The street as teaching space. A case study.

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Abstract: With the problems facing our natural environment in an increasingly human centered world, students expect that taught content within tertiary design courses acknowledge environmental and social problems. How can knowledge within indigenous cultures contribute to and expand this content? Can this be achieved through locating teaching and learning outside the traditional spaces and systems? Many indigenous youth have been failed by the school system, but have developed strong skill sets through illegal tagging and graffiti. Even though they lack the academic passport acquired through school, they are ambitious for higher studies in creative practice. But they are unaware their knowledge and abilities are transferable to other creative disciplines; they do not connect their street art skills to professional design practices. By using the streets as a project based teaching space, we can engage youth who would normally be excluded from higher design education and release their potential as problem solvers.

Keywords: Design Education, Graffiti, Public Art, Youth Engagement, Teaching Spaces.

1. Introduction.

“Those who hold power in a society determine what constitutes legitimate knowledge and what makes it superior to or more prestigious than other beliefs” (Hokowhitu, 2004, p.192).

Auckland Council, the governing body for the city of Auckland, New Zealand, commissioned Unitec Institute of Technology to undertake a research project. The project aim was to find an education-linked solution to the large amount of illegal graffiti and vandalism occurring in the city fringe town centre of Henderson.

In the early stages of the project it was discovered that a majority of the youth we were referred to for this vandalism and graffiti were New Zealand’s indigenous people; Maori. The result of this discovery was that we ensured our methodology reflected that; “today Maori parents want an education system that values Maori students by demonstrating that it values their culture”. (Hokowhitu, 2004, p.200). Unitec Institute of Technology was in a unique situation to undertake this...
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project, as it offered Foundation Level art and design programs structured institutionally to connect with Maori culture and support networks. It was important for the project to ensure that “creative activity sits alongside cultural restoration and social justice activities, acting in relation to each other” (Royal, 2007, p.38).

1.1 Student experience.

We were also interested in using the project to extend our existing student experience to outside the traditional teaching spaces, and to introduce the concept of “what might the position of artists be were work not assimilated by the market place? If there were no market place?” (Becker, 1996, p.34). These experiences were relevant to the use of play in teaching conceptual design development, as well as challenging the nature and purpose of objects.

Accessing the street as a teaching space could also provide a platform for place-making, and through this place-making, introduce to the students the role of storytelling in design. Creating a broad range of new experiences could assist us to address Becker’s (1996) observation that; “Students are trained to work in many media and technologies without equivalent time or guidance in determining what to make work about.” (p.29). To support the use of storytelling and play, the project was structured so that it “allowed the process to determine the outcomes, rather than the perverse approach of allowing the outcomes to determine the process” (Ife, 2013, p.181). This was according to Ife, (2013) “at the heart of good community development.” We saw this project as supporting Art and Design as Social Practice, an area of research popular with both Visual Arts and Design students.

The project embraced the concept from Matauranga Maori that states; “the challenge of completing a variety of tasks throughout life to further develop and extend one’s knowledge base, while still retaining traditional values associated with knowledge, is important, and that knowledge belongs to the whole group and that knowledge should be valued and used to benefit others.” (Ka’ai, 2004, p.201)

2. The story.

2.1 Creating relationships.

The Corban Estate Arts Centre, a sprawling collection of old buildings is the studio of the Kakano Youth Arts Collective. The collective is a program for from 13 to 17 years old at-risk youth who have been referred from the Justice System or from Social Workers. The youth are actively engaged in exploring alternatives to their graffiti and vandalism, but this program offers no qualifications, so the youth are unable to progress their education beyond the workshops held there.

To initiate the project, we had to create a project plan that would satisfy the Auckland Council brief. We had advantages in this other parties who had wished to undertake such a program had not, Unitec’s program stair-casing. This enabled students to progress from the lowest entry levels of education to the highest, coupled with the fact that these programs could lead to Design, Art, or Architecture.

A partnership was made between the Kakano Youth Arts Collective and Unitec. We would design and implement a plan to use the street as a teaching space, to transition youth from their life of crime to one of study in the creative arts, and with the help of existing students as mentors, hopefully on to graduation and leadership.
The work produced in the project had to be authentic and conceptual, and it was important the project acted as a vehicle for the introduction to some basic principles of design as well as visual arts. A key component of the project plan was to use social media, to record the creative process, and to generate a positive public profile for the project. This would also introduce the potential of video, even in unskilled hands when edited professionally. The making of the video content became the connecting point between the youth from Kakano and the students from Unitec. It was a technology they could all share and experiment freely with.

2.2 The methodology.

The plan we produced involved a series of creative outputs, each one designed to work within open public spaces and respond to the need to teach different skills. We wanted to produce a socially engaged practice, one that prioritized “relationships, process, and action.” (Smith, 2015, p.73). We would create workshops to demonstrate to the youth how their existing skills could be transferred to multiple disciplines.

The first action was using Mural Artwork. Prominent walls, and those that were particularly ugly and had attracted graffiti and tagging were selected. The content for these would reference the Maori myths and legends from the area, and identify the significant flora and fauna that had once flourished there.
Figure 2. Completed mural painting, Henderson Town Centre, Auckland. 2015

Figure 3. Mural painting in progress, Henderson Town Centre, Auckland. 2015.
The subject matter for the murals would communicate in the young artists own ways, social harmony and healthy living, and would reflect what is “integral to the daily life of a pluralistic society, representing diverse, hidden, necessary points of view.” (Becker, 2015 p.78). The walls were all planned to be large permanent public artworks and produced through the use of spray cans. This format would give the Kakano Youth Arts Collective their public profile, as this work would be in high visibility areas, and filmed for social media. This large-scale work also motivated the Unitec students work along side, and introduced them to the concept of place-making.

The second action design addressed a desire to reproduce the graffiti ethos of constant change and “freshness”. In response to this, two steel “Art Frames” were designed. This design could be placed in prominent places within the town centre, and would contain regularly updated works. They were specifically placed in order to be “out in the world and in non-art related and non-institutional spaces that foster a messier sort of intersection between art and life, places less marked by normative power.” (Smith, 2015, p.81). These frames could be installed quickly, and so responded to a requirement for an immediate effect on the streetscape, as Sadik-Khan & Solomonov (2016) had recalled; “the fast implementation of projects proved to be far more effective than the traditional model of attempting to achieve near unanimity on a project when you already have consensus that the status quo doesn’t work.” (p.xvi). A rapid placement of this design was possible through a loophole in the planning laws. These laws allowed any object smaller than three metres square and not cemented into the ground to be classified as a sign, for if the object was larger and classified as an artwork, it would involve an extensive permitting and fee system. This strategy introduced the students to the value of researching Planning Law when undertaking place-making or public artworks.
Figure 4. Art Frame board being prepared, Corban Estate Art Centre, Henderson, Auckland. 2016.
The street as teaching space.

Figure 5. Art Frame with image board installed and artist, Catherine Plaza, Henderson Town Centre, Auckland. 2016.
The third methodology was to produce a series of screen-printed posters. The process of creating hand cut screen stencils for four colour posters would teach the patience and attention to detail required for a later progression onto digital media. This would introduce to the youth, the logic of layering systems inherent in so many design software programs. The print-run would be made up of two parts; a series on paste up grade paper for use on the streets, and a small run of prints on art grade paper for sale and distribution. We had obtained sponsorship from Phantom Billstickers, the
owners of several public display structures, on which they could create a series of paste-ups. This demonstrated the value of taking time to research and locate strategic partnerships when undertaking a project.

An empty shop was sought so the editions could be exhibited and sold, and this was to be coordinated with a Council event in the town centre. The benefit of this was to introduce the youth to the systems involved in selling work, and the resulting shift from public to private space. T-Shirts were designed to identify the youth as belonging to the Kakano Youth Arts Collective as they worked on the street art. This demonstrated the power of branding to create identity and a sense of belonging.

Figure 7. Screen-printing posters, Artright Screen Printers, Onehunga, Auckland. 2015.
Figure 8. Kakano Youth Arts Trust artist with his poster and Constable Speers of the New Zealand Police. Kokano Pop-up Gallery, Henderson Town Centre, Auckland. 2016.
2.3 The delivery.

The project was delivered as a community of practice; defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” (Wenger-Trayner, 2015, as cited in Maurice-Takerei & Anderson, 2016). It was designed to proactively engage with Maori youth through creative practice, and to connect all participants to Matauranga Maori (Maori knowledge) through the project process. We ensured there were negotiated spaces between the roles of teacher and learner. This is based on the principles of ako, (to teach and learn), and required us to depart from the traditional methodology of teaching pre-set criteria to assessment deadlines. We worked through consensus on the timing of the project outcomes, working through issues collectively as they arose. As Ife (2013, p.181) observed, “this might to modern Western ears sound a hopelessly naïve and impossible prospect, it is worth remembering that people in Indigenous communities have used such decision-making techniques for centuries, and to people from those societies the conventional Western forms of decision-making seem utterly inappropriate.”
A press release and social media campaign was designed and implemented by a Unitec Postgraduate student in Communications. The social media content was created by teams of Undergraduate Unitec students filming the wall painting events, supporting workshops, and exhibitions. These three-minute video clips were edited and used to generate publicity for the project, through a Facebook site, and extensive e-mail based file sharing. We were very conscious that the success of the project not only relied on data, but it being seen by Auckland Council in the most positive way. Having a dedicated person with media skills ensured we could have maximum control over how the project was reported on and perceived by the public.

The two Art Frames were placed in the two most populated and strategically important sites within the town centre, ensuring the work had maximum visible impact. The plan was that the artwork within the frames would be replaced every five weeks, with teams of two working on each frame at a time. Simultaneously as the Art Frames were installed, two large walls that sat at either end of the western approaches to the town centre were painted. The popularity of these pieces of artwork resulted in more requests for murals. The Auckland Council has, on the success of the wall paintings, brokered the painting of other walls within the town centre. They expressed a desire to expand the mural artwork project to an extent that Henderson became a destination for viewing Graffiti style Public Art.

A vacant retail space in a prominent site was donated to Kakano for the exhibition of the screen-printed posters. This attracted many visitors with whom the youth could discuss the concepts behind the poster designs. The exhibition created connections between the street art and the newly established studio based practice of the youth, and importantly, it showcased their work to their families. The youth teams from Kakano were mentored by well-known professional street artists, and supported by Undergraduate students from Unitec. This enabled professional artists and designers, the students of art and design, and the Kakano Youth Arts Collective to collaborate in a shared experience. The project sought to achieve what Becker (1996) suggested when searching for new art practices, that there “will evolve a new form, one which will attempt to reach out to an audience greater than just the art world and will not see it as enough to mirror the fragmentation, banality, and destructiveness in this society and its physical environment without also offering some vision for developing a less alienated future.” (p.36).

3. The findings.

3.1 Culture and identity.

Did we discover through this project how a unique knowledge of the natural world, and the social principles inherent in an indigenous culture could contribute to the teaching and learning of art and design?

What we discovered through our embracing of Matauranga Maori in the project methodology, was the value of using its five concepts; “Whanaungatanga: (Building Relationships), Kotahitanga: (Ethic of Bonding), Manaakitanga: (Ethic of Care), Rangatiratanga: (Teacher Effectiveness), and Pumanawatanga: (General Morale, Pulse, Tone). (Maurice-Takerei & Anderson, 2016, p.142).

These principles were used with great success in all aspects of our dealings with the youth and the Unitec students. The work produced was of a very high standard, and a previously closed attitude to new materials changed to one of wanting to extend boundaries. The embracing of Maori mythology produced a rich selection of images and narratives to work with, with many of these stories showing
the trials of the hero’s journey, inspiring triumph over adversity. These stories gave the youth and students a greater belief in their own ability to succeed, and so contributed to success and retention.

3.2 Place and belonging.

Was locating teaching and learning experiences outside the traditional Western European style teaching spaces, and outside the traditional industrially focused internship systems transformative for the students?

The project through its choice of prominent public spaces, connected learning to public life, it demonstrated the teaching teams commitment to a public pedagogy, and that it “is a reaction against the way dominant educational practices and policies continue to reproduce inequalities and undemocratic and unsustainable conditions in society.” (Wildemeersch & Von Kotze, 2014, p.321).

We also found that this project had responded to the observations of Haywood & Ingleson (2011) that “artistic, pedagogical and research practices need to become increasingly mobile, creative, and responsive to diverse communities” (p.222).

It has as Haywood & Ingleson, (2011) also observed, “lead to new models for innovation and learning” (p.222). The project demonstrated creative methodologies and strategies for both design innovation and power art practices have for place-making. It used these processes to undertake project-based learning, in ways that exposed the students and youth to complexities that strictly studio based teaching and learning is unable to do.

The value of reflection that viewing and editing of documentary style video content on their creative process can bring to students, was obvious to all who undertook the project.

The use of unconventional teaching spaces facilitated innovation and spontaneity in combining media. The project model revealed what Walsh (2007) suggested, in that “youth possess often unappreciated repertories of practice which allow them to use their imagination and creativity to combine print, visual and digital modes in combinations” (p.79).
3.3 Nature/nurture.

By using the streets as a teaching space, did we engage the youth who would normally be excluded from higher education? Our data confirms that we achieved this. Of the eight youth who participated in the project from the beginning, only two dropped out. The reasons for their withdrawal were not related to the structure or activities of the project, but ones relating to ongoing substance abuse and the need for treatment. The six remaining youth made outstanding work, with three continuing to higher art and design education, and the other three intending to do so in 2017.

We believe this success was the result of our adopting the philosophy that “arts-based and multimedia activities empower young people to collectively question the nature of their historical and social situation, and that such an approach has the potential to consider sensitive issues such as insecurity, risk and marginalization.” (Fenge, Hodges & Cutts, 2011, p.8). The survey we took of the youth participants regarding their participation in the project showed their optimism for their future in higher education. We observed that; “as a result of their group membership, the participants have access to the collective capital and creativity of all of the members in the group, encouraging wider debate, cultural exchange and the production of new understandings which may facilitate social change.” (Garoian, 1999 as cited in Fenge, Hodges & Cutts 2011, p.8).

The project coordinators are quite convinced that the six youth currently participating in the project would never had been able to enter, or even consider entering into higher study without their participation in the project.
Is the street the place to start in attempting to solve problems facing our natural and social environment? Can this begin a process to engage multiple communities within society in the decision-making processes on social issues?

The popularity and support for the street art we received lead us to realise that “individuals who have traditionally been branded as having harmed the community can themselves become healing forces within their communities.” (White, Evans & Lamb, 2010). In the urban centre of Henderson, it is difficult to separate the natural and social environments, they are intimately linked together through rough sleeping and homelessness, the result of when “basic human needs go unmet, and groups suffer from inadequate access to resources and exclusion from institutional patterns of decision-making.” (Beyond Intractability, n.d., para. 2). This in turn makes it “increasingly important for academics, policy makers and practitioners to find new ways of engaging with marginalized young people, to listen to their concerns and to provide them with opportunities which support their connections to the communities in which they live.” (Fenge, Hodges & Cutts 2011, p. 9).
To use the streets as teaching spaces as way to engage at-risk and disadvantaged youth is a start in the long process of enfranchising a group within society who has much to offer. It can begin the process of turning those who society has branded as losers or outsiders into future leaders and mentors. It can connect the often closed loop of academic research to those groups who can benefit from it the most, and in turn academic research can be informed by sources outside established power structures and circles of knowledge transfer.

3.4 Conclusion.

The conclusions taken from the project are based on two outcomes; data collected on levels of graffiti and vandalism occurring within the target areas, public perception of the resulting street art, and the educational outcomes achieved by both the youth in our partnership program, and our existing students who were involved.

At the end of a 12 month period, data was collected on the levels of graffiti and vandalism occurring in Henderson Town Centre, and a reduction of 59% was measured by Council Officers. A street survey of 100 people passing by the areas containing completed artworks was conducted. This measured a 98% approval rating for both the artwork, and the teaching philosophy behind it.

An informed conclusion was made from this data, that when seen as part of an educational program, graffiti style artwork was viewed as a more highly valued public artwork, and the participating youth viewed as role models. The educational outcomes have also been successful. Of the six young people from the Kakano Youth Arts Collective involved in the project full time, two have now completed a Foundation Program and have successfully entered a Certificate in Design and Visual Arts. Two more are due to enter the Foundation Program in July 2017, with the remaining youths still completing their work portfolios. The students in these programs experience a range of different discipline specific projects, underpinned by drawing and model making.
The key to facilitating the students to connect their street art skills to a variety of art and design disciplines, are the structures and content of the programs and the pathways that connect them to Bachelor Degree level study. The Certificate builds on the Foundation Program’s focus on core literacy and proficiencies, and provides a range of basic skills and knowledge sets that can be applied to both 3D and 2D practices. This pathway leads to the Bachelor of Creative Enterprise, which is based on a central collaborative project, and allows students to select specialist electives, or practice pathways to build discipline specific knowledge bases.

The benefits in using the street as a teaching space to the Certificate and Bachelor programs, is the way in which the street art project enhanced the students ability to conduct collaborative practices. It was observed the student’s confidence to share their cultural experiences was heightened by participation in the street art project, and they showed a greater ability to locate and place their specialist skill set into a multi-disciplinary project. The importance engaging in ethnographic research and UX design principles was also better understood by students participating in the project.

The greatest beneficiaries of the project were the youth from our partnership outreach program, it provided relevance to higher education, as Stanton notes; “Prolific taggers did not see a connection between the tagging designs they worked on and using the same skills and approaches in a commercial setting. They viewed art as something abstract and forced onto them at school and seemed unaware of its large-scale commercial applications (for example in graphic design and shoe design). They therefore did not see an appealing non-illegal channel for their artistic capabilities. There were hints that taggers did not associate the design ability they apply to graffiti vandalism with work prospects because of a lack of confidence, aspiration and/or experience, such as the view that “nothing good ever happens to me, so I won’t imagine anything better.” (Stanton, 2009, p.4).

In the longer term, the findings from the project will contribute to not only the pedagogy of our art and design teaching, but to a widening of the student profile. This new pathway from often inter-generational social and economic deprivation, to art and design education, must by its very nature, lead to a new graduate profile. This will again in turn, influence all the disciplines across art and design practices that our students enter into after graduation.

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