Transnational tomorrows today:

Graduate student futures and imaginaries for art education

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CANADA

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS, ART EDUCATION, AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY:
BUILDING PEDAGOGICAL FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

This work explores how the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) facilitate pedagogical imaginaries in art education. Schools and higher education institutions have increasingly adopted the SDGs to their curriculum or initiatives to follow 21st century skill development and sustainability trends in education; yet, how, where, and why should art fit into the picture? I elaborate on a collaborative video work involving education students from Concordia University and Hiroshima University to demonstrate methodologies for the future of art education and teaching sustainability. By reflecting on the experience of the project, I analyse how the group's adoption of process-oriented, posthumanist, and globally applicable practices relates to education models in arts exposure, conversation as art, and arts integration; thus, laying a foundation to imagine an expanded and ever-evolving arts-SDG curriculum geared towards sustainability action.

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This personal reflection stems from the question: What does art *do*? To address the question, I explore how the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can facilitate pedagogical imaginaries and directions for the future in art education. The SDGs comprise of seventeen unique yet interrelated urgent goals that call for 'peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future,' designed with targeted blueprints for 2030 (United Nations n.d.). The strength of the SDG design is its interdisciplinarity, forging partnerships and collaborations at a global level. Schools and higher education institutions have increasingly adopted the SDGs to their curriculum to follow 21st century skill development and sustainability trends in education; yet, how, where, and why should art fit into the picture?

Reflecting on models of arts exposure, conversation as art, and arts integration, I demonstrate how a collaborative case involving Concordia University and Hiroshima University activated futures of an arts-SDGs education. As part of a graduate course, education students undertook a collaborative artmaking project tasked with addressing issues of sustainability that were prevalent in each student's local area. Education students located in three different cities reflected on which of the seventeen SDGs they were drawn to. Our team posed questions that included: What happens when a local issue travels to another locality? What does the language of artmaking afford? Our group's contribution to a joint virtual art exhibit resulted in the following project, *An Exchange of Locality; Video Reflections on the SDGs* (see Gera et al. 2021; https://vimeo.com/643096934). This video conversation served as a starting point for imagining an arts-SDG curriculum.

Despite the ongoing global pandemic that necessitates virtual activities, the need for conversation via video conferencing was primarily due to distance; group members included Congmao in Hiroshima, Jacky and Ashu were in Vancouver, and Marguerite and I were in Montreal for this learning encounter. Understanding our interests relating to art education became a way to introduce ourselves and learn about each other. After posing the question of peace and its relationship to art, we discussed art as healing and how this was a highly relevant subject for Congmao while living in Hiroshima. Jacky emphasized looking at art as a process rather than an outcome, a pedagogy

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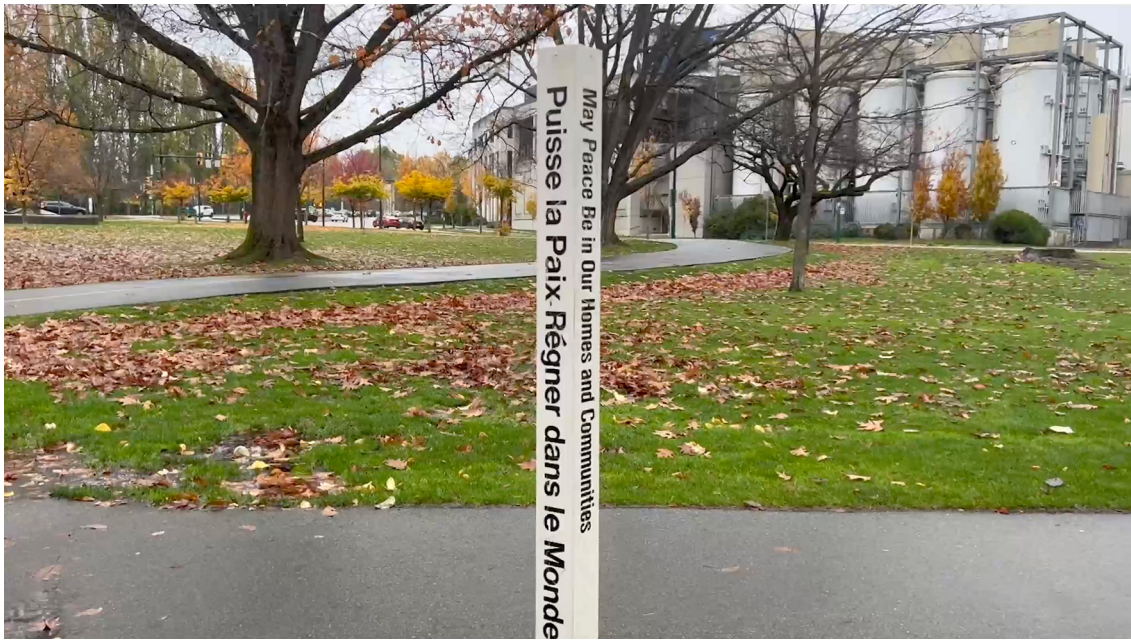
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that Congmao took up in her own lesson planning by focusing on self-portraits as a means to deeper self-realization. On the topic of sustainability, Ashu discussed what sustainable materials could look like in art lesson planning, and Marguerite emphasized how different sustainable issues are specific to cities and countries, noting how particularly impactful it feels when you *see* climate change with your own eyes. It became clear that art as a process of language, healing, empathy, and change were important notions to each of us, even if they manifested differently on an individual scale.

With group members in Hiroshima, Vancouver, and Montreal, the symmetry of our relationship became an opportunity for structuring our conversation. The notions of locality and open-ended process became vital elements to our project. The idea then flowed naturally: create a conversation that occurs cyclically by enacting both the role of teacher and student. Group members in one city acted as teacher and designed a project or a provocation that addresses an SDG in their city, filming their process. The decision to focus on a specific SDG subject for the initial provocation was made independently of the other partnerships so that the characteristics of the individual group members and the cities they inhabited would be highlighted. Each group member sent their video documentation to other group members in another city, who as students made a relevant video response - a translation of place. Montreal gave to Hiroshima, Hiroshima gave to Vancouver, and Vancouver gave to Montreal. Interpretations of three different SDGs emerged, with Goal 4.7 and 13.3 acting as a common ground for education, cultural diversity, and sustainability (United Nations, n.d.).

Congmao thought about peace and built a video provocation based on the model of arts exposure. By visiting the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, and documenting how visitors interact with the bombing site, Congmao witnessed the ways in which a city remembers its trauma through building restoration, museums and public memorials. Guiding the audience through the entire museum and surrounding public area, Congmao shares how artworks are incorporated into the museum, how the explicit visuals and oral histories of trauma are utilized for education, and how peace remains the final word of the narrative. City memorials bridge conversations between

the past, present, and future; an audience is privileged to see this occur when Congmao films a group of young school children at the memorial. The children sat pensively at the bombing site, listened to their teacher tell the history. They then visited the memorial while documenting their observations in their notebooks, and ultimately ran around the peace park together, full of laughter. The complexity of peace is revealed. The presence of children's play within the memorial site encourages a sense of healing as histories of trauma evolve.

Jacky and Ashu were inspired to visit the peace memorial dedicated to the victims of the Hiroshima bombing in their own city of Vancouver, Seaforth Peace Park. They explored the differences in how people interact with public memorial spaces depending on the location, design, utility and architecture of the space, and how that becomes representative of the population and their values (see Figure 1). Arts exposure was practiced by moving outside of the classroom and entering public spaces, following the foundational ideas of Dewey (1934) that art is activated by an engaging relationship with human and object. An active moment of learning is constructed because of the abundantly diverse experiences and perspectives that each individual carries with them to their interaction with art objects (Hubard 2015). Arts exposure models that involve an outside institution or museum continue to gain popularity in curriculum design for the many benefits to learners. To expand the possibility further, arts exposure can also involve bringing professional art into the classroom, as exemplified by the doctoral dissertation project described by Wren, Wright, and Watkins (2019). In this case study, professional artworks live in the classroom over time so kindergarten students can experience a deep, semiotic, and embodied engagement when interacting with the objects. From discussions with our group, it became clear that arts exposure strategies were important elements for our teaching styles also. Pedagogies guided by arts-SDG collaborations that are built from arts exposure models provide exciting pathways for creating active, embodied, and engaging learning interactions.

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Figure 1.
Jacky Lo & Ashu Gera, Video Still, Vancouver, 2021.

In Jacky and Ashu's video provocation, they pushed the notion of what a conversation can look like when there are no words spoken, framing visual conversation as an art practice. While conversation functioned as a permeating theme across the project, Jacky and Ashu expanded on this notion and urged thought-provoking inquiries through silent filmmaking. In Vancouver, the topic was centered on changing cities by walking through neighborhoods that are in various stages of gentrification, specifically Chinatown and Downtown Eastside. Jacky and Ashu direct the viewer to the crisis of homelessness and the acute need for metropolitan cities to care for its inhabitants (see Figure 2). The ability to engage in a meaningful, visual conversation exemplifies how the language of art can become the basis for international relationships, particularly when spoken language may pose barriers. As such, research on making conversations an essential element of artmaking, even becoming its own medium (Shields 2019), provides a method for engaging with global citizenry in arts education. The globally interconnected structure of the SDGs ideally situates itself as a foundational teaching tool for international art conversations.

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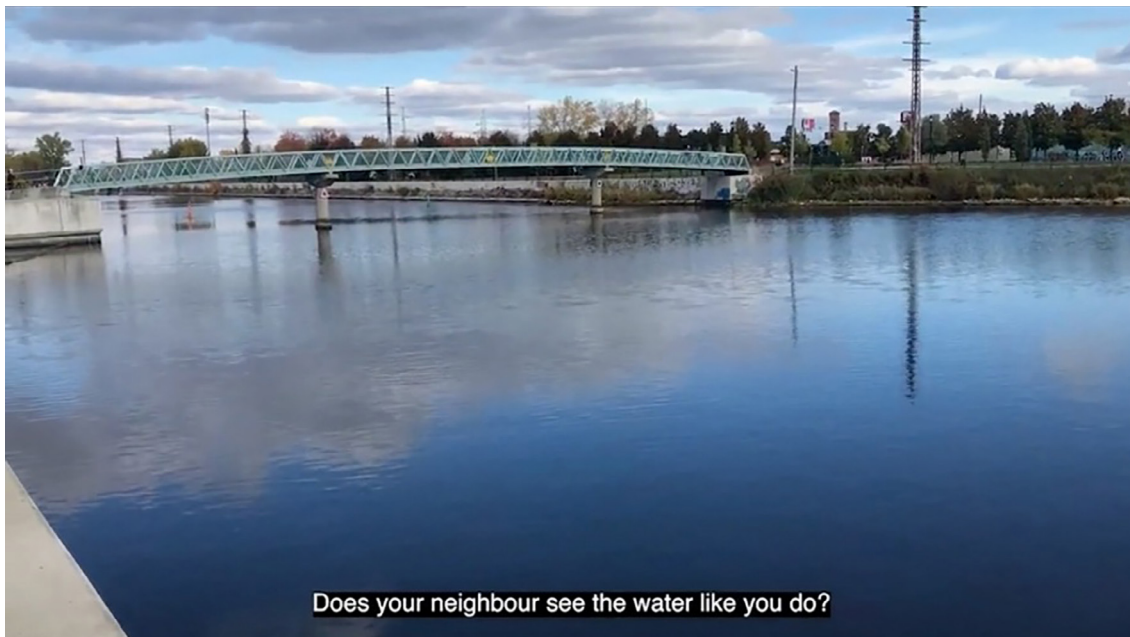Building pedagogical futures - **Maggie McCutcheon**

Figure 2.
Jacky Lo & Ashu Gera, Video Still, Vancouver, 2021.

In Montreal, Marguerite and I thought about water, since sustainability, climate change, and social action were important elements for us to address. Considering SDG 6.b, we asked our collaborators to not only reflect on what water means for them, but also to document their daily water consumption and interaction both inside and outside of their home. Inquiries about water accessibility and the circular infrastructure which provides - or does not provide - clean water to inhabitants of a place were encouraged through open-ended questions: Where do you get your water from in your home? Where is the nearest water outside of your home? Does your neighbour see the water like you do? (see Figure 3).

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Figure 3.
Marguerite Marion-Reyes & Maggie McCutcheon, Video Still, Montreal, 2021.

We urged our collaborators to reflect on the water that always flows inside of them, underneath them, and above them, and to consider what it means if you have access to clean water in your home and immediate surroundings. Accessibility to water is highly relevant in Canada – the subject of unusable water spans across the country and most prominently affects Indigenous communities and an unhoused population, speaking to the ongoing crisis of unceded land. Promoting consideration on water accessibility encourages connections to further social issues both within and between countries.

In Hiroshima, Congmao responded poetically to the theme of water, focusing on the inseparable relationship between Japan and the sea, conveying aspects of cultural identity. Through image-making, Congmao embodied the ocean and its interconnectedness with the city, noticing the personality and gestures of water. Posthumanist strategies were adopted in the filmmaking process, allowing new meaning to emerge when humans are decentered as the holder of knowledge and considered instead as a component among a network of elements (Ulmer 2017). They additionally addressed the issue of water consumption. For instance, in a response to a clip where I tried to access

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a Montreal public water fountain to no avail, Congmao demonstrated the usability of a public water fountain in Hiroshima, in addition to looking at plastic water bottles for sale in a nearby outdoor drink machine. The tool of video ideally encouraged the nuance of Congmao's ideas to be conveyed to a global audience. Modeling arts integration and interdisciplinarity were important elements for Marguerite and me. We sought to think about the material issue of water accessibility through a poetic and diaristic lens, encouraging diverse ideas of artmaking that responded to senses and prompted posthumanist interpretations of 'being-with materials' (Lemieux 2021: 3).

While developing our ideas, I viewed the incorporation of water in relation to the SDGs as an ideal beginning from which interdisciplinary arts education could be pushed forward. While the model of arts integration is not new, it still poses a wide array of potential futures. In *Reflecting on Interdisciplinarity: A Story About Bits*, author Melanie Davenport (2005) reminds readers that interdisciplinarity is only necessary because of the institutions we have created:

The funny thing was, folks first decided to divide up the world like that in order to try to figure out the bigger picture. But in the process, they became so focused on the small parts that they lost sight of the larger goal. Did the bigger world cease to exist just because different people began to specialize and cluster around different bits of it? Did the fundamental interconnectedness between all the bits disappear just because they had been studied in isolation from one another? Of course not! (p. 3-4)

One model of arts integration involves bringing the tools of artmaking to non-art fields. In Amélie Lemieux and Virginie Thériault's (2021) research, they integrated an art practice defined as data w(e)aving to environmental adult education. By collaging and diffracting water samples in glass jars over printed data, they activated an artmaking tool to illuminate their sustainability research and center posthuman inquiry, which in this case posited water as the glue among relations, rather than only human focused. In another research study, Victoria Hunter (2019) integrates performative dance to cartography and urban studies. Defined as 'vernacular mapping,' Hunter rethinks how we

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map out movement and interaction in urban spaces via the artistic practice of dance, so that individuals rewire dominant attitudes about urban space and 'become custodians [...] of the urban landscapes we inhabit' (p. 141). Each researcher turned to artmaking out of necessity to illuminate data or processes.

We may find inspiration from a model of reciprocal integration between non-arts and arts subjects that occurred in a study about a joint-doctoral program in Iceland and Finland centered on action research in education for sustainability (Jónsdóttir, Macdonald & Jokela 2018). They brought participatory artistic approaches such as written journals and visual responses to study groups in one university, and incorporated data representation into their art exhibition at another university. The researchers valued reciprocity: they 'neither use the artistic approach as an alternative nor as a supplement to conventional educational research' (p. 38). While our group members enacted reciprocity by each providing a provocation and a response video, a potential future for expanding the practice of reciprocity could include collaboration with students in non-art fields, prompting an exchange of disciplines. When space and resources permit it, a mutually dependent integrated relationship between non-art and art fields demonstrates a way forward for art-SDG curriculum that advances the learning potential of both sustainability and artmaking.

The video provocation about water prompted my own thoughts on how to expand an integrated arts-SDG curriculum that involves mobilization. My personal lack of expertise on infrastructure in Montreal brought me to Carmela Cucuzzella's (2019) work on eco-art in public space. She argues that for viewers to easily understand and be mobilized to sustainability action, an explicit didacticism is required in the artwork. Thus, feasible solutions with various stakeholders could be potential outcomes of change. I began to picture what the implications would be for expanding an arts-SDG curriculum centered on an interdisciplinary approach to water. First, imagine a didactic lesson on water cycles; now, imagine a classroom visit to water infrastructure sites in a city; now, imagine if students were asked to sketch objects, gestures, or sounds they noticed while visiting the site, to be brought back to the classroom for interpretation and further artmaking, eventually becoming a public art project for a local community.

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In this scenario, we can see how pedagogic futures and concrete actions could be enacted in relation to Congmao, Jacky, and Ashu's video works as well. Taking the art classroom on a field trip to a non-art public space prompts interdisciplinary exposure, a practice stemming from Congmao's trip to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Furthermore, when considering what a public art project could look like, one can become inspired by Jacky and Ashu's walking videos and consider other media projects that involve walking, urban space, and historical testimony, such as the *Canal* audio walk project supported by the [Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling](#) at Concordia University. The possibilities are abundant when SDGs act as a conceptual starting point from which to build arts integrated curriculum geared towards sustainability action.

In this work, the outcome was also a beginning: A video piece was created, but a foundation was also built for what new processes could look like. Thus, meaning making remains with the process, enabled by the fluidity of artmaking and grounded by posthumanist methodologies that urge for questions of relationship and interaction (Ulmer 2017). Congmao practiced arts exposure models by bringing viewers to a museum institution and public memorial, demonstrating how learning happens in interactive and embodied ways. Jacky and Ashu remade what a silent conversation can look like on an international scale, prompting a viewer to rely on their senses; thus, conversation became an art medium. Marguerite and I considered what arts integration could look like, framing water as an element from which to build reflections on city infrastructure, accessibility, and consumption. An arts-SDG curriculum not only enables these models to be enacted in art education – integrating issues of sustainability, teaching empathy through art-conversation, and exposing students to outside sources – but it also prompts inspiring futures for building a global, process-oriented arts education curriculum.

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