

# Creating Connection: Teens, Art, and Engagement

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*Abstract.* This chapter explores the role that contemporary artists can play in student learning in secondary school art education. Partnerships, combining visual and media literacy approaches in pedagogy, tend to develop essential skillsets that reflect current academic aims related to democratic and responsible citizenship. Collaborative projects between practicing artists, students, and educators yield critical, outside-of-the-box thinking and communication, social engagement, and innovative uses of information and communications technology (ICT). Such partnerships also initiate students into working holistically and collaboratively across school subjects and disciplines. The narrative describes the collaboration between a high school teacher and contemporary artists, Manuel Chantre and Elisabeth Picard, through the Quebec Ministry of Education program called the “Culture in the Schools.” Transcripts from interviews of Chantre, Picard and another contemporary artist, Brandon Ballengée, illustrates how the presence of artists in the classrooms can be a highly motivating educational strategy. The experience speaks to teens’ interests and pushes the boundaries of traditional teaching methodology to incorporate, both theoretically and in practice, critical notions of identity, belonging, dialogue, and community.

*Keywords:* high school art education, contemporary art, citizenship, interdisciplinarity, information and communications technology

Artists as agents of social transformation can play an important role in the development of pedagogical strategies in visual and media literacy in art education. Teaching in collaboration with practicing artists has served as a highly effective method in motivating teens to learn about contemporary art. This paper presents findings from a collaboration between a high school art teacher and two contemporary artists, Manuel Chantre and Elisabeth Picard, as well as interviews with them and another contemporary artist, Brandon Ballengée. Further, inspired by the artists’ practice a curriculum is proposed that actively engages teens in critical thinking about the world in which they are living.

The government program, the “Culture in the Schools” is available to public and private schools in the province of Quebec who wish to integrate culture into the classroom through creative and innovative projects (Ministère de l’Enseignement et de l’Éducation Supérieur [MEES], 2018). The program offers funding and access to artists, writers, and cultural organizations (MEES, 2018). Secondary art teachers have much to gain from developing partnerships with artists who make use of current information and communications technology (ICT) to work across disciplines through interdisciplinary approaches. As Morin (1999) explains, “to be relevant, knowledge needs to be understood according to its context, its relations with the global and its complexity within a multidimensional perspective which includes the social, economical, political and biological aspects of our human condition” (p.35).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, neoliberalism has engendered many shifts in our conceptions of culture and creativity, bringing teachers to adopt pedagogical strategies that foster the learning of skills on the one hand and the understanding of critical issues on the other (Giroux & Giroux, 2006). Contemporary artistic practices reveal to be an asset in challenging teens about ideological conceptions as they are often situated in opposition to the hegemony of capitalism and forms of

power. Visual literacy gives students the possibility to learn about the purpose of images in their everyday life and foster a more collective sense of awareness about the environment in which they are produced and which influences their identity and culture.

## Contemporary Art

Studies on contemporary art in high school art classrooms demonstrate that the arts are highly effective in developing critical thinking skills in students (Gude, 2015; Marshall, 2008). This is because contemporary art is not simply beautiful to look at, but directly engages with relevant current social issues in creative and unexpected ways, inviting critical reflection and conversation on the part of the viewer. Bourriaud's (2002) theory of relational art proposes that contemporary art creates a social context in which the public is enabled to share their experiences of the work through various interactive forms. For many artists today, the processes involved in art creation and the presentation of the art works in public spaces are just as important as their aesthetic content. Illeris (2005) states that "Contemporary art allows for a multitude of interpretations that can be recognized as valuable according to our own experiences and positions while taking into account the ones of others" (p. 235). Inviting students to examine the issues addressed by an artwork and creating their own socially engaged works requires them to think both laterally and critically about an issue, take a position in regards to it, and express it to others in a manner which is uniquely their own (E. Picard, personal communication, February 10, 2016). These learning and teaching experiences can be realized by working collaboratively with local artists in and outside the classroom.

Contemporary artist E. Picard worked with students to design a sculpture activity that involved the use of plastic Zip-Ties and lighting effects to explore the artist's practice which is inspired by traditional textile, basket weaving, and braiding techniques (see Figure 1). Through the presentation of visual images, students learned about her inspiration from natural and architectural structures and how she transforms these structures through the assemblage of industrial objects. For E. Picard, bringing students to think outside formalism aesthetic, by using objects of ordinary life and solving emergent problems through the materiality have the potential to stimulate the imagination and develop innovative ideas. Having students participate in this activity was beneficial in the way that they enjoyed the process as well as the result of their sculptures. First they had to familiarize themselves with the techniques and material to create a sculptural piece of their own imagination (see Figure 2). Then, they could see the effects of light and color on the translucent material, experimenting with markers and special lighting, such as black lights (see Figure 3). The relationship between the artist and students' work was experienced through the process of discovering and sharing new methods of art making.



*Figure 1.* Elisabeth Picard, *Strongylocentrotus*, 2013. Dyed Zip-Ties, with plexi light box 15 x 15.75 x 8 inches, Variant ½, Michel Dubreuil photo credit.

Picard notes that teens are sometimes reluctant to discuss contemporary art because they have difficulty identifying the context and the processes involved in the work. Responses like, “It makes absolutely no sense” and “Anyone could make this” are common among teens. Contextualist theory, in which the context surrounding an object is essential in constructing its meaning, is useful when applied in the classroom as a strategy to help students understand contemporary art.



Figure 2. Art making process

For contemporary artist M. Chantre, the role of contemporary art is to offer experiences to the public that question aspects of culture and to allow participants to develop increased awareness of who they are in relation to the issues at hand (personal communication, February 19, 2016). M. Chantre explains that his work engages its audiences on both a sensory level (visual, spatial and auditory) and on a social level (interactive, immersive, and participation-based). Contemporary art sets the stage for lateral thinking and open-ended reflection, leading to unexpected insights. M. Chantre gives an example of a boy who, after looking at his installation *Dispergere Maiz* (2009), which displayed industrial images of corn, said that he had the impression that the world was getting older (see Figure 4). Although M. Chantre did not intend for his artwork to generate such an impression, he welcomes comments that deviate from what he expects. As M. Chantre describes, corn cereal has been a staple for centuries and consequently has left traces in the collective imagination. His ultimate goal is for viewers to have a meaningful experience that leads them to personally identify with the work. Through his installation, M. Chantre enabled the viewer to construct and/or reconstruct his own interpretations of familiar images. Teaching contemporary art through critical media literacy should encourage students to explore aspects of their personality and culture as it relates to their own reality.



Figure 3. Student sculptures

Challenging students to discuss the messages that they perceive in contemporary art provides a space to develop their critical thinking in relation to themselves while making connections to broader social, cultural, political and economical issues (Luke, 1994). M. Chantre's use of digital media involving visual and auditory information prompts the observer to recall me-

mories and senses and consequently encourages reflection upon what is often hidden in industrial culture. Media literacy is the “ability to access, analyze, create and act using all forms of communication” (NAMLE, n.d.). In this case, learning media literacy has positively impacted students who want to deliver a specific message using various technologies in order to bring about changes in the world in which they live. As media affects the way people think, feel, and behave (NAMLE, n.d.) it is imperative that students are taught media literacy to be able to challenge the media they are confronted with and become active agents in shaping their identity.

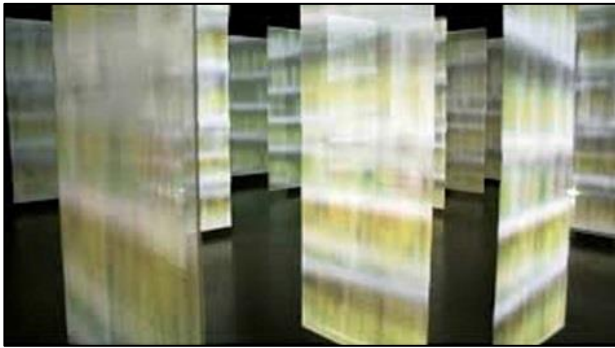


Figure 4. Manuel Chantre, *Dispergere Maiz*, Immersive installation composed of 24 projection screens, 2009. Manuel Chantre photo credit.

## Identity and Citizenship

The notion of identity has long been at the center of philosophical, sociological, and educational preoccupations in the West (Dewey, 1967; Erikson, 1968; Freire, 1968; Piaget, 1936/1968). This inquiry continues to be essential today, as the rise of neoliberalism in the past century has destabilized and reorganized individual and collective identities on many fronts (Giroux & Giroux, 2006). Territorial dispossession, the decline of cultural diversity, the privatization of services, and the financialization of natural resources have all had drastic consequences on the lives of individuals, communities, and their environments (Heynen, McCarthy, Prudham, & Robbins, 2007; Mansfield, 2007; Venne, 2004). The ideology of neoliberalism has constrained human’s freedom to the production of goods and created a simulacrum of a utopic reality (Beaudrillard, 1981). Citizenship finds itself within this turmoil of a democratic society that prevails on the one hand neoliberal values of free will, and on the other responsible behaviors and critical thinking towards consumerism and forms of domination. For this reason, visual literacy and critical media literacy become assets in reflecting upon what people think they know and questioning the relevancy of knowledge within institutions (Strauss, 2012), setting the stage for a non-conformity of rational boundaries. As Beaudrillard (1981) described, the “real” can only exist if the iconographic representation of that reality is depleted of its social connotations. To better understand what it means to be a citizen, there must be an examination of epistemological conceptions of individual and collective identity.

Rationalist and empiricist thought lay the foundations of the majority of contemporary political and scientific discourse, and are omnipresent in education systems as well (Davis, 2004). According to Davis (2004), contemporary understanding of the nature of individuality is intrinsically bound to Descartes’ rationalist philosophy. In his theory of deductive reasoning, individuals construct knowledge from inner representations of the outer world. Contrary to rationalism, which separates the mind and the body, *enactivism* emphasizes the interactions between the mind, the body, and the environment. First introduced by Francisco Valera, enactivism suggests that knowledge is not set, inert or predetermined, but rather co-constructed through individuals’ interactions within an environment (Bharath & English, 2010). As Davis explains: “Personal identity is seen to arise in the complex mix of biological predisposition, physical effect,

social circumstance, and cultural context as the agent copes with the contingencies of existence” (p.154).

Echoing enactivist principles, O’Donohue (2004) favors a teaching methodology based on “conversing” and taking a “mindful attitude” in learning about the self and the collectivity, in which knowledge is not inert matter to be acquired, but something which emerges from consciousness. For Li, Clark, and Winchester (2010), “learning is not about gaining information, but an ongoing process of exploration about consciousness, self, context, and interactions of complex systems in order to adapt to the evolving environments” (p. 408). The concept of citizenship is tightly bound to this conceptualization of ethical, relational co-existence. It calls on individuals to reflect on their own identities and raises their awareness of the well-being of others. As B. Ballengée reveals, we need to learn how to work collaboratively instead of separately and think about the environment as a home for all living creatures (personal communication, March 1, 2016). The artist’s practice becomes a model that students can investigate to find other creative possibilities. Through their social interaction, students can share their experiences and give meaning to what they are doing, as it relates to their own interests.

Amidst the turmoil of global changes stemming from neoliberal policies, the concept of citizenship takes new meaning. This notion is often difficult to grasp in the field of the arts considering its multiple social, cultural, and political referents (Cogan & Derricott, 2000; Kemperl, 2013). For Mason and Vella (2013), teaching citizenship should not only involve the transmission of knowledge about civil rights and responsibilities, but elicit active student engagement with socio-political and cultural issues. Contemporary art is an effective platform for student learning about identity and citizenship because of its relationship to real life experiences and the plurality of perspectives that it invites. My interviews with E. Picard and M. Chantre show that art can be very effective in allowing space for multiple interpretations of individual, social and cultural identities. Picard states “Making art is creating our identity” (personal communication, February 10, 2016). In her practice, she valorizes the intuition and sensitive aspect of the material to create personal work that is aesthetically pleasing for the eye, inviting the viewer to make their own interpretation. As she mentions, when it is too explicit it doesn’t give the viewer the possibility to elaborate further on what is represented and if it is too conceptual it is just too complicated to understand. M. Chantre echoes this sentiment, “Making art is to discover who we are and where we come from” (personal communication, February 19, 2016). By combining different approaches taken from music, video, computer programming, and light projections, M. Chantre is interested in creating interactive spaces that the viewer can appropriate to transform their perception. For M. Chantre, the success of a work of art is when it causes people to reflect and impacts different levels of understanding that are accessible to people of all ages.

## **Collaborative Practice**

B. Ballengée’s eco-art practice is effective in developing engaged citizenship in adolescents with respect to their natural environment around them. Ballengée asserts that increased engagement is necessary as the Holocene extinction (otherwise known as the Sixth extinction), in which we find ourselves presently, is the greatest extinction event in the history of humanity (personal communication, March 1, 2016). Ballengée’s intentions as an artist are “hopefully to increase participants’ empathy with animals that are in decline, and inspire people to care about the ecosystem and become aware of its complexity and web of organisms.” Ballengée believes that teens can have a positive impact on environmental issues if they are given chances to personally identify with nature and express their personal feelings through the arts. In his work, participants are asked to collaboratively explore an amphibian habitat and are then given options on how they wish to conduct their exploration. Some will use a camera to make a video or use a smartphone to identify species. Others will use more traditional art materials to draw what they perceive. By offering multiple means of investigation and allowing teens to use preferred technologies, he

facilitates increased interest and learning. Rather than employing a top-down approach in which an authority dictates the specific bounds of a project, his work features a process-oriented "star system" model in which a project develops organically through participants' interactions with their environment and with each other. This teen-led collaborative approach stimulates enhanced dialogue, mutual idea exchange, and ultimately, the co-creation of a work that richly reflects the participants' creative voices. Ballengée's eco-actions both raise teens' awareness about complex issues relating to the environment and gives them the opportunity to become real stakeholders in their local community. By co-leading the project, participants develop the critical sense of self-identification with their natural surroundings needed in order to have a constructive impact on environmental issues at large. Visual literacy in the 21st century involves "the ability to interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using conventional media in ways that advance thinking, decision making, communication, and learning (NCREL & Metiri Group, 2003, p. 15). In fostering these approaches, teens can understand that art has various means of expression and that it can be used to transform ways of thinking. Furthermore, in considering ethical and aesthetic value in art education, teens can develop their sensibility and responsibility towards the environment and their community.

The challenge for many art teachers today is to move away from treating knowledge from an individualistic point of view, to set up artistic practices and projects which directly address students' visual culture, and to create conditions that foster critical thinking. Guiding students to understand how the world in which they live influences their identities is setting the stage for responsible citizenship. Teachers that encourage participative and reflective practice share the notion of a communal identity. With the availability of visual images from around the globe, teachers have the ability to value different cultural backgrounds and challenge students' positions and beliefs on various contemporary issues and using a variety of technological tools.

### **Information and Communications Technology (ICT)**

How can a media-savvy generation of teens be invited to fully engage in art projects that address citizenship? ICT tools are highly motivating and fluidly adopted by today's high school students. These technologies introduce new ways of sharing creations with others and opening dialogue around a work of art, as well as encouraging the development of new techniques in art making. During the 2015-2016 school year, the artist M. Chantre along with students from a multimedia class worked on a project called "Les lieux intangibles" (Intangible spaces). This project involved three facets: an installation, a sculpture and a virtual component. To introduce the project, students were asked to define what they considered to be "real" images on the web and to deconstruct manipulated photographs to identify elements that were added or modified. For inspiration, students were introduced to the work of various Land Art artists such as Agnes Denis, Andy Goldsworthy and Christo, to learn about environmental movements and how artists of the 1970s created ephemeral works of art in nature and urban areas, outside of museum institutions. In this critical media literacy approach, students were asked to closely observe images and to engage in critical thinking when interacting with content on the web. M. Chantre presented students with manipulated photographs of their surroundings and discussed with them what constitutes a "real" image. Students were asked to distinguish fictitious from real places and to deconstruct the images they were looking at. This exercise enabled students to question their own assumptions about what they think is real in their everyday life and to make connections between visual representation and meaning. By analyzing the codes generated by the image, students were able to develop their skills and competencies to interpret various visual media (Kellner & Share, 2005).

Following this activity, students were asked to work in teams to create an installation in the park surrounding their school. Students were required to make a plan and decide on the shapes and materials they were to use. To keep track of their installation and visual experiences, students

were expected to take pictures and add them to Google Maps, an online mapping service. As with a physical gallery, they appreciated viewing their pictures and sharing their creations on a virtual site that was easily accessible. This was also an opportunity for them to reflect upon their accomplishments and difficulties, for the duration that their installation was posted on the web. For the sculpture component, students modified the photographs of their installations using image manipulation software (see Figure 5), then engraved the images on Flexiglas plates with a laser machine. Finally, these plates were assembled to create a sculpture representing the geographic coordinates of the school (see Figure 6). The benefits of this project were manifold: it gave students the chance to understand some of the processes through which images are transformed using various technologies; it showed students that artworks can be ephemeral and exist in the virtual world of the web; and it enabled students to relate to physical spaces in their local community as environments which can be creatively activated through art.



Figure 5. Manipulated photograph showing student's installation in the park.



Figure 6. Intangible spaces. Plexiglas and photo etching sculpture installation.

## The Effective Use of Technology

The use of new technologies in the classroom presents its own unique challenges. On the one hand, new technologies can be seen as taking power away from users by exercising control over the manner in which everyday actions are performed, shaping our identities to conform to their matrix (Feenberg, 2005). On the other hand, these technologies provide enormous potential in the transmission of knowledge, communications and creations. In experimenting with new ICT tools students develop unique ways of using them, while learning about the boundary between educationally effective usage and entertainment.

Freedman and Stuhr (2004) state, "technologies were once considered as an escape into a fictional, virtual world. Students using technology today are understood as engaging with complex and global communities through multiple cognitive levels" (p. 818). For M. Chantre, the internet allows him to create works of art that encourage the viewer to reflect on their visual culture (personal communication, February 19, 2016). He explains that new technologies change relationships within society because they are intrinsically bound to values. Through its multiple forms, technology allows the selection and organization of information in a way that reflects our thoughts and beliefs individually and socially. However, M. Chantre considers that these values could be challenged through his works, as it questions our conceptions of social and cultural identity. In using technology, artists have the ability to push the limits of their practice by making connections with other disciplines and increasing access to their work.

## Interdisciplinarity

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, interdisciplinarity has become increasingly prevalent in art education and the social sciences (CNAEA, 2002; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). Governmental educational programs encourage the co-production of knowledge between the disciplines in order for students to acquire a global, multi-faceted understanding of contemporary issues (MEES, 2004). Interdisciplinarity links different fields in order to describe, analyze, and understand the complexities of a shared subject of study. It emphasizes collaboration between specialists from different domains in order to break out of the specificity of each discipline and to bring its relativity into perspective (Darbellay, 2011). Visual and media literacy are considered interdisciplinary, both involving the reading and analysis of visual and textual information from various sources. In art education, visual and media literacy can be used to encourage students to appreciate contemporary art and develop their language skills and critical thinking across disciplines.

For B. Ballengée, who integrates perspectives from both art and science in his work, interdisciplinarity allows him to ask unique sets of questions about environmental issues, and to approach them from different points of view that are mutually influential.

*As I am making art, working with scientific facts, I get inspired to do more science, so I start asking different questions based on what I have found. When I have an idea and working on an art project, it inspires new ways of looking at the scientific problem. (B. Ballengée, personal communication, March 1, 2016)*

B. Ballengée's practice is interdisciplinary and involves the collaborative participation of the public, various professionals and organizations such as Q-Art (an organization that aims to break down the barriers to art education and contemporary art) to create awareness-raising projects. None of the artists that were interviewed chose the same route to becoming professional artists: B. Ballengée studied sculpture, art history, and science; E. Picard studied visual art; and M. Chantre studied anthropology, sociology, electroacoustic music and digital art. For students who must soon choose how to orient themselves after completing high school, hearing practicing artists speak about their own unique educational paths opens up options and acts as a source of inspiration and motivation.

By taking into account current political, cultural and social issues while working with various contemporary artists' approaches and practices, art classes can connect to students' personal lives. Society demands more specialization than ever before; however, complex global challenges are best addressed from interdisciplinary perspectives (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). In art class, a study of visual culture that is connected to other disciplines allows students to better understand how various forms of power influence their identities.

## Conclusions

Even though curriculum may be discipline-bound, competency-oriented, and tailored towards standardized evaluations, art educators can still find ways to make their classes fresh and relevant to teens' interests, as well as effective in developing self-aware, creative, constructive citizens.

Teaching students appreciation of contemporary arts should emphasize how it can challenge our conceptions of the world and lead us to questions about individual, social, and cultural identities. As visual images are integrated into most facets of life, visual literacy becomes a necessary pedagogical approach that can enable students to look more closely at images, to identify the information and messages behind it, and to develop a language that is more culturally and globally understood (Stokes, 2001). In encouraging discussion about contemporary art,



teachers foster the development of communication skills, sensitivity and awareness about the influence of visual culture. By listening to others and sharing their knowledge, students learn about the different meanings and emotions embodied in visual images and become more conscious of their symbolic references. As E. Picard suggests, we read a work of art from our personal baggage, recalling upon our personal knowledge, memory, and senses (personal communication, February 10, 2016). Allowing students to make connections between their aesthetic experiences and their personal lives empowers them as individuals, as they are encouraged to incorporate their own perceptions to interpret the subject.

Introducing partnerships with practicing artists proved to be a highly motivating strategy with numerous advantages: it promoted self-identification in relation to local and global issues, empowered teens to take an active role in their community, cultivated creative communication skills using various new media, fostered the ability to work collaboratively and collectively, and created practical real-world connections that students can apply outside of school. In this context, the art classroom then becomes an environment in which common conceptions are challenged and students are encouraged to take the reins in creating meaningful dialogue about current social concerns. As Freedman and Stuhr (2004) explain:

*If the intention of education is to prepare students for personal fulfillment and to constructively contribute to society, art education must deal with newly emerging issues, problems, and possibilities that go beyond the constraints of learning offered by a discipline-based curriculum and standardized forms of assessments. (p. 816)*

Contemporary artists have the ability to bring creative ideas into the practice of teaching. They can stimulate the imagination and build relationships with teens as role models. Although not all art educators are artists, they can find inspiration in their methods of working to build ambitious projects that will connect to the students' interests and needs. Through visual and critical media literacy, students can develop their appreciation of contemporary art by engaging in real life experiences with artists in their community, making connections between traditional to more advance digital technological practices, and transferring their knowledge into broader areas of learning.



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