

Social Studies Education and Public Art: The Detroit Billboard Project

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Abstract

The aim of this action-research project was to evaluate the impact of high school students' involvement in community-oriented, art-based work in the social studies. In Detroit, high school students engaged in persuasive writing and design while exploring community issues. The project culminated in the installation of student artwork on a billboard in the city's cultural center. Mixed methods were employed to evaluate the project; forty-seven students completed surveys at its conclusion. The findings suggest that creative projects with real-world applications are motivational, and they promote civic education. The majority of the students reported that their awareness of community issues had increased. This study has implications for the implementation of projects for democratic education and service learning, arts integration in the social studies, and the use of authentic assessments in contextual, culturally responsive teaching.

Keywords: Arts integration, civic education, service learning

Introduction

In the complex field of social studies, interdisciplinary approaches to instruction are vital. This study is based on an action-research project that was designed to explore the effects of community-oriented arts integration. High school students engaged in persuasive writing and design while exploring community issues and considering how to effect change. The project culminated in a public art installation in downtown Detroit. The findings of this study suggest that creative projects, with democratic objectives and procedures, motivate and inform students.

Democratic education and culturally responsive teaching are the interrelated theoretical frameworks within which this research on the Detroit billboard project lies. A proponent of experiential, democratic education, John Dewey emphasized social engagement and the development of students' capacities for reflective problem-solving (Dewey, 1916; Rocheleau, 2004). In addressing community issues, students learn to communicate persuasively and to listen to the arguments of others. Contextual instruction is both Deweyan and culturally responsive;

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learners engage in the investigation of real-world problems and innovative solutions (Hanley, 2013; Gay, 2010). Their prior knowledge and experiences are recognized and integrated.

A problem-solving curriculum and a democratic culture that fosters opportunity have been recommended by scholars of democratic education such as Art Pearl and Tony Knight (Pearl & Knight, 1999). In democratic classrooms, students investigate and make decisions based on reason and evidence (Terry & Gallavan, 2005; Pearl & Knight, 1999; Pearl, 2005; Cf. National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). They critique realities, and they consider transformations (Beyer, 1996). In preparing to be active and informed citizens in a participatory political system, students consider the complexity of communication in societies that value and protect free speech (Pearl & Knight, 1999; Rocheleau, 2004).

In *Culturally responsive teaching*, Geneva Gay argues that, to be effective, educators must address “ecological factors” that include community settings as well as students’ cultural backgrounds (2010, p. 22). She maintains that culturally responsive pedagogy raises social consciousness and empowers students. Gay and other proponents of culturally responsive teaching support inquiry-based learning and the use of varied assessments, such as projects (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2010). In problem-solving, students develop critical thinking skills (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

The Detroit billboard project was designed to promote civic engagement and to foster each of the 4Cs for learning and innovation that were established by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills: Critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. A coalition of educators, policymakers, and business leaders in the United States, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills asserts that students, if they are to be competitive in the workplace, must be able to evaluate and use information creatively in problem-solving.

The authors of this study began this project with fundamental research questions: *What impact would involvement in a community-oriented, art-based project in social studies have on high school students?; Would the possibility of a public display of student artwork be motivational?; In the eyes of high school students in Detroit, what are the most compelling community issues?; How important to high school students is having the opportunity to convey their views publicly?; and How do high school students think that they can address community issues?*

The School and The Students

Located in Detroit, Michigan, the site of this study was a public school that serves middle and high school students in sixth through twelfth grades. About 98.5% of the students were African American, and 100% were male. More than three-quarters of the students at the school participated in the free or reduced-price lunch program. The 62 youths, who were involved in the project, were high school students. Instruction occurred in four social studies classes. The project was launched with the support of a veteran administrator whom had been appointed to the position of principal the previous year.

The project

The interdisciplinary Detroit billboard project was carried out during the fall and winter semesters of the 2013-2014 academic year. The identification of community issues by the students was the first stage. They brainstormed and discussed a variety of topics. In a writing assignment that included a photograph of a blank billboard, each young man responded to the following prompts: *In your opinion, what are the three most important issues facing the community of Detroit today?; If you could publish a message on a billboard in Detroit, what would it say?; and Write a message on the billboard above. If you wish, add designs.* In a second preliminary writing assignment, the students were given a graphic representation of a billboard. They asked to write messages that encouraged positive action. The messages were later compiled. A comprehensive list was distributed and read aloud by the students in each social studies class.

The second stage of the project involved the students' consideration of art's potential to persuade and inform the public as well as the role of artists as agents of social and political change. During interactive lectures and discussions, the students reflected on how artistic designs have been and continue to be used to influence people's thoughts and/or actions. They viewed images of billboards with public service as well as commercial messages (Basten, 2007; Littlefield, 2006; Heon, Diggs, & Thompson, 1999). The students discussed how images render concepts and evoke emotions. Studying New Deal posters as well as iconic political art such as Shepard Fairey's *Obama Hope*, the students considered historic and contemporary uses of art as soft propaganda. Billboards that had been altered or appropriated by street artists inspired discussions about advertising, visual pollution, and social criticism. The students identified the

artists' audiences and techniques of persuasion. They judged whether messages were subtle or overt, and they predicted emotional and cognitive reactions by viewers.

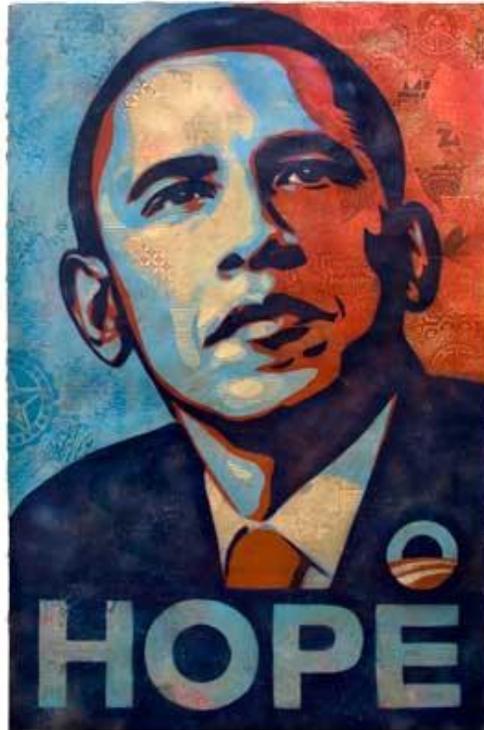


Figure 1. Shepard Fairey, *Barack Obama*, 2008; Collage, stencil, and acrylic on paper, National Portrait Gallery, United States

The third stage of the Detroit billboard project required the application of knowledge through the creation of billboard designs. In addition to choosing an audience, each student had the option of utilizing his own message or one written by his peers. They created designs using colored pencils, pastels, and/or markers on paper of specific dimensions for reproduction on a billboard. While engaged in this process, the students considered how design choices catch the attention of the public. Their aim was to influence.

Once the designs were finished, the students voted anonymously for their first, second, and third choices. They were asked to consider the importance and relevance of the messages, as well as the quality of the designs, when voting. On the ballots were color pictures of all the students' designs. Spaces were provided for written explanations of selections. Only the

students voted; the teachers could cast votes. In sum, stage four was a democratic process to select the winning design.

A local advertising company donated resources in order to display the most popular design on Woodward Avenue, a historic thoroughfare, in downtown Detroit in April of 2014. The billboard was on view only 2.9 kilometers from the school. Cultural mapping influenced the site's selection (Stevenson, 2014). The billboard was posted near prominent cultural institutions, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art. At the school and at a local university, designs by many students were exhibited in color on posters. In addition to display and discussion, the fifth stage involved reflective writing. The students completed anonymous surveys which included reflective writing prompts. They had the opportunity to express their views of the project.



Figure 2. *Stay in school*, 2014; Detroit, Michigan, United States



Figure 3. *Stay in school*, 2014; Detroit, Michigan, United States

Research Methods

The authors employed mixed methods to evaluate this action-research project. Mixed-methods inquiry offers insights into complex social phenomena (Greene, 2007). In order to answer related aspects of the essential research questions and to gain comprehensive understanding, the researchers posed questions that would yield both quantitative and qualitative results (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Efron & Ravid, 2013). Mixed-methods research captures different perspectives and yields contextual knowledge (Greene, 2007). Jennifer Greene, in *Mixed methods in social inquiry*, wrote, “A mixed methods way of thinking involves openness to multiple ways of seeing and hearing, multiple ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints...multiple approaches can generate more complete and meaningful understanding of complex human phenomena” (p. xii).

To preserve the integrity of the sample, the researchers administered only one optional and anonymous survey to all classes on a single day. In light of the possibility that a student could be absent, the authors decided against the posing of quantitative and qualitative questions on separate data collection tools and days. Forty-seven (n=47) of the 62 participants in the project chose to complete the surveys. The response rate was 75.8%.

Distributed at the conclusion of the billboard project, the 13-item survey included both closed- and open-ended questions to determine the students' views of the project and its impact. On five-point Likert scales, the students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with these statements: *The project raised my awareness of community issues; Knowing that one of our designs would be displayed on a billboard in the community increased my interest in the project, and The project gave us the opportunity to express concerns about community issues.* The ten open-ended questions were written to determine the students' views of having a public voice, their audiences, their ideas about making a difference, their understandings of persuasive writing and design, and their views of artists as agents of change. The survey is in the appendix to this article.

The researchers entered all responses to the structured and unstructured items into Survey Monkey. A cloud-based tool for survey analysis, Survey Monkey generates summaries of quantitative data that include percentages, basic statistics, graphs, and tables. The authors analyzed the results. Rather than use Survey Monkey's graphs to illustrate the quantitative findings in this article, though, they made bar graphs using the online graphing tool of the National Center for Education Statistics (N.C.E.S.).

When studying the qualitative data, the researchers employed the constant comparison data analysis strategy (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). They read all of the students' responses to the unstructured items several times. Engaged in open coding, they identified common concepts in the responses to the questions. From these concepts, some themes emerged. To validate their inferences, the authors repeatedly revisited the data. For this article, they selected representative responses to the unstructured items. Collectively, the quantitative and qualitative data informed the conclusions of this research project.

Findings

The findings of this study suggest that art-based, community-oriented projects in the social studies promote civic education and are motivational. A total of 46 students responded to the first Likert-scale item. The majority (78.26%) agreed (50%) or strongly agreed (28.26%) that the project had raised their awareness of community issues. Of the students, 21.74% were neutral. Forty-seven students responded to the statement, "Knowing that one of our designs would be displayed on a billboard in the community increased my interest in the project." With

this statement, 87.23% either agreed (51.06%) or strongly agreed (36.17%). Over 12% of the students indicated that they were neutral.

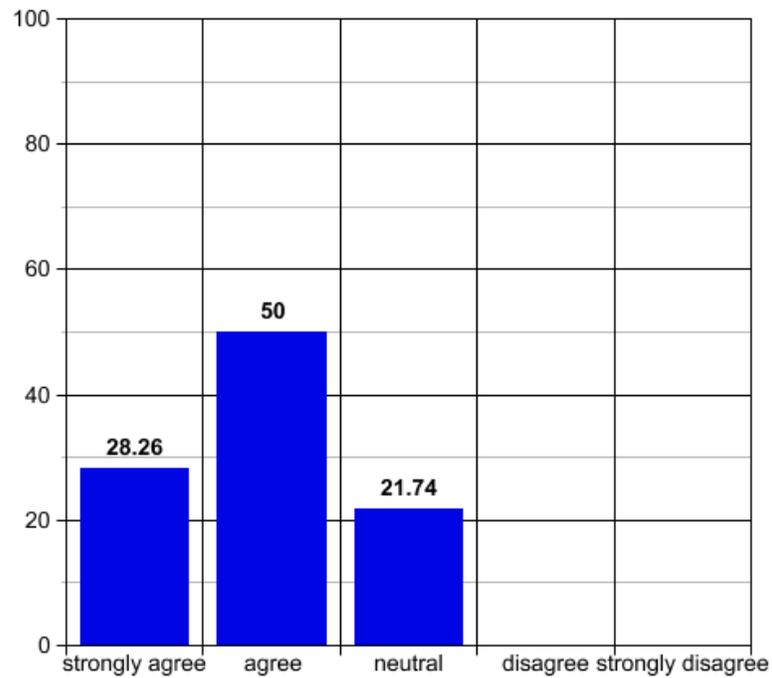


Figure 4. The project raised my awareness of community issues.

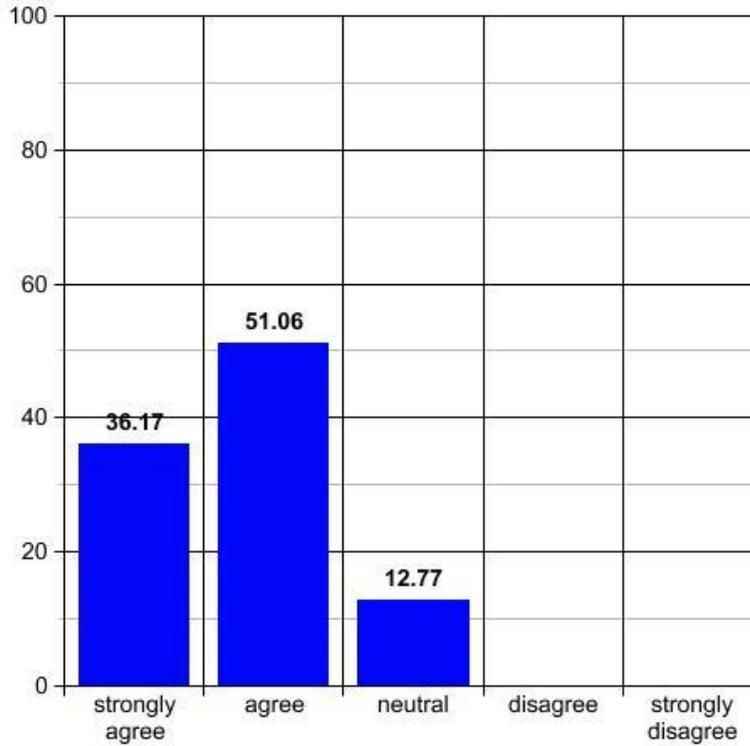


Figure 5. Knowing that one of our designs would be displayed on a billboard in the community increased my interest in the project.

A high percentage (87.23%) of the 47 students, whom responded to the third Likert-scale item, agreed (44.68%) or strongly agreed (42.55%) that the project had given them the opportunity to express their concerns about community issues. These findings have implications for the planning and orchestration of projects for democratic education and service learning, arts integration in the social studies, and the use of authentic assessments in contextual, culturally responsive teaching. The implications will be explored in the discussion section of this article.

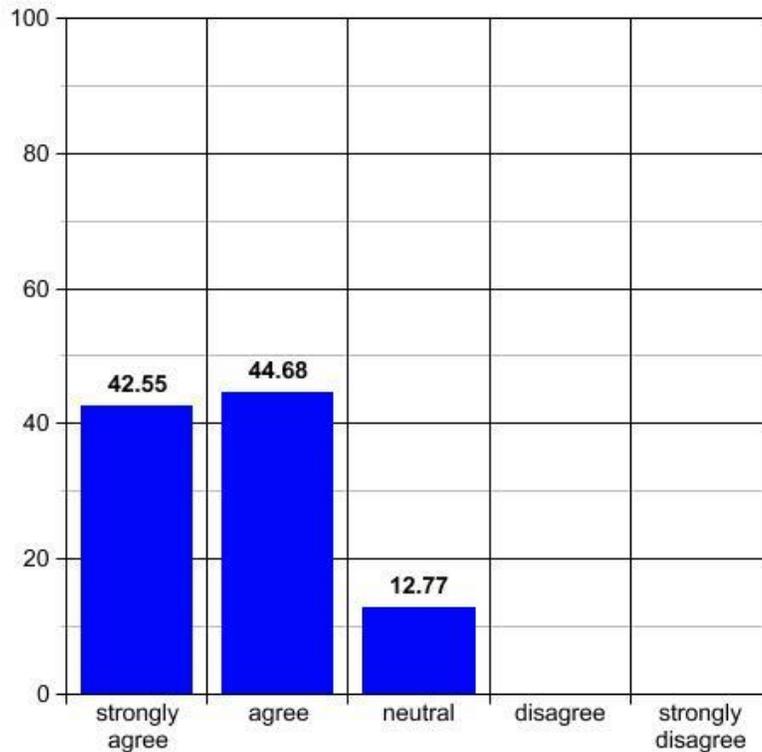


Figure 6. The project gave us the opportunity to express our concerns about community issues.

In response to the open-ended question, “Do you think that the voices of high school students should be heard more often? Please explain your answer,” 45 of 47 students responded in the affirmative, while one student had mixed views and another was opposed. Three main themes were identified during the analysis of the responses to this question: The knowledge and experience of youths in the community should be valued, youth voices are valid but often unheard, and youths will play important roles in society in the future. A number of comments suggest that high school students wish to participate more actively and seriously in democratic processes. The following comments are representative:

“...we are the ones who are mostly affected by community issues.”

“...young people are the future, and their opinions should matter.”

On the survey, the students were asked to explain why they had elected to write messages about certain issues. In their responses, they expressed concerns about education, drug use,

crime, and the environment. Once a thriving metropolis, Detroit has been dramatically affected by the contraction of the U.S. automotive industry (Martelle, 2012). The decline of the city's population has resulted in the closure of schools, the shuttering of businesses, and the abandonment of houses (Martelle, 2012; Binelli, 2012). The municipal government has had to curtail services because of its reduced tax base. The students were keenly aware of the city's socioeconomic struggles. They wrote about the importance of Detroit's having a positive image and maintaining hope. The following comments convey the students' concerns and objectives.

"...I wanted to inspire teens to not drop out and to go onto college."

"I chose drugs because I feel people should stop using them."

"...we need more gardens in our community so we can have fresh food."

The students were asked to describe the audiences whom they had had in mind when creating their billboards. A number of the students wrote that they were directing their messages at everyone. Only one young man stated that his message was directed exclusively to adults because "...they make more decisions than children." The largest number of respondents indicated that they had had young people in mind. The students' targeting of young audiences is indicative of their belief that young people are vital to the city's future. "The audience I was trying to convince was the high school students that came from a poor, humble background," wrote one student. "The audience is younger kids. It made me want to make it more exciting. Have it really stand out," explained another.

An essential part of service learning is the exploration of ways to resolve community matters and to make a positive impact. On the survey, the students were asked to think about the various issues that they had raised during the project. They were invited to write about actions that they could take to make a difference. Many wrote about organizing and meeting with others to work toward common goals. Their ideas included volunteering, mentoring younger children, staying in school themselves, cleaning neighborhoods, and maintaining a positive outlook. Some students had very specific actions in mind. Written below are some of their ideas.

"Start a community center. Offer services for young people."

"I could pick up trash around the community and start my own recycle company."

The students were invited to focus on the issues raised by the student artists whose drawings had received the most votes. The drawings were entitled *Stay in school* and *Keep Detroit clean*. The artists and their parents have given permission to publish these drawings with proper attributions. On the topic of staying in school, the students wrote about focusing on their studies and earning good grades. They also offered suggestions for adults, such as the provision of tutorial services to children. The students recommended motivational speakers, presentations on how and why to stay in school, service-learning projects, and scholarships. To keep the city clean, the students wrote about picking up trash around the community, recycling, forming block clubs, and not littering. One student suggested that more trash cans be made available in the city.



Figure 7. *Keep Detroit clean*, 2014; Colored pencil on paper

When the students were asked how they thought people might react to the billboard, *Stay in school*, many (27 of 42 responses) anticipated positive reactions. They felt that the billboard captured the sentiments and hopes of the residents of Detroit with regard to education. Some anticipated that young people would feel encouraged by it. A number of the students (11) were unsure or skeptical that the billboard would have an impact, though. The following quotations are representative.

“They will be happy because they want kids to stay in school and finish.”

“I feel they will think and focus on finishing school.”

“Most people will admire the artwork, but the choice is theirs to follow the advice.”

The majority of the students recognized the billboard messages and designs as forms of persuasive writing, and they viewed artists as agents of change. When asked what they had learned about communication, most of the students conveyed an understanding of the power of images. Through persuasive design, the students had taken informed action to influence others, thereby meeting an important objective of the *College, career, and civic (C3) life framework for social studies state standards* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). The following quotations reflect the views of multiple students.

“A simple but strong message with a good drawing could have a lot of influence on others.”

“Art has power if you can do it the right way.”

According to the surveys, most of the students had positive views of the billboard project. They valued having had the opportunity to express their concerns and ideas. In addition to having found the process to be informative, they felt that they had made a difference through their involvement. The public display of the winning design had been motivational. In response to the question, “What are your feelings about the billboard project,” the following statements are representative.

“I feel like the billboard was a good idea and a good experience for us to express our feelings about the community.”

“I feel it should spread to other schools...”

“It gives students the opportunity to make a difference.”

Discussion

Democratic Education

Democratic education emphasizes interaction among students, the rights of youths to be heard, the common good, and civic responsibility (Ligon, 2005). Engaging students in

meaningful conversations about issues, including controversial issues, is critical (Hess, 2009). Through discussions, students engage in a process of shared inquiry (Hess, 2009). They are exposed to diverse perspectives, and they construct knowledge (Hess, 2009). Productive discussions occur when students are part of the decision-making that impacts their lives (Pearl & Knight, 1999). The research on the Detroit billboard project yielded significant findings. The vast majority of the students reported that their awareness of community issues had increased and that they had had the opportunity to express their concerns. Nearly all of the students conveyed the opinion that the voices of high school students should be heard more often.

“People demonstrate civic engagement when they address public problems individually and collaboratively and when they maintain, strengthen, and improve communities and societies,” states the *College, career, and civic (C3) life framework* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. 31). Democracy building at the local level may later lead to political involvement and policy development at higher levels (Hollander & Hartley, 2003). Inclusiveness, equality, and participation are crucial (Laguardia & Pearl, 2005; Hollander & Hartley, 2003).

With service-learning elements, the Detroit billboard project was a manifestation of community engagement pedagogy. Common goals for service learning include increasing students’ levels of activity in communities, enhancing their understanding and knowledge of local issues, and supporting school-community relationships (Pritchard, 2002). Service learning requires the establishment of academic learning goals and reflection (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Warter & Grossman, 2002). Engaged in critical analysis and the exploration of ethical questions, students focus on social change (Schensul, Berg, & Brase, 2002). On the surveys in the Detroit billboard project, the students enumerated specific and viable actions which they could take individually and/or collectively.

Constructivist, culturally responsive teaching affirms and builds on students’ prior knowledge and experiences (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2010). A number of students, who were part of the Detroit billboard project, commented that the authenticity and legitimacy of their voices on community matters derives from their first-hand experiences. “We see the struggle through the city as well,” wrote one student. Service-learning projects ought to recognize students’ contextual knowledge (Warter & Grossman, 2002). “When important knowledge is conceived as something that is democratically determined, every student

is encouraged to evaluate, to weigh, to propose, to investigate, to debate,” wrote Armando Laguardia and Pearl (Laguardia and Pearl (2005, p. 12).

In her essay on environmental service learning by African American youth in Philadelphia, Nicole Webster (2007) points out a significant deficiency in service-learning research: Most studies focus on community engagement by affluent students from the suburbs. The experiences of urban youth have been ignored by many scholars. Webster recognizes the long history of activism within the African American community and civic leadership by African American churches. She wrote, “Well-designed service-learning in urban schools and communities could provide youth with opportunities for empowerment and involvement that would build on their community knowledge, experience, and contacts to work in a collaborative way on issues relevant to their own community” (Webster, 2007, p. 164).

Art, Persuasive Communication, and Social Change

Despite dramatic losses in population and an unprecedented and highly publicized municipal bankruptcy, the city of Detroit is in the midst of a renaissance, at the forefront of which are artists. Galleries are opening, exhibits are drawing visitors, street art is flourishing, and collectives of artists have grown (Balestier, 2013). Art has long played a role in the revitalization of urban centers in the United States (Graves, 2005; Stevenson, 2014). The importance of art to the people of metropolitan Detroit was evidenced by their support of a proposition to increase property taxes in 2012 in order to support the city’s art museum, the Detroit Institute of Arts (Cohen, 2012). The billboard project should be seen within the context of Detroit’s regeneration as the high school students were living and working within this context.

Mary Stone Hanley (2013) posits that, through the arts, individuals clarify their internal voices, and they empower themselves through creative agency and expression. Agency involves independent thinking when solving problems and making decisions. Artists make choices about purpose, media, design, and audience in order to influence thought and action. Hanley emphasizes arts’ transformative potential, arguing that imagination and creativity are fundamental to praxis. She (2013, p. 3) wrote, “...creativity is our hardwired capacity to change the world into what we imagine, whether for good or for ill.”

Most of the students, who were involved in the Detroit billboard project, viewed artists as agents of change, and they recognized their designs as forms of persuasive communication.

Since the students' drawings and stencils had persuasive purposes, they were forms of soft propaganda (Welch, 2013). Governments, non-profit agencies, and activists have long used posters, including those mounted on billboards, for social and political purposes. In creating propaganda, artists seek to disseminate messages and to evoke particular responses (Welch, 2013). Propaganda is associated with deceit and manipulation, but it may have benevolent aims (Welch, 2013). During the Great Depression, under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Works Progress Administration employed hundreds of graphic artists to create posters in support of New Deal programs, health and safety, conservation, education, and cultural traditions (Carter, 2008).

In *Education for critical consciousness*, Paolo Freire argues that the examination of commercial advertising develops the individual's capacity to recognize deceptive ideological and political communication. The analysis of propaganda is "...the way to defend democracy, not to subvert it" (Freire, 2007, p. 49). In this spirit, works by street and graffiti artists were viewed by the students in Detroit. By adding to or obscuring messages on existing commercial billboards, writers worldwide have produced critical, ironic, and/or humorous results. "Subvertising" is a form of political messaging (Lewisohn, 2008). The students examined *Visual pollution* by Mobstr, a British street artist who uses satire to critique society and consumerism (Saleme, 2013). *Visual pollution* intrigued the students. After discussing the imposition of advertisements on the urban landscape, they concluded that billboards can indeed spoil visual experiences if they lack aesthetic appeal, are too numerous, and/or are not well maintained.



Figure 8. Mobstr, *Visual pollution*, 2011; London, United Kingdom, Unurth Street Art: <http://www.unurth.com/Mobstr-Visual-Pollution-London>

Billboards by artists often focus on community issues (Heon, 1999). Though not typically viewed as patrons of the arts, outdoor advertising agencies have sponsored the exhibition of innumerable works of ephemeral art, most of which have not been conserved. Posters may be mounted alongside roads and freeways, on the sides of busses, on bus shelters, in subway stations, and on benches (Heon, 1999). Using digital images provided by the artist, most billboard art today is reproduced on vinyl or paper (Heon, 1999). Typically, the large-scale reproductions are destroyed after they have been dismantled.

People normally see billboards only briefly, therefore economy in design is important. Effective posters are simple and direct (Heon, 1999). Symbols may be used to convey values and concepts or to evoke feelings (Moore, 2010). “Occupying a space defined by – and therefore as – advertising, (billboards) must capture the viewer’s attention and ‘sell’ an idea rather than a product. In the time frame of a passing glance, they must create a visual stop, leaving the viewer with a thought to ponder rather than an image to buy,” observed Harriet Senie (1999, p. 22).

The billboard for which the students in Detroit voted became part of a larger discussion because it was installed in the public sphere. The appearance of the unexpected on billboards, such as artwork promoting community interests rather than selling products, may challenge

people's assumptions, provoke, and inspire conversations (Diggs, 1999). Within the high school, the response to the billboard and its message generated thoughtful discussions. "At its best, an artist's billboard provides a space where citizens speak to citizens," wrote Peggy Diggs (1999, p. 34).

Conclusion

Art-based social studies projects, such as the Detroit billboard project, teach students about community and relationships, and they are exercises in self-determination. A democratic education requires meaning, ownership, and creativity (Laguardia & Pearl, 2005). Bridging disciplines is necessary in order to have integrated knowledge and comprehensive understanding. The findings of this study show that the project raised awareness of community issues and afforded students the opportunity to express their views and ideas. Creative and authentic projects with real-world applications, such as the Detroit billboard project, are motivational. Art-based, service-oriented projects that respect the contextual knowledge and experiences of students are worthy of consideration by social studies educators who seek to advance civic education and 21st-century skills.

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Appendix
BILLBOARD PROJECT SURVEY

DIRECTIONS: Please answer the following questions.

1. The project raised my awareness of community issues.

strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

2. Knowing that one of our designs would be displayed on a billboard in the community increased my interest in the project.

strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

3. The project gave us the opportunity to express concerns about community issues.

strongly agree agree neutral disagree strongly disagree

4. Do you think that the voices of high school students should be heard more often? Please explain your answer.

5. Think about the billboard design that you made. Why did you choose the issue that you did?

6. Describe the audience whom you had in mind when creating your project. How did the audience impact your message and design?

7. Think about the many community issues that were raised during the project. In addition to designing a billboard, what could you do to make a difference in the community? How might you accomplish your goal(s)? What resources would you need?

8. The first-place billboards for which you voted focused on two issues: 1.) The importance of staying in school, and 2.) the importance of keeping the city clean. What steps could you take to address these two issues?

9. How do you think people reacted to the winning billboard, *Stay in school*?

10. What did you learn about influencing others through communication and design?

11. What genre do you consider the billboard project to be? Please select one and explain your answer.

a.) Persuasive

Why? _____

b.) Narrative

Why? _____

c.) Expository

Why? _____

12. Do you think that artists may be agents of change? Explain your answer.

13. What are your feelings about the billboard project?
