Think Before You Ink

When a visual problem is thought through, the execution of the drawing becomes easier. A cartoonist has to figure out what the key components of the image are. If you are asked to draw a French waiter, for example, you need to figure out which lines and forms, what visual shorthand, say "French" and "waiter."

Often a cartoonist will figure this out on the drawing board by trial and error. But you can reduce the amount of error by first approaching the problem in your mind's eye, thinking it through before you draw. I have played the following cartooning game show in some of my classes. It's always a blast and it bolsters confidence in weaker students as well as the stronger ones.

I begin by breaking the class into groups of four or five. One member of the group leaves the room. The others are given a sheet of paper describing a scenario. For example:

  * Blind man being led by lawnmower while seeing-eye-dog relaxes in hammock
  * Braniac ant controlling other insects' minds
  * Fortune-telling cowboy giving his horse a glimpse into its future
  * Hippie fish protesting polluted lake

The group has five minutes to discuss (and only discuss) the cartoon and how they would depict it visually (no words). They are not allowed to draw, doodle, or sketch their ideas. At the end of five minutes, the group sends up one member of the team to the front of the room where a white sheet of 8.5" x 11" sheet of paper and a Sharpie marker await them. They then have 60 seconds to draw the image.

When they are finished the team member that had left the room returns and has to state what the scenario is. Points are awarded for degrees of accuracy. This is repeated until every member of the group has had a chance to draw.

What I like about this game is that it allows the students to work together, sharing their problem-solving skills. Even the students who don't draw well are coached by other students and approach their drawing with more confidence. I'm astounded when someone nails a drawing of the Tinman, Dorothy, Scarecrow, and The Lion playing strip poker in under a minute. There are far more successes than failures.

Even the drawings that don't work are instructive. Students can then brainstorm collectively on what could have been added or removed to make the cartoon communicate more effectively.

-- Contributed by James Sturm