computers

GarageBand software

Art making materials

Lesson Plan 3

Guiding Question: Which is the most powerful between words, pictures and sound?

Objectives: 117.35. Art, Grade 7.

- Analyze ways in which electronic media/technologies have influenced art (4B)
- Produce electronic media-generated art, using a variety of art materials and tools in traditional and experimental ways. (2C)
- Identify important media related dates along a historical timeline (4B)

Introduction

Introduction to the concept of audio montage (similar to the concept of a visual collage in which diverse visual elements are re-arranged to produce new meaning, or rearrange the potential meaning of a message; an audio montage can be defined as an arrangement of diverse audio sources, which produce an aesthetic or narrative effect.) We will also examine historical visual samples that make use of the collage and montage concept.

Activities

Make original sound effect: Experimental music using “found instruments”

Homework: Bring object from home to create an original sound.

Internet search and exploration of sound sites (scavenger hunt)

Make an Audio Collage: Experimental Group Jam using Garage Band

Note: Artist, John Cage *made music out of anvils, automobile brake drums, chains, and thus further opened music to noise.*

Didactic Resources

PowerPoint (collage art, cubism, Egyptian painting, pre-Columbian art, as related to concept of montage)

See bibliography of websites for source material

Handout “The art of noise” (Appendix 2)

Assessment

Class critique of student projects and presentations

One page reflection on media related advances and how they affect the way we live and imagine the world.

Materials

Macintosh Computers

GarageBand Software

Lesson Plan 4

Guiding Question: What is the impact on society from reproducible digital media?

Objectives: 117.35. Art, Grade 7.

- Create an audible Picture Show. (2C)
- Produce electronic media-generated art, using a variety of art materials and tools in traditional and experimental ways. (2C)
- Analyze selected original artworks by peers and others to form conclusions about formal properties (3B)

Introduction

Over the last one hundred years, aural culture has been making a comeback. Like reading a book, an Audible Picture Show is a movie without pictures, in which the “viewer” reads a text and imagines their own images; however, an Audible Picture Show makes use of other recorded sounds, such as sound effects, audio samples, and other recorded impressions. The point of the Audible Picture Show is to stimulate imagination, to enhance the audience’s ability to hear and imagine, and to raise awareness about the power of sound and its role in society.

Activities

Listen to various examples of Audible Picture Shows and draw scenes.

Compose an original Audible Picture Show that lasts between 30 seconds to two minutes, found instruments, sound samples, loops, text, spoken word, sound effect, etc.

Didactic Resources

Audible Picture Show samples from website

Reading: Matt Hulse Audible Picture Show interview (from web page)

Assessment

Group critique of student presentations and works.

Final written reflections of DrawingSound project.

Audible Picture Show festival results

Materials

Macintosh computers

GarageBand software

Imagination and creativity

Appendix 1

I came up with this theoretical “three-player game” of likely relationships. It describes how other “things” might be related to the words, pictures and sound columns.

	WORDS	PICTURES	SOUND
philosophy	Mind	Body	Soul
	Sacred	Profane	Being
	Honor	Faith	Truth
	Freedom	Power	Religion
	Symbolic	Imaginary	Real
	Knowledge	Premonition/intuition	Pattern recognition
	Conventional	Natural	Being
senses	Eyes/ears	Eyes	Ears
	Intelligible	Sensible	Emotional
	Cognitive	Affective	Expressive
	Arbitrary	Imitative	Pattern recognition
	Description	Information	Emotion
function	Naming	Reproducing	Interpretive
	Lineal	Spatial	Panorama
	Neocortex	Reptilian	Limbic
metaphor	Time	Space	Space/time
	Man	Woman	Child
	Sea	Land	Sky
	Water	Earth	Air
	Red	Yellow	Blue
	Triangle	Square	Circle
	Paper	Rock	Scissors
	Brunette	Blonde	Red head
	Morning	Day	Night

DrawingSound

DrawingSound comes in a variety of sources and ways. Here are the 6 families of noises of the Futurist orchestra which we will soon set in motion mechanically:

Rumbles Roars Explosions Crashes Splashes Booms	Whistles Hisses Snorts	Whispers Murmurs Mumbles Grumbles Gurles
Screeches Creaks Rumbles Buzzes Crackles Scrapes	Noises paper metal glass wood coins skin stone	Shouts Screams Groans Shrieks Howls Laughs Weezes Sobs

In this inventory we have encapsulated the most characteristic of the fundamental noises; the others are merely the associations and combinations of these. The rhythmic movements of a noise are infinite: just as with tone there is always a predominant rhythm, but around this numerous other secondary rhythms can be felt.

The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto
By Luigi Russolo, 1913

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