

Turning Schools Inside Out: Connecting Schools and Communities Through Public Arts and Literacies

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Abstract

In this paper we tell a story about how we partnered with a Chicago high school in order to turn the school inside out by displaying larger-than-life teacher portraits and statements at street level throughout the community. This paper explores how public art and activism can help teachers and students develop notions of civic literacy and engagement in order to change prevailing ideas about the role that teachers and schools play in our communities. Can teachers learn to relate effectively in communities outside of schools? Is this a desirable or even useful goal for educators? This paper examines notions of partnership, community, civic literacy and engagement, and the role that teachers and students might play in shaping their communities.

Key words: teacher education, inside out, community engagement, civic engagement, civic literacy, community outreach

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Engaged pedagogy not only compels me to be constantly creative in the classroom, it also sanctions involvement with the students beyond that setting. I journey with students as they progress in their lives beyond our classroom experience. ~bell hooks, from *Teaching to Transgress*, p. 205



Making “Good” Teachers: Preservice Teachers Explore Community Engagement

Brian Charest

While teaching a methods course on writing—a course for aspiring English teachers at a large, urban research university—students were asked to explore the question of what made a good teacher. Without fail, this exercise would generate an interesting conversation among students about a number of things: students discussed both teachers and teaching; the role of schools and teachers in our communities; and the purposes of education in our society. For many students in the class, exploring this central question (i.e., What makes a good teacher?) would reveal many of their own beliefs and assumptions about the work and role of teachers in schools and communities—ideas and assumptions that were deeply engrained, in large part, by the students’ own school experiences.

Students were then asked to pose critical questions about how they came to understand teaching in particular ways. Why and how did they come to associate the role of the teacher with what were often very narrow, discipline-specific ways? The class conversation would soon turn to a discussion about all of the things that teachers do in schools as well as how the students thought that teachers should go about doing them. For many students education was fairly

¹ All photos and teacher statements are used with the subjects’ permission; all names are real, unless otherwise indicated. Actual names and statements are included because this project aims to publically address the Chicago community about the important role that teachers play in our schools and communities.

straightforward: teachers had knowledge and skills that students wanted; the teacher's job was to teach these things to their students.

Together, we would explore this idea and discuss its implications. In doing so, students would try to identify where the role of the teacher begins and ends. This inquiry meant examining the teacher's responsibility to students and their families, and the role, if any, that teachers might play in communities. It also meant asking tough questions about what the class thought education was about and whether or not teachers had any responsibilities—beyond translating a thorough understanding of their content area knowledge—to students or the larger community beyond the school parking lot.

Contextual matters: Contesting narratives about teachers. This class discussion about the role that teachers play (or don't play) in our communities took place at a time (2012) when the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) was gearing up for a potential strike in response to a series of actions that Mayor Rahm Emanuel had initiated against Chicago teachers and their union (CTU, 2012). The strike was closely watched in Chicago and elsewhere, becoming something of a bellwether for the state of organized labor around the country. Not surprisingly, the preservice teachers in my course wanted to know what the strike was all about.

Stories about teachers seemed to be everywhere in the news media, though the narratives we heard were largely negative. Reports in the mainstream media highlighted Chicago's many "failing" schools—a thinly veiled indictment of teachers and public schooling more broadly—and questioned why the district had one of the shortest school days in the US. These accounts serve to build support for privatizing public education (Ravitch, 2013). Other stories in the news reported on high teacher salaries and a pension crisis in Chicago. Students wanted to know why, given the way teachers in Chicago were being portrayed, they would want to strike? To examine some possible answers to these questions, we began to look beyond narratives about teachers in the mainstream media to what teachers and other public school advocates were saying in response to government officials and other interest groups who wanted to challenge the teachers' union by publically portraying teachers in negative ways.

We looked at official union communications as well as teacher blogs and reports from magazines and newspapers around the world that were covering the strike (Blount, CTU, Liebelson, Matthews, & Root, 2012). From this initial inquiry came other questions about the way that teachers were being talked about in the media, the way many people understood the role of teachers in schools, and the value of the work that teachers performed in schools and communities. These questions sparked conversations that led the class to explore possible ways in which our group might ignite a more positive discussion about the role of teachers in Chicago communities. Students wanted to change the conversation about teachers; they wanted to get teachers and community members talking about the different ways to support and honor the important work of teachers in Chicago. In doing so, students hoped to interrupt the prevailing narrative that said that teachers were lazy, incompetent, and greedy (Blount & Root, 2012).

Through our research and classroom conversations we started to see, as DeStigter (1998) argues, that "for an educator to play a part in promoting democracy . . . it is crucial that she or he regard the contexts of school and society as overlapping, interactive, and mutually influential" (p. 12).

When we began to see that classrooms and schools were not separate from, but rather, intricately linked to our communities, the discussion in class shifted, moving us, for a short time, away from our immediate concerns with the teacher strike; we began a different, but related, conversation about the relationship between *how* and *why* we teach writing (or any other subject) in schools. Was it possible to link these two things in ways that would encourage students to see writing as a technology that could help them reshape their communities? Would it be possible to make the *why* more immediate and visible to students and teachers by connecting to real issues and concerns in communities? What would it mean for schools to take writing out of the classroom and into the community?

After a series of brainstorming sessions about how to make the link between schools and communities more apparent, while also attempting to change the conversation about teachers in Chicago, students in the course decided on a global arts project that seemed, in many ways, to be an ideal way to use public art and writing to link teachers to their communities. Our hope was to get people talking about the positive role that teachers play in our schools and beyond. We wanted to bring a message about education to the community by making teachers—and their views on teaching and learning—visible to local community members. In this way, we hoped to spark a conversation in the school and the community about how these spaces overlap and how they might work together in more intentional ways.

Imaging possible worlds: Connecting communities through public art. We found a project called *Inside Out*, started in Paris by a street artist named J.R., that has become a global phenomenon. J.R.'s work on *Inside Out* has been featured at the Technology Entertainment and Design Conference (TED) and in the *New Yorker* magazine (Khatchadourian, 2012). Various iterations of the project can be seen in communities across the globe, from Israel and Palestine to Africa and the U.S. Initially, the idea for the project came to J.R. when he began to think of ways to rehabilitate the image of the people living in the *banlieue*, the low-income communities that fringed the outer border of Paris, after the destructive riots that took place there in 2006.

J.R.'s idea was to take photo portraits of individuals (often mugging for the camera) living in the community and then print and post the photos in a large-scale format around the city. The main idea of the project was to figuratively turn communities inside out by bringing the images of individuals and communities to a larger public audience. Confronted by the oversized images of people living in what we might consider ghetto-housing complexes, people around Paris might pause to consider the larger social problems as well as the human costs of the policies that excluded large segments of the population. At its core, the project was meant to raise questions and get people thinking about race and class.

In other words, the goal was not necessarily to solve these problems or to even suggest solutions, but rather to begin critical conversations by provoking questions among passersby. In this case, some of these questions might include why and how decisions are made that often result in the marginalization of large numbers of people, most often poor people of color. The point of the project, then, would be to reverse the process of ghettoization by making the human dimensions of poverty and inequality unavoidable, since the project made it so that no one could avoid seeing these massive portraits pasted around the city.

Students in my course were likewise invited to think about ways in which they might change the image of public school teachers and ignite a conversation about what teachers and schools can do in and for our communities. Because the course required students to develop and participate in a series of writing projects—it was, after all, a course on the teaching of writing—we wanted to augment the Inside Out project with statements from teachers and some additional writing about the intersection of teachers, schools, and communities.

I offered students the opportunity to pursue the idea of turning a school inside out as one of their course projects. About six students signed on to participate in what later became known as Chicago Teachers: Inside Out (CTIO). The project, in our view, came to represent a step toward an ecological view of schooling, one where teachers and students see school and community building as reciprocal projects, rather than separate ones. In other words, an ecological approach to schooling sees school reform as an organic process that engages a series of overlapping and mutually influential spaces, from the homes of students and their families, to teachers, schools, businesses, and community-based organizations (CBOs). All of these individuals and institutions play a role in the building of healthy and sustainable communities. Our hope was to get people thinking about these intersecting spaces and the nature of our relationships across them.



Teachers in the Community: Voices and Images on the Street

Marialuisa Gonzalez and Brian Charest

The Teaching of Writing methods course in 2012 contributed to the genesis of my (Marialuisa's) profound, ongoing teacher inquiry. This class really sparked an evaluative discussion about teachers' responsibilities and roles outside academia, outside the content area. I contributed to that same conversation that would ultimately lead to this project. As a college student, my mentality leaned more toward my biased school experience: the teachers I had and their different methods of teaching, the specific ways that I learned, and how all of that and so much more helped me choose the path of becoming a teacher. Therefore, my position during this project was different. My contributions and perceptions were from a student's perspective of honoring teachers, yet I quickly became immersed in the teacher community with hands-on experience beyond education theories.

Our first collaboration with Bowen High School, located on the far South Side of Chicago, took more hard work than we had initially predicted. Before we could meet with Principal Jennifer Kirmes at Bowen, our team (comprised of Brian, our methods instructor, and several fellow classmates) needed to refine the project's concept in order to be prepared for some hesitation on the administration's side. After several meetings and ongoing emails, I then created a flier to present during our initial meeting with Principal Kirmes. The flier would later be distributed to all teachers to help publicize and explain the project. Brian, a fellow group member, and I all contributed to the successful pitch to Principal Kirmes, and our project was approved. Our next step was to encourage the teachers themselves to participate and be active. Many meetings later, we finally found ourselves in Bowen's school library in front of about 40 teachers willing to participate in this project.

One of the most interesting steps in this project was collecting teacher statements. Teachers with whom we worked were invited to write a belief statement about teaching and learning that would accompany their portrait and be displayed at street level for community members to see. We invited teachers to write honestly about the value of teachers and the responsibility of teaching. What role did teachers play in the lives of students? Why was this role important, and what did it mean for the larger community?

We asked the teachers to write personal statements about teaching and learning and we explained that these statements would be displayed at street level in the community along with their portraits. The statements ranged from heartfelt to pragmatic to philosophical. Here are just a few:



I believe that our students are a reflection of ourselves. Good or bad, they give us little hints of what we do (or don't do). They serve as walking reflections of what we still need to do. ~Patricia



As a teacher, I believe that my students should be motivated and inspired to explore and make the world at large their classroom: learning without boundaries or borders. ~Mojisol



How does anyone become who and what they are without teachers? ~Pat



There is no consensus on the purpose of education, and so the purpose it ends up serving is mysterious, because it is, in fact, confusing, and thus a matter of faith, and so this means that we need to put faith in one another, as students and teachers. ~Albert

These teaching statements were displayed in the community where residents could see and consider them along with the black-and-white portraits. Our hope was that this project would help teachers, students, and community members “glimpse possible worlds and then, perhaps, to imagine possibilities in their own neighborhoods, possibilities that might be made real through individual, or, more likely, collective action” (Robinson, 1998, p. 10). We wanted to change the conversation not only *about* teachers, but also, *among* teachers. Our project asked the question, What could teachers and students do, if given the choice to do things differently?

According to Robbins (2005), doing our work as teachers differently means that teachers come to “believe that viewing school literacy as ‘public’ can also mean tapping into its potential for culture-making” (p. 8). Robbins sees public literacy as a way for students and teachers “to make meaningful contributions to the places where they live” (p. 8). We believe that public arts projects are one of the ways teachers might give to their communities with students and colleagues.

While many current models of education tend to emphasize individual achievement and success (both student and teacher), these same models often ignore the power and importance of things like relationship-building and collaboration among teachers, parents, students, administrators, community members, CBOs, and schools. When teachers and students acknowledge and seek out the connections between their schools and communities, they might begin to see these spaces

as sites of legitimate inquiry. As Robbins believes, doing so “encourages students to see themselves as active composers of their communities’ identities” (p. 10).

Backbone of the Joining: Perception that Guided Action

Veronica Parker

In a seemingly normal day at our university, 35 other pre-service teachers and I entered a guided discussion of what it means to be a teacher. This occasion was neither the first nor the last time this conversation erupted. Fueled, however, by the recent teacher’s union strike, the bubbling ideas from books and articles we read, and our first foray into classroom observation, the tone took on a more urgent quality. Many of us tried to fight the ideas of teacher as dictator of the class by referring back to the readings from the previous semester, but often we fell into describing teachers as these mythical beings who live and breathe for the classroom, teach in rote ways, and cease existing outside of said classroom.

However, we often would challenge these ideas of oppression by referencing Kumashiro (2004), a class favorite from the previous semester. In order to remind ourselves of what we wanted to change, we would bring up Kumashiro’s idea that “many people in society do not acknowledge that everyday practices in schools often comply with or contribute to racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression” (p. 1). Our discussion grew more practical, and we discussed ways to banish such oppression. None of us wanted to make our classes oppressive. We wanted to be teachers who were part of the class—not divorced from its community.

We couldn’t agree on a way to make teachers seem less divorced from the class, however. As the conversation lulled, Brian offered the class the opportunity to join CTIO. He enticed our class with his experiences with a prior class and some discussion of how this project could help reframe the place of a teacher in a community.

Fueled by the recent discussion and the less-than-ideal experience at my previous semester’s observation placement, I joined the project. At the time I thought and hoped the project would turn into a form of activism that, as Kumashiro said, would “involve challenging . . . institutional practices that perpetuate an oppressive norm” (p. 53). In other words, we hoped to challenge that idea of a teacher as an outside oppressive force. My perception of the project was that through these images and statements of teachers’ perceptions of their role in the classroom, the community as a whole would be able to think of how they perceive a teacher in a classroom, thus opening a discussion that could mend those fences of oppression that slip in without notice.

Practicality in implementation: Wrenches in the machine. When we met after class to talk about the project, we discussed many challenges: taking photos, getting statements, fundraising, publicizing, and scouting sites. We all staked our claim on different parts and agreed to meet at Bowen High School at 8AM on a Wednesday morning in order to meet with the staff and discuss the next steps. On that day, we worked as a team to persuade teachers to allow us to take their pictures, write their statements, and volunteer to help out either with fundraising, location scouting, or publicity.

I spoke to the groups particularly about fundraising. I shared some of my initial ideas to use Kickstarter.com, sell tokens, have a raffle, sell off prizes having to do with teacher's skillsets, and go door-to-door asking for donations. We then opened it up for discussion, and this list grew. To close each meeting, we passed around sign-up lists for more information and to start an online conversation about our project.

By the end of the day, we emailed the teachers on our lists with a letter of welcome and an invitation to continue the conversation. While we waited to hear back from the teachers at Bowen, we set our sights on working on our own sections of the project. Although I listed multiple options in the email, my main funnel for fundraising was to use Kickstarter.com.

It took longer than expected to be approved by Kickstarter, due to their vetting process and our need to open up a bank account, but the page "went live" in mid-November, with a fundraising deadline of November 30. Taking into account the needs of the project and prior fundraising done before my initiation into the project, we set our goal at \$800 and prayed that the spark seen at the meeting at Bowen would lead to monetary support. At times, I wonder if we went too fast and tried for monetary support too soon, sharing Horton's (1990) concern that "You try to stretch people's minds and their understanding but if you move too fast then you break the connection"(p. 161). Something must have broken in our connection with the teachers at Bowen, for many people who signed up to help never responded to our inquiry.

Nevertheless, we emailed everyone we knew, posted fliers around campuses and schools, and talked with pre-service teachers at our university just to plead our case for funding and support. At times it seemed as though we would not make our deadline, but with just two hours left, we reached our goal and breathed sighs of relief.

A few setbacks occurred during this stage as well. The first came from our financial donors, some of whom donated with expired cards, and some of whom did not respond to inquiries for information to deliver on the incentives promised at donation. Additionally, Kickstarter chose to take the highest percentage possible from our funding and left us with a bit less money than expected. Nonetheless, with fundraising at its end, we set off to find a location for the project that would be visible enough to the community as to draw attention and clear enough to start that conversation we all desired.

Armed with our cameras and measuring tools, we found many locations that would suit our needs, including a few abandoned buildings with plenty of wall space and some businesses willing to donate a window to the cause. The Executive Director of South Chicago Chamber of Commerce told us he would track down the owners of the abandoned looking buildings to find out if posting would be an option, and I swear Brian winced at the idea of not being able to follow his "don't ask for permission, ask for forgiveness" attitude. Either way, things appeared, for a change, to be running smoothly. We had our photographs, a location, and a date for posting: February 23, 2012.



Implementing the vision: The freezing reality. We imagined hanging the photos to be a community event. We pictured families of teachers and students coming to help us hang the photographs while eating food and talking about the community. As February 23rd neared, however, a few things began to work against us. The first was that the owners of those desired buildings were unresponsive to The Executive Director's inquiries, and thus we had to go to plan B: hang more photographs inside businesses and create a mural in the alley by The Executive Director's office. Although initially dismayed by the change in locations, we soon fell in love with our new plan of creating a mural on the side of The Executive Director's office where passersby would have to try hard not to see what we created. The second setback came in the form of weather.



The morning of February 23rd greeted us with snow-covered ground and a below-freezing temperature that quickly turned toes numb and noses red. Nevertheless, we arrived at the executive director's office at 10:30 AM with all of our materials, and planned to eat donuts and

hang posters with our new community. As the time ticked by that morning, we were slightly dismayed by the turnout.

Due to an unplanned fire alarm at Bowen High School the day before the project, teachers were not given a final reminder of the event, so turnout was much lower than expected. In addition, many friends and family members who showed interest in helping could not make the drive that far south due to the ice, snow, and cold. That is not to say that no one showed up. We had multiple families, friends, professors, and a few community members pitch in to roll the larger-than-life pictures onto the wall or mix up some paste for us to get the faces to stick. In addition, a few families walked down the streets to hang photographs in shop owners' windows, and by 3 PM we had 35 of the 40 photographs up, as well as statements posted in a frame outside The Executive Director's office. We even had a few conversations with community members who walked by. Excitement was palpable.

Creating a Community: Engaging with the Broader Population

Lauren DeJulio Bell

As the systems and perceptions of education in this country are continually reshaped, the experiences we engage in regarding notions of voice and action—within and outside of a school community—present daily opportunities to reflect upon how we can make a difference. Working from both local and global perspectives, we are able to effect change and reframe the conversations about what it means to educate, to have a voice, and to act purposefully in the world in a critical manner. As an educator in Chicago for quite some time (first, in a high school setting, and now, at the university level), I value these ideas greatly. This kind of participatory work guides CTIO in its vision and implementation.

Any opportunity to engage in meaningful discourse about our educational responsibilities and our impact and relationships with the world around us inspire me, so when I learned of *Chicago Teachers: Inside Out*, I immediately jumped at the opportunity to help. I was struck by the meaning and potential of this project to change minds and change lives, and became very excited about the possibilities that such a project introduced to both school and community. As we wandered the streets of Chicago on a snowy morning in 2012, hanging portraits and written statements during the first installation, I felt a great sense of connection, not only to the educators and volunteers associated with this project but to the community as a whole.

As Lipman (2011) asserts, "Education is integrally linked to the struggle for the right to the city. Building alliances across issues helps forge solidarities across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, class and other boundaries and clarifies the interconnectedness of urban issues" (p. 164). Given this imperative, our responsibility to students, families and communities reaches beyond the spectrum of our classroom walls. Our commitments through CTIO to honor the work of educators in our city—and to extend beyond the boundaries of Chicago—allow us to further examine such issues in a nuanced way. We are able to recognize the necessity for critical conversations, the need for our community to pay attention to its people, the importance of connecting organically to effect positive change, and the opportunity to encourage others to think

more significantly about the world that surrounds us. In doing so, we “forge solidarities” in a myriad of ways.

As we displayed the first installation of the project, such connections were immediately evident. Walking and working with and amongst educators, students, and people in the neighborhood allowed for an amazing sense of community. Interest in what we were up to evolved as passersby asked questions. Important conversations took place as we worked. People started to notice.

Sharing a vision: Engaging educators, students and neighborhood residents in the community. When we began to consider our next steps in the project, our focus continued to be tied to a vision of voice, action, and community. Our current work with Amundsen High School, located in a diverse neighborhood school on the north side of Chicago, further illuminates this vision. Resting on a significant intersection in the city, Amundsen joins various multicultural neighborhoods while concurrently running adjacent to a large city park. Amundsen draws students and teachers from throughout the city; it houses more than 1500 students, with over 90% coming from non-white backgrounds. Amundsen’s varied population allows for the perfect opportunity to expand the CTIO project; it provides an ideal space for voice, thought, and action to come together as we search for a means to move from, as Lipman (2011) suggests, “defending public education to organizing to transform it” (p. 165).

The administration at Amundsen, new to the school as of 2012, is committed to providing staff and students a rich, nurturing environment where students are able to learn and grow in numerous ways. Long considered a “tough” school, Amundsen’s administration is interested in changing the public perception of the school, since they want the community to gain a greater understanding of each member of the school’s value on and commitment to success. Not only are they interested in re-imagining the school internally, they hope to transform the prevailing notions of the school within the surrounding community.

Forging a path: Connecting with humanity and the world around us. In addition to involving staff members, Amundsen’s administration plans to engage students in the project, so we’ve expanded the program to include student voices. We have sent a synopsis of the project to the school, so teachers and students can begin to shape what this might look like in their specific setting. We have asked them to consider how they are connected to the greater school community. Their work on the writing portion of the project involved time to contemplate how what we do and say shapes the world around us, as well as how the world around us shapes who we are and what we do.

We will be meeting with staff and students in the next few months to take their portraits and print their statements, and we are reaching out to community organizations (including the Alderman’s office, the Chamber of Commerce, and various local businesses and organizations in and around the school) to begin to scout out locations for the installation. Because Amundsen is situated next to a city park, Winnemac Park, our plan is to install some of the portraits/writing on the grounds to bring consciousness to the connection between school and community, art and action, and the environment and its people.

Our goal is to have the project completed and ready for installation by mid-spring; our hope is to display these pieces throughout the spring and summer, to have a larger impact on all who see them. In doing so, we offer an opportunity for people within the community, as well as passersby, to realize the value and importance of education, community, and the connection to humanity that brings our world together in meaningful ways.

We can then continue to engage in conversations about art, space, work, education, and purpose; to work toward the principles that, as Lipman (2011) suggests, are crucial for all children to have “an intellectually and socially rich, culturally relevant, hopeful, and joyful education that develops their full potential through academic subjects, arts . . . and connections with their community and environment” (p. 165). CTIO provides ample opportunities to do just that, offering multiple ways for all members of society to participate in and share their voices with the world—in and outside the classroom.

Reflection and growth: Educating from the inside out. With CTIO, we (Brian, Veronica, Marialuisa, and Lauren) believe we have begun the process of helping others to see some of the ways in which schools and communities intersect and reflect one another. We hope that projects like CTIO will encourage other teachers in other communities to see that creating successful students and schools means more than teaching our subjects. It means working for healthy and sustainable communities for all. While the project was far from perfect, we believe it made a lasting impression on many of those who participated and on the community where it was installed. We believe that despite the many challenges, it was worth the effort and the risk to see this project through to completion.

As Payne (2008) argues, “Most discussion of education policy and practice is dangerously disconnected from the daily realities of urban schools . . . most discussion fails to appreciate the intertwined and over determined nature of the causes of failure” (p. 5). Payne goes on to point out that though we may find problems in our schools—many of them, in fact—we cannot continue to make the mistake of reducing these problems to just the people in the schools. His point is that rather than looking for quick fixes to improve teachers or the next new program to raise test scores, we need to look more broadly at the ways in which students, teachers, parents, administrators, and community members can build relational trust and work together to solve pressing community issues. According to Payne, relational trust needs to be present in ways that encourage all of these groups to genuinely care about each other and work toward making the local community just and sustainable.

In other words, we need to turn our schools inside out. We need to leave our classrooms and enter the larger community. We need to invite the community into our schools, and we need to bring our schools into the community. We can do so by providing teachers with the time and supports necessary to spend time in the communities where they work getting to know the people with whom they will need to work in order to build healthy and sustainable schools and communities together. CTIO is one step in this ongoing process to shift the way we perceive our schools and to reshape the way we approach community engagement.

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