

Chatting While Waterskiing Drawing as an Ethnographic Method

by Erika Hoffman Dilloway

S U M M A R Y

In this essay I reflect on the challenges and opportunities I encountered in trying to incorporate sketching into my work as a linguistic anthropologist. I ground this discussion in my experiences participating in Kim Tondeur's Graphic Anthropology workshop hosted by the Expeditions field school, and put these engagements into conversation with Andrew Causey's (2016) book, *Drawn to See: Drawing as an Ethnographic Method*. Specifically, I attend to the processes through which the other workshop participants and I learned to manage our attention in new ways when simultaneously sketching and interacting socially; further, I comment on how this process helped attune me to related strategies used by deaf and hearing signers in Malta and Gozo. This essay first appeared as a three-part series of posts on the University of Toronto's Teaching Culture blog and is reproduced here with permission.

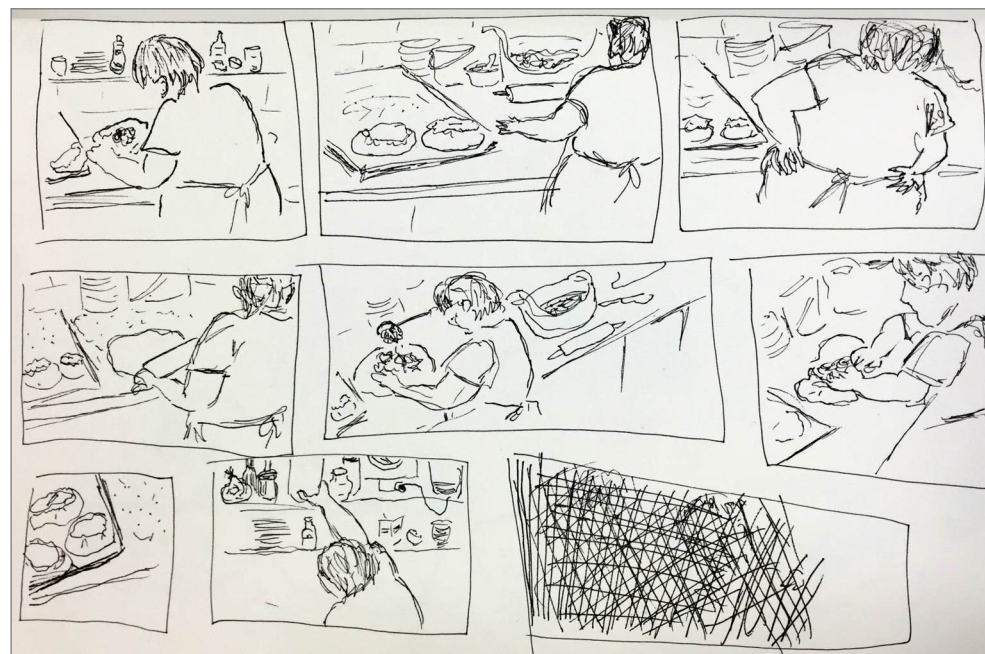
A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

Graphic Anthropology, ethnographic methods, attention, sign languages

How to refer to this article

Hoffman Dilloway E., Chatting While Waterskiing, Drawing as an Ethnographic Method, 2017, Omertaa, Journal for applied anthropology, <http://www.omertaa.org/archive/omertaa0079.pdf>



Introduction

Reflecting on the experience of writing, Lynda Barry has commented that, “you should be waterskiing behind it, not dragging it like a barge. Writing should take you for a ride.”* Despite my best efforts, to date I continue to experience my academic writing process as dragging a barge (though I don’t always find the grim exertion this implies totally unpleasurable). I can sustain this effort only in short bursts and manage to complete a text—including this one—only by overcoming, again and again, my desire to distract myself. However, when drawing I do experience the waterskiing sensation that Barry describes. In my experience (shared by many others, I’m sure), drawing allows me to become totally absorbed in a process that seems to emerge spontaneously, and which manages to tune out my surroundings until I’ve finished the image. It’s highly satisfying.

Consequently, I’ve begun to think about ways in which I might incorporate drawing into my work as a linguistic anthropologist. Until recently, I had considered its possibilities primarily as a tool for analyzing and publishing data. However, in 2016 a happy coincidence put me in a position to concretely explore ways of incorporating graphic methods into fieldwork methodologies as part of real-time, face-to-face, communicative interactions. I was spending my sabbatical in Malta, a small Mediterranean island country, where I was beginning a new project with a network of signers using Lingwa Tas-Sinjali Maltija (Maltese Sign Language). Anne Brackenbury, editor of the *ethnoGRAPHIC* series, knowing about my interest in graphic anthropology and aware that I was in Malta, brought to my attention the serendipitous fact that a graphic methods workshop was scheduled to be held in Gozo, a smaller island within the Maltese archipelago. Feeling lucky to be a short ferry ride, rather than an ocean, away from the program, I signed up immediately. In this short essay, I will reflect on some of the challenges and opportunities I encountered during this workshop, and in trying to incorporate drawing, which I typically experience as such an absorbing activity, into face-to-face field interactions.

Drawing and Talking at the Same Time

Led by Kim Tondeur of the Université libre de Bruxelles and hosted by the Expeditions field school, the workshop drew on the program's long-standing relationships with people on the island to offer participants access to a range of local settings and activities, such as observing a blacksmith make knives or experiencing the morning rush in a Gozitan bakery (see Tondeur 2016). In each of

these contexts we were asked to observe, participate, and engage in a range of drawing exercises. I found that the very focus I usually enjoy when drawing made it difficult for me to engage socially while sketching. Andrew Causey, in his book *Drawn to See: Drawing as an Ethnographic Method* (2016), also identifies this problem, positing that "it's almost as if you are paying for the chance to record the spirit and animation of what you perceive by reducing your own vigor, and that by stopping your attention to your own emergent life you are then able to channel it to the line" (Causey 2016: 122). He also notes that this potential conflict has long been a part of the "participant observation" dynamic (e.g., Ingold 2013), but which for some may be experienced more acutely (and thus potentially grappled with more thoughtfully) via the use of graphic methods.

For example, during our visit to the bakery, I attempted to sketch the steps one of our hosts took in making a batch of ftajjar (a pizza-like baked good). While rapidly engaged in the challenge of shifting my gaze back and forth between my sketchpad and her movements, simultaneously dodging the long handles of the baker's paddles and the elbows of the customers picking up orders, I occasionally missed a vital action that could have clarified the subsequent moves I observed. As illustrated in the comic I drew to reflect on that day's activities (we were asked to produce one such strip each day), when I complained about this problem, Kim, laughing, pointed out that I could have simply spoken up and asked our host to explain the step I'd missed. Despite my many years of fieldwork experience, I had been so focused on drawing that it quite simply had not occurred to me to just ask!

In fact, to varying degrees, all the workshop participants were initially struggling to maintain conversation and other forms of active social engagement while also drawing. Of course, this can't be attributed to something inherent in the activity of drawing, but rather to the ways we had been socialized to engage in the practice and to frame it ideologically (just as, for example, reading can be practiced and ideologically framed as private, individual, and silent or as public, collective, and noisy) (e.g., Long 1993; Cody 2011).





Drawing and Talking and Eating at the Same Time

As I was not alone in my difficulty engaging in other activities while sketching, the workshop's leader asked the group to commit to continuously drawing throughout dinner each evening (while also eating and socializing) in order to help us incorporate drawing into a broader range of communicative practices. The first few nights were very quiet. We were having trouble coordinating turns at talk: often speaking over one another, laughing, and then falling silent. Bids at telling stories often faltered and then pattered out. Aside from the general challenges of paying simultaneous attention to what we experienced as multiple domains of activity and of getting to know a new group of people, these problems may have in part arisen from the fact that we weren't using eye gaze to manage talk in our usual ways.

Though norms for the use of eye gaze vary widely within and across cultural contexts, we participants were all accustomed to attending to gaze in order to "monitor one another's mutual perceivings" (Goffman 1964: 95). However, at these dinners our gaze was alternately unavailable (when looking down at a drawing in progress) or fixed on another participant's face (when studying the subject of a sketch) for unusually long periods of time. This caused disruption to our habitual practices for initiating talk or displaying our engagement in dinnertime conversation (Goodwin 1981; Rossano 2013). But even as we were having trouble tracking one another's gaze for evidence of attention in real time, our sketching activities were producing materialized "evidence" of our "visual perception" (Causey 2016:13). This too caused some initial awkwardness. Though we occasionally sketched the contents of the dining room's open pantry or the objects arrayed on the dinner table, we spent most of these evenings drawing one another. I, for one, was initially inclined to try to minimize signs that I was sketching a particular person, guiltily darting my eyes away when they caught me studying them. I also often tried to shield my sketchbook with my arm, because I was worried that my rendering of a subject might cause some offense. Even in this low stakes exercise, the potential repercussions involved in depicting another person (a fundamental concern in anthropological projects more broadly) felt quite salient.

However, as the two-week workshop progressed, we became more comfortable with allowing the other

participants to observe and comment on our depictions of them, and with observing and commenting on their depictions of us. These practices both reflected and affected an emerging sense of intimacy within the group. As we became more comfortable discussing our sketches in progress, what initially felt like multiple domains of activity began to feel more integrated (just as anthropological methods for recording interactions cannot be framed as a separate activity from the events we aim to study, but must be treated as a component of the social interactions we analyze). Similarly, many anthropologists who have incorporated graphic methods into their fieldwork have noted that their drawings became a means of generating new forms of social engagement with research partners and an opportunity to

elicit interesting information as participants commented on or corrected sketches (Alfonso and Ramos 2004; Causey 2016, Tondeur 2016).

Additionally, over the course of the workshop some aspects of our conversational practices began to shift, leading to less difficulty coordinating talk (e.g., it seemed to me that we increasingly attended to vocal rather than visual indications of an addressee's attention). It's unsurprising that we were able to adjust in this way: human communicative repertoires are highly flexible. For example, research has shown that eye gaze can be utilized differently depending on the particular goals of talk (Rossano 2013), in response to short-term changes in available communicative channels (e.g., when speaking on the phone to a non-visible partner), or in response to more enduring changes in sensory capacities (e.g., when Deaf-Blind signers adapt to gradual reduction in sightedness (Edwards 2014)). Indeed, as someone whose research has engaged networks of deaf signers, I've always attended to the multimodal flexibility of human semiosis in my work. However, as the next section details, my efforts to incorporate an exercise from the graphic methods workshop into my broader ongoing research in Malta helped me notice in new ways how local signers integrated writing and drawing into their broader communicative practices.

Drawing and Signing at the Same Time

The first weekend of the workshop I had the opportunity to integrate sketching into my new research project focusing on signing practices in Malta and Gozo. Most of the social life of Maltese Sign Language (Lingwa Tas-Sinjali Maltija or LSM) takes place on the main island of Malta; deaf Gozitans who wish to regularly access contexts for LSM use, deaf social clubs, and sign language interpreters often relocate from Gozo. However, it so happened that the first LSM course to be offered on Gozo in almost a decade coincided with the graphic anthropology workshop, allowing me to participate in both simultaneously.

The instructor was a fluent deaf signer whose linguistic repertoire also included spoken Maltese and English. While she occasionally spoke with the class, however, much of the instruction took place in a signed medium. Consequently, the demands on students' visual attention were greater than is typically the case in primarily spoken

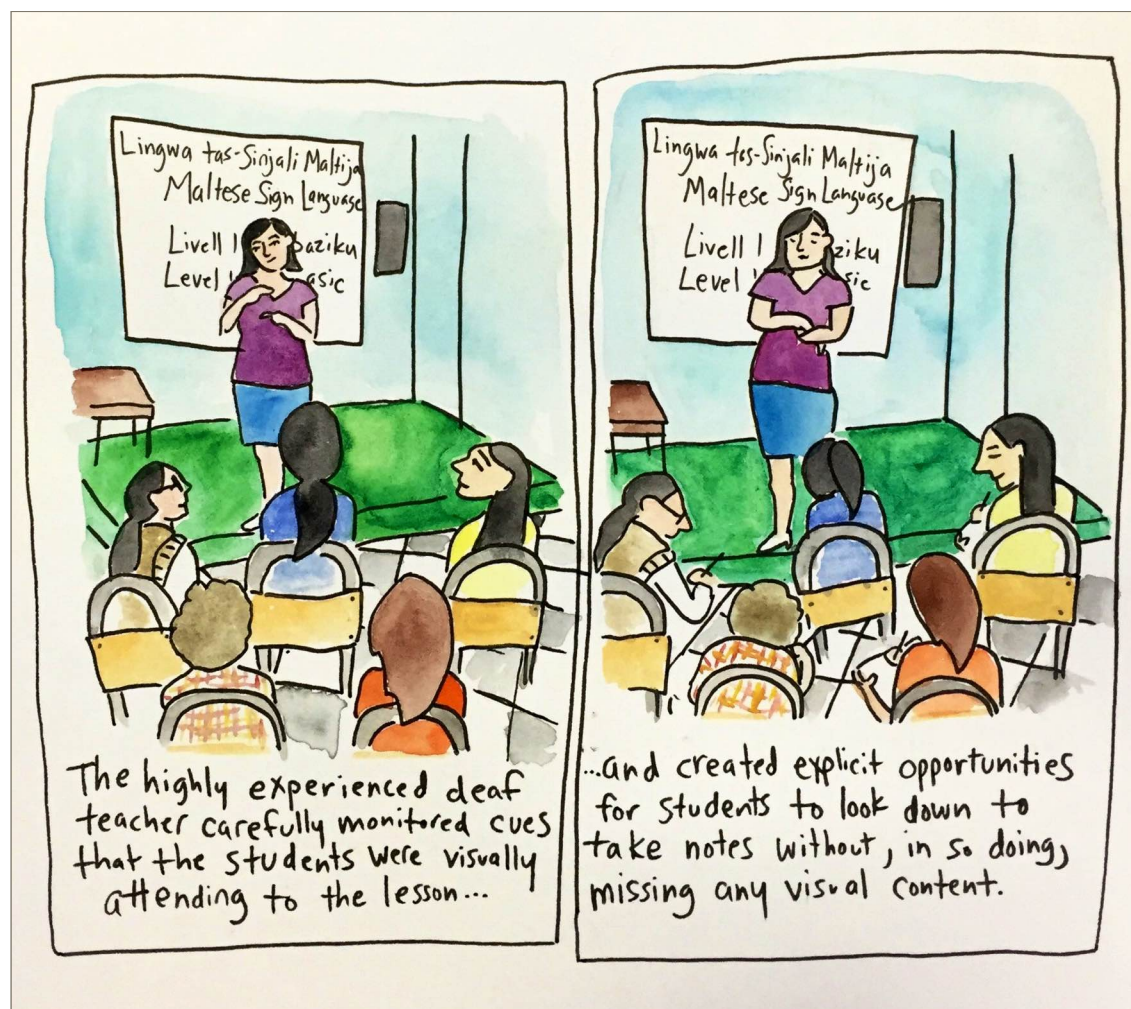


language based classrooms. When the teacher was signing, students could not look down to take notes, to gaze briefly out the window, or rest their eyes without missing important content conveyed visually. Sign language teachers, aware of such potential “knowledge gaps” (Bagga-Gupta 1999: 102), may draw on a range of strategies to minimize their impact. These may include positioning students in such a way as to increase the ease of maintaining visual access to the signed talk, monitoring students for signs of visual attentiveness, or

repeating important content (Bagga-Gupta 1999; Ramsey and Padden 1998). Given my recent efforts to coordinate talk and sketching, I was particularly aware of the skilled way in which the LSM instructor carved out designated intervals during which students could look down to take notes (and during which I could sketch). While introducing content, she monitored students’ attention and comprehension by engaging us with requests to repeat signs or to guess at the meaning of a newly introduced form, but during the occasional intervals for writing, she held still, waiting for our eyes to return to her before resuming signing.

I admit that, even as I was becoming more skilled at participating in spoken conversation while sketching, I had wondered if incorporating graphic methods into field research with deaf signers would be more difficult due to the primarily visual nature of talk in such settings. However, during this LSM class I realized I had not been considering the fact that deaf signers draw on a range of strategies to incorporate activities that can divert visual attention into signed interactions. The GAD instructor’s practice of going “on hold” while students wrote was one such strategy. Keating and Mirus (2012) provide another example, describing how some deaf signers adapt to signing while driving (challenging because of the demands driving places on both visual attention and on manual articulators) by creatively manipulating both the environment of the car (e.g., adjusting mirrors) and the forms of signs (e.g., by articulating a typically two-handed sign with one hand, while steering with the other). Attending to such practices in order to align my sketching activities with them could not only help me integrate drawing and signing, but also help bring these (often subtle) strategies more clearly into analytical focus.

Thinking about ways to represent signing practices graphically also made me wonder what kinds of notes the other participants were taking. Having become more habituated as a result of the graphic workshop to showing others the content of my notebooks and asking to see theirs, during a break midway through the session I approached several fellow students to see if they’d be willing to discuss their note-taking practices. They pointed out that few of the students had access to an LSM dictionary featuring detailed pictorial representations of the signs, so they were attempting to record, via a combination of text and images, the forms of the signs to better reproduce them when studying in between classes.



It can be quite challenging to represent, in two-dimensional form, the changing shapes and complex movements that characterize signing, especially during relatively brief note-taking breaks. As I showed my classmates, I made my notes using both sketches and a systematic visually iconic writing system for sign languages called SignWriting that I have studied for many years (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2011; 2013; 2017). The others had not previously learned such a system and most had drawn on familiar forms, such as letters, numbers, arrows, or simple shapes as extemporaneous “visual codes” to quickly capture enough information to trigger later a more detailed recalling (Causey 2016: 47). (Causey, in fact, provides a series of exercises to facilitate skill with this strategy in order to “increase the speed at which you are able to draw what you see” and “provide you with an additional way of documenting the fast-moving visual world around you” (Causey 2016: 47)). The process of comparing and discussing our relative visual codes functioned to jumpstart the process of getting to know my fellow students, leading to broader discussions of their motivations for taking the course and their understandings of the nature of LSM.

Conclusion

As my research in Malta is in a nascent stage, the role that graphic methods will play in its development is not yet clear, but I’m quite encouraged to keep experimenting. As Tondeur (2016:667) notes, being “comfortable enough to ostentatiously draw in public is not natural but learned by practice.” Even as I have begun to develop such capacities, I’m happy to report that the process of hunkering down in my office to make the drawings to illustrate these posts still felt like waterskiing, a wholly single-minded pleasure. Increasingly, however, this sense of waterskiing can be embedded in efforts to be “a part of” and “moving with” the “flow” of activities in fieldwork encounters (Tondeur 2016: 669).

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