

Raise-a-Reader: Is childhood art key to developing language literacy?

BY YVONNE ZACHARIAS, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 25, 2014

Over the years, art education professor Bob Steele studied hundreds of drawings by children from age two to the mid teens.

Four or five years before his retirement from the University of B.C., the now 89-year-old came to a conclusion: Spontaneous drawing is the child's most useful language for articulating acute perceptions, expressing subtle and complex thoughts and coming to grips with intense feelings.

Thus drawing, he said, is a largely unrecognized but valuable tool in acquiring literacy.

Even before learning words, children have an innate language that emerges as graphic models or symbols. "It seems to be buried there," said the father of three, grandfather and great grandfather. "It seems to be a gift."

Ignore it, and it will wither. Nurture it and it will blossom.

Children use the uncoded language of drawing to reflect their thoughts and feelings with a complexity that they can't put into words, part of the coded literacy learned later in life. The first leads to the other.

Steele founded The Drawing Network in the late 1980s to promote understanding of how children use spontaneous drawing as a language medium and how daily drawing enhances literacy.

Years later, he is largely disappointed with the results.

"We have neglected this almost shamefully," he said in an interview in his Vancouver home. "Somehow we have overlooked this enormous tool."

Despite his efforts, most reading experts will list spoken language, writing and spontaneous reading as key ingredients in the literacy mix. They neglect what he argues should be the fourth: spontaneous drawing.

He gets a little frustrated with literacy campaigns such as Raise-a-Reader, sponsored by The Vancouver Sun, for the way they largely ignore the importance of drawing as an aid to literacy.

The process works roughly like this: Using that mysterious innate language that every child seems to be born with, children begin with exploratory scribbles. This evolves into crude symbols for people, things and creatures. Eventually, printed words are added, growing along with the drawings in complexity.

He uses an example drawn by his niece Mary. When she was two, she was drawing on the kitchen floor while her mother prepared lunch.

The day before, she had been visiting her grandparents. Her grandfather had carried her out to the back garden to see the single peach on his new peach tree. They had discussed its roundness, colour and furry texture. She called her mother over to see the circular form she had drawn on the newsprint sheet. She said with delight in her voice, "Grandpa's peach!" Then the two-year-old recalled the previous day's visit and the pleasant memory of her grandfather and his garden.

Although she was unaware of it, Mary had stumbled on a new language. She knew it was fun to use, but didn't know that it was also enriching her use of words and contributing to her literacy. The casual participation of her mother made drawing purposeful, not accidental. It also increased the bond between the two.

Drawing is closely related to literacy from the first scribble, Steele would argue, noting the similarity of language structure and verbal syntax with pictorial composition. Drawings have the equivalent of nouns (objects), verbs (actions), and adverbs and adjectives (descriptions and added details).

In language, what strings this all together is syntax. In drawings, the equivalent is what Steele calls esthetic energy. "It's the way forms and lines are put together," he said, adding, "Perceptions, thought, feelings and memory are all synthesized in drawings."

Because the building blocks of language are embedded in drawing, they lay the groundwork for learning that language.

At the very least, drawing with a caring adult encourages conversation that improves the child's literacy.

Steele has a hunch that this failure to develop an integrated language practice involving drawing is a principal reason for any reading crisis.

There is certainly no doubt that Steele cares deeply about this subject matter. He writes books displaying and analyzing children's art and working on his computer trying to get the message out. He feels he has no choice. Too much is at stake.

It alarms him when low reading scores are placed in the context of economic health and the economy instead of a concern for each child's mental development and health, for encouraging the joys of language practice and designing optimal schooling for children.

“Quite apart from language development, which is the focus of this whole thing, the parent and child are going to bond,” he said. “They are not bonding when they are put in front of the television to watch children’s cartoons.”

Without a recognition that spontaneous drawing is a signpost on the road to literacy, the future, he believes, looks bleak.

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Drawing for learning

Tips from Bob Steele, a retired UBC professor of art education, for parents or caregivers on using art as a tool for developing a child’s literacy:

Set up a daily draw session that begins with a conversation, moves to the drawing activity during which there can be spontaneous conversation and finishes with a brief conversation about the new drawing. The parent’s role is not to instruct but to nurture, motivate, inspire, stimulate conversation and image.

Consider two kinds of themes: those that grow out of the child’s interest and experience and those that are “mind stretchers” that would not likely be thought of by the child. They might be based on a story, read or told, or based on a current concern such as bullying on the playground or a news item on television or a subject matter taken from social studies, science, language arts and art. Try alternating sessions in which the drawer chooses the theme with others in which responding to the theme is obligatory.

Children left on their own fall back on easy pop stereotypes and then the language spinoffs are insignificant.

Encourage contour lines and only contour lines because they encourage detail and hence language value and produce the most empathy. One child described it “as putting a line around what I know.”

For older children, it will help if the drawing is presented as a game with two simple rules: the line must be kept moving along the contour path (the metaphor of the jet aircraft is helpful: if it stops in mid-air, it crashes) and you must imagine the drawing tool touching the contours of the form when it is actually touching the paper. This is more or less the way children draw anyway, on automatic pilot. Tone, colour and texture are techniques belonging in the art class; line is the technique for language.

After a child draws an image that they exuberantly identify as “my mom” or some other important person or object, the parent or caregiver can help add the printed word or words to the drawing. Then the adult and child can

read the text. With daily practice, drawings become more complex, with printing and reading following suit.

If it's a provocative theme but a weak drawing, tackle it a second time after using visualization and guided imagery to work out changes. In guided imagery, parent or teacher with the drawer explore different ways to translate the story for effective presentation on paper. For example, a "weak" drawing is improved by bringing the action closer to the viewer in a second drawing.

Consider themes that require a visible model (a figure posed in costume, a vase of flowers), a remembered event (an annual parade remembered, an exciting game), a programmed subject ("tomorrow we will draw your bedroom so tonight study it closely"), that stimulate imagination, invention or fantasy (a myth, a dream, a story from children's lit), record a process or solve a problem (manufacturing something, designing a space colony).

Steele says the entire exercise can be completed in 15 to 30 minutes depending on age, past drawing experience, native aptitude and success of motivation.

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