

# MAXIMIZING THE USE OF POETRY AND ART IN PUBLIC SPACES FOR PROMOTING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Tema

Au fil du temps, les graffitis ont inspiré des expositions d'art et de poésie par des jeunes marginalisés. Les graffitis, autrefois exclus des musées d'élite, gagnent désormais en popularité et sont conservés dans les espaces publics des aéroports, des métros, des parcs, des coins de rue et même des chantiers de construction. Cet article met en lumière Hope at Hand, Inc., un fournisseur à but non lucratif établi du nord de la Floride qui utilise des expositions d'art thérapeutique et de poésie dans les espaces publics pour aider les jeunes marginalisés et incarcérés à reconnaître et à surmonter les circonstances qui limitent leur participation réussie à la société. Le mémoire en six mots (6WM) est proposé pour inspirer la poésie graffiti et la création artistique pour une meilleure compréhension de la compréhension culturelle. L'article passe en revue les expositions d'art internationales qui revoient les façons dont les musées peuvent décoloniser et soutenir davantage l'engagement communautaire et l'apprentissage inclusif des langues. Les leçons apprises démontreront les façons dont l'exposition de poésie et d'art visuel peut engager les jeunes et créer des espaces pour promouvoir la sensibilisation culturelle. Ce cadre d'intervention holistique intègre la poésie, les meilleures pratiques muséales et les arts pour relier et autonomiser les vies. Il comble un vide critique dans les connaissances et la pratique entre les arts, les études muséales, le développement du langage, la santé publique et la citoyenneté, en tenant compte de la recherche basée sur le lieu pour créer une société plus bienveillante et inclusive avec les arts.

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## Introduction

Graffiti is writing or drawings made illicitly on a wall or other surfaces in public places. Graffiti has existed since ancient times, with examples dating back to the Roman Empire. Price-Dennis and Sealey-Ruiz (2021) observed that graffiti, like poetry, has historically been leveraged as a tool of protest, such as with Black Lives Matter, helping to capture current realities and imagine new ones into existence. Graffiti may be used in multilingual ways. It has been used sometimes for political protest (Dalla Torre, 2018). Graffiti adds to the linguistic landscape that consists of visual road signs and includes street art and graffiti (Pennycook, 2009). A rich linguistic landscape for language learners encourages students to talk together, write, draw, paint, and dance.

Graffiti is writing and art that freely expresses human consciousness. The potential for using graffiti to teach how to express the written and spoken word may be emancipatory. Education in the

context of freedom is humanizing as opposed to dehumanizing (Freire, 1970). Decolonization is an integral part of this process.

Over time graffiti evolved as a visual art teaching strategy. In practice, the graffiti wall strategy involves students brainstorming, sharing opinions, and expressing emotions, through art and poetry on large sheets of chart paper. Casino (2019) stated that graffiti is an effective and creative form of communication. "It carries high-value, because it is imbued with the ability to link people of all ages, colors, and communities, regardless of cultural racial, or lingual differences, in a way that nothing other than art can". Rodríguez-Valls, Kofford, and Morales (2012) reported their case study of using graffiti wall poetry for fostering language and literacy development in forty-five schools that served linguistically diverse migrant students. Their findings supported combining language arts with visuals.

Beck (2010) noted in modern times that poetry has largely appeared within the pages of a book or journal. However, she observed that poetry may surprise us by turning up “off the page” in totally unexpected public places. Queensbound, a public poetry project that started in 2018, mounted poetry on placards in subways and buses, and projected it onto bridges and buildings in Queens, New York. Poetry in any language is a means of communicating, teaching, healing, resisting, and reflecting on the larger human drama of refuge, fight, and the pursuit of freedom for all. Marshall and Rogers (2017) stated that poetry serves as counter-narratives to the images of the squalid, the waste, the isolation, and the vacancy of the conditions of the city. Poetry may be curated in public exhibitions to effectively extend the boundaries of museums and take a larger role in promoting cultural awareness and language development. International art exhibitions may re-envision the ways museums can support more community engagement and inclusive language learning.

## The Context

Hope at Hand, Inc. is a recognized north Florida service provider specializing in improving the social, emotional skills, and mental health of struggling youth populations. Jacksonville, Florida like many southern United States cities has struggled with breaking the shackles of decolonization by removing confederate monuments that stand as stark symbols of racism and pain for many of its African American and Native American citizens. According to Wash (2018, August) blending poetry with art and wellness strategies creates a safe environment for participants to realize their own abilities, cope with their extraordinary stresses of life, and become better able to contribute to their communities. Poetry and art facilitate hope and resilience. Since 2009, Hope at Hand has developed from a small grassroots nonprofit to one that now provides services to a wide range of populations and community organizations, including the annual Jacksonville Poetry Festival. Hope at Hand staff members have specialized training in education, meditation, poetry therapy, and counseling.

Hope at Hand, Inc., an urban nonprofit organization, partnered with the Univer-

sity of North Florida's, MOCA, the Museum of Contemporary Art and exhibited poetry and visual art in public spaces by marginalized youth to develop language skills, resilience, social skills, and reframe their life stories from adversity to hope. The organization serves a population of preliminary English speakers with some multi-lingual participants. There are face to face and virtual workshops.

An example of a workshop is the poetry walk. Students are provided examples of poetry at museums and with existing poetry exhibits. Discussions between the students and facilitators developed consciousness and knowledge of poetry. Students tried out writing their own poems with some poems being included in the future poetry walk. A poetry walk experience included performances and exhibits by at-risk youth from an international airport, construction site, and storefronts. The benefits of the project included reflection on art in public spaces, performing poetry expressively, and creating exhibits for public spaces. A critical void is filled with knowledge and practice between the arts and citizenship with place-based research in creating a more kind and inclusive society.

Creating poetry in public spaces can be an effective way of helping clients in recovery, increasing organizational impact, humanizing the community, and increasing archival research data. According to Clawson and Coolbaugh (2001), findings show that arts-based programs for juvenile offenders are highly transformative for the participants. These programs support the premise that participation in arts programming enhances protective factors that enable youth to lead productive lives. Poetry in public spaces may take a larger role in healing, advocacy, politics, research, and community well-being. Groups served by Hope at Hand consistently indicated in satisfaction surveys that the participants would like to attend other sessions and that they found the sessions beneficial.



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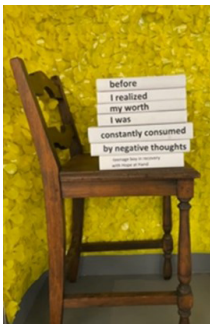
**Graffiti is writing and art that freely expresses human consciousness. The potential for using graffiti to teach how to express the written and spoken word may be emancipatory.**

## Poetry in Unexpected Places

Poetry may be used in unexpected places such as the baggage claim area, storefront windows and doors, sidewalks, and construction sites. An example of a poetry exhibit may be seen in Figures 1a and 1b, which is from the airport baggage claim area. The exhibit looks like stacks of books. Then looking closer, each stack of books is a single poem. The youth's lives are open books for all the public to read. An example of one of these follows.

*Before  
I realized  
my worth  
I was  
constantly consumed  
by negative thought*

The poem illustrates a common refrain for those in recovery. The exhibit demonstrates what researchers Wang, Liu, and Hwang (2017) revealed are essential for healing and language learning too, that is, social interaction, working collaboratively, and playfulness. The exhibit for the benefit of travelers sends a message that poetry and caring are valued in Jacksonville.



**Figures 1a and 1b**

Poetry and art exhibited in the baggage claim area of the Jacksonville airport.

Examples of Haiku poetry used at a construction site follow. The poems were written by two students.

*is young and restless  
trying to find my own way  
I'm bulletproof now*

*better days  
looking forward to even better days  
get rid of clutches*

The poems seem to speak of resilience. Haiku poems posted on a chain link fence are an interesting juxtaposition of confinement, rebellion, freedom, and hope.

A rigid view of Haiku is that it must conform to the traditional Japanese rules of having three lines with the number of syllables 5-7-5. Modern poets, however, free themselves of the formal rules. The poems are outside the fence. When the mind is spacious after quieting, it is open to and available for new experiences. Writing and illustrating Haiku poetry is a way to overcome mental barriers, explore the world as it could be, deal with stress, and find peace on the road to recovery (Bullock & Williams, 2022; and Johnson, 2020).



**Figures 2a and 2b**

Haiku poetry at a construction site.

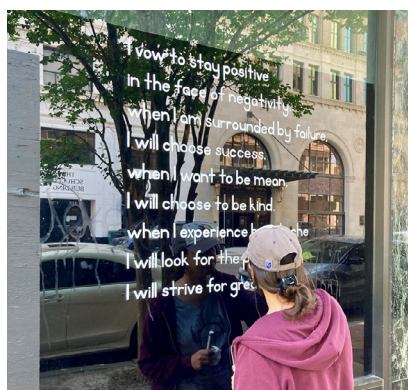
Poetry on storefronts is unexpected. It is graffiti to some, a rant against consumerism. The poem is literally "a window to the soul." Here is an example of a poem from a door.

*I vow to stay positive  
In the face of negativity.  
When I am surrounded by failure  
I will choose success.  
When I want to be mean  
I will choose to be kind.*

*When I experience heartache  
I will look for the positive.  
I will strive for greatness.*

The poems underscore the pain, hope, and voice of many underserved members of our communities.

The uniqueness of this exhibit lies in the depth of the backstory behind each exhibit (Schat, 2015). The stories told through the poems are from the perspective of local incarcerated girls, traumatized youth, recovering addicts, adolescents in recovery who are struggling with being their best selves in their challenging circumstances. When used therapeutically, these mediums have the power to shine a light on the personal barriers that limit true healing. By placing language and images around their unprocessed feelings, participants gain a deeper sense of self-awareness along with essential tools for regulating their emotions. They also deepen their understanding of their struggles and illuminate workable solutions to improve their lives. Archibald, and Onwuegbuzie, (2020) advocated the wider use of poetry in mixed methods research. They contend poetry viewed as an artifact are rich data sources for a deeper understanding of human behavior. Poetic representation advances the research process as a dynamic, interactive, creative, artistic, and transformational meaning-making process that opens a new epistemological, theoretical, and methodological space.

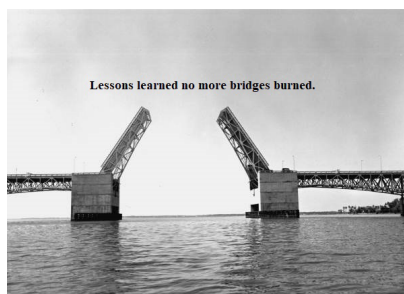


**Figure 3**  
*Poetry on a storefront.*

## How to Inspire Students to Write Graffiti Poetry

Hope at Hand has used the six-word memoir (6WM) as an effective icebreaker for inspiring poetry writing. 6WM is a fun way to engage and inspire people to get to the core of who they are and what matters most. Simmons and Chen (2013) conducted a case study of Vietnamese, EFL high school students and recommended the 6WM as a storytelling vehicle to create a space to engage students in critical, reflexive (re)considerations of their cultural identities. Results showed students engaged in reading and writing poetry improved creativity and fostered English language development. For example, Stephanie, a self-identified minority, created a mobile that read, as it dangled from brightly colored ribbons on a hanger: "Better to be seen than overlooked". Stephanie shared that she would rather stand out from the majority than blend in, thus rendering her individuality "lost."

An example of a 6WM from a Hope at Hand poet is by a young person recovering from the traumatic experiences of human trafficking and incarceration and who resolved that she would now "not burn her bridges". The drawbridge pictured is an iconic Jacksonville landmark. Poetry sessions led by Hope at Hand with others like herself have made her realize the importance of restoring connections with family, friends, and community as she moves forward on the road to healing. Her next writing was body graffiti. She changed the tattoos on her fingers from "Hate" to "Love Hope."



**Figure 4**  
*Six Word Memoir: Lessons learned no more bridges burned.*



**Figure 5**  
*Graffiti tattoo.*



Another way to inspire students to write poetry might be to support writers in exploring their own graffiti poetry. A graffiti board of 6WMs using butcher paper may create a display outside a library or park. Students may use large chalk to write and illustrate 6WMs on the butcher paper or display on the street. Students may explore making graffiti poetry for creating awareness about urban challenges like homelessness, racism and gun violence.

aims of decolonization which make for interesting questions to guide museum education:

- Creating visibility: Do the museum exhibits and education programs reflect only the dominant Western perspective? Is there a conscious effort to make visible the histories and languages of marginalized groups?
- Increasing inclusivity: Is there the inclusion of non-museum voices, actors, or decisions into the workings of the museum?
- Decentering: Does the museum operate under prevailing norms or is it open to the possibility of alternative viewpoints or approaches?
- Championing empathy: Does the museum create space for emotional experiences, reflections, and social interactions?
- Improving transparency: Has the museum untangled its colonial past to be an institution of social trust and social justice?
- Embracing vulnerability: Does the museum encourage an openness to discuss difficult matters, enable emotional and compassionate relationships for possibility of ethical transformation of both exhibits and visitors?

Unfortunately, Jacksonville Florida parks and museums until recently would have scored low on many of aforementioned questions due to its dominant Western perspective which minimized the artistic contributions of marginalized peoples like African Americans and Native Americans. Yet recently, the downtown Hemming Plaza's name honoring a Confederate soldier was changed to James Weldon Johnson Park to honor Johnson, the Harlem renaissance composer of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" which became known as the Black national anthem.



**Figure 6**  
200 years of racism.

## Museum art exhibitions may re-envision the ways to support community engagement and inclusive language learning.

### Re-envisioning Museums

Museum art exhibitions may re-envision the ways to support community engagement and inclusive language learning. Exhibiting poetry and visual arts can engage youth and create spaces for promoting cultural awareness. Stanley (2020) observed that with the threat of COVID-19 internationally, educators and families are facing a conundrum: needing to keep students separated, but also needing language enrichment programs in the face of shuttered schools and reduced capacities. These are challenging times for language learners who are not able to attend classes or meet face to face with tutors and need inspiring, convenient spaces to practice language and grow vocabulary. Poetry in public spaces and more open space museums bridge the knowledge gap and expand the boundaries of where and how languages are taught and learned through the creative written expression.

Several studies (Wang, Liu, and Hwang, 2017) have looked at the ways museums are changing ways as tools for learning/teaching language. Some studies (Villacañas de Castro et al., 2022) have recommended art galleries as places for language learning. The aim may be to explore the elements of museum programs that prove essential in engaging youth in museum education programs. Ariese and Wróblewska (2022) in a new book "Practicing Decoloniality in the Museum" discuss the myriad of approaches through which the current hooks of colonialism are being untangled from the museum. It is based on a conceptual framework of six

Sometimes graffiti evolves into protest signs as the citizens' raise their voices in anger, as in the "200 Years of Racism in Jax, Take them all down" where organizations stood at City Hall and protested the Confederate monuments still standing in the city. They held signs and chanted, calling for an end to white supremacy and begging city leaders to finally take down the rest of the monuments (Kernbach, 2022). An annual young Black writers conference, cosponsored by Hope at Hand, was established to encourage the legacy of emancipatory graffiti poetry.

### Exemplary Museums Inspiring Language Learning

Wang, Liu, and Hwang (2017) reviewed trends in the ways museums 2009-2014 teach language. Museums provide exhibits in multiple languages. Students may be transformed from passive receivers to active learners. Below are examples of real life social interactions resulted in more playfulness in the museum context.

#### Worcester Art Museum of Massachusetts

<https://www.worcesterart.org/exhibitions/love-stories/>

This museum hosted an exhibit "Love Stories from the National Portrait Gallery London". At the heart of this exhibition is a series of real-life love stories, from the 16th century to today. Museum goers were encouraged to write their own love poems and write on hearts and added to a giant poet-tree.

#### Museum of Homelessness, London

<https://museumofhomelessness.org/>

Museum of Homelessness is a community driven social justice museum that was created and run by people with direct experience of homelessness. It tackles issues of homelessness and housing inequality by amplifying the voices of its community through research, events, workshops, and exhibitions.

#### The Amsterdam Museum

<https://www.totzover.nl/english/>

The pet exhibit at the Museum Tot Zover ("So Far") is an artistic reflection on life and death of furry friends, once excluded from museums. It presents contemporary work by artists responding to a grow-

ing trend in the Netherlands: mourning animals. 'The Last Pet' or 'The Final Carress' pays homage to animals and considers not only the grieving process and compassion for our pets, the rituals and practices surrounding animal death, but also our indifference to other animals. Museum goers are encouraged to exhibit their own poems and artwork about their departed pets.

#### Planet Word, Washington, DC.

<https://planetwordmuseum.org/>

"Aloha. Konnichiwa! Guten Tag. Hola!" or however you say hello, welcomes museum viewers to Planet Word. Language comes to life at Planet Word and is a voice-activated museum (the world's first!), and its interactive galleries and exhibits bring words and language to life in all sorts of fun ways. Interactive exhibits in any language includes writing poetry, telling jokes, understanding idioms, reading, and writing international menus for participants' favorite cuisine. One can meet speakers and signers from around the globe. Using the museum's state-of-the-art technology, visitors determine their experience through their own words and choices. Planet Word is a bold and imaginative response to the life-long importance of literacy and to the challenge of growing a love of language.

Poetry curated in public exhibitions can effectively extend the boundaries of the human experience and take a larger role in promoting cultural awareness and language development.

### Conclusions

The Hope at Hand, Inc is a nonprofit organization that uses graffiti like art and poetry exhibitions in public spaces to help incarcerated youth recognize and overcome circumstances that limit their successful participation in society. The six-word memoir (6WM) and poetry walk are examples of methods used to teach people how to write and exhibit poetry for public spaces. These showed concrete ways to inspire graffiti poetry and artmaking. The paper reviews similar international art exhibitions that re-envision the ways museums can decolonize and support more community engage-

ment and inclusive language learning. In the end, language teachers may embrace a holistic intervention framework that integrates poetry, museum best practices and the arts for bridging and empowering lives. With a resounding yes! poetry curated in public exhibitions can effectively extend the boundaries of the human experience and take a larger role in promoting cultural awareness and language development.

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