

# Tagging text

*by Kurt Wootton*



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*“The school turned into a book”* First grade student, Mérida, México



### The Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard University

Founded by Doris Sommer, The Cultural Agents Initiative brings together artists, educators, and community leaders in innovative collaborations that revitalize civic life both locally and internationally. Their activities feature workshops, conferences, tv programs, performances, exhibitions, and scholarly publications. Recently Habla was selected as one of the Cultural Agents primary sites for using the arts for social change and community development.

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

Doris Sommer, the founder of the Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard University, looked at an unseemly building on a high school campus in Mexico City, musing *“That looks like a canvas, let’s paint it.”* When she broached the idea with the school’s principal, Doris proposed taking markers and paint and “going for it” with the school’s teachers and students. The principal, perhaps wisely, suggested otherwise. What emerged is a way of inscribing walls with text without incurring the wrath of school administrators or custodial staff. Many venerable institutions, including art museums, libraries, and universities have famous lines from artists, thinkers, and writers engraved on the walls of their buildings. Graffiti (derived from the Greek root “graphein” meaning “to write”) throughout history has been a way for individuals to make their mark on the world. Today graffiti is one of the primary elements of hip hop culture. “Tagging” refers to the signature of Graffiti artists on their work such as the famous tag SAMO of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Our approach, *tagging texts*, takes its inspiration from both the institutional and counter-cultural approach of decorating walls with text.



## Scale and Space

Classrooms, courtyards, the sides of a school, hallways, the community square, highways; the possibilities are limitless in terms of the potential spaces transformable by textual tagging.

Materials will vary from outdoor spaces to indoor spaces. Our description of this activity is based on the work we did with Doris Sommer in Chalco outside of Mexico City where students used simple materials to tag the side of a building.

## What's the point?

From a literacy perspective tagging allows students to develop what Louise Rosenblatt refers to as an aesthetic relationship with text. Rather than looking for specific information in text (an efferent reading), students explore the texts to find lines that resonate with them. They extract these lines from the page and then design them in a way that makes ideas interesting and accessible to the larger community. Professor Randy Pausch in his famous last speech at Carnegie Mellon before he died of cancer asked parents, "And anybody who is a parent, if your kids want to paint their bedroom, as a favor to me let them do it. It'll be OK. Don't worry about resale value on the house." Tagging texts allows



students to transform their physical environments in a way that responds to who they are. The wall is a potential canvas and the students have the opportunity to take dead spaces and turn them into something extraordinary.

## Procedure

**1. Choose a text.** Any concept or theme might drive the selection of texts. The more choices the students have the better. Recent research clearly demonstrates that students who participate in voluntary, pleasurable reading on a regular basis dramatically supersede their peers in nearly all aspects of literacy development. Students might choose a theme or a body of texts they would like to extract textual quotations from. This activity also works well with difficult texts that might be required on school reading lists. By selecting portions of these seemingly boring texts, students begin to build a relationship as a reading community to the text by selecting and sharing lines.

**2. Select lines.** Throughout a course, students might mark up the book or keep a list of potential quotes they would like to use. At the end of the semester, the teacher can ask the students to review all the texts they've read and select their favorite and most compelling lines, the ones they want to share with the rest of the school.

**3. Assemble materials.** Take simple poster board and cut it into about 4 inch tall strips. Make a wide range of paints, markers, crayons and random art materials (glue, construction paper, scissors) available to students. Students will write the selected quote(s) on the strip of poster board and decorate it any way they like.

**4. Exhibit.** Place the strips of poster board on the selected wall. An option might be for students to create a performance – using the various texts studied – and have the wall serve as the set.



**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)***