

# Broadsides

*by Kurt Wootton and Anne Thulson*



# Broadsides

## Words in the street

### Introduction

Chicago artist William Estrada came to teach at our summer lab school, and during one of our planning meetings said, “I want to do something where the students’ art moves beyond the classroom, even outside of the school. I want to take their work to the streets.”

What better way to do this than with a form of publication called “street literature.” Street literature has taken many forms over the past five hundred years. One of these forms from Brazil, Portugal, and Spain, has already become one of Habla’s best practices: **The Cordel**. Previous to the cordel, the broadside provided another form of street literature that was popular first in Europe and then later across the Americas.

The United States Library of Congress writes

*“Often quickly and crudely produced in large numbers and distributed free in town squares, taverns, and churches or sold by chapmen for a nominal charge, broadsides are*



*intended to have an immediate popular impact and then to be thrown away. Historically, broadsides have been used to inform the public about current news events, publicize official procla-*



### Habla’s Summer Lab School

Every year teachers from around the world gather to teach collaboratively at Habla’s Summer Lab School. In 2010 Habla partnered with CAPE to bring artist William Estrada and educator Mary Beth Werner from Chicago to teach at Habla with the support of the National Association for Arts and Culture (NALAC). Together with Habla’s Karla Hernando and visiting artist Vanessa Ramírez they piloted this version of broadsides.

View the complete documentation of **Habla’s Summer Lab School** [here](#).



**1. One sheet of paper.** Early printing presses didn't have the capability to print easily multiple sheets of paper, so the one-page broadside became popular. Due to its simplicity, the form is also ideal for the classroom.

**2. Text and Image.** Many models are available that combine text and image in different designs. Since all of the information had to be conveyed on one page, printmakers were particularly conscious about the arrangement of letters and images. This provides an ideal opportunity in the classroom to consider how text and image might be combined in order to communicate a message.

**3. Public manifestations.** Broadside have been referred to as "fugitive literature." A broadside provides a democratic medium

*mations and government decisions, announce and record public meetings and entertainment events, advocate political and social causes, advertise products and services, and celebrate popular literary and musical efforts. Rich in detail and variety, and sometimes with striking illustrations, broadsides offer vivid insights into the daily activities and attitudes of individuals and communities that created America's yesterdays."*

Even before the printing press was invented, handmade broadsides announced the latest news or pronounced political proclamations. Here in Mexico, artist José Guadalupe Posada's engravings of skeletons decorated broadsides sharing the news of the day. In Mexico broadsides remained popular through the early 20th century.

Broadsides have several qualities that make them an interesting medium to explore in the classroom:





## Procedure

**1. Possibilities.** Historic models of broadsides provide a ripe opportunity for discussing design in the classroom. Gather several models to show to students. You can find many in the United States Library of Congress's archives or by typing "Broadside" in Google and clicking on "images" which will yield hundreds of fine models. Discuss with the students how the different arrangement of text and image convey different messages.

**2. Message.** Over the summer the students at Habla's lab school were exploring the concept of *labyrinths*. The summer classes examined four sub-concepts: labyrinths of the self, labyrinths of the city, labyrinths in nature, and labyrinths of myth and imagination. During the second week the students discussed the city of Mérida and what they would like to change in their communities. Explore with the students what they would like to improve about their city (this might be part of a larger unit about the city, community, ecology, biodiversity, city planning etc.) Ask students to write a "message for change" about their city.

**3. Portraits.** Take black-and-white photographs of the faces of all the students in the classroom. Since the images need to have all the faces in the same position and framed the same way, it's best to assign this job to one student or adult. Take the photographs against a white wall or background.

for anyone's voice to be heard in any public venue. Students can strategize where to put their broadsides up in the community. They (and their teachers) will also need to consider how they will seek permission to post their broadsides and when they might play a more fugitive role.

**4. Literature of the moment.** Not unlike blogs today, anyone could almost instantly publish a broadside with not much money and minimum supplies. An article in a book or magazine might take months or years to reach publication, if ever. Historically the

broadside communicated the news of the day or an emergency gathering to the citizens. The immediate nature of publication allows the students to quickly see their words in the community.

**5. Historical significance.** Broadsides provide a rich opportunity for studying primary source documents. In the United States the Library of Congress has over 5000 broadsides available for viewing on their website [here](#).



**4. Downloading and Printing.** Download the photographs and print on 11 inch x 17 inch standard paper or card stock (not photographic paper). If this size is not available in your country note that it is important to print on a paper that is larger than letter or legal size. Print the photographs only on the top half of the page leaving the other half of the paper blank.

**5. Adding text.** With a black sharpie or similar sized marker, the students write their messages in large letters below their photographs. First ask them to practice on some scrap paper before writing on the page with the photographs.

**6. Illuminating the images.** The students then use multi-colored oil pastels to illuminate their photographs in a way that helps communicate their messages.

**7. Conversation about where and how to post broadsides.** Before leaving the classroom, talk with the students about posting their broadsides and the potential consequences. Ask what the difference is between posting a broadside on someone's personal property versus public property? Are there legal ramifications to posting broadsides in public? What if people on the street (or a policeman) stop them to ask what they are doing? Do they need to get permission from the school principal or the parents? As a teacher, you may choose for students to post their

broadsides on their own time at home with their parents supervising or you might enlist parents to help take the students out in the community in small groups to help them with the process. At Habla the teachers walked with the students around the school and asked the students during the field trip where they'd like to post, and the teachers approved of each area before posting. Depending on age and context of the educational setting, the teachers and students will need to decide how much they want to embrace the "fugitive" quality of the art form and consider what the consequences might be.



**8. Documentation.** Assign students to document the broadsides in the community with photography and video. Students can document the posting of the broadsides and the reaction of people on the streets. The documentation and editing of the posting of the broadsides can be a richer artistic product than even the broadsides themselves.

## Portrait of a Classroom: Fugitive Art in the Hallways



### Anne Thulson

Anne presented her version of broadsides at the 2010 Habla Teacher Institute, "Into the Labyrinth." Anne teaches at an elementary Expeditionary Learning School in Denver, Colorado where she facilitates contemporary, cutting-edge arts experiences with her students.

See Anne's work [here](#).

Arts educator Anne Thulson, from Denver, Colorado, takes a much more fugitive approach to broadsides with her elementary school students at the Odyssey School. The 4th and 5th grade students were studying the conflict between the American colonists and Great Britain at the time of the Revolutionary War. Anne wanted to explore issues of power, voice, and representation with her students by creating broadsides and posting them around the school.

Anne and her students discussed the question "How do the powerless find voice? How do the under-represented represent themselves?" They then looked at models of broadsides from the past to the present including the work of Benjamin Franklin, Paul Revere, [Barbara Krueger](#), [Shepherd Fairley](#), and the [Guerilla Girls](#).

After examining models, Anne led her students through a process of considering how image and text influence each other. She

explains, "Text and Image have a relationship. They help each other deliver meaning together, but don't duplicate one another. Each has a distinct role. Each is necessary."



She and her students engaged in the following process:

**1. Text and Image Interaction.** Anne’s first step was to explore the relationship between text and image. Her students looked at children book illustrations at first without the text. They then read the stories with the text. Anne asked the students, “How did the meaning change for you after the text was added? How did the text enhance the illustrations?” “How do text and image work together to convey meaning?” She then gave the class *New Yorker* cartoons from the contests where the magazine asks readers to create a caption. Students voted on their favorite captions. The students then created their own cartoons and gave them to other students in the class to create captions.



*Leave no Trace*



*Pull 'em up!*



**2. Text and Image Dissonance.** Anne then gave the students images and asked the students to develop texts to accompany the images. She discussed with the students how text might closely connect to or be far from the meaning in an image, thereby changing the way we see it. She introduced the idea of an “Obscurometer” based on E.B. White’s famous quote “Be obscure clearly.” To draw attention to the relationship between the text and the image, students rated the different texts they created with the images, from those that had no connection to the image to those that paralleled the image directly.

**3. Choose an Issue.** Anne then asked the students, “Choose an issue you feel powerless to change, but would like to change through protest.”

**4. Make a Broadside.** The students then took photographs or selected images from other sources and wrote texts to accompany the images. Anne told the students the image and text needed to “work as a poetic team.” The students then used the obscurometer to test the “poetic potential” of the broadside.

**5. Fugitives in the Hallways.** The students posted their broadsides in relevant places. For instance, one student posted “Homework kills trees” over the teachers’ copy machines.

**THE OBSCUROMETER**  
 “Be Obscure Clearly.” E.B. White

100% INDIRECT		100% DIRECT
word has no connection to image	word and image connect in a way that is not obvious at first	word equals image

*At an expeditionary school the students go on many camping trips. One student in Anne’s class posted her protest sign, “I’d rather sleep in a hotel,” on the door of the coordinator of the outdoor programs.*



**Habla** is an educational center and lab school based in Mérida, Yucatán, México, dedicated to fostering school environments that promote the success of all students from multiple cultural backgrounds. For teachers, artists, and school leaders, Habla offers: cultural and language experiences, teacher institutes, and an annual international educational forum.

[www.habla.org](http://www.habla.org)