Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele

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Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele is a Festschrift in honour of Bob Steele, Professor Emeritus, artist, educator and tireless advocate for bringing authentic aesthetic lived experiences to young children. Bob Steele’s prolific contribution to the field of visual arts education recognizes the importance of drawing for everyone, but especially with young children. As an artist-teacher-researcher Bob has devoted decades to developing understandings of drawing as language. He is a progressive thinker with commitment and passion, and through a lifetime of work has provoked serious engagement with children’s drawing processes: how children learn through drawing, through authentic experiences with their sensory world, and through their intense engagement with stories.

In this unique collection we have invited educators and scholars whose work represents the ongoing influence of the ideas and teachings of Bob Steele: what he has brought to the field of art education, early childhood studies, and curriculum studies in general. It traces the history and development of his ideas. The reader is taken through his journey as a young educator in rural Saskatchewan, Canada to significant moments in his teaching and his work. The voices of the contributors offer an insightful alternative into how drawing need not be limited to a particular discipline but can be language of communication; a language that significantly matters in the daily lives and learning not just only for children, but for those who also work with them. We hope this Festschrift inspires you to think about the drawings of children differently and take your understanding to a new level.

Cover photograph: Capilano University Children’s Centre studio, by Sylvia Kind


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TRANSDISCIPLINARY STUDIES
Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele
TRANSDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

Volume 5

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Transdisciplinary Studies is an internationally oriented book series created to generate new theories and practices to extricate transdisciplinary learning and research from the confining discourses of traditional disciplinarities. Within transdisciplinary domains, this series publishes empirically grounded, theoretically sound work that seeks to identify and solve global problems that conventional disciplinary perspectives cannot capture. Transdisciplinary Studies seeks to accentuate those aspects of scholarly research which cut across today’s learned disciplines in an effort to define the new axiologies and forms of praxis that are transforming contemporary learning. This series intends to promote a new appreciation for transdisciplinary research to audiences that are seeking ways of understanding complex, global problems that many now realize disciplinary perspectives cannot fully address. Teachers, scholars, policy makers, educators and researchers working to address issues in technology studies, education, public finance, discourse studies, professional ethics, political analysis, learning, ecological systems, modern medicine, and other fields clearly are ready to begin investing in transdisciplinary models of research. It is for those many different audiences in these diverse fields that we hope to reach, not merely with topical research, but also through considering new epistemic and ontological foundations for of transdisciplinary research. We hope this series will exemplify the global transformations of education and learning across the disciplines for years to come.
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Bob Steele’s life has been dedicated to the arts in education. In 1998 he published *Draw Me a Story* a book that did not just argue for, but demonstrated the importance of drawing/art in the life of children. It is a book that both confirmed and informed my own understanding and promotion of drawing/art in my early childhood teaching practice. Through that book and the Drawing Network Bob Steele’s insights, passion and research around the notion of drawing as language spread. As Michael Emme writes (this volume) ‘Bob Steele’s mix of romanticism and social responsibility is not so easily dismissed’ and this edited collection is evidence of that, filled with writings by teachers, researchers, teacher educators, former students, and artists all influenced and touched by the presence of an artist/educator and his ideas and passion over the past 60 years. Eileen Adams (this volume) provokes the reader with the question ‘what is drawing for?’ Many of the authors in this collection take up that question and bring forward Bob Steele’s understanding of the primacy of drawing in children’s authentic engagement with meaning making as they try to navigate the world. In their writing the authors share the multiple ways in which they have been influenced by Bob Steele and his ideas, but more importantly they articulate the ways they have used those ideas alongside children in the journey of becoming.

– Patrick J. Lewis Professor, ECE, University of Regina (Canada)

As an artist then as an educator and scholar living and working in Canada, Bob Steele held drawing in high regard, as a foundational visual and schematic language that helped young children develop creatively and intellectually. He saw that children used diverse ways and styles for drawing to work out their ideas and beliefs, and he realized that children’s drawings held rich clues about a child’s thoughts and propositions seen in their reality, and imagined in their fantasies.

*Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele* offers insightful glimpses into Bob Steele’s life-long dedication to promoting daily drawing as a method for honing the ways we can interpret and comment on our experiences and ideas. The text is a rich collection of thoughtful, critical contributions by practitioners and scholars who have experienced, benefitted from, have been influenced by, and continue to endorse Bob Steele’s groundbreaking approaches to supporting and nurturing children’s drawing as a practice for noticing, analyzing and re-presenting the world and all its possibilities. *Drawing as Language* is filled with the accounts of those who knew Bob: colleagues, family, students and friends. The interviews, family reminiscences, memoirs and contributions collectively present a deeply touching tribute to a visionary artist and educator who continuously advocated for
Bob Steele is an extraordinarily energetic, prolific and enduring advocate for Art education more broadly and for children’s drawing practices in particular. He has spent his life working with children and their drawings and advocating on their behalf for the crucial place of drawing as a daily personal and educational practice. His reach has been global, yet humble, and he has dedicated his life to this mission. This important book, *Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele*, is far more than homage; it is an expose, a critique and as the editors themselves assert, a significant festschrift.

Significantly, what Binder and Kind have managed to achieve, is to assemble a suite of empathic, accessible, scholarly writings, in keeping with Steele’s mission – as Steele himself says, empathy and the empathic nature of drawing along with its important presence as a language form, is the key. Appropriately, the contributions range from colleagues, former students, Art teachers and Art education scholars and explore the work of Steele through varying lenses, in order to create and assemble this valuable festschrift. Through the lens of this edited collection, Binder and Kind have benchmarked the work of a highly significant Art educator as well as created an historical work of Arts (and especially drawing) education – work we can all aspire to in its practicalities, influence over generations of Art educators, compassion and Steele’s ever-growing reach. This book makes a highly important contribution to the field of Art education generally, specifically drawing practices and ever more essentially, to children’s daily drawing as a fundamental educational and communicative medium.

– Alexandra Lasczik Cutcher, Senior Lecturer, Education & the Arts, School of Education, Southern Cross University, Australia

I was first introduced to Bob Steele’s work when I was teaching intersession classes at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. In my early days teaching in Hamilton, Ontario, the value and power of children’s drawings had been introduced to us by our arts consultant, and throughout my career, Bob Steele’s articulation of “drawing as language” was an integral part of my understanding of teaching and learning. Children have always understood the language of drawing, of personal artmaking, and Bob Steele’s Drawing Network and his books give us the praxis required for deepening and extending this means of communication with our students.

A classroom needs to be a collective, just as Bob Steele believes, where together we share stories, our own and others, global and personal, and where our responses
take shape in words and images, connecting to and changing our own perceptions, helping to engender authenticity for each of us. I need his wisdom as I work with graduate students, to keep the underpinnings of why we interact with children clear in their research goals.

Somehow the drawings of children open connections to so many processes of meaning making; we begin to relearn the forgotten language of childhood, awakened once more in their drawings, revealed by our personal interpretations of the lines and spaces of syntactic images. Bob Steele knew this all along, and as new theories emerge, we must hearken back to his premise of the value of personal expression, of finding the magic ways of revealing thoughts and feelings that words often cannot translate. I keep his books on my special shelf of ageless writings to act as icons for my teaching life.

– David Booth, Professor Emeritus, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Drawing as a Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele is an essential and inspiring read, especially for those whose daily routines include the creative presence and endeavoring of young children. In dialogue with Bob Steele, as well as reflective essays of former students, artists and colleagues, this festschrift gives visibility to the extensive composition of personal histories and conceptual sensibilities that shaped Bob’s imaginary for authentic aesthetic engagement, and the importance of approaching children’s drawing as both a language and site for meaning making. Whether you are already familiar with Bob’s work, or only just now making his acquaintance, this edited collection will challenge you to reexamine existing, even emerging orients to drawing, especially in early childhood, and the oft taken-for-granted modes of attunement that comprise our work with young people.

– Christopher M. Schulte, Assistant Professor of Art Education, Pennsylvania State University, USA

This collection of anecdotes, interviews and reflections provides a warm introduction to an enthusiastic advocate for children and their drawings. Bob Steele’s persuasive ideas and infectious commitment to drawing as a daily practice, as a language uniquely capable of developing empathy and authenticity, are shared, contested, and contextualized by those who gather here to testify to his influence. Understanding drawing primarily as a means of exploring content and telling stories, Bob Steele reminds us that the pathways that each child wanders are far more idiosyncratic, intriguing and important than traditional accounts of children’s drawing lead us to believe.

– Christine Marmé Thompson, Professor, Penn State University

Inviting the reader to visit with Canadian artist and art educator Bob Steele through interviews, reflective essays, and anecdotes, Marni Binder and Sylvia Kind offer perspectives that solidify the rich affordances of drawing as a means for young
children to connect, communicate, make meaning, and experience language. This wonderful and thoughtful collection brings an important dimension to the discussion of young children’s learning and the ways that drawing engages empathy, imagination, ideas, and musings. In reading this book, I was reminded of how the simplicity of children’s drawings become complex when we consider the robust processes and reasons for children’s drawing activity. While certainly an excellent resource for art educators, the text reaches beyond the field of art to become an important addition to those who work with children and those who are interested in children’s early forays into language and literacy.

– Kristine Sunday, Assistant Professor of Teaching and Learning, Old Dominion University
Michael J. Emme, “Bob Steele: Three Stones in Alignment,”
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Bob Steele’s Drawing Network: A Foreword to Looking Forward  xiii
   *Rita L. Irwin*

Acknowledgements  xvii

Introduction  xix
   *Marni J. Binder and Sylvia Kind*

1. In Conversation with Bob Steele  
   *Marni J. Binder*  
   1

2. Bob Steele: Father, Teacher and Artist  
   *Marne St. Claire*  
   13

3. To Teach Is to Touch the Future  
   *Kit Grauer and Peter Scurr*  
   25

4. Drawing as the Invention of Language: Prairie Socialism and the 
   Practicalities of Authentic Children’s Art  
   *Michael J. Emme*  
   37

5. Power Drawing  
   *Eileen Adams*  
   49

6. Transformation  
   *Pamela Proctor*  
   63

7. The Drawing Room: Drawing in—Drawing out  
   *Nadene Guiltner*  
   83

8. Moon Bear and the Night Butterfly: Exploring the Pathways of 
   Children’s Drawing-Stories  
   *Sylvia Kind and Cindy Lee*  
   101

9. Sunset; Sunrise  
   *Michael Wilson*  
   117

10. Drawing as Language: Final Thoughts and Compulsion to Look Again  
    *Nadine M. Kalin*  
    131

About the Contributors  135
It is such a pleasure to write the foreword for this very special edited volume recognizing the tremendous contribution Bob Steele has made to the field of visual arts education. His Drawing Network (http://drawnet.duetsoftware.net) and books on children and drawing (e.g. Steele, 2011, 2014) have found interest not only among faculty and students at The University of British Columbia but across Canada and indeed internationally. What is so incredible about this edited book is the range of people it represents from Bob Steele’s personal network: colleagues, students, artists, and new friends. Indeed, it is a network of individuals coming together to recognize the importance of drawing for everyone, but especially with young children. As I reflect on this coming together of so many people, I cannot help but think about how Bob Steele was ahead of his time: he was and is an individual gifted with forward thinking. Even though he credits others whose scholarship preceded him, his own artistic imagination nurtured insights into how children learn through drawing, through authentic experiences with their sensory world, and through their intense engagement with stories.

In today’s art education literature, many are reflecting upon different forms of pedagogy and art. One such discussion is around network theories (see May, 2013). Interpreting art through network theories requires a shift from focusing on the art object to the encounter or the experience. Similarly, interpreting pedagogy through network theories causes us to shift from translating the curriculum text to transforming the curriculum encounter. What is so important about this collection of essays is their thoughtful engagement with Bob Steele’s forward-thinking notions of a Drawing Network and the philosophy behind his idea. As we learn from Michael Emme’s chapter, Bob Steele’s socialist leanings created an educationally-oriented cooperative within his classroom: individuals subsequently gained from sharing in the challenges and resources. Indeed, they created a network of artists committed to learning and making art together, building upon the strength of the collective. They learned that their relationships and the processes they were using among them, were contributing to their learning, to their art production, and to their advocacy for the cause of art education.

Recently, one of my doctoral students completed her PhD by studying digital media artist-educators and found that they were engaged with multidisciplinary
practices of cultural production (May, 2013). In many ways, their networks were based on three forms of connections between their artistic and pedagogical practices: dialogical, collaborative, and performative. Appreciating the relationality necessary for networked practices in contemporary art and pedagogy is essential if we are to rearticulate, perhaps reimagine, pedagogical practices that respond to contemporary ideas, questions, and directions. I think this is where Bob Steele’s vision for art education was indeed forward-thinking. He was able to imagine the power of the collective to make significant change, not just through the numbers of people involved, but through the quality of the connections they were making, that is, the philosophical ideas permeating the learning experiences of those he taught and those who became part of the Drawing Network.

In these learning communities, Bob Steele holds firm to his belief in individualized authentic learning. Moreover, he believes we need to find ways to help young children learn the language of drawing if we are to encourage a love of drawing. This may be where several authors in this collection deviate from some of Bob Steele’s ideas. Whereas his teaching and advocacy practices are steeped in the relational aspects of what is now known as network theory, he also believes in the fundamental nature of individualized authentic learning. Sylvia Kind and Cindy Lee, in this volume, illustrate the social nature of learning among young children and in doing so, provide an example of how Bob Steele’s ideas have been adapted and extended. Bob Steele’s commitment to networking still resonate on many levels, yet these newly articulated distinctions are important to consider as our society becomes more and more networked on so many levels.

Bob Steele’s primary legacy is with his Drawing Network and the books he has published on children’s drawing (see 2011 and 2014). Yet he also has a legacy with the many people he taught. Some of those individuals are represented in this volume. Each has very fond memories of his significance in their life journey. Many have enacted their own versions of networking in their learning environments. Still others continue to experience the power of the network through his newsletters distributed through various analog and digital forms.

My own experience with Bob Steele is as a dynamic energetic colleague and inspirational advocate for art education. I treasure my many memories of him returning to our home department for years after he retired as he worked on new editions of his Drawing Network and related works. I also treasure his artistic contributions to our university community through the numerous prints hanging in our Faculty hallways—prints made by his students. And I will treasure the conversations we have shared when he brought out his recent prints and drawings, and spoke at length in his articulate style about the need to allow children to develop their own language through art. Bob Steele simply has an unstoppable commitment to advocating for drawing and art among young children. His sheer determination is a force to behold. It is on this note that I would like to draw these comments to a close. Bob Steele was, and remains, a remarkable art educator whose work is widely
known and appreciated. His thinking was forward-thinking decades ago and remains so today. May we all look forward to reading more about his work in the future.

REFERENCES


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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this book together and working with the contributors has been a wonderful endeavour for us. What started out as a conversation of mutual interest at an Early Childhood Symposium in Victoria, British Columbia in July 2012 has become a delightful reality. The contributors of this book come from many different backgrounds and generations. They bring to their work, not just a commitment to the education of children and teachers, but a deeply profound passion for the arts in the lives of children. This Festschrift is intended to honour the scholarship of Bob Steele and his contribution to the arts and education of young children. Without this collection of contributors, this book could not have happened.

Deep gratitude goes to Bob Steele for his permission to move forward with this project and to Mary Steele, for her behind the scenes affirmation every step of the way.

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On a final note, I (Marni) would like to thank Sylvia for her insightful ideas, scholarship and friendship. Thank you to my partner, Michael for all your support throughout this endeavour. I (Sylvia) in return, am deeply grateful to Marni for her initiative and diligence in moving this project forward. It has been a pleasure working together.
INTRODUCTION

Drawing as Language: Celebrating the Work of Bob Steele is a Festschrift in honour of Bob Steele, Professor Emeritus, artist, educator and tireless advocate for bringing authentic aesthetic lived experiences to young children. Since his retirement from the University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver, Canada, over 25 years ago, Bob has focused his energies and passions in challenging the lack of creativity in education and the importance of the arts in education, but most important, the significance of children’s use of drawing as language. At age 91, Bob shows no signs of slowing down in his pursuit of giving children agency and voice through representation. He has kept in touch with current trends in education and recently has explored the interdisciplinary approach of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and advocates for STEAM to include the arts.

Bob Steele could be called a Renaissance man. He is one who through his voracious reading and studying, draws on philosophy, psychology, history and other art forms such as music to weave his theoretical underpinnings of what he believes is critical for young children. In this way, he moves beyond the visual arts and embraces a transdisciplinary lens to his work. From the creation of the Drawing Network over 25 years ago, his seminal book Draw Me a Story (1998), ongoing Drawnet publications to his newsletters read by a wide international audience of educators and academics, we offer a variety of narratives, perspectives and scholarly complements that build on his contributions. Bob has touched and influenced many teachers, scholars, artists and colleagues.

I (Marni) can recall my doctoral supervisor David Booth, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, handing me Bob’s book in 1999, saying, “Read this. Your thesis is here.” And so, being the diligent student, I quickly purchased the book, read it, and kept it close at hand. At that time I was a teacher of grade one and two students. Bob’s description of children’s intricate narratives tied to their images and the importance of listening to their voices in describing their world was something I could relate to in my daily classroom teaching.

In July of 2004, I went to present my doctoral research at The Imagination and Education Conference in Vancouver. Since Bob’s book had been so influential and inspiring, I contacted him by email and asked if it was possible to meet with him when I came for the conference. I can still remember my nervousness as I walked up to the front door of his house. I sat in the living room with Bob and his wife Mary and had tea and cookies. We talked for several hours about my personal history, teaching
M. J. BINDER & S. KIND

children and art. But what I so fondly remember was when Mary asked if I had been a “hippie.” I responded, “Yes, though I was at the tail end.” She replied, “good!” And so, began what has now been a twelve-year relationship. Bob and I correspond by email regularly. I receive his newsletters, and am always a grateful recipient of his books. I bring Bob’s theories and passions about children and drawing in both the literacy and creative arts classes to the university students I now teach in Early Childhood Studies. I have recommended his book to many teachers who I know will find a scholarly colleague in his writings. This Festschrift has been several years in the making and I cannot think of anyone more deserving to have a career celebrated.

I (Sylvia) met Bob in person for the first time at the beginning of this book project. While I had been familiar with his work, my first personal encounter with him was in his living room when Marni and I met with him to interview him for a chapter in this book. I had read his book *Draw Me a Story* and had used selections of it in the elementary art methods courses I had taught as a graduate student at UBC. I also had once, years ago, attended a talk he had given about the value of daily drawing. But it wasn’t until 2005, when I first visited the schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, that I began to really appreciate Bob’s perspective on drawing as a language. And so it was a great pleasure to meet, talk with him, and be part of honouring him through this Festschrift.

My initial encounter with the pre-primary schools in Reggio Emilia was a profoundly moving experience. Throughout the schools there was a deep and sustained commitment to taking the arts seriously. The arts were not seen as separate disciplines or subjects of study, but were approached as ways of knowing, communicating, investigating and narrating experience. Drawing, painting, sculpting, constructing, dancing, and so on were engaged in as expressive, poetic, and symbolic languages, and as ways of making ideas visible. It was a profoundly moving experience to see the scope of the project, how not just one classroom or a single school took up these ideas, but how a whole city embraced the arts at the centre of learning, valued young children’s understandings and perspectives, and through the artistic languages created spaces for their voices to be expressed and attended to. I was left with the question: what if we took the arts seriously in North American education? This is a question that still propels my work as an atelierista at the Capilano University Children’s Centre and I can see this same sustained passion and commitment in Bob’s work, as he asks us to consider taking drawing seriously as a language for children.

Entering into a serious engagement with drawing as a language means thinking of even very young children’s early marks as intentional, investigative, relational, communicative, and conversational acts (see Matthews, 2003). So that children’s graphic languages, even their early efforts, might be understood as explorations in interrogating spaces, investigating relationships, wondering about the world, and as social processes of making meaning (Kind, 2010). This requires learning to see and appreciate what children do, not merely as instances of learning and developing skills or techniques, or even as process-oriented self-expressive “creative” acts, but
as inventive moments of thinking through drawing. This also means that we need to take children seriously, for children do have things to say, and as Hoyuelos (2013) describes, can have an intense desire to be seen, heard, and noticed.

In this way, this book is timely. As education continues to become more narrow and confined through standardization and compartmentalized approaches, it is necessary to continue to advocate for the value of the poetic, artistic, and expressive languages. The voices of the contributors offer an insightful alternative into how drawing need not be limited to a particular discipline but can be language of communication; a language that significantly matters in the daily lives and learning not just only for children, but for those who also work with them.

For this Festschrift, we have invited educators and scholars whose work represents the ongoing influence of the ideas and teachings of Bob Steele: what he has brought to the field of art education, early childhood studies and curriculum studies in general. Represented are contributions from those who have been taught by Bob Steele in university settings, elementary school teaching and, in some cases, both. We are deeply appreciative of Rita Irwin’s contribution in writing the foreword and Nadine Kalin’s, “Final Thoughts” at the end. Their words not only inspire, but provoke us to think deeper about Bob’s ideas.

We begin in Chapter 1 with “In Conversation with Bob Steele.” Here we learn about his early conceptions of the Drawing Network, what emerged, his influences and his strong beliefs in the symbolic nature of drawing as language and expressive communication for meaning-making. We hear his voice advocate for the critical inclusion of what is essential in learning to include his views on the spontaneity of drawing, the importance of the aesthetic and empathy to viewing learning as an “internal holistic integration” for the child.

In Chapter 2, “Father, Teacher and Artist,” we are introduced to Marne St. Claire, his daughter, who makes a deeply personal contribution, discussing her father through three lenses. We view the family contribution, which has never left his work and how when she became a teacher, his work was embodied in so much of her teaching and learning. Along with the conversation with Bob, Marne offers additional insight and perspective on a life well-lived, and committed to the teaching and learning of children. We travel with the Steele family from Saskatchewan to British Columbia and to Europe. The journeys of the family parallel the journey of Bob as father, teacher and artist.

The next two chapters reflect the experiences of past art students several decades apart. Chapter 3, “To Teach Is to Touch the Future,” is a vibrant recollection of Bob’s teaching days at UBC by Kit Grauer and Peter Scurr. Kit, a student of Bob’s takes us back to the late sixties and early seventies at UBC. We enter into the progressive world of the department of art education. They discuss his teaching philosophy, the “Graphics Hut,” his mentorship and the long lasting influence of his “emphasis on authentic art and empathetic line.” We hear the stories of experience and continued influence shared by three other students from that time, as well as Kit and Peter’s scholarly anecdotes of their lived experience with Bob, past and present.
Michael Emme in Chapter 4, “Drawing as the Invention of Language: Prairie Socialism and the Practicalities of Authentic Children’s Art,” brings us deeper into the underpinnings of Bob’s philosophy of teaching art students. He discusses Bob’s grounding in prairie socialism, co-operative principles of social responsibility, the value of individual creativity within a collective practice, and the play of freedom and responsibility that shaped both Bob’s teaching in the university studio-classroom and approach to children’s drawings. Michael also gives insight into Bob’s views on authenticity in art and art education, how drawing emerges as “primal communication” and an inventive, un-coded language, and relying on Rancière, proposes a pedagogy of radical egalitarianism.

We then experience in Chapter 5, Eileen Adams’ discussion of her program, “Power Drawing,” in England. We learn of her action research to involve educators to explore the use of drawing as a means for across-the-curriculum learning. She discusses her theoretical views of drawing, Bob’s influences, support for her work and how he has challenged her to interrogate her ideas and rethink and revisit ideas. Eileen challenges the reader to think about “what is drawing for?”

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 reflect the experiences of two former teachers whose work with young children evolved through their connection with Bob through many years. In “Transformation,” Pamela Proctor takes us on her teaching journey and progressive transformation to engaging in innovative work with young children. She shares her challenges, changes and the possibilities that emerge through the representational and textual voices of her students. Like so many of us, she values the ongoing mentorship and collegiality Bob has shared over the years.

Nadene Guiltner in Chapter 7, “The Drawing Room: Drawing in—Drawing out,” takes us on a gallery walk through time. We visit a rural schoolhouse in the interior of British Columbia and meet the children through a number of projects. Through the correspondence between Bob and Nadene, we see the children’s thoughts unfold and made visible and get a glimpse into Bob’s insights and perspectives on the children’s processes. We see how a sustained commitment to integrate drawing through all areas of the curriculum helped turn a classroom into a studio for learning.

In Chapter 8, “Moon Bear and the Night Butterfly: Exploring the Pathways of Children’s Drawing-Stories,” Sylvia Kind and Cindy Lee engage with young children’s impulse to draw stories and the collective and social nature of drawing as a language. They describe what happens as children gather and draw together in the “drawing room” of the Children’s Centre. They discuss the necessary attunement of the educator, the poetry, probing, and inventions of children’s graphic languages, and give glimpses into the evolution of stories and images as they travel between children, situations, home and the drawing room. They present drawing as a dynamic interplay of ideas, fragments, imaginings, narrations, speculations, and wonderings.

Chapter 9, “Sunset; Sunrise” reflects the correspondence between two relatively new colleagues. Michael Wilson has recently met Bob through online correspondence. Through a weaving of personal common interests in music, specifically jazz, we gain further insight into Bob’s vision for the arts as a whole. We see how two seasoned
scholars navigate their ideas later in life, holding true to ideas and passions. While in the sunset of their chronological years, we witness the (re)emergence of a newfound advocacy.

We hope this Festschrift for Bob Steele inspires you to engage with children’s drawings in authentic ways, and with the joy of viewing the world through the eyes of children. For those who know Bob and his work, we hope this adds to your appreciation of his important contributions to the multimodal ways children make meaning. To those reading about him for the first time, it is our intent and the intent of our contributors to share, challenge and prompt you to think about the drawings of children differently and perhaps take your understanding to a new level. We close with Bob’s words: “A drawing is a holistic artifact consisting of perceptions, thoughts, feelings and memories, four mental strands in meaningful and heartfelt integration. Should we not expect, then, a degree of integration of personality, indeed, integration of soul?” (Personal communication, May 5, 2014)

REFERENCES


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1. IN CONVERSATION WITH BOB STEELE

On May 29, 2013, Sylvia Kind and I spent the afternoon in delightful conversation with Bob Steele. I returned the following day to continue our discussion. Out of these two days, which emerged as part interview, part conversation and part writing, Bob’s articulate voice and passion led us back in time, space and place. We spent time talking, thinking and provoking ideas about children and art. Bob’s history as an artist, art studio professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, and the birth of the Drawing Network all merged together. Throughout, Bob wove his philosophy, personal history and ideas that informed his vision of the significance of drawing as a language for children and aesthetic energy. As I reflect back on those two days, our conversation was joyfully interspersed with laughter, unrelated personal exchanges, and necessary breaks—two days of delightful encounters.

We sat in the living room with the sun shining through the windows. Bob sat in his chair surrounded by his notes, drawings, self-published books and laptop. There was prelude of chat before we began as Sylvia and Bob had not met before. Sylvia and I had come up with three main questions that we hoped would segue into a rich discussion. And so, after checking audio for taping and getting comfortable with purpose of the afternoon, I began.

Marni: We thought we could begin with the experiences that started you thinking about “The Drawing Network.”

Bob: It was the result of being introduced to Viktor Lowenfeld in my undergraduate years at the University of Saskatchewan. The notion that children have a developmental progression in their drawing ability was new to me. I am referring to their first graphic expression as scribbles of various kinds and then the arrival of the head/body combination as a symbolic construction for the human form and so on. When I graduated from university, I began a career as a secondary art teacher and so these developmental stages were less important to my teaching, but not to my new role as a father of two little girls. I saw this development in their drawings and again when I taught a summer school class of drawing and painting to children of all ages. I did this for two summers. It was a program popular in the Greater Vancouver area and I also taught it for two years in Chilliwack, British Columbia where I was teaching at the time.
After some ten years teaching older students in high school and art school, I was asked to join the art education department at UBC. Then understanding developmental stages became important again as basic content for future elementary teachers. I returned to Lowenfeld as my guide to teaching art to the young. And then one day I had a sort of light bulb experience.

Marni: Do you remember how long ago? Was it 20 years ago?
Bob: Oh, it would be closer to 25 years ago. I was walking back from the UBC Bookstore, probably thinking of a class I was about to face. Anyway, it suddenly struck me: We, and I suppose I meant my profession, tend to use the term “language” for the drawings children produce, but only as a loose sort of metaphor. Why don’t we think of it as a language in the same serious way we think of literacy? Before I got to my office I had a pretty good idea what I would do. This was the birth of the Drawing Network, which has been devoted over the past quarter century to spreading the word about drawing, as children use it, as a language medium. I produced a series of semi-annual newsletters. It began with producing nine newsletters. I made it clear that my purpose, goal, or whatever you want to call it, was to contact parents, teachers, academics, and anyone who might be interested about this rather singular, uncomplicated idea. I didn’t want to start another professional organization with annual meetings, table officers, fees and so on. It would be simply a network of friends and interested folk who would carry on their own local campaign as they thought best. Hopefully we would achieve a critical mass that would lead to reform. The challenge was this: Drawing is a language, just as literacy is a language. If so what are the implications of this for the schooling of children, at home and later in school?

Marni: This was very important for the time and now. How many people do you think the Drawing Network has expanded to?
Bob: I was determined to avoid any semblance of a properly run organization. Perhaps that was a mistake, but I wanted to write, to explore the idea, to bring an audience of like-minded people gradually to the state of critical mass with a long-term political goal of bringing about a change in language education. So, I can’t tell you how many, because I don’t keep records. I have the feeling that after 25 years of promoting the Drawing Network, it is still growing, and reaching an ever-expanding audience. It has in many ways become a part of a growing movement for “holistic education.” I can say that we have interested groups in several Canadian provinces, England, the USA, Germany, Czech Republic, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Malaysia.

Marni: The global reach is impressive. And Draw Me a Story?
Bob: Near the time of the eleventh newsletter, I wrote a book that was accepted for publication: *Draw Me a Story: An Illustrated Exploration of Drawing-as-Language*. That was in 1998.

Marni: Why do you think of children’s drawing in terms of the use of lines?

Bob: If you study children’s drawings or watch children draw, you find that their use of a line is their “natural way to draw”! To expand the term, one can call it contour line, with contours being the edges of the form. Forms can be made through tone alone, i.e., a range of tonal values from white to black but most tonal drawings begin as line and are given a tonal development subsequently. But from my observations, children draw in line only occasionally “shading-in” a form in black for emphasis or differentiation. Children draw to tell a story or describe a situation or a “thing” and the more stories they tell, the more details they wish to include. Line is the drawing technique that makes detail possible.

I feel the use of line is important in another way. When children draw they lose themselves in the subject matter. This is what I call empathy. I expect we will come to this in greater detail later, but line is the child’s most efficacious way of experiencing empathy for the world or some aspect of it. This too is tremendously important to the optimum development of individuality and maturity. Another way of putting it is line drawing facilitates the integration of perceptions, thoughts, feelings and memories. Tone, colour, and texture, all useful and exciting additions, do not have the same power of empathy or integration.

Sylvia: Can you say a bit more about representation? When you watch children draw, they are quite free in how they represent and they’re not so particular about what things look like. But as they get older, they get very concerned with accuracy.

Bob: It’s a matter of making a moment of something. That is important. The child is inventing symbols. We are used to thinking of symbols as words. Words are as abstract as numbers when you think about it. The child is inventing symbols when drawing the big circle and big eyes for example.

Sylvia: So children seem to feel quite free in how they represent things in drawing and are not so concerned what their representations look like.

Bob: Yes. I think it’s because children are unconsciously making symbols, not naturalistic representations. Of course, these symbols-of-the-moment have enough representational power to insure that their reference is clear and unambiguous. The head/body symbol for the human being is an example. The child knows that “My Mom” does not really look like this in any way and yet the symbol. The word or words are needed to clarify that this is Mom and not Dad. There
is a higher degree of representation in the graphic symbol than in the word symbol. The way I see it is that there are three language systems that are available to anyone: words alone, which are supreme for practical communication; drawings alone, an uncoded powerhouse for articulating, expressing and communicating perceptions, thoughts, feelings and memories; and words and drawings in a single integrated language medium with even more power than drawing alone. It would be interesting to observe how our children and young people rate in the opportunities we give them at home and school to gain experience in these three language systems.

Perhaps we have put a finger on why younger children draw freely and older children suffer from a form of mental block when it comes to drawing. Younger children are free to invent symbols; but as they get older they are blocked by cultural stereotypes that shift the emphasis to naturalism and photographic verisimilitude. This is an impossible goal, in my opinion, for children and young people and anyone else, except the supremely gifted and the professionally trained. The result is that the youngest children receive the benefits of spontaneous language practice, which are most often denied as they get older.

Marni: I always thought that children draw what they know and what they’re comfortable with. I tell students in my class: “You know I am quite tall. So if you are someone who is three years old and looking at me, I probably do look like a big head with arms and legs sticking out of me.

Bob: Absolutely!

Marni: It is what they know. They know we have a belly button. We know they know they have necks, but this is just the beginning step.

Bob: And here’s a really magical moment: when the child thinks of a belly button to enhance Mom or whomever. The nice thing about it is that the child feels what he or she knows. So, for the first time, an invention of symbol, unlike the invention of numbers or acquisition of numbers or literacy code, the child knows and feels at the same time.

Marni: Yes, I would agree. I really like the idea of knowing and feeling coming together.

Bob: They draw what they know but also what they feel and how they perceive. That incredible organ, the brain and our nervous system, have the power to integrate the three basic functions – thought, perception and feeling. Sometimes one or the other dominates, but all are there in every drawing to be teased out in pictorial analysis. We can analyze the drawing but the child has the power to synthesize what has been drawn and project the synthesis to the paper as an integrated image. Articulation is in the brain; expression is in the act of drawing; and communication takes the process from the personal to social
interaction. The thesis of the Drawing Network is that it is a matter of simple *transference*: integration through the practice of drawing equals integration of the human psyche. This equals mental health, deeper cognition and enriched learning.

Sylvia: That’s interesting.

Bob: And that means empathy is at work. Drawing, more than any other art form, is empathic. It is an empathic experience. Now there is empathy in making pots, there is empathy in weaving, but it is never so quite intensely focused on real experiences as it is in drawing.

Sylvia: What I’m interested in is why drawing? What is it you feel about drawing rather than, say, painting or clay? What is unique about drawing?

Bob: I measure visual arts activities by how successful they are in generating empathy, which can be an indication of brain synthesis and the values of integration to cognitive development. Those who draw empathically “touch” the content material (the significant items in the child’s graphic narrative) and then include significant elements in the child’s life. We observe outlines for the shape of forms (head/body circle for Mom), and in lines for interior details (eyes, ears, nose, mouth). Tone, colour, and texture are not without empathic significance but don’t provide the “intimate touch,” the empathic tension that we see possible with line. In other words, through line drawing, content is meaningfully internalized and transformed in heartfelt ways.

Colours, textures, and tonalities set up formal relationships within the picture plane and they generate an aesthetic energy. Line drawing requires a pen, pencil or ballpoint and paper. Painting requires more materials and is a time consuming set-up. Clay modelling, especially when motivated by human themes, is as developmentally important as contour drawing, but the materials may be hard to get and the logistics to implement on a daily basis are challenging to say the least. There is no doubt about it: line drawing is the staple in this discussion and ideally should be daily, but painting and clay modelling should be frequent activities in the life of every child.

Sylvia: I love drawing!

Bob: I would think everyone loves drawing, but how do you react to the rather controversial claim I make that for a few years in our human span of life, drawing is the most important language available for sorting out our perceptions, thoughts, feelings and memories; in other words, for making sense of our world and its ever unfolding experiences and challenges. We have words that are the perfect medium for practical communication and this is with us – for most of us, at any rate – throughout our lives. But what about those subtle, complex, celebratory, awesome moments when spoken words simply
are not up to the task? Of course, they remain bottled up, lacking in articulation, expression and certainly, they are not communicated to anyone, a serious loss for parents. Nature, in her beneficence, has given us the possibilities of a language without a cumbersome code, but unfortunately we have neglected it, not partially, but very nearly totally. I am not a developmental psychologist, but it doesn’t take one to recognize the importance of language to cognitive development! It’s astonishing to me that we have largely undervalued the arts as language in the home and school curriculum.

Sylvia: I think for young children drawing can be a very effective way of communicating an idea. I would agree that it is one of the most important ways to communicate and express. Children often can be far more articulate in drawing than in clay modelling or sculpture or other kinds of media.

Bob: Or writing.

Sylvia: Yes, absolutely. For example, a five-year-old is not going to be able to write very fluidly.

Marni: I agree with you. I have also experienced what children are able to do with paint or markers for example. Narrative details can be difficult to represent with some mediums. But when they use pencil, and even sometimes crayon, the detail or some of those minute pieces of narrative that might not show up with other mediums are clearly evident with drawing.

Sylvia: So what we are talking about is invention, drawing as symbolic invention; particularly when you can’t erase what has been drawn or you haven’t realized you can erase. There are so many instances where children are drawing, and they’re telling a story. Maybe they’re drawing an elephant and they can’t quite draw an elephant so it turns into a duck elephant and so the story becomes a story about a duck elephant, which is incredibly inventive. You’ve then just invented this other new animal.

Marni: Transformation of thought and ideas, definitely.

Sylvia: That does not happen in the same way in painting. Painting has its own way of being. It is so much more fluid and the colour takes over.

Bob: It is emotional.

Marni: There is a tactile piece to that, too.

Sylvia: But drawing is a particular way of expressing.

Bob: Yes, indeed, as Zero Mostel used to say in a skit about himself, “Flexible mind!” The tactile side of drawing relates specifically to empathy. We have all observed the child clutch the pencil ferociously and – using a metaphor again – “carving” the form on or “into” the receiving paper. This is nothing less than translating forms into a surrogate form. This is an effort on the drawer’s part to internalize the
content that has been pushing its way out of the unconscious into the preconscious and hence to the paper. It’s a marvellous process with significance for the optimum use of intellectual resources. I am always struck with awe when I see anyone draw, or when I draw myself, or when I busy myself with analyzing the finished product. Yes, I must confess I have been paid a good salary for this most pleasant work!

After some laughter, Bob continues.

This a good time to introduce my “coup de grace” when faced with skeptics, although I have to say that most skeptics seem to keep out of sight. Looking at almost any drawing by a six-year-old, one could ask the question: “Do you think it is possible that a child could incorporate anything like the content of this drawing using words alone?” I use that challenge myself and it helps me establish the basic themes we have been discussing. You should try it yourself.

So, in all this talk about drawing, I know we can agree that both painting and clay modelling are incredibly important art activities. I would even give these a hierarchical pitch and say that expressive painting is on a higher scale of values than drawing because of the emotional energy of colour, and coloured drawings don’t quite supply the aesthetic punch of large brush and tempera paint. And “aesthetic punch” is important. But for daily use, drawing is the most expeditious medium available and certainly the easiest for parents and teachers to include in their daily routine.

Marni: I am wondering about something. We are pushing academic expectations and skills on children younger and younger as opposed to opening up the spaces for children to be able to draw, to express themselves in a myriad of ways using many possible techniques and artistic mediums. Being able to draw, to represent their worlds is a part of who they are and who they are becoming.

Bob: One thing that must happen before significant progress is possible is the role of the adult in creative language schooling. We have inherited a “do your own thing” attitude towards the arts. This has resulted in many progressively-minded parents who should be in the vanguard of the “daily” draw movement, taking a hands-off attitude towards what their children do. This has serious implications for television watching, the time spent on computer games, and cell phone mania, but it also prevents the kind of supervision necessary for productive arts involvement.

Left on their own, children will draw occasionally, but only when there’s nothing else to do. When they do draw, the subject matter is apt to be trivial in my opinion, current pop art stereotypes and so on. Needless to say, there is absolutely no language significance here, but
I’m sure parents want the best possible schooling for their kids. They could set up a daily drawing session and play the adult role creatively. This role is to be part of the daily event, to discuss possible themes in conversations, and to resist showing children neat tricks to achieve “better” results, and to discuss the drawings when they are finished. The spin-offs are significant for many reasons: The development of an ever more useful drawing skill; a practice of authentic rather than spurious art; increased interest in drawings as an auxiliary to words; the enhancement of literacy; and bonding with the supervising adult.

Sylvia: Yes, especially if you think of drawing as communication. Somebody has to be there to listen and respond. It is not just self-interest, or self-expression where you go on to do your own thing. Somebody has to respond to the drawing. It’s the idea of drawing as a conversation, as interaction.

Marni: Something that is socially constructed.

Sylvia: What you are promoting is an adult-child interaction which is incredibly important not just to children’s communication but to their development of empathy and the adult-child relationship of listening, caring and communicating through drawing.

Bob: I like what you’re saying. To put it in a topical framework, there has been a lot of talk recently about school bullying. I like to believe that if a daily drawing routine had been in place in preschool years, and integrated into kindergarten/primary programs, there would be a lot less bullying in the first place. But we have it and it is not too difficult to see how spontaneous drawing and other art forms could contribute to healing for the victim. As for the perpetrating bullies, a healing regimen for them in my school would be a daily session of drawing and writing, not on any topic but specifically on life experiences that might have forged a bullying personality. And yet in the dozens of opinion pieces in the newspapers, radio interviews and phone-ins, the word drawing doesn’t come up once in my listening and reading! We have lots of work to do yet. The ideas and practice are, I believe, gaining ground in professional agencies and some school classrooms, but apparently it has not reached a critical mass in the arena of public opinion. Until that happens reform will just sputter along.

We decided to end the conversation here for the day. Both Sylvia and I were grateful for the time we had with Bob, exploring his ideas and getting contextual and historical perspective on what shaped and informed his ideas. For Sylvia, it was particularly significant as this was the first time she had met Bob. She had heard my stories of time spent with him and his wife Mary, and how our relationship grew over the years into one of not just collegiality but friendship. The next important part of the discussion revolved around Bob’s concept of aesthetic energy. This was
particularly significant for him and he felt the time together would not be complete without focusing on this important idea. I returned the following day to continue our time together and to allow Bob time to call our attention to this central idea.

Marni: Bob, you wanted to talk about aesthetic energy. This was where we left off yesterday. You felt it was really important and we didn’t have time to get into it, so today I’m just going to ask you why aesthetic energy in children’s drawing is so important?

Bob: Central to the Drawing Network approach is conceptualizing spontaneous drawing as a language medium. I want to make the case that spontaneous drawing is also a very special art form. What makes it special is its lack of code, its natural spontaneity, and that children experience empathy when they draw. That empathy produces “aesthetic energy” and occasionally when aesthetic energy is all encompassing in a “work of art,” it has a positive effect on cognitive development and wellbeing. Here are the ideas that flow from this series of statements and why I believe this. First, aesthetic energy would appear to be the linchpin and I will attempt a definition. Think of the feeling you get when you confront a favourite work of art, hear a great piece of music, respond to a fine poem, or are moved by an actor’s performance. In each case, a flow of emotional response will connect you to the source. For want of a better term, I will call this flow, aesthetic energy. Of course, we can experience it from natural phenomena, too, and I remind you that early childhood is a time when we experience it with a special clarity and intensity.

As for locating it in art forms, it will help to identify it if we relate it to what we mean by “design,” “form,” and “composition.” If we break it down further we can think of the so-called elements and principles of design: balance, proportion, rhythm, contrast and so on. And here I also want to add a word of caution: it is really counterproductive to “teach” these aesthetic phenomena but perfectly legitimate to “find” them in student artwork, and even point them out to the artist in an act of backdoor teaching, but, I repeat for emphasis, never “teach” them as separate phenomena.

Marni: Why is that?

Bob: The first and perhaps most important reason is that in the time that you have taught lessons and all the elements and principles of design there is no time for real art. And real art begins with content, with a motivation, so that is why the backdoor approach is better. You see a work of art and you say, “oh look here, look at what you have got, look at how this shape echoes that shape, bet you didn’t know you were doing that.” Now it depends on the age of the child of course, just how much of this maybe the case. But speaking of age, it turns out in my
experience that the deepest age for the unconscious, better still pre-conscious development of aesthetic energy, is about ages five, six and seven. But, then maturity begins to intrude, a growing up of knowing one’s culture and then knowing that a lot of people have ideas about this and that, and maybe you should have as well.

Bob: There is a relationship, a formal relationship that turns up in children’s art that has always astonished me, but especially since I’ve been concentrating on line drawing. And the main reason for writing my most recent book was to present about 70 drawings that illustrated this and I have sidebars that comment on that.

Bob: Books are written on form but enough about form, which is only half the equation. The other half is content, the subject matter that triggered the art expression in the first place. Our position is that if the artist – for example, any two-year-old right through the years of schooling and beyond – feels deeply about the subject, the elements and principles of design will look after themselves. If you try to motivate themes that stimulate empathy, children will draw with empathy and art works will emerge charged with “aesthetic energy.” Children will feel good, but won’t necessarily know what we as caring adults assume, for instance, that the drawer’s soul is abuilding.

Bob: What do you mean by the “drawer’s soul is abuilding”? It is an interesting way of phrasing it.

Bob: Well, yes, especially “abuilding” which my computer did not accept willingly. But it just seemed right. Of course, we are talking equally about character and growing up and all that it implies, which are beyond the scope of this conversation and beyond my scope too. It would mean beginning to think about Maslow and his goals.

Bob: You want me to start thinking about that now do you?

Marni: No, not really. Jung and Maslow are two key people. It simply means to consider the “fully developed person.”

Marni: You have me on that one. But I think we are actually looking at the development of the whole person, which would actually include spirituality, and soul, which is very holistic, and it is not necessarily spirituality or soul in a religious sense. So, you talk about the soul is abuilding, and at the end you talk about “what has happened here.”

Bob: What has happened? The act of drawing (singing, dancing, playing and in due course, writing) has performed a miracle of internal holistic integration: Form and Content are united in the drawer’s mind and simultaneously on the page. How can this not push cognitive development to its natural limit? How can it not contribute to a
population of integrated human beings who will at last – thanks to
universal empathy – eradicate bullying from schoolyards and armed
conflicts from the political arena for example?
Marni: And possibly bullying in our political context too.
Bob: Of course.
Marni: The one thing we were talking about yesterday is you wanting to
discuss this aesthetic. Do you want to sum up? You said that people
might ask why are you bringing this in.
Bob: My answer would be that children have three languages, actually more
than three, but there are three that are particularly useful in focusing on
human problems and human growth. Dance, for example, is not one of
them. Dance is a spiritual, I mean, at least, an abstract language, call it
spiritual or not if you would like. And it can be specific of course.
Marni: And be a language.
Bob: But it is a language because it’s a system of movements, creating
meanings. It is the same with music. In my evaluation, music tops
the list, because music is the dearest art I know, but it is a spiritual,
abstract language. It doesn’t talk very well about being hit in the
nose in the schoolyard. The three languages of course are: drawing,
words, probably oral words set in passion, and the two of them
working together on the same project: words and graphic images. And
remember yesterday I said quite a bit about these being an innovation
of the child, that the child invents symbols. It is a representation,
but it is also a symbolic language. They are inventing symbols that
are personally based on observation and feeling and convenience I
suppose, shorthanded things or shorthanded symbols. So that’s what
I would say. We’re just dealing with a very small galaxy of languages
that focus on what has been experienced. And some of them take
longer to develop than others. Drawing happens to be the one that is
easiest for children in the early years.
Marni: Because they start just by making marks. It is just a very natural thing
to do.
Bob: Yes, because drawing is spontaneous and it is un-coded and literacy is
coded.
Marni: What would be the one thing you would like readers of this conversation
to take away?
Bob: The universal acceptance of drawing as a language medium and all that
it implies. I am an unpretentious observer of teaching and children. It
is not a fancy theory, just an observation and a hope that people would
put it into practice.

And so the conversation ended here. After two days of intense conversation with
Bob, I was left with a busy mind of ideas and reflections. I could not help but think of
the long journey and commitment Bob has made to the language and literacy growth of young children through the daily draw and the importance of the arts in their everyday lives. At the time of this conversation, Bob was 87 years old. He was still drawing everyday, doing his graphic art and writing. And while we spoke of many other things throughout the two days, what I have hoped to capture is the passion, commitment and tenacity that has influenced and shaped so many of us who have had the privilege to read his work and meet him.

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