Facilitating Cartoon Drawing Sessions for Aphasia Groups

How you can get groups drawing to boost communication skills and confidence

By
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The purpose of this document is to:

- Give you an insight into my cartoon drawing sessions with aphasia groups in the UK and at Boston University’s Sargent College
- Help you to understand what I have learnt from my experiences that may be of benefit to those working with such groups
- Provide practical guidance and access to resources that would enable anyone to facilitate similar cartoon drawing sessions with aphasia groups
- Set out my thoughts as to how the activity of drawing with aphasia groups may be developed and applied for further benefits; specifically where drawing skills may assist those with aphasia to communicate their thoughts, ideas and information.

What is Aphasia?

The following description of aphasia is taken from the website of the TALK charity in the UK:

‘About 130,000 people in Britain have a stroke each year and it is generally accepted that a third of these are left with some form of aphasia.

Aphasia has a sudden and profound effect on the person, their family and friends. It impacts on the individual’s confidence, personal relationships, employment and social life. It is a communication disability that is caused by damage to the language processing centres of the brain, most commonly through a stroke. It can affect the ability to speak, read, write and understand what’s being said and is a very frustrating and isolating condition. Aphasia can be mild or severe, depending on the type and extent of damage to the brain. It is one of the most enduring consequences of stroke and can be the most difficult to overcome.’

Why get groups drawing?

- Most people do not believe they can draw.
- It is an example of a limiting belief.
- Younger children draw quite happily, but by the time they reach their teens, most have decided they can’t draw. By adulthood this belief is well fixed in the mind.
- Therefore when people find out they actually can draw, it can cause them to challenge the way they think about their capabilities.
- People are very pleasantly surprised to discover that they can draw good quality pictures.
- Most people are quite astounded and delighted to discover a talent they never knew they had.
- By gaining this realisation that they can draw, it boosts confidence and self-belief and encourages people to question other limiting beliefs they might have. Therefore they are apt to wonder; “What else is possible for me that I hitherto thought I couldn’t do?”

Why draw cartoons?

- Because I have discovered a really quick way to teach people to draw very acceptable cartoon pictures in a very short time span.
Within a few minutes the method I have devised will have people drawing cartoons that look good.

Cartoon drawing is very ‘forgiving’ – i.e. if you don’t get all the lines in exactly the right place, the picture usually still looks good. In other words, rather than having to be completely accurate all the time, there is a fair degree of room for error, or tolerance, in how precisely the lines are drawn.

What is my experience of teaching Aphasia groups to draw cartoons?

I have worked with three organisations concerned with aphasia;

1. ‘TALK’ – a charity in the UK

   - In Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, UK, where I live there is a charity called ‘TALK’ which supports people with aphasia after a stroke.
   - The Talk charity runs sessions of activities for groups of people with aphasia. These include a variety of opportunities including musical activities, interesting talks on a range of topics and entertainment of various kinds.
   - Susan Houston, the current TALK Coordinator has been very supportive and helpful throughout ever since I began visiting their groups to run the session.
   - The charity’s website is;  [http://www.talksurrey.org.uk/walton.html](http://www.talksurrey.org.uk/walton.html)
   - My sessions with the groups started when I was asked by a volunteer at the charity of I would do some kind of activity with the group.
   - I decided to do cartoon drawing. In particular, I thought it would be something they would enjoy, gain a new skill and that it would boost their confidence.
   - I felt it would be a vehicle to enhance their communication skills because it would get them talking and discussing what they were doing.
   - I envisaged people working in pairs and small groups which would lend itself to discussion and exchange of ideas.
   - In addition, drawing itself is a method of communicating e.g. communicating an emotion through an expression on a cartoon face.
   - I ran the first session in November 2013 and have been running further drawing sessions with the Talk charity’s five different groups ever since. In total I have run 14 sessions across their 5 groups.
   - Every few months I usually visit a group.

2. ‘BASH’ – The Bracknell Aphasia Self-Help group – based in Bracknell UK

   - I have also worked with this group in Bracknell, UK, called ‘Bracknell Aphasia Self-Help.’ This visit was arranged in 2016 through Alan Batup, who himself has aphasia, and at the time co-organised the group.

3. [Boston University Sargent College](http://www.bos.sargent.college.edu) Aphasia Resource Centre at the College of Rehabilitation Sciences

   - A visit was arranged by Jerry Kaplan of Sargent College in January 2017.
   - I ran two sessions that comprised two one-hour workshops with a refreshment break on a Saturday between 11am and 2pm. Those with aphasia were typically accompanied by a relative or friend. Some students of the college were also present. They joined in the activity and helped out.

How do the sessions work? - Tips to help you facilitate a cartoon drawing activity
• **Duration:** In most cases groups in the UK meet for two hours. Allowing for a refreshment break and time for notices the total session time tends to be around 1 hour 30 minutes but split into two halves.

• **NB** It is not essential to have this length of time to run a useful drawing session. A one hour session would work well.

• **Number of people:** I have anything from around 10 up to about 36 typically. However at Boston University’s Sargent College there were around 60 people and it still works as long as they all can see the demonstrations.

• **Volunteer helper ratio:** Most of the aphasia groups I have worked with provide a ratio of one volunteer helper to each person with aphasia. This is an ideal situation if possible. Therefore it is of great help if a family member or friend is in attendance.

• **Role of the volunteer:** I encourage volunteers to join in i.e. to draw along with me. Yet at the same time to keep an eye on the person they are with and help them too. Sometimes the volunteer may not draw, but simply assist the person who has aphasia. E.g. they may hold the paper still for them. One of the valuable things a volunteer can do is to encourage conversation and discussion about the drawing activity. This works especially well after the initial demonstrations when people are having a go at the exercises. Asking questions rather than telling is especially helpful because it encourages people to think for themselves. E.g. “*What would you like to do next?*” “*What do you like about Mary’s drawing?*” “*How could you draw a person looking shocked?*” It is important to realise that the process of doing the drawing is more important than the resulting drawing. Therefore although it may be tempting, I would not encourage volunteers to be doing parts of the drawing for the person with aphasia. There may of course be exceptions to this, but generally I suggest that the principle of getting them to do it all themselves should prevail.

• **Room set-up:** People are ideally seated in groups of four or six at round tables.

• **Paper:** I provide plenty of white paper A4 size (photocopier paper will do).

• **Coloured Pens:** I always provide water-based felt/fibre tipped pens in a range of twelve colours usually at least a pack between two people. Twelve colours are not essential, but it is certainly useful to have a range of colours because this opens up more possibilities for the group to create variations in their sketches. They also enjoy having more colours to use. NB It is ideal if pens can produce both thick and thin lines but not essential. The pens I give to the group are double-ended; one end producing a thin line and the other draws a thicker line.

• **Grey and Brown shaded pens:** In addition I have an assortment of pens in grey and shades of brown which people can use to achieve a variety of skin tones when drawing faces. For these brown and grey pens a brand currently available that I recommend is by ‘Letraset’ that produced pens called ‘Pro-markers.’ Typically useful shades are ‘Cool Grey 3’ and ‘Cinnamon’ as these are good-looking colours for skin tones. Although not essential, I have found that it is worth going to the trouble of buying these grey and brown pens for shading the skin tones because the results look so good and people love using the pens.

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• **Equipment for demonstrations**: I use two flip charts positioned at the front of the room to ensure good sight-lines for all members of the group.

• **Music**: I often play classical music very quietly in the background, but only when people are doing the drawing exercises I have set. Typically I will play Baroque music e.g. Vivaldi, Bach. I find that when played at very low volume in this way it seems to help create a very pleasant atmosphere while people are concentrating on their drawing skills.

• **Session focus – how to draw cartoon faces with different expressions**. As I have now done many sessions, naturally the groups have progressed to drawing different things. However, for the purposes of this outline, I will describe how I did the first session which is on drawing cartoon faces with a range of expressions.

• **Insight in to the teaching method**. The best way of getting an insight into the way I teach drawing at the sessions is to view my 15 minute talk at **TEDx Hull** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TXEZ4tP06c

• In fact at Boston University’s Sargent College the aphasia groups initially learnt the drawing skills in my absence by following along with my talk at TEDx Hull. Apparently the leader of the group simply stopped the video regularly so people could have the time to complete each step of the drawing as they followed along with the video.

• The initial demonstrations I do for aphasia groups are very similar to how I did the drawings in the TEDx Hull talk. Therefore a great way to get an insight into how you could teach the skills to a group is to watch that talk yourself and draw along with me.

• **Introducing the session**

  I mentioned earlier that many people do not believe they can draw. Therefore I typically start by referring to that commonly held view. As I did on the TEDx Hull talk, I often ask; “How many people of you would say you can draw?” Hardly any hands will be raised. I usually then do ask if there is anyone who does draw or paint and acknowledge them. Perhaps ask what kind of painting they do, or used to do.

  I then refer back to the belief that most people think they can’t. I often liken this to singing or spelling in that people of ten say e.g. “You can either do it or you can’t.”

  Then I will have some pre-prepared drawings of cartoon faces on the flipchart and ask people if they would be happy if they could do drawings like this. This always gets a positive reaction but also a sense of disbelief. The look on people’s faces is as if they were thinking; “Yes I’d be very happy if I could draw like that, but I never will be able to do it.”

  I usually then say something like; “Actually, there are only two things you need to do to be successful in drawing like this. One – to have an open mind and two; be prepared to have a go. Are you up for that?” At this point the audience will normally chorus; “Yes.”

• Therefore the above introduction is designed acknowledge that most people don’t believe they can draw, but open their minds to the possibility that they can. In addition I am also gaining their commitment to at least have a go.
• **NB** I assume that everyone will have a go at drawing. In other words I don’t offer the option of not joining in. I have found that in adopting this approach the result is that in almost every case everyone will give it a go. I have found that if I am displaying confidence in their ability then this helps people to react in a positive way and be prepared to join in. Having said that, if some people decide part way through to just watch, then that is fine too. If this happens I might even make a virtue of just watching for some of the time.

• **The first drawing** I teach is always the same each time and is the key to the success of the whole session because in just one drawing people can mentally switch from thinking; “I can’t draw” to “Wow – I actually can draw!”

• **The teaching sequence step one:** I start by demonstrating how to draw my character ‘Spike.’ It is important that they just watch this demonstration. I make a point of telling the group to “Just watch.”

• Then I turn over the flipchart page so they cannot see the drawing I have just done.

• I then start again with the blank page and do the drawing and draw it again line-by-line with them following me i.e. I draw the first line/they draw the first line then I draw the second line/they draw the second line… and so on. This is almost the same as actually guiding their hand one line at a time.

• **Top tip:** with aphasia groups I scan the room to see when they have all drawn each line before I go on to the next one. In doing so I ensure that I do not go too quickly but slow down to match the pace to the people in the group.

• **NB** Many people with aphasia will be drawing with their non-dominant hand. E.g. due to the effects of a stroke a right-handed person may not be able to use that hand very well and therefore need to draw with their left hand. Thus it is important to be sensitive to this and even acknowledge it.

• The benefit of people following me line-by-line is that the result is virtually certain to look very much like my demonstration drawing. That means that when they hold up there drawings everyone around is impressed because they do actually look good.

• **Top tip:** asking them immediately to hold up this first drawing always creates a positive atmosphere and laughter in the room.

• **Top tip:** when they hold up their drawing, I ask them; “How do you think everyone is doing?” In my experience this works better than asking; “How are you doing with your drawing?” because people tend to be more complimentary about other people’s drawings.

• **Key learning point to make**
  The next thing I say is central to the success of the session; “It looks like you have just learnt to draw one cartoon character i.e. Spike. In fact you have learnt a sequence that will enable you to draw hundreds and thousands of cartoon faces.” I then demonstrate how we can use the same sequence but just change one or two lines and create a different character. In other words all the new characters are mainly variations of the first drawing.
• **Teach a few more drawings**  I would demonstrate a few more with the group joining in – just like on the TEDx Hull video. This starts to build their confidence and muscle memory.

• **Set an exercise using the three-page handout**
  
  NB You have my permission to make copies of this handout for use with aphasia groups. (Even though it does say ‘copyright’ at the foot of the pages).
  
  I have produced the three-page handout in order to give examples of many different faces they can draw. I simply give these out with the following brief; *“Have a go at as many as you like. Copy some of the pictures from the handout and you can also make up some characters of your own if you would like to do that.”*

• Duration of the exercise is variable but can be typically around 15 minutes. This is where I may play the classical music quietly in the background.

• Also, just before they actually start the exercise, I will demonstrate the use of the brown and grey pens already mentioned, (Letraset Pro-markers). I will show how these pens enable coloured skin tones of brown and grey to be achieved. The handout gives lots of examples of characters drawn using such pens and this ensures that a multi-ethnic collection of characters may be drawn.

• **Review the exercise**
  
  Needless to say there are all kinds of ways this can be done. I will often ask people to hold up drawings during the exercise as well as at the end. Asking small groups to holds up drawings works well. Also I sometimes ask everyone to hold their drawings up which looks impressive.

• **Tip tip:** During the review it is worth acknowledging different drawing styles of group members. I always find people drawing in very individual ways. They come up with style and ideas that weren’t the same how I taught them in the demonstration. Rather like handwriting where e.g. no two people are exactly alike in their signature, the same appears to apply to drawing. It is important to acknowledge such individuality and value such creative talents. I make a point of saying that these variations are examples of the talents that people already have, irrespective of my teaching input.

• **The ‘two-people drawing’ exercise**
  
  Here is a lovely creative exercise that is always so enjoyable for the group. I demonstrate it first at the flipchart with a volunteer from the group. I often think of it as ‘visual improvisation.’ All you need to do is ask someone to help you at the flipchart. By this time you may have a good idea of who would be suitable ‘volunteer.’ Then say that you are going to do a drawing of a face together. Give them an idea of how big the finished drawing will be on the flipchart so they get a sense of scale. You are looking to achieve a head and shoulders drawing. Tell them they can start anywhere i.e. they do not need to use the sequence taught to them in the first drawing of the session. The way it works is you ask them to just draw the first line. They can draw e.g. a nose, or an ear or anything they like. I suggest using a thick black felt pen and having two pens to hand so you can have one each. Once they have drawn the first line then you draw the second line. Then they draw the third and so on until you have a completed head and shoulders drawing.

• Part of the fun of this is the unexpectedness of it all. The audience enjoy watching the picture develop and it really is a very enjoyable experience all round.

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• Set the group the same exercise in pairs. Now it’s the turn of the group. Working in pairs they set about creating their own drawing in a similar way. If there is an odd number, then it works fine if there is the occasional group of three.

• **Various further exercises**
  
  The guidance notes I have set out above is intended to be a blueprint for running a successful drawing session. Although I have made recommendations, you may have further ideas of your own to enhance the whole experience. Once you get the hang of it you will be no doubt be able to think up further valuable exercises for groups to do.

• **Big review at the end and call to action**
  
  It is worth having a final review at the end of the session and also thinking of a suitable ‘call to action.’ By this I mean making some suggestions as to how the group might continue to use these drawing skills. Suggestion might include; Drawing a picture to help you communicate, take the handout with you and try more drawings at home, show your children or grandchildren the handout and demonstrate the skills to them so they can have a go at drawing too. What about drawing your own card? E.g. a ‘Birthday’ card, or a ‘Thank you’ card or a ‘Get Well’ card. In fact some of my drawing sessions I have had groups drawing such cards on pieces of folded white card.

**Photographs of my first cartoon drawing session at the TALK group in the UK- Nov 2013**

• Here below you will see a link to a selection of photographs from the first session I ran. The photographs may assist you in seeing how the room was set out and what kinds of pictures were drawn. It will also hopefully give you a sense of the collaborative and creative feel and atmosphere in the room.

• The link takes you to the TALK charity website page which currently features those pictures; [https://plus.google.com/photos/107016716676231818039/albums/5942688250859315553?authkey=CLCCr_-E8ff3wwE](https://plus.google.com/photos/107016716676231818039/albums/5942688250859315553?authkey=CLCCr_-E8ff3wwE)

**Boston University’s Sargent College Aphasia Resource Centre - January 2017**

Photographs of drawing session with aphasia group and students.

• The photographs on the link below show the drawing sessions at BU Sargent College on 28th January 2017 with the support of Jerry Kaplan and Dr Elizabeth Hoover and their team at the college.

• The photographs will I hope give a sense of the joy of the activity as well as showcasing many examples of the excellent drawings produce by the group.

[https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipQ27TZDUysp_n0rhYdQV6U53EXa-C4P-CJhGd3wdWSIFjjDMnjdzIdQnVYHqPCXA?key=QnMyQ0xsMUU4bGRlZnZRNlRpa2E3WU9IYzZwbWVR](https://photos.google.com/share/AF1QipQ27TZDUysp_n0rhYdQV6U53EXa-C4P-CJhGd3wdWSIFjjDMnjdzIdQnVYHqPCXA?key=QnMyQ0xsMUU4bGRlZnZRNlRpa2E3WU9IYzZwbWVR)

**Benefits of cartoon drawing with aphasia groups**

I have no background in aphasia and no knowledge of the condition other than my experience of working with groups. Therefore my assessment of benefits is based on my own observations and on reactions of professionals in the field who have been present during the sessions. It would be fascinating to know what light the field of neuro-science and related disciplines could throw on the topic of drawing for aphasia groups.
When I ran the first session for the TALK charity Dr Mike Jordan, the Chair of the charity was present. He took the photographs that are shown on the TALK website. He was very positive about the benefits of the session as was Susan Houston the TALK Coordinator. The fact that I was invited to work with the other four aphasia groups organised by TALK indicated that the sessions are recognised as being of value.

**Confidence-building** Dr Jordan commented; “Our recoverers really enjoyed themselves and discovered they could draw! That kind of experience really helps to build confidence.” My own observations endorse this view. Watching the positive reactions of people as they discover talents they never knew they had leads me to the view that this activity can only be good for confidence levels.

**Enjoyment** My observations are that the whole experience of the groups is one of enjoyment and fun. There is always much laughter and discussion. Due to the fact that people generally do not believe they will be able to draw, the reactions are of complete surprise and delight.

**Changes in self-belief and perception of own ability** I believe that the fact that even after one drawing people are generally convinced they can draw makes a big difference to the benefits resulting from this activity. This fast change in people’s perception of their own ability is probably the most striking aspect of the sessions. The same reaction happens with non-aphasia groups too. Once they have completed the first drawing they are totally on board i.e. after this initial success they very happily follow along with everything else they are asked to do despite any initial sceptism that many of them have.

I am convinced that this swift change in belief has a domino effect. My view is that it not only positively affects people in terms of their thoughts about drawing, but the boost in confidence transfers itself to other areas of their lives. One person who watched the TEDx Hull talk wrote to say that doing the drawing prompted him to resurrect his desire to play a musical instrument. It gave him a renewed belief in his ability to learn.

**It prompts people to communicate with each other.**

It is evident that the act of drawing, especially when working in pairs or small groups, prompts a great deal of interaction. With the assistance of volunteers who can facilitate the experience there is a great deal of spoken communication involved. The sessions really are a lovely mix of quiet concentration interspersed with periods of lively collaboration and interaction.

**Development of hand-eye coordination and motor control**

Needless to say, some people work very slowly and painstakingly, especially when drawing with their non-dominant hand. To watch the concentration as they draw is to observe complete absorption in the task at hand. I only have my observations as evidence to suggest that this activity may enhance hand-eye coordination and develop motor control in general. Without a neuro-science background I cannot say with authority exactly what is happening. However, it would be of great interest to know what happens in the brain when we draw and how such activity is benefiting people’s capacity for thought as well as improving their physical skills.

**Further possibilities to extend drawing with aphasia groups – a visual vocabulary**

Drawing is obviously a way for people to express themselves visually. When drawing faces they can express many emotions such as happiness and sadness. One might argue that the simple act of drawing even one line is enabling people to express themselves.
In addition to this however, I believe there is a strong case for even further developing the drawing ability of those with aphasia. Specifically, I believe it is possible to help people to acquire the skills of being able to develop what I would call a ‘visual vocabulary.’ I am referring here to the ability to easily draw simple symbols, icons, or pictures to convey thoughts, ideas and information. I heard a great example of this ability whilst at BU Sargent College. I was told of an aphasia sufferer who could communicate by drawing what he wanted to talk about. e.g. he would draw some wavy lines to indicate that he wanted to talk about the seaside. When working with non-aphasia groups I already do something similar in that I help people to be able to create easy-to-draw symbols that convey even abstract ideas. This is something that I believe is certainly possible for aphasia groups. For people having difficulty expressing themselves with spoken words, this could I believe be a very useful skill to acquire and a potentially valuable area to explore in terms of supporting those with aphasia..

Concluding thoughts
Every time I visit aphasia groups I am inspired and humbled by the positive approach of those present. In every case the willingness of the vast majority of people to have a go at cartoon drawing is evident. Despite the challenges due to their condition, almost everyone will join in without question. Even when they are only able to draw extremely slowly, people will usually persist.

When first asked someone first asked me if I could visit an aphasia group and do something useful for them, I had no idea what it would lead to. I didn’t even know what activity I would decide to do with them at first. Being full of apprehension before my first visit, it was as much of surprise to me as anyone else when my chosen activity of cartoon drawing was so well-received.

I have welcomed greatly appreciated the interest and immense support of professionals such as Jerry Kaplan, Dr Elizabeth Hoover and team at BU Sargent College. They saw the opportunity to for me to offer the cartoon drawing sessions to their aphasia group. Jerry was invaluable in helping me design and prepare the sessions for the Sargent College group. Likewise the support and encouragement of Susan Houston of the TALK charity in the UK has been so valuable in enabling me to develop and refine the sessions.

I hope that my continued collaboration with professionals such as those mentioned above will result in increasing understanding of aphasia and how those with the condition may supported. Specifically I hope that insights into of how drawing may assist those with aphasia will be enhanced.

Contact
I am happy to be contacted at graham@visionlearning.co.uk and will do my best to offer any guidance I can on running drawing sessions with aphasia groups. As mentioned already, I am not a professional in the field of aphasia, but will be pleased to offer my thoughts based on experience of doing the drawing sessions with groups as described above.