



Seven Questions on Children's Art by Professor Bob Steele

Bob Steele is an artist and a retired art professor from the University of British Columbia at Vancouver, Canada. In college he specialized in arts education. He is the founder of the Drawing Network and the author of *Draw Me a Story*; *The Drawing Path for Children*; and *A Picture Book of Children's Drawings*. His full bio is at http://www.abcbookworld.com/view_author.php?id=2692

In this article, educators Colleen Mieczanec and Maggie Milne Martens ask Professor Steele seven questions about children's art.

Question 1: Bob, based on your experience and research, how do the visual arts (drawing, painting and so on) help children develop their thinking skills?

Answer: Some school administrators add art classes to make their schools seem "cultured" or to add restful, fun activities to the schedule. Have you heard the expression "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy"? In many schools, making artwork is considered "play." Reading, writing, math, social studies, and science are considered "work." Since art periods are thought of as playtime, some school administrators and classroom teachers don't put much thought (or money) into planning art projects. Students follow simple rules to complete projects. (Cut this out. Paint this blue. Glue this here.) Many projects direct students to make art in order to celebrate holidays or make gifts. Such projects may be fun and restful for some kids, but they do little to help children's brains stretch and grow.

Here's what I want to say first: the visual arts are languages. When children use these languages freely in their own ways, making art becomes as exciting as reading good books, having lively class discussions, or using vivid descriptive words to write stories and poems.

Children can use drawing to express strong emotions such as fear, anger, love, and amazement. Expressing such emotions can be a comforting or joyful experience. For those of us who are hesitant to describe our feelings aloud, drawing can be a good solution.

Children love to illustrate stories, songs, poems, and myths. Students can also use drawing to illustrate and solve problems, or to relive and celebrate family and community events. Students might illustrate historical events in social studies. They might feel closer to nature—understand it better—by drawing birds, animals, fish, and bugs in their natural habitats, surrounded by the foods they eat, the places they need for shelter, and the weather that helps and harms them.

To sum up, combining art with other school subjects—and making art a high priority instead of an afterthought—can make schools richer, happier, more fascinating places.

Question 2: At what age do most children begin to draw? And how old are they when they first begin to speak, read, and write?

Answer: Early in their second year children begin to scribble. They figure out that they can show and tell information by drawing. With encouragement from caregivers, each child invents a unique drawing language for him- or herself. At about the same age, a toddler's "vocalizations" morph into words, then phrases, then full sentences. A child's drawing skills and verbal skills can develop together. Each language supports the other.

While children may learn to speak fairly quickly, reading and writing skills take longer to develop. In order to read and write, a child must learn a "code" (letters of the alphabet)—and this slows things down. On the other hand, drawing doesn't have a code, so drawing skills can develop more quickly.

Because it has no code, drawing is a language that young children can use to describe complicated thoughts, feelings, memories, and made-up stories that would be much harder (or impossible) for them to describe in writing. Giving students chances to draw freely every day can help them develop their literary (speaking, reading, and writing) skills.

Question 3: Is it helpful to young artists when parents, teachers, and other caring adults talk with them about their work? How and why does this help children?

Answer: Such conversations about artwork help children develop their speaking, reading, and writing skills. As they draw, children think about their own pictures in silent words and phrases—they tell a story to themselves about what they are drawing. When their drawing is done, talking about it with an adult they know, like, and trust gives the artist a chance to tell her drawing's story aloud, and to answer interesting questions about it.

A drawing teacher must do more than just set out paper, pencils, crayons, and markers and give students a time and place to draw. Drawing teachers need to be caring adults who help students think of ideas for their drawings by asking questions, telling stories, stirring up memories, taking students on interesting field trips, and so on.

Question 4: Should a drawing teacher show students how to draw certain things?

Answer: "How do I draw a horse?" This is the kind of question many children ask their teachers and family members. It may sound odd to you, but I believe that teachers should NOT answer such questions! It is not at all helpful to "show how." It drives children's creative process right off the rails.

Let's say that an adult *does* show a student how to draw a horse (or the way that adult is in the habit of drawing a horse). Before he received this "help," the child had the potential for being a creative artist. But now he is a mere copier of easy formulas. (Start here with the horse's head. Draw a straight line for the top of its nose....) No! Teachers should *NOT* show how!

Here is a better way to teach. Remind students that drawing is not the same thing as taking photographs. Have them close their eyes and imagine a horse. How big is the horse compared to how big you are? What colors are its different body parts? What does it smell like? If you touched its soft nose, how would that feel? How does its long mane feel different from the short fur on its neck? In your imagination, is the horse looking at you? How do you feel about standing next to this horse? How does the horse feel about being close to you? Is the horse hungry, tired, energetic, excited, or what?

Using their imaginations won't be a problem for preschool and kindergarten children, but some older kids and teenagers don't trust themselves—and some of them really want their drawings to “look real.”

The Drawing Network website (<http://drawnet.duetsoftware.ca>) offers some strategies to help overcome the “I can't draw” syndrome. Here is one of the best strategies: If you feel frustrated because you mistakenly think “you can't draw,” be patient with yourself. Keep drawing as best you can. Daily practice is the cure.

Question 5: Bob, how do you think elementary school teachers should teach art?

Answer: I've said that every child has her own art language. But if this is true, why do nearly all young children's drawings of people have “happy faces”? Here's my answer: When they first begin to draw, young children have similar life experiences. Most also share the same level of control over their fingers, hands, and arms (“fine motor skills”) and the same level of hand-eye coordination. Most two- and three-year-olds haven't yet developed their own art languages because they simply haven't had enough practice yet. Yet, the potential is there waiting within the child's mind. With nurturing from caring adults, a child will begin to develop her unique drawing language by about age four.

Elementary school art teachers should realize that learning to draw and paint is a “trial and error” creative process. Teachers: don't be surprised if kids' drawings and paintings look childish, crude, natural, simple, honest, and full of feeling. Watch children making art, and accept that what they draw is real to them. Enjoy the pride they express as they show you their drawings. Even if you, the teacher, happen to be someone who prefers that a drawing of a horse looks like a photo of one, you will soon find yourself enjoying the way children's drawings look.

In my opinion, the most striking and unusual drawings, the ones that glow with energy and deserve to be called “works of art,” are made by artists who are four to six years old!

Teachers: Take a moment ask yourselves which of two classrooms you would prefer to visit:

The first is filled with children's paintings, drawings and sculptures that look childish, crude, natural, simple, honest, and full of feeling. (These are the same adjectives I used a couple of paragraphs ago, and I meant them as praise, not criticism.)

The second classroom has bulletin boards filled with finger-traced turkeys and teacher-made (or textbook-company-made) handouts with outlines dutifully colored in by children.

I have examined hundreds of children's drawings that I call “authentic” (I use this word to mean “real, heartfelt, genuine, and original.”) I call these drawings authentic because, to make them, children use their brains to uniquely combine what they see and ways they feel about their subjects. They use their deep thoughts, feelings, memories, and fantasies to create their artworks. Each of these drawings contained artistic energy that I, the viewer, received with joy, sorrow, curiosity, excitement—an array of emotions and different degrees of intensity.

I believe that a drawing's artistic energy comes from:

- 1) the drawer's deep feelings about the subject (whatever he or she is drawing)
- 2) the drawer's happiness at being able to show on the page the images that flow from his or her imagination
- 3) the energized, exciting-yet-calming feeling that the drawing process gives people when they are completely involved in their work

Question 6: How often should children have opportunities to make “authentic art,” as you call it, Bob?

Answer: My answer springs from the answers to three more questions:

- 1) How often do children need language to describe their experiences?
- 2) How often will making drawings add important information to a written or spoken response?
- 3) How often might drawing be the *best* language for a child to use in order to express certain thoughts, feelings and imagined images?

In other words: Every day!

As I mentioned earlier, drawing and other art-making should not be just an occasional “fun, restful” activity for students. It should be entwined with other school subjects that teachers teach every day (reading, writing, math, science, and social studies).

If students draw as a part of their studies in biology, they can sharpen their observation skills and better understand that we people are as much a part of biology as other living things. (And as a group we can be as harmful—or more harmful—to our fellow living things than natural disasters such as fires, earthquakes, and hurricanes.)

Illustrating the stories of history brings them closer to students’ own time and place.

Illustrating literature helps readers understand it better and appreciate it more deeply.

Question 7: Who is able to teach art to preschool and elementary-age children?

Answer: Any caring, responsible, intelligent classroom teacher, aide, or family member. This might be a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, grown-up sibling, day-care teacher, or babysitter. You don’t need to be a talented artist or have a teaching certificate to help a child with her “daily draw.”

Anyone can motivate children to draw by:

- 1) helping them think of interesting themes
- 2) asking good questions about children’s experiences
- 2) resolving not to “show how”
- 4) listening carefully as children tell their pictures’ stories
- 5) mirroring children’s stories back by asking more good questions and listening carefully to the answers

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