

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tJPeumHNLY>

Drawing in class, Rachel Smith, 2012

When I was in high school, I was a pretty good student and I took very good notes. And my teachers really appreciated that. My notes looked a lot like this most of the time. So you look at these notes and you say to yourself, “This is great. This student is clearly paying attention in my class.” Right? That’s what it looks like.

The trouble is that sometimes my notes looked a little more like this. And this was a little hard, a little more problematic, because to the teachers it looked like I was drawing in class. And so I would get a different reaction.

But for me, it was just as easy to listen closely to what the teacher was saying if I was drawing images as it was if I was writing words. Sometimes, it was actually easier for me to listen and pay attention if my hand was doing something, and it didn’t matter if the images that were coming out had anything to do with what I was hearing. It was just easier for me to focus if I was drawing.

But teachers would stand in the front of the room and see me in the back of the room, because my last name started with an S and so I was always in the back. And they would say, “She’s drawing in class again.” And they’d make me stop and then they’d make me stand up in front of the class and recite some exercises to induce me to pay attention better next time. And maybe, after class, I’d have to stay and clean off the blackboard and then I’d always get the same lecture which went something like this: “Rachel, you’re such a good student, but if you don’t pay attention, you’re not going to do well.”

Guess what I do for a living now? Any guesses? 25 years later, it turns out that what I do for a living is pay attention. I get up in front of a group and the group talks, and while they’re doing that, I pay attention. And I pay attention totally, and completely, and with everything that I am. And while I’m paying attention to what the group is saying, I take notes. And those notes look something like this. This is called graphic recording. I use huge sheets of paper on the wall, and I use big markers, and I listen to the group’s conversation and I record it, using words and images. Sometimes there are more words and sometimes there are more images, but usually the notes come out looking something like this.

This helps the group in several ways. It lets them see what they’re doing, it lets them see their work in a way that’s not normally possible in a meeting or a conversation. It lets them see the big picture together. They can make connections between pieces of information that come up at different times in the meeting. They can follow the thread of a conversation through a multi-day meeting because it’s all around them on the walls, all the time. It really helps the group to see what they’re accomplishing as they do it. And that’s my contribution. I make the group’s work visible.

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I also use visual note-taking to take my own personal notes, when I'm listening to speeches, or lectures, or meetings, what have you.

A couple of things are different than when I was in high school. I'm using different tools, so my notes look a little different. I also draw on an internal library of images that I've developed over the years and that I carry with me, that I can just draw very quickly when I need them. They're just ready for me to use. And I've gotten better at pulling out the key points that speakers are making, I've had a lot more practice. And I've stopped worrying that people are going to make me stay after the meeting and clean up because I've been drawing.

Any type of note-taking is designed to help the student take what they're hearing and hook it to their internal frame of reference. That's how learning occurs. You take new information and hook it to old information you already had. When you take notes, it's very possible to write down word for word exactly what the teacher's saying and not understand any of it. Has that happened to any of you? I know it's happened to me — where I just have no clue what's going on, so I just write it all down and hope I can figure it out later. When you're using visual note-taking though, you have to listen to what's being said, you have to really hear it, and you have to understand it, because that's the only way you're going to come up with an image that connects what you're hearing with what you already know in your mind.

Visual note-taking opens the door for more playful connections between information, for students to use their imaginations in an activity that can often be very passive: note-taking. It also helps students to create a personal visual memory aid that they can study from later, they can look at, and tell themselves the story again. When a teacher is teaching, what they're doing, really, is telling a story about something they're passionate about. And when a student takes visual notes, what they're doing is making that story visible.

When taking visual notes, the critical thing is that your images are very quick and easy to draw, and that they're relevant to the content that's being said. If you find yourself doing a really, really detailed image, and it has nothing to do with what the speaker's currently saying, and this happens to every visual note-taker at some point, then you've lost track of what's going on, you've fallen behind, and what you need to do is stop, leave a space, move on and keep up with the speaker.

When I was taking the notes here, the speaker that I was listening to, Chris Schunn, was talking about the difference between low-success teams and high-success teams, and you can see that in the lower portion of the slide here. And I had this image of how I wanted to represent his description, of what those two teams were like, but I didn't have time while he was talking to work it out because I hadn't had those postures of the people that you see here. That wasn't in my library, in my image library, already. So I left a space and I went on with him, which is good, because if I hadn't, if I'd tried to work out that drawing right then, I would've ended up missing the take-home points of the lecture which is the important thing, that's what you want to know, this is what the speaker wants you to walk away with. So I waited until he was finished and when the talk was over, I went back and I worked out the drawings the way that I want

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them. And now when I look at them, they remind me of the descriptions that he used because this is the image that came to my mind when he was saying that.

I'm not saying that this is the only way to take notes. I am not saying it's the best way to take notes. I'm just saying it's another way to take notes. It's another option. And for some people it can be very, very helpful. Some people have a very hard time writing words while they're hearing words. For some reason, it's very hard. Other people naturally think of images as they're listening. And for other people, like me, it's just easier to focus and listen closely when something is coming with your hands – when you're doing something with your hands.

We like to think that school has changed in 30 years, gotten better, improved. I want to tell you a little story about my niece, Elizabeth. Elizabeth is 13 years old, she's just going into 8th grade this year. And Elizabeth is a really good student, most of the time. And last year in school, she got caught drawing in class. Astonishingly, she got in trouble. I can't believe this is still happening, but it is.

So, she got called up after class to the teacher and he was going to assign her a detention, but before he could say anything, Elizabeth, who is much sharper at 13 than I was, showed him her paper and she said, "I wasn't just drawing in class." This is what she showed him. She said, "I was taking notes in your class. I was paying attention." And she went over this paper with him, point by point, and she used her words and her images to recall the story that he had told in his lecture. And she captured all the key points. It was clear that she had been paying attention, and that she could read her notes.

And when she was finished, her teacher said, "That's really good. If you want to keep taking notes like that in my class, you go right ahead." So, some things have changed. And she continued to do it all through the semester. As you can see, her notes got better. She got better at organizing the information. She got better at choosing which images to use. And in the end, she was able to demonstrate that these notes could help her study so she was able to do it in other classes as well.

I talked to her recently and I said, "Elizabeth, tell me how was this experience for you, this visual note-taking in class? What was the experience like?" And this is what she said to me. She said, "It helped me remember better because I could place the information with a picture that's relevant." And that's what it's all about. But the key point here is that the picture and the information are not just connected in Elizabeth's notebook. The picture and the information are connected in Elizabeth's mind, that's why visual note-taking works.

What do you think is the most common objection I get when I start to teach people how to do visual note-taking? Any ideas? Here, I'll show you. Okay, say it with me, "But I can't draw." I get that all the time. The good news is it's not about drawing, it's not about making beautiful pictures. It's not about making detailed images. It's not about accurately drawing a person, or a car, or a light bulb. It's not even about doing something that's recognizable to anybody other than yourself. The thing that you need to do with visual note-taking is capture what you're

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hearing in a way that's memorable for you. It's a personal experience and it needs to be personally relevant and connect with what you heard, and that's all.

So, let's say that you're convinced and you want to try this yourself, or, if you're a teacher, you want to let your students try it. We're going to go over three simple steps that will get you set on this road, get you started. And the first one is to choose a tool that works for you, the second one is to start building up that mental library of images that I talked about, and the third one is to really practice listening and capturing the key points. After that, it's just practice. That's all you need to know and then just practice. So let's go over these one by one.

Choose a tool that works for you. This can be anything at all, it can be paper, and a pen or pencil, it can be a tablet computer or an iPad. You can use lots and lots of colors, just a few colors, just one color, whatever you like. It just has to be something that you're absolutely comfortable with. Whatever's happening, the tool cannot get in the way of you taking your notes. It can't get between you and capturing that information. So if your tool is too confusing, or if you're not familiar with it, it's not going to be helpful to you. Whatever you choose, you should practice with that tool before you record a lecture, or a class, or a meeting that's very important because you want the tool to just be seamless not in your way at all.

By the way, the sketch notes here have been done by Mike Rohde, and he's a fantastic inspiration if you're going to begin doing visual note-taking. So I really recommend looking at his books and his pictures.

Second thing is actually your most important tool. The tool that you write with is important, but the most important tool is your internal library of mental imagery. You start with one or two icons; when you see something that somebody else did you steal it, you make it your own, you modify it, and gradually you build up this library that you can use whenever you need to. Every image that I use in my digital notes, in my visual notes, digital or paper, I've done dozens and dozens of times. I know exactly what I'm going to do. I might modify it slightly to fit the context, I might add a little detail, but I'm not making it up on the spot. It takes all of your attention to listen and capture those points that you're hearing. All of your attention is bound up in that.

If you're creating a new concept, if you're creating an image or an icon for a new concept or idea, that takes all of your attention. You can't do them both, it's one or the other. Think of it this way: if you are taking notes in a lecture, and you are just using words, you are not using images at all, you would not dream of inventing a language to take the notes in while you're listening to the lecture. Can you imagine making up words and trying to assign a context to them that's consistent while you're listening to something else? No, you couldn't do it. It's exactly the same with visual language. You need to have these words in your vocabulary already. You need to be taking notes in a language that you already know.

Finally, and this is the most important thing, if you forget everything else that I said today because you're working on a detailed drawing about slide two or whatever, if you forget everything else, this is what I want you to remember: visual note-taking works if you capture

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the speaker's key points. That's all you have to do, it's capture the speaker's key points. The images that you use should be simple enough that you can draw them very quickly, but you can add details to them to capture additional information that the speaker says, even if you don't write it all out.

So for example, what I'm talking about here: this slide is visual notes that I made of a talk on key competencies for participating in virtual meetings, especially where you want to do visual note-taking, so things that you have to know to be in that kind of meeting, to run that kind of meeting. And one of the points the speaker made was that you have to have patience. So you can see the patience up there. I have a little patient person, right? So this is just my standard person, modified to be like this, with a little halo to indicate how patient they are, and next to them is a computer that I draw all the time. But I've added lines coming out of that computer, right? Unhappy – the computer's unhappy, there are these lines coming out. And what that one image reminds me of is that the speaker was talking about being patient with technical difficulties, not being patient with people who are difficult in your meeting or something else. So just those lines remind me of that detail without my having to write it all out.

Elizabeth. I called her and said, "Elizabeth, I'm going to be giving this talk, what's the one piece of advice that you would give to people?" And she said, "I would tell them that you don't want to take too long because then you get sucked into the drawing and you can't hear what they're saying," which is absolutely true. You get sucked into the drawing and you can't hear what they're saying. It's really not about the drawing. It's about listening and capturing, listening and capturing.

If you're working on that detailed drawing and the speaker's talking about something else, I can guarantee that you're not listening to the speaker anymore. You might be listening to your inner critic who's saying, "That drawing's not right, keep working on it. It's not right, it's not right." Or you might be listening to that voice in your head that says, "That's not what a zebra looks like." But you're not listening to the speaker. And what you need to be doing is listening to the speaker.

When you've done visual notes, the way that you tell if you did it right is if you can look at your notes and tell back the story that you heard from that speaker. Then you did it right. That's all there is to it. It's no more than that. Can you look at it and recall the story? After you've had some practice, it's really meditative doing visual note-taking. It's kind of like a conversation between you and the speaker that takes place in your notebook, and you can recall that conversation later.

It takes a little bit of practice to get to that point but I hope that you will give it a try and practice it, and in fact, I'm going to get you started right now. So please get out something that you can write with. You can use a pencil and paper, you can use a tablet, a notebook, an iPad. If you have nothing at all, you can draw with your finger in the air, that's fine. We're going to start by adding one icon to your visual library, and we're going to start with one that usually stops people in their tracks. We're going to draw a person.

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It helps to have your objective in your mind before you get started, so this is the person that we're going to draw. This is affectionately known as a star person, because in its simplest form it looks like a star. But I've done years and years of research and I find that people rarely stand like this. So we're going to give our person a little more natural posture. You're ready to go? Everybody has something to draw with? Okay. I'm going to be zooming in and out while I do this, so you'll see things get bigger and smaller.

A star person just starts with an oval for the head, please draw an oval for the head. Then, the next thing is, from the bottom of the oval, a line that curves up and out, and that's the top edge of the upraised arm. Doing the hand is very simple, it's a line straight down and two little bumps, and there's your hand. And now we're going to complete the arm with a curved line that comes back down, and notice that this line stops almost underneath where the other line started. You don't want to go back under the head, or your person will have too narrow a body later. That's a protip.

The other arm is a little boomerang that goes out and comes back down, and after that, we just draw two straight lines for the legs, and these taper together a little bit at the bottom but they don't touch. Then, down at the bottom, we're going to add the feet, which is just two little curves, almost like a W. We're almost done, we just need to add a few details and we're finished.

So the first thing is a little triangle in this area, and that's the negative space inside the arm. The next thing is, we're going to give the person a little personality, with two little lines for the eyes. And finally, one straight line for the leg, and that'll divide the two legs. And there you have your star person.

So it's entirely possible that you all walked in here convinced that you couldn't draw, and now you've just drawn a person, there's a first image for your mental library. If you practice this guy, he'll be ready to drop in your notes whenever you need him. And he's very versatile. For example, you can make him face a totally different direction if you just draw the eyes a little differently. I'm going to draw them close together on one side of his head and watch what happens. He's looking to the side now. Very versatile. So, he's ready to pop into your notes, where he can hail a taxi, he can make an announcement, he can raise an objection, and he can rally a group of people. All with this one little drawing. And that's how you get away with drawing in class.

Thank you.

(Applause)

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