

Graffiti Walls: Migrant Students and the Art of Communicative Languages

Fernando Rodríguez-Valls
San Diego State University-IV Campus
frodrigu@mail.sdsu.edu

Sandra Kofford
Imperial County Office of Education
skofford@icoe.org

Elena Morales
Heber Elementary School District
elenamoralesur@gmail.com

Abstract

Visual Arts help to create communicative actions between teachers and students. In this article, we explain the interdisciplinary methodology –Visual Arts and Language Arts– utilized by three teachers and one faculty member at San Diego State University. The purpose of the project was to create a common ground and a shared agreement based on linguistic codes utilized in the classroom. For four weeks, forty-five high-school sophomore migrant students and the teaching team discussed and analyzed poetry, short stories, graphic novels, and movies. They later created visual expressions –Cultural Tags and Graffiti Walls –that reflected students’ views about their cultural identities. The outcomes of this project stressed the importance of preserving Visual Arts Education as a pivotal element for the development of students’ communication skills.

Introduction

Human communication takes place at two levels, at the same time: a message is expected to have a meaning *and* the message is expected to contain information (Leydesdorff, 2000, p. 275)

Language is one of the vehicles through which high school students express themselves and make sense of the deeds and words of others. Students talk *with* and listen *to* their peers while playing outside, having lunch or simply when they move from classroom to classroom. Most of these interactions are created to establish or to maintain a social link between the individuals as well as to share meaningful information. There is consent among the students on the codes and tones to be used in these conversations. Without being instructed, students develop communicative actions that use language to actively build understanding; while talking and listening, they compare and contrast their individual ideas within a shared world, developing contentions that can either be acknowledged or denied (Habermas, 1985). Languages within this context are tools equally owned by participants who share significance and knowledge.

In contrast, when students enter the classroom, human communication often turns into strategic exchanges between teachers and students. Teachers talk *to* the students rather than *with* the students, which somehow impedes the students' partaking in the language (Appleman, 2009; Copeland, 2005). Here, the languages used by teachers and the ones used by students differ from each other; hence, there is a struggle on the students' side to master and to understand the teacher's language; and there is a challenge on the teacher's side to build shared agreement with students about information acquired and meanings communicated (Gallagher, 2009).

The struggle depicted above increases when students who are participating in these communicative interactions are from migrant populations. Their constant mobility from school to school, from state to state – following the harvesting seasons – and the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) of these students add an extra difficulty in the attempt to reach a common ground where students and teachers might “speak the same language.” Moreover, Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, and Chu Clewell (2001) note that “the organization of secondary schools into subject departments (mathematics, sciences, social sciences) created barriers to integrating language and content learning for students with LEP. The departmentalization of secondary schools also effectively barred language and content teachers to improve im[migrant] student outcomes” (p. 4). Departmentalized education *fences* the voices of migrant students within the areas comprised in the Language Arts curricula. Most subject area courses focus on the transmission of content, thus limiting solely to Language Arts classes the space where students can refine and enhance their language. When communication is the exclusive property of English class, then art, science, history, music, and many other subjects become voiceless subjects (hooks, 2009).

Instead, as stated by Kozoll, Osborne and García (2003) in their analysis of research on migrant students, in order to create communicative actions teachers must “accept students as they are, with the language they speak at home and the value systems they live within” (p. 579). Communicative action, within this context, is defined as the capacity and willingness of teachers and students to listen to and adopt each other's languages, and from there, develop a common language without excluding each other's perspective (Habermas, 2001). Moreover, communicative action avers that constant dialogue between teachers and

students nurtures a Participatory Pedagogy, in which both groups are equal heirs (Ochoa & Ochoa, 2004). Participatory Pedagogy implies the “informational efficiency of pedagogic communication” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000, p. 71) to link teachers’ rhetoric and students’ utterances. Moreover, Participatory Pedagogy is a new way to reach migrant students, who, though often silent, have powerful voices within themselves waiting for an opportunity to dialogue with their teachers about who they are and how they see themselves in their communities. Boler (2006) supports this need for dialogue when she poses and answers the question, “What is this desire for dialogue? The commonsense answer is that it has to be a good thing to be able to communicate across difference” (p. 57).

Following this concept of creating communication across difference (i.e., across instructors’ discourse and students’ voices), three teachers –Loreta, Esmeralda, and Celia¹ –and Farabundo, a faculty member from the Division of Education at San Diego State University-Imperial Valley (SDSU-IV), designed an interdisciplinary curriculum that combined various artistic expressions – poetry, photography, drawing, painting, tagging, and graffiti –with Language Arts skills. They designed this curriculum to de(fence) the voices, often silenced by schools, of forty-two sophomore high school migrant students attending the 2011 Migrant Summer Academy (MSA) co-organized by the Migrant Program at the Imperial Valley Office of Education (ICOE) and SDSU-Imperial Valley. The main goal of this summer academy is to enhance incoming sophomore high school migrant students’ learning processes with a non-traditional, student-centered curriculum that fosters communicative actions between teachers and students by using multidimensional language(s): visual language, written language, spoken language, and cultural language among others.

Each teacher was in charge of a group of twelve students. The faculty member supervised the teachers, provided small group coaching to students in need of extra support, and facilitated the pre-teaching and post-teaching dialogues. For four weeks, students and the teaching team a) wrote and drew their bio-poems that describe their personas and responded to the question, “Who am I?”; b) created “Cultural Tree Collages,” with pictures taken by them with disposable cameras; c) drew “Cultural Tags” that depicted in a single signature their cultural identity; and d) assembled these tags to create “Graffiti Walls.” These activities and artifacts are explained more fully in subsequent sections.

To analyze how the aforesaid assignments nurtured communicative actions between teachers and students as well as to empower students’ voices and ideas, the teaching team --the three teachers and the faculty -- met twice a day: before they began to teach and after the three hours of teaching and learning. The meeting before teaching was set to provide the space for all four members to share their ideas on how they would be working with the students on the core assignments (i.e., bio-poems, cultural tags). It is important to underscore that although the project had common-core assignments, every team member had the freedom to create her/his own way to develop communicative actions. The meeting after teaching was a debriefing session where each teacher talked about how assignments engaged students and themselves in communicative actions. The main goal for both meetings was to constantly review practices in order to refine and reshape communicative action across interdisciplinary teaching practices.

During these daily meetings, the faculty member took fieldnote descriptions of what was shared by every teacher during the meetings. The faculty member also recorded fieldnote

¹ People’s names in this article are pseudonyms.

descriptions to document what he observed in the three classrooms and outdoor activities when teachers and students were working on the core assignments. In both scenarios, writing fieldnotes was much more than “passively copying down ‘facts’ about ‘what happened’” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 8). The faculty member was involved in “active processes of interpretation and sense-making” (p. 8). These processes of constructing meaning were extended when once a week he discussed with the whole team his thoughts and understanding of what he had observed and recorded in the field: meetings, classrooms, outdoors activities. Finally, after the Migrant Summer Academy concluded, every teacher wrote a final reflection on the whole project around two main themes: how the interdisciplinary curriculum ‘bonded’ students and teachers in communicative actions and how the Migrant Summer Academy had transformed her views on teaching and learning. All these sets of data framed the thematic narrative included in this article, which is a response to the general topic or question: Can a curriculum that fosters communicative actions by combining oral, reading, and writing skills with visual expression enhance students’ language skills, critical thinking, and creativity? What follows is the analysis of common-core assignments and how those provided a place to construct communicative spaces between students and teachers.

Establishing Art: We Read, Therefore We Create

Students participating in the Migrant Summer Academy come from high schools where Visual Arts are overlooked subjects. In many cases, as they expressed throughout the Academy, Visual Arts were not even part of their curriculum activities. As Mel, a student, said, “Drawing and painting is something we did when we were in elementary school. We like to do it but now we just read and write” (personal communication, 6/21/2011). Thus, teachers and faculty, in order to set the ground for communicative actions, meticulously scaffolded an ‘intellectual commute’ from the text to oral and written language to visual expressions – sketching, drawing, painting, spraying, tagging – and back to the text (See Figure 1).

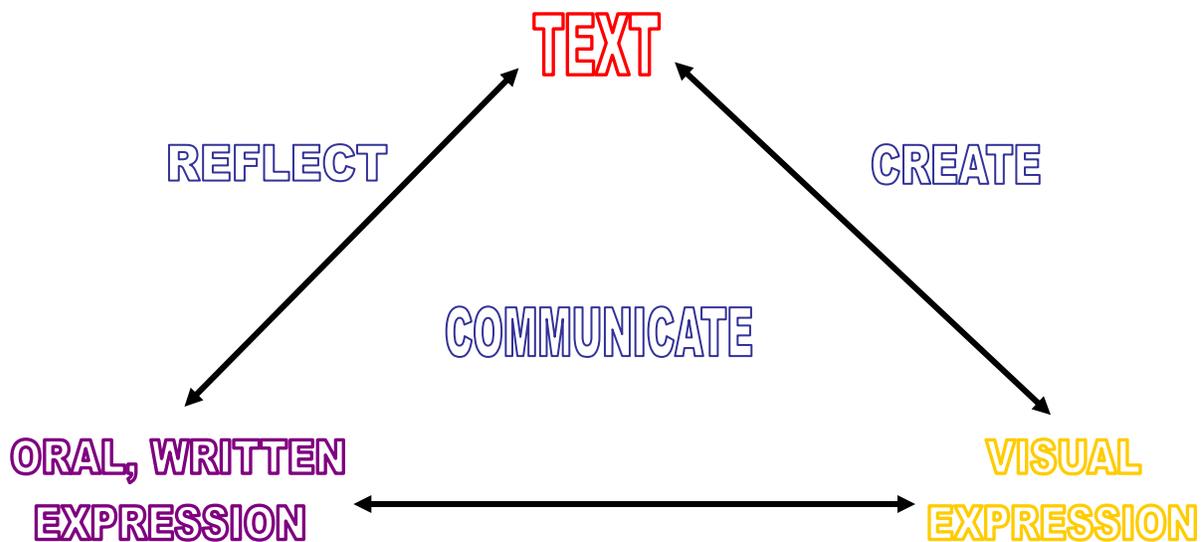


Figure 1. Intellectual commute.

The first component of this intellectual commute included a dialogic reading and analysis of contemporary written texts: Tupac Shakur's (1999) poetry, *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*, Gene Luen Yang's (2006) graphic novel *American Born Chinese*, Sandra Cisneros's (1984) short stories in *The House on Mango Street*, and the cinematographic version of Ned Vizzini's (2006) novel *It's Kind of a Funny Story*. Migrant students and teachers read extracts of those texts and proceeded, following Barrett's (1999) continuum when interpreting art: to reflect on what was read; to wonder about the author's purpose; and to respond to the opinions of others. These three activities "broke the ice" for those reticent students who struggled to share their thoughts. Etienne, a student, explained, "When I am reading and talking with you [his teacher], it does not feel like I am forced to learn. I feel like I can write like Tupac. I feel more like asking questions than answering" (personal communication, 6/23/2011). Etienne's words portray some of the features, as mentioned before, that Habermas (1985) describes when talking about communicative actions. He declares that the uses of language are "... reaching understanding ... relating to a world ... [and] reciprocally rais[ing] validity claims that can be accepted or contested" (p. 99).

The second step was to expose students to the concept that a reflection and/or a literary analysis could take the form of a drawing, a tag, and/or graffiti. The challenge at this point was two-fold: first, to convince students that everyone was able to produce a visual reflection; and, second, to stress the power of visual arts to position themselves within the students' culture and community. Some students, when they were asked to add an image to their initial written reflection, felt somehow skeptical and insecure: "I do not know how to draw," "What do I draw about?," "Draw, to express my ideas?" These reactions reflect some of the weaknesses of our current schooling, which primarily asks students to report rather than to create (Lutz Klauda, 2009; Morais & Kolinsky, 2004). Hence, as Hetland, Winner, Veenema, Sheridan and Perkins (2007) explain when describing the benefit of visual arts education, the key task for the teaching team was to explicitly show students that visual arts and language arts share common skills "that comprise high-quality thinking" (p. 1). High quality thinking in this project was defined as first, the students' ability to abstract and synthesize by using visual images what the author (i.e., Tupac, Sandra Cisneros) was communicating through their written texts; and, second, their capacity to compare and contrast their own interpretations with their peers' in order to cooperatively create productive responses (Rothstein & Santana, 2011).

The last step in this commute connected the students' visual expression back to written text. At this point students and teachers reflected on how their drawings, paintings, and/or graffiti represented their understanding of the text, as well as how much of their visual expressions were a portrait of who they are, how they think, and why they respond in certain ways. As Marshall (2008) points out in her research of cultural identity and creative processes, "We all have a cultural identity that is formed by family, community, country and the world in which we live" (p. 1); thus students should be given a chance to reflect critically on their cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, Buffington and Muth (2011) stress the importance of creating links between visual arts and literary work as a "coalition" to analyze the lives and experiences of students.

The next two sections describe how students and teachers traversed this intellectual commute by constructing a path of communicative actions nourished by oral, written, and visual reflections.

Cultural Tags: 'Depicted Me'

If graffiti is a window of culture, as has often been stated, then it is the same window that people use to look in on themselves as they actively construct the guidelines and concerns of their lives. (Phillips, 1999, p. 21)

In the Imperial Valley, like in many other places, tagging, used as group identification, is associated with gangs and street groups. Within this context, tagging is used to communicate territoriality, identity, and sentiments and often connotes violence.² Yet, tagging, utilized as an individual identification, can be a form of human art used by political activists to make statements or by individuals who want to be heard by their society (Gastman & Neelon, 2011). This idea of communication between individuals or individuals and their society framed the Cultural Tag Project. However, before students and the teaching team began to conceptualize how different artists “tag” their cultural voices and social opinions through different forms of expression, they talked about how/if tagging defined their communities and how their families, friends, and neighbors reacted to this phenomenon. The goal of this quick exercise was to demystify views on tagging by openly discussing why certain groups used this form of expression. It was important to cover this aspect because most of the students, as expressed during the dialogue, linked tagging with *cholo* [gang] activities. As Ramon said, “Tagging is for *cholos*” (personal communication, 7/6/2011). Ramon’s comment and many others are the outcome of an educational system that educates students to assume without evidence rather than to think, research, and contextualize answers.

To break this cycle of assuming without thinking, the teaching team initiated the first stage of the intellectual commute, previously described; first, by dialoguing on how individuals define and distinguish their cultural tags; second, by reflecting on and identifying the key elements that tag/depict their individuality; and third, by designing their own individual tags to communicate and express their identity.

Dialogues were framed by what Hamamura, Heines, and Paulhus (2008) call dialectical thinking, which occurs when dialoguing/communicating with others. Students and the teaching team read, discussed, and reflected on four sources:

- “Family Tree,” a poem by Tupac Shakur (1999), that starts with this stanza:
“Because we all spring/from different trees/we are not created equal . . .” (p. 115).
- “Those Who Don’t,” a short story by Sandra Cisneros (1984), explaining how safe we feel when we are surrounded by those whom we know, and yet how afraid we feel when we go to places where everyone looks different from us: “All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight” (p. 28).
- An excerpt from *American Born Chinese* (2006) in which Gene Yang portrays how a Chinese high school student (CS) refuses to be friends with a newcomer from Taiwan (TS):
CS: “You are in America, speak English”
TS: “...Eh... You-you-Chinese Person?”

² Hector Tobar, 10/10/2009, A former tagger searches for a new means of expression:
www.streetgangs.com

CS: "Yes"

TS: "...Eh...we-b-friend?"

CS: "I have enough friends" (pp. 37-38).

- And a scene from the movie *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, (2010, Anna Boden & Ryan Fleck) showing the main character, Craig, a clinically depressed teenager, talking with his psychiatrist about the pressures that teenagers experience to be successful even before they begin college.

Moving from poetry to narrative, from graphic novels to cinematographic expressions, students and the teaching team searched for how all these artists – poets, novelists, cartoonists, and actors/characters – face the process of constructing their personal cultural tags/marks by challenging the views others might have about their culture, language, personality, and/or behavior.

During the analysis of cultural tags/marks, Martha, one of the students, said, "It is amazing to see how all these artists use their own voice to express who they are. Tupac hip-hops. Sandra writes. Yang draws fun cartoons. And Craig draws buildings to express his feelings" (personal communication, 7/6/2011). Following Martha's comment, Araceli added, "More than that, they found a way to talk with us about themselves and we enjoyed reading and knowing about them" (personal communication, 7/6/2011). And Seraphim, in one of her written reflections stated, "They all seem *como si tuviesen un problema que resolver* [as if they had a problem to solve]. I think they write and draw to feel better about themselves" (personal communication, 7/6/2011).



Figure 2. Fatima's cultural tag "Mask".

After reflecting on the expressions created by other artists, students began to construct their Cultural Tags by drawing a Tag that symbolizes who they are, their voice, and their view about today's society. Fatima, one of the students, sketched a Cultural Tag (See Figure

2) titled “Mask,” which portrayed rephrasing her words: how people hide behind their masks, never unveiling their true feelings or their true selves. Presenting her Tag, she depicted herself, “You think I am quiet and shy. But I am not. I have thousands of things I want to share with you. There is a person behind the mask” (personal communication, 7/7/2011). Moreover, when connecting “Mask” with the readings, she expressed in a written reflection that Tupac, Sandra Cisneros, Yang, and Craig taught her to be proud of where she comes from and to value her past because “in the end that is what makes me, ‘me’” (personal communication, 7/7/2011).



Figure 3: Alexia's cultural tag “Believe”.

Another student, Alexia, focused her Cultural Tag (See Figure 3) on the word *believe*. Describing her tag she said,

My parents came to this country because they believed that it would be better for us. More opportunities, a chance to be successful. I also believe that I can be successful. My tag shows who I am, a believer like Tupac who felt like a rose growing in concrete, but he was strong enough to show everyone that he was smart. I am like Esperanza, a strong woman who wanted to have her own house. They always have a positive attitude *aunque se les tuerza* [even though things do not go their way]. I would like to think my community sees me as a positive person. (personal communication, 7/7/2011)

The two Cultural Tags (See Figures 2 and 3) and the others created by their classmates are examples of the communicative actions created by migrant students and teachers. Drawing provided students with the opportunity to voice their cultural identity. Shifting from the written word to visual expressions lowered the affective filter LEP students have when attempting to use their new language in academic settings (Cummins, 2000). Moreover,

linking language and art wherein language can be displayed empowered students by providing them with a new tool to depict their thoughts. As Toto, one of the students, said, “It is the first time I used drawing to answer questions. My teachers always ask me to answer questions repeating what they told me before. Drawing makes me think and I like it” (personal communication 7/6/2011). Cultural Tags reinforced the foundation of a Participatory Pedagogy, which underlines the idea of communication between students and teachers as the core for meaningful, cooperative learning across the disciplines of language arts and art.

Graffiti Walls: Me in We

Following the Cultural Tags Project, students designed Graffiti Walls including all the Cultural Tags created by the students in each class. To connect the Cultural Tags and the Graffiti Walls, students and teachers visited The Goffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles to see *Art in the Streets*. This exhibit “traces the development of graffiti and street art from the 1970s to the global movement it has become today, concentrating on key cities where a unique visual language or attitude has evolved.”³ Observing and analyzing the art work displayed at the museum exposed students to artists such as Lee Quiñones, Margaret Kilgallen, and Shepard Fairey, who have used graffiti and street art to voice their thoughts, as well as to the work of other artists, like Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat, whose pieces also reflect the art made within a community.

Jaro, one of the students, was surprised to see these art pieces in a museum: “I always imagined a museum like a dark, quiet room with old people watching portraits of kings and queens. Here everyone is talking and having fun” (personal communication, 7/12/2011) Listening to Jaro’s words, it was obvious that for most of the students this visit to MOCA was their first time in a museum. Beyond the goal set by the teaching team, which was to connect and to provide a frame for the Cultural Tags and the Graffiti Walls, visiting the museum revealed to the students that art is a human, communicative action used by people who want to share with others how they relate to their world by visually expressing claims –art work – that can be accepted or contested (Habermas, 1985).



Figure 4: Cultural tags into graffiti walls.

³ MOCA-Pressroom, 3/9/2011, *Art in the Streets*: <http://www.moca.org/audio/blog/?p=1522>

The teaching team developed the Graffiti Walls Project in order to extend the socio-cultural relation between students and their environment expressed in their Cultural Tags by combining these individual expressions in a communal piece that embodied the idea of shared language across personal statements. Starting with an empty piece of butcher paper (See Figure 4) students connected their individual expressions by talking and analyzing how these pieces better fitted together to construct a stronger common claim. While drawing, coloring, painting and spraying the Graffiti Walls, students and teachers continued reading and analyzing poems by Tupac Shakur: “Where There Is Will There Is Way”; short stories by Sandra Cisneros: “The Three Sisters,” “A House On My Own,” and “Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes”; and they finished reading Yang’s graphic novel *American Born Chinese*. As Cummins (1994) explains,

Language is always used for some purpose, and thus, we must examine what purposes of language are promoted in the classroom interactions that students experience. Language is also never devoid of content, so the nature of the content that students are exposed to in learning [it] must be considered. (p. 33)

Maintaining the intellectual commute by reading, reflecting, expressing, and connecting was key when showing evidence that art could be a vehicle for students and teachers who challenge themselves to equally own and use academic language and its content.

Little by little the empty paper became a colorful wall displaying students’ cultural tags that were enriched by connecting all the individual expressions. As can be observed in Figure 5, when Fatima drew her tag “Mask” on the graffiti wall, she added drawings around the mask representing an imaginary forest that protects her. Then, she drew a big eye after one her classmates told her that even though she tries to hide, somebody is always looking at of her. These dialogues are examples of the artistic synergies conveyed in the graffiti wall. Teachers working in the Migrant Summer Academy highlighted the transformation students showed throughout the academy. Esmeralda, one of the teachers, said,



When they [students] came, they were quiet; nobody wanted to talk. Now I am looking at them drawing and spraying at the graffiti wall and they do not stop talking. They are always asking questions. When I am coloring with them, I do not even feel that I am teaching, but I am. (personal communication, 7/13/2011).

Figure 5: We, the graffiti wall.

Loreta and Celia, the two other teachers, were amazed by the skills their students displayed when constructing the graffiti wall. In one of the debriefings they both shared, “They [the students] are unbelievable. They spray like professional graffiti artists. But the most incredible thing is that those who were quiet during our reading activities are now talking non-stop about their drawings, the readings, and most importantly about themselves” (personal communication, 7/13/2011).

Every project – Poems, Collages, Tags, and Graffiti – designed by the teaching team for the Migrant Summer Academy promoted communication between students and teachers. Moreover, the graffiti wall was a comprehensive activity to fuse all the communicative actions spawned throughout the session. As Nino, one of the students described, “Every project was amazing, but the graffiti wall was just so different that it captivated me” (personal communication, 7/14/2011). Pamela, his classmate agreed: “It was nice to see that despite everyone’s own vision on the graffiti wall, we were able to pull off an awesome piece that represented all of us” (personal communication, 7/14/2011).

Conclusions: Art, Communication and Education

At the beginning of the 2011 Migrant Summer Academy when the teaching team asked the students to share their views on reading, writing, and visual arts, most of them responded that reading and writing were boring and that the required classes to graduate from high school did not include visual arts. Mario, a student, summarized it when he said,

We read to answer questions. We write to explain what the teacher said. We are not asked to write about what we think. Forget about drawing. The funny thing is that when we are bored in class listening to the teacher talk, the first thing we do is to draw something.
(personal communication, 6/22/2011)

Reading through Mario’s words and other comments shared by his peers, it is obvious that high school students typically spend most of their language learning time in passive activities. Though it is extremely important that students learn how to construct and present arguments, to comprehend a text and/or to write an essay, it is equally important that students be exposed to visual and performing arts and also acquire competency and skills when responding to a reading or when expressing their views about themselves and/or social issues.

The 2011 Summer Academy provided students with the space to combine oral, reading, and writing skills with visual expression. Art enhanced students’ language skills because they were able to do the following:

- a) Experiment with different forms of expression: “All the activities gave me the freedom to complete an assignment fulfilling my own vision, rather than a set of instructions that demanded to be followed” (Lupe, student, personal communication, 7/14/2011).
- b) Own their work: “ Art allowed students to take ownership of their learning, and when they do that, they want their work to be their absolute best” (Celia, teacher, personal communication, 7/12/2011).
- c) Empower themselves: “Through language and art I learned to appreciate the strange and the unspoken, the underground work of those who hide in the shadows.

I embraced my culture, my roots. I'm a new person who is no longer ashamed”
(Fatima, student, personal communication, 7/13/2011).

To obtain these outcomes, teachers challenged themselves by seeing and analyzing with different eyes, they challenged students to create new ways to voice their thoughts and ideas. Teachers and students engaged in art and communication that transcended departmentalized approaches to instruction. Students in the 2011 Migrant Summer Academy learned that meaningful education – teaching and learning – becomes an art of communicative languages. This art of communicative languages informed the art exhibit (See Figure 6) created by students and teachers, which included the graffiti walls, cultural tags, their poems, and cultural collages among other pieces.



Figure 6: We de(fence)d and communicated.

Implications: Communicative Schooling

In *L'escola contra el món* [School against the world], Luri (2008) describes an encounter between Socrates, the Greek philosopher, and some of his pupils:

Un dia que Sòcrates dialogava amb un grup de joves . . . es va fixar que n'hi havia un que no obria la boca. Tots els altres li feien preguntes, li donaven respostes . . . però aquell continuava immutable . . . Finalment Sòcrates el va mirar i li va demanar: 'Parla, perquè et vegi' [One day Socrates was talking with a group of young people . . . he saw that one of them was completely quiet. Everyone else was asking him questions, answering questions . . . but one remained quiet . . . Finally Socrates looked at him and told him: 'Talk to me so I can see you']. (p. 213)

Nowadays, schools have thousands of students like the one described above. They come to class and sit quietly; perhaps they have nothing to say; maybe they do not understand what

the teacher is saying; or they do not know how to express their thoughts. Whichever the case, they are missing an important aspect of education, which is to communicate with peers and teachers. The challenge for schools is to find ways that teachers and students can effectively communicate, which enriches learning (Castells, 2011). In order to be able to listen, read and write, it is important that students use, on a daily basis, other forms of expression – drawing, painting, dancing – to create communicative actions with their teachers and peers when analyzing texts and/or expressing personal experiences and feelings.

The model described in this article is presented as a tool for fostering critical and creative thinking, a multidimensional skill that equally feeds from every subject – Language Arts, Art, Math, Science, Social Studies –taught at school. Privileging one subject over others tracks and delimits students' thinking. Rather, let students talk, draw, write, paint and tag so we can see them.

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