

# Retired UBC prof draws link between art and children's literacy

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Contributor

What's the connection between art and children's literacy?

That is a question that Bob Steele, a retired associate professor of art education at UBC, has been occupied with for over 20 years. Having always been a strong advocate of art for younger children in the classroom, Steele aims to promote the understanding that children use spontaneous drawing as a language medium, and that its daily use enhances literacy.

"Children use language in their drawings," said Steele. "We always [hear] of the 'language of music' or of art, but we never take it seriously [and we should] because the language of art is the most important language that young children have."

Steele attributes the importance of art to the idea that unlike writing, drawing does not have a "code." Children can simply invent a language and it all begins with a scribble.

"[In literacy], you learn the rules and you're chastised if you break the rules, and [the process] works, but it doesn't do much for the psychology of most children because they are constantly struggling with this code," said Steele.

He also pointed to the psychological benefits that come when children are free to explore language through art.

"From [as young as 18 months], children have experiences that are difficult to understand, and so language [expressed through drawing] becomes a way to articulate those experiences," said Steele.

So what's the connection? According to Steele, drawing is a huge facilitator of literacy, particularly if parents are actively involved in engaging in conversation about the drawing with the child. A child makes a drawing, then tries to ex-



Retired UBC professor Bob Steele is passionate about art's power to increase children's literacy.

plain the drawing to a parent, thereby nurturing a facility with words.

Steele also said that drawing is a means through which children can communicate their deepest and most subtle perceptions, thoughts and feelings. The problem, he said, arises with the arrival of self-consciousness, when children absorb their culture and have social values built into their way of thinking about art.

"One of the beautiful things about children's drawing is that there's never a misplaced line," said Steele. "They don't put a line down and then scribble it out, then put another line down and

scribble that out. That happens once they become self-conscious — say, age 9 or 10. [Before that], every line is perfect."

Bridging this self-consciousness gap then becomes key in making this spontaneous and uninhibited drawing a language that works for people from childhood through adolescence and even to adulthood.

Steele also pointed to the "drawing game" — an exercise whereby a line being drawn must keep moving and cannot stop, while focused on making a recognizable form — as a way to help self-conscious drawers, including

both pre-adolescents and adolescents, get over their embarrassment about making mistakes.

"It's like basketball [or any sport], when you first start it's awkward, but you become good at it by playing a lot," said Steele. "Gradually, your body just knows what to do and things are automatic so you're no longer controlled by that self-conscious nagging and criticism. That's the point of the drawing game."

With more parents nurturing that connection with art and exposing their children to art, Steele remains confident that there will be an increase in literacy. □

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