



Dispatch

“But isn’t it illegal?” Using Street Art to Engage Students on Issues of Social Justice

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For the past 15 years I have been researching and documenting, through photography and video, street art from different parts of the world. As a long-time educator whose teaching practice is rooted in the principles of equity, inclusion and cultural responsiveness, I regularly integrate street art in my courses when discussing issues of social justice. I have witnessed how this art form encourages learners of diverse ages and backgrounds to have in depth discussions on accessibility, racism, decolonization and related issues. I see how street art not only engages students but also opens pathways to difficult discussions. This is something I experienced personally when I was eight years old. At that age, I became aware of the importance of political freedom for the first time. I didn’t learn about it in a classroom, or by reading a book, or from watching or listening to a news report. I learned about politics through messages posted anonymously on the walls and streets of a bustling city.

In the summer of 1976, when I was visiting Lisbon, Portugal with my family, I first saw political street art. It was fanned out like the pages of a newspaper, providing information and personal opinions everywhere I looked. One image was painted and posted repeatedly: a red carnation. I remember a specific piece of street art on a wall at a busy intersection. It depicted a soldier with a rifle and a red carnation stuck in its barrel. There were no words with the art, but I remember thinking that it meant something important. I asked my parents, who were both Portuguese, what the message was communicating to the many people who were crossing paths with it daily. They explained that the red carnation, already a symbol associated with socialism in Portugal, was adopted during a revolution that started on April 25th, 1974. Known as “The Carnation Revolution,” it led to the fall of a dictatorship and the installation of a democratic socialist government backed by ordinary citizens, who despite the risk of imprisonment took to the streets to support the risky coup started by a handful of low-ranking military officers. The dictatorship, which had been in

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place for 41 years, had made illegal many things taken for granted in democracies, such as freedom of speech. The old regime censored what people could say and jailed and tortured them for criticizing it openly; but the revolution had changed that (Steele & De Figueiredo, 1974). The citizens of Portugal were free to express their opinions anywhere and they didn't hold back. Although "The Carnation Revolution" happened in 1974, two years before my family's visit to Lisbon, the street art it had inspired was still visible everywhere, and it captivated me. It was as if the illustrations of a history book had sprung to life on the walls of the city. Street art made it possible for me and others to learn lessons on politics and the importance of democracy right on the street.

"But isn't it illegal?" is something I am often asked when I share that I use street art as a tool to learn about social justice. Street art and other public art interventions, such as graffiti, postering and stickers, are often associated with crime in the minds of the general public, even when created legally. Under the Canadian Criminal Code, for example, street art made without permission of the owner of the space used is considered damaging or vandalizing a structure (Criminal Code, 1985, s 430). In my classrooms, discussing the legality of pieces has led to rich exchanges on the nature of public property, ownership and who has the right to use the walls of a city to communicate their views in public areas. One topic that comes up constantly is whether illegal street art is vandalism. There isn't an easy answer to this as it depends who you are speaking to on this issue. Through the eyes of the law, yes, it is vandalism – but there are lots of gray areas. A good amount of illegal art is created for the public good. The sticker in Figure 1, located on a light post in Manchester, England, brings awareness to trans rights by informing passers-by of the importance of gender-affirming healthcare. It is a great example of the educational value found in something created and exhibited illegally.



Figure 1. Sticker by Unknown Artist (photo: A. A. Rodrigues, 2023).

I have written about how street art complicates traditional notions of ownership in communities (Rodrigues, 2020). I think that when illegal street art is created to bring awareness to an important issue of justice, questions on either the nature of its creation or where it can be seen by the public, should become irrelevant.

An Educational Tool for Social Justice Education

So how do I use street art in my teaching practice? Once, in an undergraduate class dedicated to exploring issues of equity in diverse communities, I introduced the image of a piece depicting a group of caged chickens (Figure 2). It makes a statement on animal rights, as the chickens are crammed together and piled on top of each other. One chicken has a tear in its eye and there is a sign that reads, “FULL.” The piece was placed behind the bars of a window in an abandoned building, completing what many might see as a shocking but also very effective statement on animal welfare.



Figure 2. Street art by artist Kat (photo: A. A. Rodrigues, 2015)

This street art is made by Kat. When she moved from France to Montreal in 2011, she began creating street art to amplify her views on animal rights. She states online that combining her concerns on the treatment of animals with her passion for drawing and painting led her to incorporate surrealism into the street art she creates (Kat, 2025). The results are beautiful works – the type of

art one might encounter in a gallery. They capture the attention of a passerby immediately, although it might take time to realise they depict animal suffering.

Kat's street art provided an excellent springboard for a classroom discussion on the ethical treatment of animals. When I asked students to share their thoughts on what they were seeing, they were silent for what seemed an eternity. But then a flurry of hands went up and the conversation flowed as they shared ideas and opinions with me and each other on the significance of the piece and its message. A serious discussion on animal rights followed, which thrilled me as an educator. Then another possibility opened when a student explained how they had liked the use of this piece to talk about a difficult subject. They found it hard to discuss animal rights when seeing images of real animals suffering; however, the street art, being an artistic rendition of a factory farm practice, with many significant visual markers which could be analyzed, was a good way to start and sustain the dialogue with less difficulty. It was impactful but would not make them turn away; and so a discussion, although uncomfortable, could proceed.

Finding street art that can be successfully integrated into a social justice lesson isn't always easy. One of the most important photographs I have in my collection is called *What About Our Girls* and I was fortunate to document it before it was erased permanently from a wall and the public's consciousness (Figure 3).



Figure 3. A wheatpaste by Kitten (formerly Red Bandit) (photo: A. A. Rodrigues, 2015).

I had been walking the back alleys of Toronto, Canada's downtown, for hours on a very hot summer day. My mission, when I went out that morning with a digital camera in hand, was to find and photograph street art with social justice messages. But after hours of walking through smelly alleyways, I had not found anything worth documenting for possible use in my courses. I decided it was time to stop the search, and as I left the alley and walked up a side street, I felt as if the wind had been knocked out of me. I was facing a wheatpaste showing a young woman in profile, with the words "*What About Our Girls*" written on her long, flowing hair.¹ I knew right away what this piece was communicating. It was a vivid, visual reminder of the unconscionable number of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG); but there was more to this message, as I would find out after engaging in some online sleuthing.

Digging deeper into the meaning and origin of the pieces that I will want to integrate into my teaching practice is necessary to ensure I bring the voice of the artist into the classroom along with their art. This is easy to do when the street art is signed with either the artist's real name or a tag, but in some cases, their signature may not be there or can't be seen. That was the case with this piece. When I can't search for the artist online because I don't know who they are, I do a reverse image search using Google. This doesn't always work as not every artist posts their works online. But in this case, I was successful. My search brought up the artist's blog with a short entry providing background on "What About Our Girls." The post from the artist Kitten, at the time identifying as Red Bandit, explained that they created it "as a response to radio silence on missing and murdered Indigenous women here in Canada at a time when much kerfuffle was made over the disappearance of young girls a continent away" (Kitten, 2014).

Kitten was contrasting the media coverage of MMIWG to the extensive media reporting in Canada on the Chibook schoolgirls kidnapping early in 2014. An extremist group, the Boko Haram, kidnapped young women from a boarding school in Nigeria, and shortly after their abduction the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls trended worldwide. In Canada, demonstrations were organized to bring attention to the kidnappings; these were covered extensively by the media.

I've used this image many times in my courses to facilitate conversations on MMIWG and it always tends to start with an uncomfortable silence. The reactions after the silence depend on the ages of the students. With youth, I hear that the message isn't clear, so I reveal more about the background of the piece to start the discussion. When using this piece with adults, at times I hear audible gasps. I recognize that response of shock and shame, as that was how I felt when I saw "What About Our Girls." The power of encounters with street

¹ A wheatpaste is a type of street art where a homemade flour and water adhesive is used to glue paper to a wall, door or window.

art always humbles me as I remember how much it can teach us about ourselves in relation to the society we live in.

Not being able to locate information online to help understand the meaning behind a piece I have come across doesn't mean that I won't document it for future use. This was the case when I took a photo of a sticker in Lisbon, Portugal that had the rhyme, "Na luta hoje e sempre, Marielle presente" surrounding the illustration of a woman's face. Those words translate to, "In the fight today and always, Marielle is present." I didn't recognize the name or face on the sticker, but those words seemed to connect it to a social justice issue, so I took a picture of it with the intent of doing online research later. I found out that the sticker was bringing attention to the life of Marielle Franco, a politician and human rights activist in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, who was assassinated in 2018 for being a bisexual, Black woman who spoke out against many unjust situations, including police brutality, that were present in the community she represented as a councilwoman.



Figure 4. A sticker by an unknown artist (photo: A. A. Rodrigues, 2017).

I haven't been able to find out who created the sticker, but I've used it in my classrooms to open discussions on homophobia, gender-based violence and the power of patriarchy in society. The conversation also brings attention to the critical work in human rights that Marielle Franco accomplished in her short life, information that may not otherwise make it into classrooms in the Global North. I'm so glad I made the decision to take the picture of a sticker I wasn't sure was connected to a social justice issue, as it has allowed me to provide information on a hidden history.

Bringing to light such erased histories is an important way I use street art in

the classroom; but there is another aspect I see to its integration. Street art is responsive to societal issues and resists dominant narratives. When running a workshop on street art and social justice with two Grade 8 classes, I showed the stencil, “Mr. Trudeau, why are my people still thirsty?” created by Windigo Army, an art collective of Indigenous artists based in Ontario, Canada (Figure 5).



Figure 5. A stencil created by Windigo Army (photo: A. A. Rodrigues, 2017).

The piece depicts a young Indigenous girl with a question for the then prime minister of Canada, which brings into focus a 2015 Liberal election promise to provide clean water to all First Nations by March 2021. In December 2020, the federal government admitted they were breaking their election promise as they would not be meeting this deadline. Although many long-term boil water advisories have been lifted on reserves across Canada in the past 10 years, there

are still many communities waiting for safe, clean water. Yet that election promise is not always remembered in the news cycle.

The image immediately captures the students' attention. They analyze it for a few minutes, then discuss the meaning behind the question it asks, with a few of the learners confessing to not understanding why it is directed to the prime minister. This opens a discussion on social justice issues which goes beyond the lack of safe drinking water in Indigenous communities in Canada, as we also discuss the impact of government policies rooted in colonialism.

An Educational Alternative

When street art is framed as pedagogical it opens doors to different and more critical ways of thinking, and provides a myriad of rich opportunities for learning about social justice that may be more effective than many traditional methods found in education today. Street art is radical, courageous, uncompromising and on the frontlines of social justice issues at both a local level such as a small neighbourhood, and on a global scale such as when a piece on an international issue gets shared online. Street art can be integrated into the curriculum at no cost. I use images of pieces I have encountered and photographed in my own community, and anyone can do this if they have access to a smartphone or digital camera. Educators can also take their students outside of the classroom to see what they find in their neighbourhoods. If you do go for walks, it's important to remind learners to look closely at walls, light posts and other structures found on the street. Providing such direction is necessary because people don't spend much time just strolling outside these days, tending to navigate from point A to B with the intention of getting to their destination as quickly as possible, and overlooking a lot in the process. Whether to get to work, run an errand, exercise, or walk the dog, there always seems to be a task associated with walking outside. It's only when we slow down and take the time to look around that the social justice message of a sticker on a light post or a wheatpaste on a wall might get noticed. This is why I encourage people to practice strolling down streets without a purpose. You will see how many things you have never noticed before will come into focus as you spend more time looking at your surroundings.

By its nature, street art is ephemeral and may be gone by the time you try to find it again. And so can your memory of it. Photographing is essential to ensure these works, embedded in a historical time and space, are available to be shared with learners in the years to come. As a collection of images grows, I suggest creating a system to organize your files, with details about where and when you photographed them, before you forget. I have learned this the hard way as I didn't start a system of organization until I had taken a few hundred pictures. Some of their information is now lost forever. Knowing their location is significant as many are tied to place, and documenting the date the image was taken may be useful when discussing something that is historically

significant. Looking at how street artists responded to a particular issue on the world stage is an excellent learning opportunity, even years down the road. The wheatpaste below is an interesting example (Figure 6). I photographed it in the summer of 2024 in Köln, Germany when it was one of 10 German cities hosting the Men's European Football Championship, known as the Euro Cup. An online search of this image revealed that Sei leise, its creator, is commenting on the huge amount of money spent on the event. The piece is called "Games for Millions."



Figure 6. A wheatpaste created by Sei leise (photo: A. A. Rodrigues, 2024).

It's also important to take note of the street artist or artists who created the work, when that information is available. It's the right thing to do to ensure the artist's name and background are shared with students so that the creator of the work receives proper credit, and sometimes artists build up significant bodies of work as social justice commentators.

For educators not wanting to create their own collections, many images can

be found online. I have used Google Arts and Culture Street Art Project (artsandculture.google.com/project/street-art) in my classrooms, and public social media accounts are a rich source of images of street art that provide a unique window into the artist's process when they choose to share information on the development and production of a particular piece. Social media can provide a way to hear directly from an artist and the community where a work has been created, as individuals will use the artist's feeds to comment on how the work has affected them.

Some Concluding Thoughts

After 15 years of exploring streets in diverse communities, documenting illegal and legal pieces through photography, and analyzing them through an educational lens, I am still excited by all I learn from this art form. Street art has not only expanded my knowledge on issues of equity but has also opened my eyes to social injustices I was not aware of until I saw a piece that made me want to find out more. As my knowledge grows, I share what I learn with others, and I have come to see social justice issues in a different light. I have also witnessed how street art engages learners of all ages by stimulating thoughtful discussions on difficult issues while encouraging learning that is student driven and memorable. In essence, street art has the potential to raise critical awareness as learners gain a deeper understanding of a social justice issue. I hope this article has sparked some ideas on how you might use it in your teaching practice.

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