

Drawing Together: Using Sketchbooks to Gain Insight on a Program's Effectiveness

Abstract

Drawing Together is an activity based on work in Extension and other fields that involves drawing as way of delivering information or collecting participant impressions about a program. It was used as part of the Healthy Garden and Healthy Living program in New Jersey and produced impressions about the program that were candid, reflective, and useful. A simple set of instructions can be used to collect information in sketchbooks, and the content can be analyzed in a variety of ways. This flexible activity can be easily incorporated as part of an existing Extension program or an interdisciplinary collaboration.

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Introduction

Drawing activities have been used in Extension programs to teach schoolchildren about trees (Nichnadowicz, 2001), to incorporate children's perceptions into program evaluations (Evans & Reilly, 1996), and to collect data for evaluators to use in their quest to capture the "real picture" of a program (Tilburg, 1987). These examples represent the value of drawing in delivering program content or documenting attitudes and perceptions about a program. More recently, drawing activities have been used across a variety of disciplines—forestry, science education, and psychology—to connect urban youths and urban nature (Kelley, Pendras, & Minnella, 2012), to teach science in schools (Ainsworth, Prain, & Tytler, 2011), and to improve memory recall in adults (Wammes, Meade, & Fernandes, 2016).

On the basis of these examples, a cross-disciplinary group involved in a health and nutrition program for an underserved community in New Brunswick, New Jersey, developed an activity using sketchbooks to document participant impressions of and attitudes toward the program. The Drawing Together activity was an important component of the Healthy Garden and Healthy Living program, a collaboration of Robert Wood Johnson Medical School; Elijah's Promise, a local organization that alleviates hunger through training, education, and social services; and the Rutgers Department of Landscape Architecture. Those of us involved in Healthy Garden and

Healthy Living sought to understand the potential for community gardening to improve the health of underserved individuals through their participation in gardening and food-related activities. Participants were primarily homeless or previously homeless individuals who used Elijah's Promise soup kitchen and health services. They received modest stipends as an incentive for participation, which included working in a community garden.

Case Story

In the program, we implemented group drawing as a way to keep track of attendance, activities, and participants' impressions. During the course of two or three weekly 30-min sessions across 15 weeks, the technique developed into an important activity that allowed participants to document their attitudes toward work, gardening, the program, and one another. The loosely structured activity started with participants roaming the garden to find "things to draw." After a few days, participants opted to sit in a common space to draw, write, talk, and discuss the day's work. Participants wrote about conflicts within the group, specifically relating to those who "really did the work" and those who were "getting credit for work they didn't do." Other participants' drawings and writings revealed a disagreement over ownership of the garden's compost pile. The activity also provided valuable input with respect to our program management, most notably our lack of clarity on when participants would receive their stipends. Overall, the sketchbook entries were a collection of participants' thoughts in words and images (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

A Collection of Sketchbook Entries (Drawings and Text by Several Participants in the Healthy Garden and Healthy Living Program)



The information in the sketchbooks provided insights into the utility and shortcomings of the program that were not readily available through the program's existing evaluation structure. For example, the confusion over stipend payments led our team to provide regular group updates and to explore alternative sources of payment funding. We also began to formally recognize individual and group contributions to address the "who did what" issue and help improve the group dynamics.

Usefulness of the Activity and Instructions for Implementation

Drawing and writing about garden work or a day's activities is not new. Sketchbooks and journals are often used for documenting observations and impressions. Moreover, Extension professionals use a variety of techniques and methods to document community attitudes and program outcomes. But drawing together can produce information that can be more candid and reflective than responses to a onetime survey. The qualitative information in the sketchbooks can be reviewed, evaluated, and interpreted independently or as a supplement to other data from a program.

Program developers who want to implement Drawing Together can use the following steps:

1. Give each participant a small, inexpensive sketchbook and a pen. Encourage participants to identify and personalize their sketchbooks as they wish and, if the activity will occur multiple times throughout the program, to bring additional drawing tools, such as markers and colored pencils, if they want to do so.

2. Maintain a sketchbook yourself to become familiar with the process, understand the benefits and constraints of group drawing, and record your impressions during the drawing sessions.
3. Direct participants to describe what they did that day, in images or words. Simple instruction (e.g., "Draw or write about what you did today") is best. Avoid using too many instructional prompts, such as "Draw over here" or "Make sure you write about..." so that participants feel free to use whatever modes or forms of expression suit them best.
4. Situate participants physically close to one another during the drawing session, either around a table or sitting in a circle, side-by-side or face-to-face. The sessions should last 20–30 min to allow time to sketch, write, and talk. The duration of a session may be adjusted as needed. The goal is to provide enough time for participants to settle in to the practice and for there to be fluidity between sketchbook entries and conversation.
5. Review the sketchbooks and systematically record observations and expressions about the program. Make sure you have documented consent to share the participants' work as research or for teaching or public presentations.

Conclusions

The informality of the Drawing Together activity's execution allows for an information-rich collection of participant ideas and thoughts. The activity can be easily incorporated as part of a community gardeners' meeting, as an afterschool program, or as an independent Extension program. It can also be used in ongoing research. The flexibility of the activity allows for its application in multiple types of settings, with diverse groups of participants, and across different disciplines.

Acknowledgments

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