Stenciling Dissent

A student project draws on the language of the streets

By Andrew Reed

A COUPLE OF SUMMERS AGO I was racking my brain to come up with new lessons for my U.S. history classes. I wanted the format of their projects to reflect the content of our unit on the power of protest. I finally came up with the idea that my students would create stencil images. Stencils are often used as a form of street protest, not just in the United States but throughout the world, because they're easy to make, quick to apply, and can be used over and over.

Because most of my students here in Wichita, Kan., are immigrants or children of immigrants and from lower socioeconomic households, I stress in my history classes how dissent, strikes, and protest have given the poor, minorities, and immigrants a voice when the vote hasn't. When my students learn about people like Sacco and Vanzetti, Emma Goldman, and Malcolm X, and events like the 1892 Homestead Strike and the United Farm Workers' grape boycotts of the 1960s, it gives them an understanding of the struggles and achievements of those in the past who have faced obstacles similar to those my students and their families face today.

The relevance of this kind of curriculum was apparent in April 2006. After learning about the 1968 Chicano student walkouts, some of my students organized a walkout in solidarity with the nationwide immigrant rights rallies and walkouts going on at that time. My students' walkout

involved about 500 young people from different Wichita high schools; it ended up on the front page of the *Wichita Eagle* and was the top story on all three local evening newscasts. I took no part in organizing the student walkout and, contrary to the superintendent's claims, no other adults organized it either; it was led by students. On the other hand, I do believe that the history curriculum they learned in my class gave them a sense that they were capable of doing it. The following year, I wanted to do something to keep alive my students' spirit of protest.

Our power-of-protest unit dovetailed with a school district requirement for a research-based persuasive essay. I decided to ask students to choose an individual, group, or event essential to the history of dissent in the United States. Their project would entail researching their chosen topic, writing the essay, creating and printing a stencil, and distilling the essence of their topic into a paragraph to accompany the stencil.

The list of topics I gave students included individuals like Emma Tenayuca (labor organizer for Mexican migrant workers in the 1930s), Fred Korematsu (Japanese American who resisted relocation to an internment camp during World War II), and Philip and Daniel Berrigan (Catholic priests who protested against the Vietnam War); organizations like the Brown Berets (Chicano rights activists in the 1960s who were inspired by the Black Panthers); and events like the Ludlow massacre (famous labor strike in 1914) and even the recent immigration rights rallies.

Being artistically challenged, I figured if I could make a decent stencil then any of my students could, too.

I foreshadowed the stencil project by including lessons throughout the school year on the general use of art (fine art, music, video, and other types of media) as a means of protest in the past. For example, we listened to and analyzed songs of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), connecting the lyrics to the importance of uniting workers and giving them a voice during the early 1900s. Then, while learning about the 1920s Red Scare, the students interpreted the messages about injustice in a Diego Rivera mural.

One Step Ahead of the Class

While the students researched their topics and wrote and rewrote their essays, I prepared for the stencil piece of the project. I knew that before I could ask my students to create these stencils, I would have to make some myself to get an idea of how difficult and time-consuming it might be. Being artistically challenged, I figured if I could make a decent stencil then any of my students could, too. My first stencil was of the abolitionist Henry David Thoreau. I spray-painted it on my podium along with one of his quotes: "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law so much as a respect for right." (Thoreau was jailed for refusing to pay a tax to support the U.S. war against Mexico—a war he believed was launched to spread slavery.) Next was an image of Emma Goldman, then Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatista movement, and on and on. By the time I was ready to show my students how to create the stencils, many of them already had an idea just from watching me so many times.

Before students started their stencils, we watched video clips on stenciling. I found a couple of five-minute clips on YouTube to show as a visual introduction to stenciling. One video was a tutorial on creating stencils. Another showed that stencils were used throughout the world as a form of protest, especially in Latin America.

The Stencils Take Life

First, students searched for an image on the web to make their stencil. Some students found ready-made designs, while others had to modify the images. The easiest way to modify an image to create a stencil is to load the image into Microsoft Word, adjust it to higher contrast, and experiment with the brightness until it looks more like a stencil. Once we reviewed the basic concepts, the students were able to design their images fairly easily.

> *"It was nice to see people learning about Mexicans for a change."*

The next stage was to create the actual stencil. I provided each student with a piece of 8.5- x 11-inch transparency film. Students laid the transparency over the printed image and traced it onto the transparency. Transparency film is good to use because it's easy to cut, it's thin, and paint won't bleed through. If students wanted to make a stencil larger than 8.5- x 11-inch they used an 11- x 17-inch file folder. I then gave students small utility knives to cut out their stencils, along with stern warnings about safety. (I'm happy to say that not one student had an accident; I wish I could say the same for myself.)

Students had to make a stencil image to represent their topic and also a stencil cutout of the name of the person, group, or event they chose. Given the time constraints, some students used the stencil fonts preinstalled on the computers, while others made their own by hand. A variety of interesting stencil fonts can be downloaded for free from the web. After students found their image, manipulated it, traced it to transparency, and then cut it out, they were ready to paint.

Instead of having students make individual posters, I bought a giant 7- x 12-foot canvas as a "wall." We used spray paint to apply the stencil images, although other kinds of paint can be used. I chose spray paint to give my students more of a feeling of making street art. Because stenciling on public spaces without permission is illegal and, of course, I was not advocating that my students do that, I figured painting the stencils on one big canvas would be the closest we could get to doing it on the streets.

There was a sense of nervous anticipation as students applied their stencils to the canvas. They would have only one shot to get it right. Too much paint would cause a stencil to run; too little paint would make it look blurry. We worked outdoors and wore masks because spray paint fumes are dangerous. Each student laid a stencil onto the canvas, applied the paint, and slowly removed the stencil to reveal the image on the canvas. I loved seeing my students' eyes light up, watching them smile, and listening as they bragged about the quality of their images.

Some moments were magical: Pedro was fairly new to the school and didn't know many people yet. When it was his turn to spray his stencil he did it with ease, as if he had done it many times before. I asked him if he had painted stencils previously.

He explained that he works with his brother in a body shop airbrushing cars, which is a similar skill. He then spent the next 15 minutes teaching the other students and me the proper techniques for applying spray paint. That seemed to be the ice-breaker between him and the rest of the students; from then on he was more social in class.

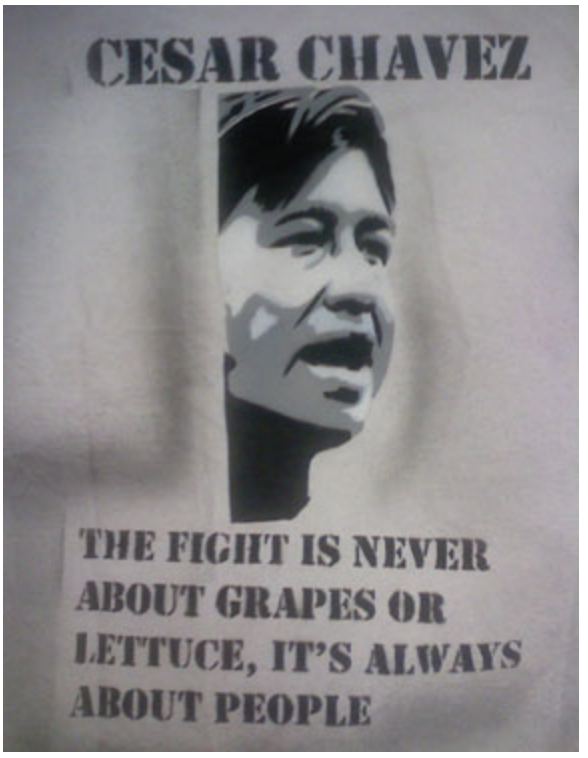
Another student, Ricardo Valdez, an amazing graffiti artist who has done a lot of street art in Mexico City, painted additional art on the canvas to give it more of a street art look.

I have never had students so into doing a history class project as they were into this. They loved it. Some students wanted to make more than one stencil. They would show up in class with the stencil of Che Guevara or a Zapatista that they made at home. Even though protesting the Iraq war was not on the list of topics, some students made antiwar stencils on their own time to put on our class canvas.

I wanted to shine a light on great people who were lesser known.

Stencils for Justice

We displayed the canvas in the school's hallway for all to see. Next to the canvas, each student posted a paragraph distilling the significance—in terms of the history of dissent in the United States—of the person, group, or event represented in his or her stencil. This one-paragraph description was a big challenge for many students, taking pages worth of research and condensing the most important parts down to five or six sentences. In a hallway display, students don't have time to stand and read a lengthy report about, say, Cesar Chavez; they have to be able to get information about him as they walk by. My students realized that in describing why Cesar Chavez was an important figure in American protest history, they couldn't start with where he was born, what schools he attended as a child, and so forth. They had to stick to the boycotts, hunger strikes, arrests, and lasting impact of his actions. It was the students, not me, who figured out what to teach to others.



For example, my student Odalis Sosa distilled Emma Goldman's life into this summary:

> **Emma Goldman, 1869–1940**
> *Anarchist, feminist, antiwar activist*
>
> *Emma Goldman made [it] her life to fight for the rights of women, immigrants, and all others in the United States who were being oppressed. In 1893, Emma was put into prison for "inciting a riot" when she wanted unemployed workers to stand up for their rights. In 1911, she was imprisoned for distributing birth control literature. In 1917, Emma was imprisoned for a third time for protesting against World War I and wanting people to refuse the draft.*
>
> *Emma Goldman's protest influenced many people during her time and later to fight for the rights of the oppressed.*

The canvas display was the eye-catcher, while students' paragraphs posted to the side of the display were the education for onlookers. As my students watched others studying their "wall," they recognized how art can be an effective means to reach other people. A former student, Alma, told me how much she wished we'd done this while she was in my class. But she asked, "Why isn't Martin

Luther King Jr. or Rosa Parks on the display?" I told her that those historical figures definitely fit into the theme of the project, but they were not on the list because I wanted to shine a light on great people who were lesser known. Other students, and teachers, too, talked to me about the people or events we failed to put on the display. I wasn't offended; it made me feel that the project served its purpose. As people looked at the display and read the information, they began to think: "Who else should be up there? Who else have I learned about whose protest was important to U.S. history?"

A week after the display went up, my classes discussed the project and what they observed. Eduardo, an immigrant from Durango, Mexico—"and proud of it," as he reminded others all the time—said, "It was nice to see some people learning about Mexicans for a change." I asked the students if they thought others would have paid as much attention to the display if we had used more traditional visuals instead of stencils. They gave a resounding no. They said that the purpose of using political stencils on the streets was to get people's attention.

The display was well received by students and staff at the school. Students stopped in the halls to observe and talk to each other about why images of Dolores Huerta or the Freedom Riders looked so cool. I received emails from teachers praising the project. I even received emails from the art teachers praising students' work. With antiwar stencils on the canvas, it did not completely escape negative reactions. One staff member told me that he wanted to go home and get his paint so he could paint over the whole thing. A couple of others decided the display was un-American, but most seemed to understand that dissent is what makes us Americans. Some staff members had preconceived notions about street art. They felt that any street art is graffiti and any graffiti is gang-related. But when they saw how street art was used for an educational purpose, many told me they gained a new appreciation for it.

Especially in an urban school where students appreciate graffiti and other street art, stencils hold the potential to engage students. Youth can create something that might get them in trouble on the streets but an A in the classroom. And students can use stencils in other ways: to create their own shirts, posters, book covers, or postcards. Whether in a school or on the streets, stencils—at least political ones—can catch onlookers' attention and make them think.

Resources

*Stencil Revolution: A Stencil Art Community Re*source: www.stencilrevolution.com.

To see how history has been represented in street art, check out Justseeds: Visual Resistance Artists' Cooperative: www.justseeds.org

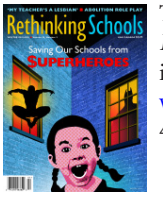
YouTube links:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6c3w1ztnwW8

www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXSg8BApBwA&feature=relatedwww.youtube.com/watch

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3Zb2aJ7CG8

Andrew Reed (bajiboy@gmail.com) currently teaches at Niwot High School in Colorado. When this project was created, he was teaching at East High School in Wichita, Kan.



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