




Commentary


Urban Arts Pedagogy at James Lyng High School

Melissa Proietti

ABSTRACT

Melissa Proietti is a PhD student at McGill University as well as a youth worker and street art coordinator at James Lyng High School in Montreal. In this interview, she describes an urban arts pedagogy project at the school. In its first year, the students, in collaboration with McGill and various community groups, created a gallery space in the school and held their first exhibit. Ms Proietti talks about the advantages of incorporating urban arts in the school curriculum and the lessons she learned from working with students on the project.

 *You have been working in the area of youth intervention for many years and this involves doing street graffiti and street arts programs in schools. Can you tell us how you became involved in this area?*

 *I've been working in this area for about 10 years now and it began through my involvement with the Under Pressure Festival, a graffiti and hip-hop festival that takes place in Montreal. As a volunteer for this festival I was able to meet with artists and see their interactions with the general public. As I saw those interactions, I thought the students that I was working with in community centres and schools would be really interested in having those kinds of people working with them. At that point, I was able to see a coming together of two very different worlds. Slowly, I was able to integrate a little bit of muralism and graffiti into some of the schools where I was working. This started in an after-school program in elementary schools and then I started working in high schools. In developing those projects I would always go into the schools as someone who had a lot of youth work experience and I brought an artist with me in order to really be able to reflect graffiti*

and street art culture. This is something that both legitimized and enriched the experience for the participating students.



Currently, you are involved in an SSHRC-funded project as a research assistant and as a PhD student at McGill. The focus of the project is the transformation of the James Lyng School curriculum to reflect urban arts pedagogy. Tell us about how all this started and what has been evolving at James Lyng.

This began about five years ago when I first started at James Lyng. At that time, school on Wednesdays used to end at 12:30. We were asked to do an after-school graffiti program on that day, because it's quite an early end time to send the students either home or out into the world. We wanted to make it a very true-to-the-culture kind of graffiti-based club because a lot of the students that we had were actively involved in graffiti culture in Montreal. That just meant that we brought sketchbooks for all of our students, we had about 12 in the group at the time, and we would just take the time to draw and talk together.

Through that experience we were able to get to know our kids better, get to know what their experiences were like in school, what they found difficult, what they enjoyed, and the positive or negative points of their life. We built a strong bond with those students. We started at 12:30, and our program often went all the way to 3:30 when school would normally end. That was really huge. The administration took notice of this because it's not something very common for students to participate in any kind of an extracurricular activity for that long. Once the administration started noticing that the students involved in urban arts programming (we were not the only one; there was also a hip-hop literacy program that was taking place as well) were really connected and engaged, they started to imagine ways of incorporating these kinds of urban arts into the actual school day for the students.

Our principal at the time, who had been an art teacher, understood that the arts is something that really levelled the playing field for all of our students. It made them feel more comfortable engaging in different kinds of activities and gave them a lot more space to be present in different areas in their school. She began to suggest ways that we could incorporate the urban arts into classrooms. My supervisor Bronwen Low, at McGill, also took notice of this project and it was suggested that we build a partnership together. Through McGill and community partners (like the YMCA), we were able to apply for a SSHRC grant, which was successfully received. We are in the first of three years of SSHRC funding to transform this whole school

into an urban arts pedagogy school. This means that in class time the students are doing urban arts programming.



How would you define an “urban arts pedagogy” and what are the advantages of a curriculum that reflects this?

We’re just learning what all of that means because we are the first school in Canada to bring the urban arts into a pedagogical situation. We’re trying to understand how to define the urban arts pedagogy. All the different components of the urban arts are about responding to an environment, being a voice for marginalized populations. It’s often about finding a way to express yourself and take space in an environment that may not be either reflecting you or may not be giving you that space to begin with. Based on the histories of the urban arts culture that exist outside of a school, those are the important components that we’re trying to inject into our school context and each classroom.

Having students find ways to represent themselves within their school and within the greater school context is probably the most important starting point. Students need to know how to take ownership of their work and take responsibility for what it is that they’re doing in a classroom. Those are the strengths that we’re working with when we take the urban arts from a street context and put it into a more formal setting.



We’re sitting outside the exhibition space that you’ve been involved in at James Lyng High School. Can you talk a little about how this space evolved and a pinnacle event that you had this semester?

This is a gallery space that we are running with the 15+ class, which is an entrepreneurship-focused class. With the urban arts curriculum that’s been developed, we’ve been working with different curricular classrooms; that means music and art, but also French, English, and math. For the curricular requirements of the 15+ group, running the gallery space seemed like a fit because it is an entrepreneurship project. The space behind me was used as storage in the library and we were told that we could use it as an exhibit space however we saw fit. Understanding that it was to become an exhibit space mainly for the visual arts, I toured all the classrooms (we have about 160 students in the school) and discussed with the students how they thought a gallery space could play an active role in their school, something they could take pride in.

Through these discussions we discovered that our students wanted to have a very classic exhibit space, which meant white walls and spotlights. If that's what they wanted, then what we were going to build for them.



Fig. 1: Gallery space at James Lyng high school

With the students in the WOTP class, which is the Work-Oriented Training Pathway, we were able to completely empty out the storage and then start the construction. The walls that had been cement were framed with wood and then dry wall was placed on top. There was sanding and painting and all the things that come along with building an actual space. Through those experiences the students were able to understand the different steps in constructing a space and how these things are all very possible. You just have to understand how to reach out to your community and get people involved who would like to support you. Once the space opened, the students in the 15+ class decided that they wanted the first show to be a Black History month show, because of the time of year and because it reflects our student population quite well. The students put together a call for submissions. It was put out to our community at large and then they started receiving submissions both from student artists, including high school and CEGEP, but also from professional artists. The show, which was called "The Struggle for Black Equality," opened here at the school. We had a vernissage; we invited the media and it was very successful. The students were able to go through the entire process themselves and were completely responsible for the running, curating, and opening of the show.



You described a subsequent event that was a very interesting one. Can you talk about that?

Once the show had successfully opened, the students decided that they wanted to invite the artists who participated in the show to come and see the work if they hadn't been able to attend the vernissage. They invited the different school groups in particular to come and tour the gallery space. One of the groups that submitted a piece was an adult ed. class for adults with special needs. One of the adults in the class is completely blind and when he arrived at the school two of our students took it upon themselves, completely independently without being asked, to take this student around and describe to him each and every single piece that is in the gallery space. Not only were they showing a great deal of empathy and real commitment to being the curators of this space, but they were also showing that they are engaged with the actual artwork itself, which they were able to fully convey to another student.



What are some of the lessons that you've learned from this experience, building the gallery with the students and working with the students in this way?

I've learned a lot of lessons and I've learned a lot from the students going through this experience in our first year. We are really learning together what it means to run a gallery space in a school, what the constraints are, what the strengths and challenges are. What is fantastic is that we're learning this all together. What I'm realizing also is the importance of flexibility and that being able to respond to the students and their needs and desires is something that is of the utmost importance for a project like this to succeed.

I'm also learning the importance of incorporating what the urban arts is structured on into an actual classroom and how the students can then see themselves becoming participants in that culture. What I had said to the students at the beginning of the year is that this project is not about me—it is about them and this is their gallery space. I have experience and expertise coming from my background, but I'm just here to help them do whatever it is that they want with this space. It's really a reflection of them. It's a space for them to start discussions, to critique society, to express themselves, and be a voice for the rest of their school community as well. If they're able to take that on and really use the space in that way, then I think that we're achieving something together.



What are your hopes for the future?

My hope is that our students find this a successful experience and that they feel connected to something. It's important to connect the students to communities that exist outside of their school community, like the Under Pressure Festival. By integrating the urban arts into the curriculum, we're also integrating the students into a community that is strong and positive and that already exists within their city. When you feel like you can identify with something, not only in your school, but also in your surroundings and daily life, that is something really positive that will help our kids both now and as they become adults. My hope is that this is just a first step to a long future together.



What suggestions would you have for other educators who wish to promote urban art pedagogy?

It's very important to integrate the people who are true participants in the urban arts culture. In order for students to feel like they're having a legitimate experience, you need to bring in people who can speak on behalf of the urban arts, whether it's graffiti or hip-hop or break dancing. Without those people it's really difficult to understand the reality of what it means to be in the urban arts. Often these artists are happy just to come in and share their experiences with the students. For the most part, these artists felt that the high school curriculum did not reflect their needs when they too were students. When you can have these invited guests, it gives students more to connect to and a greater sense of ownership over their learning.



Melissa Proietti is a PhD student at McGill University in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education and has been working in formal and informal educational contexts for nearly 15 years with a wide range of learners. Based on organizational involvement with Under Pressure International Graffiti Convention and with the urban arts culture in Montreal, during her Masters she began to research the implementation of an urban arts program in a school as a method to encourage student engagement and success. This has carried on into her doctoral research which documents the development of the visual urban arts within the context of a wider shift in a school's development as it becomes the first urban arts concentration school in Canada.