

# Finding out what children 'know and can do' with DTWS

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**D**raw, Talk, Write and Share (DTWS) is a pedagogical approach resulting from research conducted by the author (Mackenzie, 2011, 2014; Mackenzie & Veresov, 2013). In this article however, I describe how DTWS can also be used as a powerful observation process, allowing educators in preschool and early years classrooms to find out what children 'know and can do' (Mackenzie, 2011) in terms of drawing, talking and early writing. Used for this purpose, it becomes a systematic, formative assessment task.

DTWS allows an observer to note a child's current methods of self-expression – talking and drawing – as well as their early engagement with writing. The protocol has been adapted from one developed and applied for research purposes by the author, and is appropriate for use with children from ages 3–6 years. The process can take between 5 and 25 minutes depending upon the age, interest and previous drawing and writing experiences of the children.

This process values young learners multiple and developing modes of expression (drawing, talking and writing) and understands that young children can create more complex texts using multiple modes than using only one. This can be seen when children are adding random letters or symbols, labels, or simple short phrases or sentences (perhaps using invented text) but can draw quite complex pictures and can talk at length about their ideas.

## Literacy and DTWS

Children need to learn how to create and interpret 'oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial patterns of meaning' and be able to... 'apply these practices flexibly in different cultural, social or domain specific situations' (Kalantzis et al., 2016, p2). The literacy skills developed in the early years, including drawing, talking, listening, movement, dance, storytelling and drama form the foundation for reading, writing and communicating more generally.

Writing is critical to literacy in today's world and contemporary writing incorporates a variety of traditional, digital, multimodal, and visual literacy forms, although the written word remains key to most text forms. Young children begin to compose

texts long before they can write in conventional ways using words and letters. They are able to create multimodal texts through drawing and talking about their drawings.

Gradually, as children learn about print, they start to add letters and words to their texts and they then express themselves using three modes: drawing + talking + some letters and words. The talking often happens in two ways:

1. spontaneously during the process of drawing (and writing) as they chat, to themselves, to educators or to other children, and
2. after they have finished their text, in response to prompts from an educator or as they spontaneously share with others.

## Rationale

Most children start school being able to draw and talk; therefore, they are able to create multimodal texts that incorporate visual and oral modes of communication. If we value and encourage children to create multimodal texts using these two modes, we can then teach the written text mode as an additional mode. This approach is supported by considerable research which confirms that early writing develops at many levels simultaneously as children build a symbolic repertoire of which the written word is only one element.

If Draw, Talk, Write and Share (DTWS) is an established pedagogical approach used in your classroom you may not feel the need to formalise the observation process and apply the DTW Observation Protocol (<https://noellmackenzie.com/>). You may instead just identify which children you wish to observe carefully across a week, as they draw, talk and write, although the guide for observations and analysis developed for use with the protocol, may be useful.

## DTWS as a pedagogical approach

DTWS as a pedagogical approach aims to promote the development of two of the two foundational skills mentioned earlier (drawing and talking) and add early writing. Dispositions for learning are also developed through DTWS: message creation; idea development; sense of story; self-expression; and creativity. In addition, children develop

concentration and fine motor skills through drawing.

DTWS is based on the notion of recognising and building on what children already 'know and can do' and introducing written text as an additional mode of communication. This way children remain successful meaning makers and become successful users of the written mode of meaning making.

As a pedagogical approach to teaching writing, the process is quite simple (see Figure 1). Start with drawing and talking, actively encouraging and supporting both drawing and talking. Of course, children need to learn to talk quietly so that only the people closest to them can hear them, and this takes training. Gradually help children learn how to add labels to the drawings. Sharing can take place at any time.



Figure 1: DTWS as a pedagogical approach to support early writing

However, teacher modelling at each stage will be necessary when getting this process going because drawing at home is not common in some households. Children with older siblings often have access to drawing tools and are also provided with models of drawing and writing. However, this is not the case for all children as parents do not always understand the importance of drawing prior to children starting school. Tablets and smart phones have taken over from drawing in some households. This means that some children may not have had time to explore how to hold and use drawing implements. When observing children using the protocol for the first time, it can be worth asking children if they draw at home.

### The Draw, Talk, Write (DTWS) Observation Protocol

The DTWS Observation Protocol takes DTWS and uses it to allow an observer to understand what a young child knows and can do in terms of text creation from an early age. This observation process values three modes of expression: Drawing,

Talking and Early Writing. Importantly, the observer witnesses the process, not just the final product. As the children are engaged with the task, take notes. You may record the session for transcription at a later date – noting that this will only give you the talk mode. I prefer to observe the processes in combination. You can download the protocols from my webpage at no cost. (Mackenzie DTWS Observation Protocol at <https://noellamackenzie.com/the-draw-talk-write-dtws-observation-protocol/>).

#### READ. THINK. EXPLORE.

- Read and think: Mackenzie, N.M. (2011).
- From drawing to writing: What happens when you shift teaching priorities in the first six months of school? *Australian Journal of Language & Literacy*, 34(3), 322-340.
- Explore <https://noellamackenzie.com/> where you will find a number of blog posts that may be of interest in terms of DTWS.
- Locate and download the free *Mackenzie DTWS Observation Protocol* and try the process.

### Conclusion

The observation protocols discussed here have been developed from protocols originally developed by the author for research purposes. However, teachers using DTWS as a pedagogical approach told the author how much they were learning about what their children know and can do when they stopped teaching and took the time to observe children as they were drawing, talking and exploring early writing. They asked for something to support their observations in a systematic way. Consequently, the protocol you now have, grew from the author and classroom teachers working together to better understand what young children know and can do at any particular time and how they develop a repertoire of text creation processes. Your feedback is welcome.

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