

Discovering Charcoal – Warm-Up Exercise for Children

by Paula Briggs

The aim of this warm-up session is to help young children explore the qualities of charcoal, opening their minds to the mark making possibilities and to introduce them to different ways of working with various complementary materials.

Using this warm-up before other sessions which use charcoal will ensure that children understand what kinds of effects they might get from the medium.

Notes for Teachers: Skills, Progression, Assessment, Tips

• Generating Ideas

How does this resource help children to:

- Use a starting point to initiate an exploration
- Be open to trying things out and learn to trust their instinct
- Look outwards to find inspiration

This resource takes the pressure off children to come up with ideas. Instead it introduces them to the idea that there is a stage in making art which is purely about exploring a material and experiencing what that material can do.

There is no subject matter as such, and children are not prompted to draw anything - instead the session is purely about mark making.

Through guided exploration pupils are taken on a shared

journey, during which they can discover what it is about that material that they particularly enjoy or dislike. This is a session about discovery and openness, not answers. Because of the nature of the guided session there is little time during the activity for pupils to sabotage their process by "I can't do it" "I don't know what I am doing". Through this they learn to trust that sometimes we just need to "try the activity, make the marks, trust the process," and then reflect later.

Children will enjoy working alone but as part of a bigger group. Sharing outcomes at the end, seeing what kinds of marks others made, is part of the discovery process.

• **Exploring Materials & Techniques**

How does this resource help children to:

- **Explore materials using:**

- **Tools**
- **Hands**
- **Heads**
- **Hearts**

This resource enables an exploration of charcoal and chalk. Children experience the variety of marks that they can make with the drawing medium, and learn the scale of drawing that works best for this medium. They learn how much pressure they need to apply to make dark dense marks, and how to move the charcoal on a page to make lighter marks. They experience how they can use erasers or white chalk to make light marks against darker marks. They experience how the space of the paper itself is also an important element of the drawing.

Children develop hand eye coordination but in a safe space with lots of margin for accidental discovery. As they work they are encouraged to intuitively respond to

the marks they make.

• **Reflecting**

How does this resource help children to:

- **Evaluate their activity**
- **Take their experience forward**

Children can be encouraged to reflect as they go along in this exercise; the teacher can prompt them to think about the marks they make: do they like them, could they make them darker, lighter, softer, harder, clearer, more blurred?

Sharing the work as a group at the end provides an opportunity for the class to discuss what kinds of marks they liked making, liked seeing. What do the marks remind them of? Which kinds of marks might they like to push further? Try next time?

• **Building Knowledge & Experience**

What do children learn through this activity, including their understanding of the creative process.

Children learn that certain materials can do certain things, that some materials are harder to control and that sometimes you have to go "with" the material to get the best from it. That art doesn't have to be something that has to be done alone: that it can be a shared experience (i.e. via guided session). That they can feel safe (i.e. within the structure of a guided session) to take creative risks and push a material.

• **Looking at Artists**

For younger children:

Look at early cave drawings which used pigments.

<http://www.heatherhansen.net/ochi-gallery/e9xm67l76oie6waelalx32cr05fjis>

For older children and adults:

William Kentridge uses charcoal to create drawings for his animated films: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/sep/19/charcoal-drawing-william-kentridge>

Kentridge on his process: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0d3JRHUlo08>

[Frank Auerbach](#) manipulates charcoal to make densely layered surfaces, which include the 'ghost' lines from erased marks.

▪ Assessment

What does success look like? How do we spot children needing extra help? How do we stretch more able children?

Try not to have a preconceived idea about what the children's drawings will look like.

Bear in mind this is an exploratory exercise. You are looking for signs (through the marks on the page), that each pupil has:

- Been able to listen to and understand your directions as to how to hold and move the charcoal across the page
- Explored the creation of a variety of types of marks, using different parts of the charcoal, apply different pressures, holding the charcoal in different ways and using different actions

It is all too easy when using charcoal for drawings to result in a general greyness. Keeping the drawing fresh

by having marks which are dark, and areas which are light, can demonstrate the student has managed to control and explore mark making.

After the exercise, use a group discussion to talk about the work and reflect upon how marks were made, what kinds of marks pupils respond too, and how they might be put to use in future work.

▪ **Builds on... Develops into...**

This is an early stage exploration of charcoal.

Follow on with the [Drawing Like Cavemen](#) resource which further explores how we can use our body/hands to make marks and push the charcoal further to make personal drawings:

▪ **Teacher Tips**

This exercise takes 10 to 30 minutes. Remember that exercises like this can be undertaken by any age (including adults) and every time someone tries the activity they will have a different experience of it. return to this activity whenever you feel pupils need pushing outside their safe zone of mark making.

Setting up the Room:

- Charcoal can be messy!
- You might like to cover tables with newspaper and then place the sugar paper the children will be working on over that.
- Have enough charcoal and chalk so that each child has one of each material.
- Have the children wear aprons or old clothes, and make sure paper towels are nearby to clean hands.

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