

Figure 1. *Untitled*, Tion Bukue, spray paint, 2016. Florida. Photograph by Tion Bukue.



From the Streets to the Students: TION BUKUE and Empowerment Through Graffiti

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GRAFFITI-INSPIRED CURRICULUM has always been the most profound and transformative work in my classroom. Art educators can be reluctant to study graffiti with their students, commonly citing that the practice of graffiti art is rooted in illegal vandalism. While this is true for a large amount of graffiti, today, graffiti art is also often completely legal in the form of murals, commissioned pieces, works in galleries, billboards, logo designs, and much more. Differentiating between legal and illegal graffiti actions is a mandatory emphasis throughout a graffiti-inspired unit. The benefits of engaging in graffiti study with students far outweigh any perceived social stigmas. This instructional resource expands on the work of Tion Bukue, a professional graffiti artist with over 25 years of international experience, to illustrate how a graffiti-inspired curriculum can empower students.

Graffiti is a popular art form that intrigues students of all backgrounds. The historical lineage of graffiti expression can be traced back to prehistoric cave paintings. A prolific surge in the art form exploded near the end of the 20th century. Graffiti now encompasses the form of drippy markers on benches, ornate stickers on street signs, and masterful murals on walls. In discussing student engagement and graffiti, Kan (2001) asserts, “graffiti is the most familiar form of their ‘visual culture’ of everyday living and a must in their art curriculum” (2001, p. 21).

Graffiti art is accessible almost everywhere. Billboards, neighborhood storefronts, street signs, clothing, bathrooms, vans, and video games are some of the countless venues for the art form. Documenting local graffiti pieces to analyze with students becomes a powerful teaching tool. The imagination and creativity found in graffiti art is astonishing. The twisting and morphing of shapes, electrifying explosions of color combinations, and elaborate layering of paint demonstrate advanced skill and knowledge. For many students, graffiti arts are associated with their conception of culture or environment. Brown, Benedett, and Armistead (2010) write, “visual art assignments can allow for the opportunity of students to engage and incorporate their own cultural knowledge, traditions, languages and experiences that are devalued by mainstream education into their academic work” (p. 114). Graffiti art is the artistic language of the youth and provides students an outlet to communicate what matters most to them—whether personal, social, or political. Graffiti provides a platform to communicate positions on controversial political issues, identify social problems, and express personal struggles. No other visual art form provides youth such abundant access to communicate their views on personal, social, and political issues.



Figure 2. *Untitled*, Tion Bukue, spray paint, 2017. Venice Beach, CA. Photograph by Tion Bukue.

Classroom materials like paper, colored pencils, and markers are sufficient for creating art in graffiti-inspired ways. Daichendt (2013) describes graffiti as a text-based art form that led to the concept of street art (p. 7). Bukue agrees with Daichendt that the primary focus of graffiti art is words and letters, but imagery can also be incorporated to augment the composition (T. Bukue, personal communication, July 10, 2017). Graffiti—now seen in commercials, movies, magazines, documentaries, and as enhancement to products, is a part of popular and visual culture. Eldridge (2013) quotes Tavin (2013) to express that a graffiti-inspired unit “aligns with values proclaimed by visual culture education: Make connections to students’ lived experiences, and ask them to think about popular culture through multiple perspectives and meaningful production” (p. 27). The study of graffiti in schools flourishes more from imagination, creativity, and critical thinking than from any particular materials.



Figure 3. *Untitled*, Tion Bukue, spray paint, 2016. San Francisco, CA. Photograph by Matt Christenson.



Figure 4. *Untitled*, Tion Bukue, spray paint, 2017. Denver, CO. Photograph by Tion Bukue.

Besides legality concerns, some believe that studying graffiti art in school will encourage students to engage in harmful, life-threatening activities. For example, Hampton (2013) contends that “it is critical, literally a matter of life and death, that art educators consider how graffiti might intervene in adolescent identity development and spark a risk-taking tendency” (p. 53). These types of fears can be dispelled by responsible discussion and focusing on the artistic practice of designing letters. Bukue provides workshops in graffiti art to youth in the San Francisco Bay Area. One of his workshop goals is to help people deconstruct myths and understand what graffiti is and what it is not. Bukue emphasizes that the essence of graffiti is the study of letters (T. Bukue, personal communication, July 10, 2017). The essence of a graffiti-inspired curriculum uses letter design to communicate and develop academic and artistic skills. Students analyze graffiti murals to expand knowledge of letters, words, language, meaning, identity, color theory, symbolism, society, and self.

This instructional resource includes:

- A biography of San Francisco Bay Area artist Bukue
- The graffiti art of Bukue
- An interview with Bukue
- Academic implications
- Discussion questions that are aligned with the National Visual Arts Standards
- Web-based resources for further graffiti exploration

Figure 5. *Untitled*, Tion Bukue and Illuminaries Crew, spray paint, 2017. Oakland, CA. Photograph by Matt Christenson.



Tion Bukue

Bukue is a professional hip-hop artist who has toured the world for over a decade as a talented rapper (with several published albums), DJ, brand manager, skateboarder, and graffiti artist. Bukue currently creates pieces and leads graffiti workshops throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. When creating graffiti pieces, he writes the name “Bukue,” which is his version of the French Creole word “beaucoup” meaning “a lot” or “many.” His graffiti pieces can be found all over the United States and in numerous other countries, including Australia, Germany, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Born and raised in Berkeley, California, Bukue was brought up with ties to the Black Panther and hippie movements. In response to the purpose of his work, Bukue explains, “I want my work to spread optimism, love, and inner-child support, and to create art that is positive and inspires people. I want people to smile and have a good time.” Bukue believes that graffiti-inspired curriculum should be implemented in schools because it is an art of the time and of the youth (T. Bukue, personal communication, July 10, 2017).

The Graffiti Art of Bukue

The pieces that Bukue creates are visually captivating. They are characterized by a dynamic contrast in color and areas of visual emphasis. Bukue has a range of lettering styles. Some of his work exaggerates and distorts letters, pushing the boundaries of what constitutes the letter itself. Some of his pieces are sharp and condensed for clear and precise legibility. Each design has an energetic flow that creates a sense that the letters are dancing on the surface they are on. The illusion of form is skillfully executed through complex overlapping and proficient one-point perspective. Bukue is drawn to colors high in contrast, and often incorporates various complementary color schemes. Several of his pieces utilize

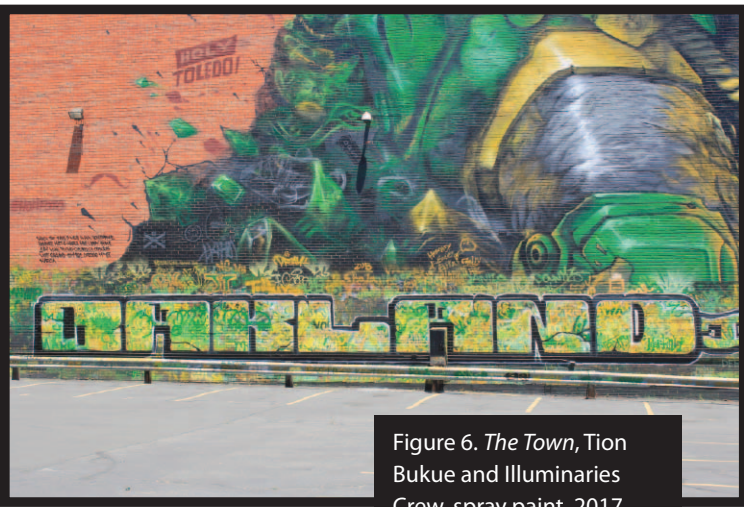


Figure 6. *The Town*, Tion Bukue and Illuminaries Crew, spray paint, 2017. Oakland, CA. Photograph by Matt Christenson.

a deep, neutral background to help propel a striking combination of warm and cool colors in the word design. There are patterns, designs, and electrifying effects within the letters that Bukue paints (Figure 4). Transitions and gradations between colors are smoothly blended. Spirals, swirls, and spots embellish his letters. The vibrancy and playfulness of each piece leaves the viewer feeling uplifted and optimistic.

Bukue also paints with other artists and community members in collaborative projects. "Oakland is Proud" (2017) (Figure 5) was created in collaboration with artists from the Illuminaries crew from Oakland, CA. Bukue invited community members to "tag" the bottom of the mural in their own styles. Once the entire bottom border was established through the work of local hands, Bukue designed the lettering "Oakland is Proud" on top.

The finished piece incorporated numerous local participants into the mural, cultivating an authentic process of collaboration. It is through work such as this that graffiti art can empower not only individual artists, but larger communities.

An Interview With Bukue

My own artistic practice is in painting traditional murals with brushes, not spray cans. I interviewed Bukue to gain insight from an experienced hip-hop artist around issues of graffiti in education. Our discussion addressed controversies surrounding graffiti, why graffiti-inspired curriculum belongs in schools, and how graffiti art is empowering. The following highlights some of our conversation around those topics.

M: Do you differentiate between graffiti art and vandalism in your workshops? How do you address issues of legality that come up with students and parents?

B: You have to address it. Graffiti itself is neither legal nor illegal. If you do not have permission, then it can be illegal. If you obtain permission and potentially get paid for your work, then it is legal. It depends on what the context is. When one says "graffiti," it is a neutral term until the context is applied.

M: Hampton (2013) interviewed FUNK, a Montreal-based crew of graffiti writers, and reported that "FUNK crew members do not believe that art teachers should teach children about graffiti, especially younger than 16" (p. 54). How do you respond to that sentiment? What do you have to add?

B: We are selling our teenagers short if we decide that they can't figure out what is a safe activity and what is not. We know how to get permission. We have moral compasses. In ancient times, a 16-year-old was a warrior who could hunt food and identify



Figure 7. *Untitled*, Tion Bukue, spray paint, 2017. Hayward, CA. Photograph by Matt Christenson.

Figure 8. *Untitled*, Tion Bukue, spray paint, 2016. San Francisco, CA. Photograph by Tion Bukue.



the right berries to eat. We are not doing our youth any service by trying to coddle them. I teach elementary school kids how to design letters. That is not illegal. Kids can start drawing letters on shoes or video games. It does not mean that they will then climb rooftops to go bombing.¹ Graffiti is a youth-based art. It speaks to the youth. You have to use the medium that matters to them. If we ban their art form, we then alienate them and create a wedge between student and educator. We need to speak their language with them and help guide them in it. Graffiti-inspired curriculum should be implemented in public education.

M: In what ways do you see graffiti art as academic? What kinds of educational value does graffiti art have in a school setting?

B: The use of the alphabet and word play is academic. We use the alphabet poetically, in the form of rhyme, writing, and poetry. We use the alphabet verbally through public speaking and vocabulary enhancement. We express with the alphabet visually through graffiti, calligraphy, and font design. Everything we teach and learn requires the use of words. Whether we are enhancing vocabulary through story writing, presenting historical information, or painting words and images, we are involved in our deepest abilities to communicate. In our youth, we do not always have a developed vocabulary as an outlet to express what is going on inside of us. Youth do not always have the means to speak what's on their minds and then that can come out in forms of rage and violence. Youth can use graffiti letters and words to communicate instead of turning to harmful expression, such as drugs or violence. Drawing graffiti is another way to engage your brain and a pathway to entertain the creative parts of the mind. Developing the power of words leads to true freedom.

M: How else is graffiti art empowering for students?

B: The platform of graffiti is a bridge between cultures and upbringings. Graffiti is a study of font. Fonts have different sizes, shapes, colors, and energy that are transmitted through them. Letter design is the foundation of many artistic directions. Graffiti speaks to the ninja, video game, comic book artist in all of us. Most of us do not go to galleries. Graffiti is a part of hip-hop culture, which changed the entire world. It is what comes from the streets. It's real, it's uncut, and it's what speaks

to the youth. Studying graffiti in schools validates what students experience on the streets. As they get older, advancement in graffiti skills can help expand career paths. Students can get into numerous art-related avenues, like design and marketing.

Academic Implications

The foundation of a graffiti-inspired curriculum is the study of letters and words. The implementation of graffiti can also include studies in imagery, identity, symbolism, metaphor, irony, juxtaposition, interdisciplinary content, and artistic conventions. Words and images in graffiti compositions lend themselves to critical deconstruction and making interdisciplinary connections. Marshall (2007) believes that art education should study how art images convey and construct meaning through metaphor while linking subjects like science and literature to art (p. 38). Serig (2006) also comments on the importance of being able to make visual metaphors, as it allows students to think like artists (p. 232). Rahn (2002) explains that using the alphabet can provide a formal structure for students while imposing a discipline that can be developed through individual style with differentiation and increasing complexity (p. 204). Other than expressing aspects of personal identity, the potential for communicating social and political messages through graffiti is extensive. The words and images designed by students can be in response to current events, academic themes, and essential questions. Graffiti can be used to enhance artistic skill and content while also demonstrating knowledge and beliefs. The directions that art educators can take students in graffiti-inspired work are endless.

Creating, Presenting, Responding, and Connecting With Graffiti Through the National Core Arts Standards

CREATING: Conceiving and Developing New Artistic Ideas and Work

► Curricular Questions

- What kinds of artistic conventions do graffiti artists use?
- What word(s) would be appealing to design in graffiti study and why?
- What materials best communicate graffiti concepts in a classroom setting?

Figure 9. *Untitled*, Tion Bukue, spray paint, 2016. Oakland, CA. Photograph by Tion Bukue.



- How can the use of imagery enhance graffiti-inspired compositions?

PRESENTING: Interpreting and Sharing Artistic Work

► Curricular Questions

- How do graffiti artists share work with and influence one another?
- What does the role of social media play in graffiti art?
- Who determines what makes a graffiti art piece successful or not?
- How do you determine whether a graffiti piece was done legally or illegally?

RESPONDING: Understanding and Evaluating How the Arts Convey Meaning

► Curricular Questions

- What words communicate aspects of our identities?

- How can symbolism and metaphor strengthen a graffiti-inspired composition?
- How does the location of a graffiti composition impact an audience?
- How can combining word, image, and artistic conventions convey meaning?

CONNECTING: Relating Artistic Ideas and Work With Personal Meaning and External Context

► Curricular Questions

- How can understandings from other academic disciplines be demonstrated through graffiti-inspired art?
- What aspects of popular culture are influenced by graffiti art?
- What careers paths would benefit from developing graffiti skills?
- How can other art forms can inform graffiti-inspired work?



Figure 10. *Untitled*, Tion Bukue, spray paint, 2017. San Francisco, CA. Photograph by Matt Christenson.



Figure 11. *Behind the Scenes*, Tion Bukue and Illuminaries Crew, spray paint, 2017. Oakland, CA. Photograph by Matt Christenson.

Web-Based Resources for Further Investigation

Bukue on Facebook, www.facebook.com/Bukue-One-164826016886246
 Bukue on Twitter, <https://twitter.com/bukueone?lang=en>
 International graffiti work, www.graffiti.org
 Technical letter development, <https://graffwriter.com>
 Graffiti Apps, www.theartofed.com/2014/08/29/a-look-at-graffiti-apps-for-high-school-students

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Endnote

¹ Graffiti term meaning to paint large pieces, typically at night and in an illegal manner

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