

## Children's activism and guerrilla philosophy

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores how engaging in and with philosophy in the streets has unique and special potential for children doing philosophy both inside and outside the classroom. We highlight techniques drawn from research into the political, social and activist potential of street art, and we illustrate how to apply these techniques in a P4C context in what we call guerrilla philosophy. We argue that guerrilla philosophy is a pedagogically powerful method to philosophically engage students whose ages range from 11-13. In calling attention to the power of guerrilla philosophy to engage students philosophically, we are tacitly assuming a Deweyan philosophical approach (Dewey 1916, 1925, 1934), which emphasises (1) the importance of promoting civic-mindedness as a social value; (2) the reliance on imaginative, creative and experiential forms of learning as essential to education ; and (3) a vision of the classroom as an embodiment of the larger civic community to which we all belong and in which we all must cooperate and engage (Dewey 1916). This paper traces these three themes in Dewey's philosophical views of education and democracy, and considers how they are given a twenty-first century interpretation through street art, guerrilla philosophy and children's activism.

### **Key words**

activism, community engagement, community of inquiry, guerrilla philosophy, P4C, street art

## Introduction

### *A personal story (Karen Shuker)*

Growing up in Paekakariki, a small seaside village up the coast from Wellington, a painted sentence was scrawled on the public toilets at Campbell Park, my local playground, saying: 'A little boy in a field - happy because he doesn't know'. Know what?, I wondered as a primary-aged child. In a take on the New Zealand author Margaret Mahy's book, *The Lion in the Meadow*, I imagined a lion was lurking somewhere in the field with him. But would he find out? And what was going to happen? I was fearful it was an unhappy ending.

As a child, this painted sentence bothered me. It was unfinished. I wanted to know for sure what it was that the little boy in the field didn't know. Indeed, it irked me every time I went to the park; so much so that when I simply wanted to have fun going down the slide, I purposefully didn't look at this painted quote taunting me from the wall. No one else ever mentioned it. One day I asked my father about it. He responded that it had been written by a slightly unhinged woman who was an artist who lived in our town. I wondered what she had in mind when she wrote it—was this the ramblings of a mad person? Was it profound street art or was it merely graffiti? Or, as much as I didn't want to suspect this about my own father, was Dad's view possibly wrong?

As a teenager, I saw it differently. It seemed to imply that not knowing was wrong. How could the boy be happily sitting in that field when he was clearly in terrible danger? Which led me to think: Is knowledge more important than happiness? If it will make him unhappy, is it better to stay ignorant? If he's happy does it matter if he doesn't know? And how would he know that he doesn't know? Is it a metaphor for having cancer before it is discovered? Is it being cheated on by a boyfriend and you don't know about it yet? Are we all walking around happy in ignorant bliss? Is our happiness an illusion? And what *exactly* is happiness anyway? It drove me mad.

When I revisited the park in my early twenties, the sentence had been painted over. It was almost a relief—maybe now it wouldn't bother me! But it has always stuck in my mind. This one sentence that generated so many questions.

This story illustrates the power of philosophy and the power of street art, integrated into a single painted sentence. When philosophical questions are inserted into our ordinary lives, as happens when philosophical musings appear in the streets, it can have a transformative effect on the ordinary passer-by.

***Sharing a connection*** (Sondra Bacharach)

When Karen Shuker relayed this story to me, we realised an important connection between us, and between my research in the university in philosophy of art and her teaching aesthetics in her philosophy for children class at intermediate school: it highlighted the unique potential of harnessing street art's capacity to extend our philosophical thinking beyond the traditional confines of the classroom. My own research interests are in the philosophy of art, so appreciating the philosophical issues at stake in street art was nothing new. What was new and exciting was thinking about street art within the P4C context. As this story demonstrates, street art has a special power to engage with children in philosophical thinking. What an intriguing connection!

This paper explores how engaging in and with philosophy in the streets has unique and special potential for children doing philosophy both inside and outside the classroom. My research in the philosophy of art is used to defend Shuker's use of guerrilla philosophy in a P4C context as a pedagogically powerful method to engage students philosophically at the Intermediate level (children who have just finished their primary schooling, and range in age from 11-13). In calling attention to the power of guerrilla philosophy to engage students philosophically, we are tacitly assuming a Deweyan philosophical approach (Dewey 1916, 1925, 1934), which emphasises (1) the importance of promoting civic-mindedness as a social value; (2) the reliance on imaginative, creative and experiential forms of learning as essential to education; and (3) a vision of the classroom as an embodiment of the larger civic community to which we all belong and in which we all must cooperate and engage (Dewey 1916). This paper will trace these three themes in Dewey's original philosophical views of education and democracy, and considers how they are given a twenty-first century interpretation through street art, guerrilla philosophy and children's activism.

**The power of street art** (Karen Shuker and Sondra Bacharach)

Very broadly, street art is any art that is made on property without the owner's permission (Riggle 2010; Bacharach 2015; Chackal forthcoming). Whether consent is necessary for street art is currently under debate among philosophers of art (Bacharach argues that lacking consent is a necessary feature of street art, while Riggle denies it, and Chackal's account sidesteps this concept entirely). Regardless of one's stand on this matter, street artists can certainly make other kinds of art. Sometimes they make street art; but other times, they are commissioned, supported

or endorsed by institutional bodies, for display in controlled environments—consider, for example, many artworks that are commissioned for shopping centres in Melbourne.<sup>1</sup>

Typically, such art is literally on the streets, though it need not be. For example, Banksy (a street artist whose identity is unknown and who makes street art, guerrilla art, activist art and various other types of art—see [www.banksy.co.uk](http://www.banksy.co.uk)), has notoriously inserted guerrilla artworks into art museums. But street art can show up anywhere - on bathroom walls, inside abandoned houses, in public transport systems and other unlikely spots. Street art ranges in quality from undecipherable scribbles that barely qualify as art (whether graffiti qualifies as bad street art, or is not art at all is up for philosophical debate) to stunningly beautiful masterpieces requiring the skills of a traditionally trained artist. We encounter it on our daily walks to work, as we run our errands and make our way around town. Some street art is perfectly ordinary and completely forgetful. Increasingly, however, street artists have been exploring the profoundly transformative impact that effective street art can have on how we see and live in the world. In this, street art shares similarities to philosophy; the following discussion explores how.

Street art is usually neither supported by an art museum nor celebrated by highly regarded art critics. Of course, sometimes artists who make street art are also commissioned by art museums, galleries and other artworld institutions to create art. When artists make works that are commissioned, however, they are not making street art. This is possible because street artists are perfectly capable of making art that is not street art (just as painters may sometimes make art that is not painting, so too street artists might well make art that is not street art).<sup>2</sup> But, street art must stand on its own to earn its place in the world. This art is inherently democratic—the people get to decide to keep it or overwrite it, and no fancy artworld institutions can overthrow the democracy of the street (though it's perfectly legal for a city council worker to paint or 'buff' over a genuine work of street art, as has been done even to

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://melbourneartcritic.com/tag/dr-geoff-hogg/>. Thanks to an anonymous referee for highlighting this case.

<sup>2</sup> What is less obvious is what to call works made by practising street artists who receive some form of public or institutional support and who have full control over their work—does the resulting work qualify as street art, or is the work simply public art that is made by someone who also is a self-identified street artist? See Bacharach (2015) for a discussion around the differences between public art and street art.

some of the most famous street artworks, Banksy's included—usually to everyone's great dismay).<sup>3</sup>

Art on the streets must compete for attention amongst all the ordinary items that fill our visual field; the more an artwork stands out, defies the ordinary, breaks the boundaries of the normal, the more likely we are to see and appreciate the work. Street art shows us other ways of seeing and visualising the world. These works have the capacity to make us think outside the box, to raise collective awareness of how we live in the world, and to shine a light on other ways we might do so.

When yarn bombers (people who create street artworks using knitting as the artistic medium) crochet the potholes, their work has the capacity to raise collective awareness of the importance of valuing our public goods. When guerrilla gardeners transform street corners into a bounty of food for the homeless, their work has the capacity to raise our collective awareness about poverty, and their work models a way for individuals to help make the world a better place. When someone 'wraps' a dumpster in beautiful wallpaper, he or she invites us to reconsider why our personal spaces are so warm and inviting, but our public spaces so cold and depressing.

These forms of street art are activist, inviting us to change our world. Art may be used to make it a better place. It is also art that fosters a community spirit, by raising our awareness about issues and problems within the community. Street artists show us other ways that the world might be. For example, they reveal how we can use pretty things to improve the functionality of our roads; they show us how we can make our land more productive and more beautiful by replacing council grassy areas with food for the poor; they show us how we can create a more beautiful urban environment. When they do so, these artists literally show us new ways of thinking about the world, about our place in it, and about what we can do to change our world from the place we find ourselves. Street artists who make such work express their own individuality and autonomy of thinking, and show us how art can be used to let everyone's ideas be heard. This kind of street art, in other words, is a grassroots and activist way of generating political and social engagement to challenge the status quo—values that are central to Dewey's commitment to promoting civic-mindedness as a social value.

Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate that not all street artists do positive work of this kind—some make the environment look ugly, some do not have permission

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<sup>3</sup> Depending on one's interpretation of the artworld, artworld institutions could conceivably regulate street art and the "democracy" of street art. See Bacharach 2015 for a discussion of this. Thanks for an anonymous referee for raising this point.

to make their art, and some break the law when they make their art. This fact can be a useful segue into questions of ethics, how aesthetics and ethics interact, and what role the law plays in the realm of public space. Children can think about the role of laws, when and why laws should be upheld, and what happens if people do not abide by the laws.

In the next section, we aim to draw a direct parallel between the street artist's activist approach to their impact on their community, and the philosophy student's role as actively encouraging civic-mindedness with philosophy bombs—an act that combines reason, critical thinking, imagination and creativity (Bleazby 2012). To do so, we shall explore in more detail how philosophy bombing succeeds in this socially-oriented, civically-minded and democratic endeavour. We argue in this section that street art represents a viable tool with which to foster imaginative, creative and experiential forms of learning, which reflect Dewey's theory of education.

### **Harnessing street art's power for philosophy: Philosophy bombing**

If yarn bombing involves 'bombing' the streets with yarn, philosophy bombing involves spreading philosophy throughout the neighbourhood. Shuker's P4C class engaged in just such an activity in Newtown, the neighbourhood near South Wellington Intermediate School where she takes P4C for years 7 and 8 students. Philosophy Bombing, as they called it, was an injection of creative, critical thinking and questioning into everyday life, in places where normally a question such as these would not be seen.

Students developed their own philosophical questions designed to provoke, challenge and undermine the ordinary tacit assumptions of the inhabitants of the targeted neighbourhood. They plastered these all over—taped onto the monkey bars of the local playground, inserted into library books, taped up alongside advertisements on electrical poles, and even furtively introduced into the McDonald's, the local youth hangout. Because the philosophy questions weren't the norm in the community's everyday environment, it seemed as though they would attract *more* attention than they would if there had been an allocated spot specifically designed for anyone to post a provocative question. Shuker's P4C class basically treated the entire neighbourhood as a giant classroom—a way of expanding the classroom into the larger civic community to which those students also belong. In this respect, the very act of engaging in philosophy bombing is a way of bringing to life the three central tenets of Dewey's philosophy of education listed earlier—to

promote civic-mindedness as a social value, to encourage students to engage in imaginative, creative and experiential forms of learning, and expand the classroom to include the larger, civic community.

Where street artists insert art that challenges our mainstream assumptions, philosophy bombers insert philosophical ideas that are equally non-conformist. The philosophy bombing for these emerging adolescents was an activity of behaving in a non-conformist way. Students in years 7 and 8 (roughly ages 11-13) are of an age which involves a lot of social conditioning—students are often conditioned to measure how they perceive themselves based on how others perceive them; as a result, students often understand themselves in terms of the expectations that others placed upon them. This activity turned this conditioning, and its associated perceptions and expectations, on its head. An urban environment through which these young people would normally walk became a space in which they had been given permission to make their own impact.

Philosophy bombing, in other words, promotes civic-mindedness in part by raising awareness, through such bombs, about how individuals work together collectively and cooperatively within a particular community. These bombs raise this awareness by inviting community members to imagine alternative ways the world might be, to conceive of alternative realities than the ones that operate in our ordinary day-to-day lives, and to invite community members to take positive steps to become more self-aware and self-empowered in our development as persons.

### **Philosophy bombing and the Community of Inquiry**

Having drawn relevant parallels between the role of street artists and pre-teen P4C students intervening in the streets, we end our paper with a discussion of the implications of taking P4C out of the classroom and into the streets. In this section, we discuss the benefits and disadvantages of such an expansive approach. First, bringing philosophy into the streets represents one way of expanding the notion of the community of inquiry (CoI), in ways that are consistent with Dewey's conception of the student as situated within a social environment and of knowledge as essentially involving active learning. Broadly understood, a CoI is a community in which students are involved in a philosophical examination of a particular issue. In this case, students choose the topics for their philosophy bombing by drawing on and synthesising the ideas they have covered during the year, by reflecting on their

stimulus material from their classroom CoI, and by deciding how to transform it into a stimulus material for their community. The open discussion around what questions are selected for bombing means again that students are treated as co-inquirers while the teacher is responsible for maintaining rigour in the quality of the discussion. So the experience of preparing the materials for philosophy bombing is essentially modelled on a CoI.

Philosophy bombing a public space is also a way of inviting students to extend their CoI from their classroom into the neighbourhood community itself. Just as street artists have moved their art out of the museum or gallery and into the streets, where its impact and meaning really count, so too philosophy bombing brings the CoI out of the classroom and into the streets. Philosophy, like street art, is about thinking about important issues, about raising awareness of things that matter to us, about fostering a community of inquiry and developing and promoting (student) agency and autonomy. P4C makes achieving these goals possible because it brings philosophy to students. And philosophy bombing takes this one step further—by taking philosophy out of the classroom. Shuker's strategy requires that she and her students model and embody the same values and principles that artists do when they bring their art to the streets. Philosophy bombing, in other words, does not just bring philosophy to students, but it also makes a place for philosophical students to effectively introduce the CoI concept into the local neighbourhoods. Philosophy bombing is one way of developing situated cognition whereby students engage with active learning in a social environment.

The children had great fun sharing questions that they had explored throughout the year in the classroom with the public at large through their philosophy bombs. They encouraged change through this form of 'activism'—through the public discovering and comprehending questions that challenge, energise, invigorate and engage contemplation on a deeper level than they might otherwise do.

The very idea of extending the CoI into the local neighbourhood is itself at the heart of the central view that John Dewey (1916) endorses about how we ought to conceive of schools—viz, that the education within the classroom naturally expands into the broader civic community. In this respect, philosophy bombing helps students learn how they might extend, apply and imagine philosophical ideas within their broader social community; it helps students visualise and imagine (literally and figuratively) the ways that their in-school learning can be translated into a larger, more expansive community of inquiry that breaks down the school walls.



Of course, there is a relevant disanalogy here between the CoI constructed *within* the P4C classroom and the CoI that P4C students are attempting to construct in their philosophy bombings *outside* of the classroom. For one, the P4C classroom CoI is always conducted with a teacher who facilitates the discussion and ensures philosophical rigour in that discussion. When we engage in philosophy bombing, there is no teacher. Moreover, while there is a group of recipients of the bombs, viz, the neighbourhood community members who read the bombs, there is no discussion amongst them, and hence no role for anyone to facilitate or ensure philosophical rigour or engagement.<sup>4</sup>

We acknowledge that this is a problem with the current model. But it is not an insurmountable problem. Some extensions of the philosophy bombing project could address these issues in exciting and productive ways. For example, we can imagine that after 'bombing' the neighbourhood, we could arrange community interventions, perhaps even facilitated by the students themselves. In such a case, students may be responsible for running the CoI, meeting with the neighbourhood community members about the ideas and questions raised in the bombing. If we were to take this one step further, we might draw up a flyer or make a poster reflecting the ideas and thoughts articulated during the CoI to share with the larger neighbourhood public. In such a case, it is possible we would need to refine and narrow down the philosophy bombing topics to generate a useful and productive CoI. These additional opportunities suggest different ways of bringing together philosophy, community engagement and activism. Our own exploration of philosophy bombing is just the beginning—how any particular community chooses to respond to the provocation or stimulus is up to them.

We suggest that philosophy bombing as described here, and in the possible future directions that we have sketched, is in the spirit of Dewey's philosophy of education, in two respects. First, this approach emphasises the degree to which our own personal philosophical inquiry is embedded within the larger communal inquiry of our social environment (Bleazby 2012; Dewey 1934), which enables us to triangulate between our own personal perspectives, and those divergent perspectives from

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<sup>4</sup> Some artists have recognised this problem. For example, Fiona Hillary curated the Urban Laboratory, a collaboration between RMIT Art in Public Spaces and the City of Melbourne's Community Safety Team. According to Hillary, 'The project aims to investigate current issues impacting Hosier Lane and Rutledge Lane, and address these issues through innovation and creative risk. The project is designed to explore perceptions of safety through a twelve month engagement strategy for the site involving teams of artists creating various forms of artistic interventions' (<http://www.fionahillary.com/urban-laboratory-city-of-melbourne>, accessed 19 October 2016). Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this case to our attention.

those around us. Second, this approach highlights the way in which this form of communally engaged learning is also a skills-based, learning-by-doing model of educational inquiry, which reflects Dewey's pragmatist spirit.

### **Philosophy bombing empowers students**

A further consequence of our expansive approach to philosophy in the streets is that philosophy bombing's anonymity empowers students by (a) dismantling stereotypes of children and (b) providing a way for children's voices to be heard as equals. Philosophy bombing requires anonymity. This has several benefits for students who are often not taken seriously by adults. First, due to the anonymous nature of the bombs viewers are more likely to think exclusively about the issues and questions at hand, rather than focusing on the person who produced them (and whether they should take that person seriously). This small act introduces an additional dimension of democracy for children, by giving them a chance to be heard.

Finally, philosophy bombing lets *philosophy* be taken seriously. Because ideas are disseminated through anonymous bombs, they are disconnected from the people, agendas and stereotypes with which philosophy is often associated. That means that the ideas are evaluated on their own, without regard to the person expressing them, or their affiliations. Viewers are able to examine the philosophical ideas on their own philosophical merits, not based on the perceived power of the person who makes them. Philosophy bombing encourages its viewers and audience to respect the power of ideas for what they are, not for the power of the person who utters them.

### **Conclusion: Philosophy as transformative experience**

Conceiving of philosophy bombing as an extension of P4C is underwritten by a larger, broader assumption about what it means to engage in philosophy. We argue that philosophy, and philosophy bombing in particular, can offer a transformative experience to its practitioners (Paul 2015): to conceive the neighbourhood community as a possible forum and location for a community of inquiry, to imagine philosophy as a way of empowering students, not just in the classroom but in their ordinary lives in their neighbourhood community. It encourages people to think philosophically as part of their day-to-day lives, to see reflective awareness as part of one's ordinary existence; these are all grounded in a conception of philosophy as a transformative experience.

Treating philosophy as a transformative experience acknowledges that philosophy has an intimate connection to one's most deeply held beliefs, values and ideas—the ones that make you the person that you are. To engage in the process of reflecting on those values is to undergo a particular kind of transformative experience—one that raises self-awareness, that connects you to the world and to the people around you. Moreover, these personal transformations that result from engaging in philosophy highlight the central role that a community of inquiry plays in giving students access to knowledge and understanding of themselves and the world around them in ways that is not available to philosophy as it is traditionally or more formally studied, particularly at the tertiary level.

We believe that P4C provides the personal growth opportunities to students, in part because it accepts the notion of philosophy as providing transformative experiences. Philosophy bombing represents a unique opportunity for extending the same concept of philosophy as providing transformative experiences to our neighbourhoods. We think that such an extension would help make philosophy have a great impact on our budding philosophers as individuals, and on the world and community in which we live. This is at the heart of Dewey's philosophy of education.

This paper provides a sketch of the approach one can take to integrating philosophy, community and activism. We acknowledge that this is merely a starting point. We imagine that there are as many different ways of extending these ideas into meaningful, transformative experiences for those communities of peoples who are interested in engaging in such experiences. We hope that other philosophers, educators and activists will add to the body of knowledge on this topic.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> We would like to thank the editors and two anonymous referees for very useful improvements to this paper.

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