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## Across the Bridge: A Story of Community, Sociality, and Art Education

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### Abstract

The article examines the planning, development, and outcome of an experiential learning project that brought together undergraduate studio art students and the workers of a power plant about to shut down. As one of the instructors for the project, I reflect on how our emergent pedagogical methods interfaced or conflicted with students interests, and plant employees.

Principles of phenomenological research inspired my early steps to the study. However, its operative conceptual framework follows the thoughts of socially engaged artists Suzanne Lacy (2010) and Pablo Helguera (2011), guiding an analysis of the relationships between students and workers with instructors as observer-participants. I investigate how these roles and relations developed through different modalities that ranged from familial sentiments to memorializing impulses, including the industrial conditions that inspired various sensual and aesthetic student responses. I argue that the production of artwork as autonomous objects, which constituted the self-evident outcome of this community-focused experience, contributed only a transactional

materiality to the project, and that the relational exchanges from which transformative experiences originated, offered unrivaled creative possibilities.

### **Introduction**

“In every integral experience, there is form because there is dynamic organization. I call the organization dynamic because it takes time to complete it, because it is a growth. There is inception, development, fulfillment. Material is ingested and digested through interaction with that vital organization of the results of prior experience that constitutes the mind of the worker.”

(Dewey, 1934, p. 57)

In this article, I examine the development, outcome, and significance of an experiential learning course-project that was created in 2014 for a class of 30 junior and senior undergraduate studio art students. The students were invited to develop artworks through encounters and conversations with a group of soon-to-be-laid-off workers from a power plant whose generating station was about to shut down. This community-focused art project was designed and taught by a team of three artist/educators, of whom I was part.

From its inception, the project sought to combine the experience of the artistic studio-classroom with experiential learning gained from active relationships with the world outside college. At the plant, in the studio, or in class, everything that happened would become fodder for creative insights focused on that experience. Seen through this perspective, the art object would not only operate as response but also as a palimpsest, a trace of the workers' memories of the place overlaid with our students' interpretations of the site as they experienced it, and redrawn every time conversations and artistic gestures bore witness to and inscribed the place with new insights.

The decision to write about the project and reflect on its development, pausing at its momentous points, arose from a sense of unease. As we celebrated its perceived successful completion, I sensed that we had missed the 'real' point. To begin with, the exhibition that was the project's final outcome featured few resolved artworks. I see now that this was, in part, due to our full time students' lack of focused time for cogitating. As well, an unclear sense of practical and creative boundaries in regard to working with employees of an operational plant limited everyone's vision. Importantly, despite our efforts to expand our students' sense of creative possibilities, our pedagogical methods remained implicitly rooted in a conventional paradigm: idea + object making = art exhibition and communication to an audience. As practicing artists we were comfortable with conceptual and performance traditions, but our usual model of college studio instruction coupled with the need to evaluate

tangible educational outcomes seem to have impeded these speculative considerations. There were other sources of entanglement that this study intends to clarify.

In writing about the project a few years after its completion, I am able to “re-open the case” and investigate in greater depth its pedagogical and artistic implications. Documents such as meeting notes, social media records and press coverage, students’ field notes, instructors’ logs, and project assessment provide a complex web of data that reveals new implications. In large part, the nature of the material collected suggested a phenomenological approach in which the process of writing a descriptive story was integral to my interpretation of the project. The more I tried to find the “true” value of the experience, when reflecting upon the course outcome, the stronger I felt that I needed a “situated, relational, embodied and enactive” (van Manen, 2011, n.p.) consideration of the project to fully comprehend its meaning. This initial phenomenological contemplation of stories and memories led to pivotal insights.

Ultimately, the narrative that follows borrows from the writing of socially engaged artists Susan Lacy (2010) and Pablo Helguera (2011), whose ideas served to interpret these insights and articulate important features of our experience. By contrasting the educational ambitions of the course with our expectations of students’ response to the workers’ life circumstances – their contribution as objects of study as well as performing subjects – I am able to see the blind spots that, until now, hindered a full understanding of the project’s scope. I can now see how the relational experience of the students and workers became the art outcome instead of the traditional art object that we had originally expected. In such context, what Helguera (n.d.) called *the fiction of the artwork* was necessary to discover the project’s transformative value.

From its onset, the experiment was engulfed in a spirit that Huyssen (2003) referred to as the way we configure our current memory narratives to be not only visible in the preservation of heritage buildings but also in what he calls “the mass-marketing of nostalgia, the obsessive self-musealization per video recorder, memoir writing, and confessional literature ... the spread of memory practices in the visual arts often centered on the medium of photography” (p.14). Integrating the CEO’s suggestions that the project would “recognize, document, memorialize, and honor the people of the plant” (personal communication, November 2013), the experiment already bound us to this culture of memory. With our students, week after week, we would revisit the workers’ stories of impending loss and of golden years, seeking to give these stories a shape and infuse them with a critical perspective, as well as, for a time at least, save them from oblivion.

### **Conceptual Framework: The Conditions of Relational Art and Transpedagogy**

Transpedagogy is related to relational aesthetics, participatory art, and to forms of public performance and socially engaged practices that have emerged across the discipline for many decades now. Transpedagogy, Helguera (n.d.) pointed out, includes the characteristics of community-based projects that integrate art making with educational methodologies in ways that are distinct from the established functions of art education. In contrast with academic art education, which traditionally has sought to teach skills for making art and to scaffold through this material practice the students' developing knowledge of conceptual approaches, transpedagogy makes use of methods of education to create artwork that is "constituted simultaneously of a learning experience or process and a conceptual gesture open to interpretation" (para. 5).

I chose to examine the project at the center of this essay in part using the lens of transpedagogy because of the many connections I could make, in retrospect, with the opportunities that were available to us within the project context, with students and workers, instructors and audience.

In my analysis, pedagogical approaches are not understood to be the sole concern of instructors. True, one could reflect on the project as an instructional experiment whence the teaching and learning was conceived as an artwork. The excitement of the unknown that faced us certainly made us feel like we were embarking in a creative adventure, but we did not think of the project then as something of our making. Nonetheless, educational elements permeated the project from beginning to end. As instructors, we acted as facilitators wanting students to construct their own experiences. My interpretive storytelling focuses on the possibilities that were offered to our students and to the workers, as they formed two communities engaged in exchanges that were calling for the production of artwork for an audience. This politicized and activist audience— as we imagined, from the protests outside – would be curious to see the industrial site morph into an art exhibition space. As the final community in the string of exchanges, I imagine that the audience encounter with the art experience would be lived through the confluence of their pre-established points of view, the worker's stories and perspectives, and the students' responses to the latter, all this in a silenced plant, an environment that had held multiple meanings. We did not foresee all that at the onset, but we intuited that the context would see the emergence of a dialogic pedagogy where the roles of learners, and teachers, workers, guides, visitors, observers, and observed, would become interchangeable and in flux (Freire, 2007). At first, the future audience was not on our mind. Students, plant administrators, workers and instructors were simply eager to establish working conditions where hierarchies would be negotiable. Only in retrospect do I see that the context of our experiential art project led us ineluctably towards considerations of relational and transpedagogical approaches to art making.

In his essay about transpedagogy, Helguera (n.d.) established a historical lineage to the term, linking its early forms to the legacy of Beuys' art and pedagogy as social mission, and Broodthaers' *Musee d'Art Moderne* mock pedagogical artifacts of communication. Helguera (n.d.) recalled the last decades of the twentieth century and artists' interest for engagement with identity politics that spurred many public performances, expressing other forms of pedagogical art. One is reminded of the late 80's public and volunteer-based performance work of Suzanne Lacy presenting learning artistic experiences as a medium to articulate a political consciousness in a community (Garoian, 1999).

Clear connections could also be established with Bourriaud's ideas of Relational Aesthetics (2002). Helguera (n.d.) suggested that Bourriaud's art as space of sociability and of encounter, where one experiences a moment of exchange "without any other agenda than to merge the artwork into daily life" (Referents, para 11), expresses a different purpose than that of an art with a pedagogical direction. Participation, in his view, remains central to pedagogical art projects, but its difference lays in its structure. It is meant to "create a type of experience in the Deweyan sense – an experience that specifically leads to the construction of knowledge, or in a larger sense, to the production of culture" (Helguera, n.d., Referents, para 12).

Transpedagogy as a socially engaged art practice adds to relational aesthetics an actual collective construction of knowledge, an experience that is distinct from a participatory work, where exchanges with an audience often call for a symbolic response, where "one attains an "experience" in the most expansive sense of the word, where the artwork may encourage the formation of an ephemeral community" (para 11).

In examining the project, I use both relational and transpedagogical ideas to look back and discern the conceptual outlines that can help me make sense of what took place.

### **Setting the stage**

The course was designed to include a variety of pedagogical approaches that would support the customary development of studio art skills while introducing ideas linked to experiential learning and socially engaged artistic practices. The instructors devised methods to develop the students' ability to trust what were to be unfamiliar conditions of relationship building. As well as navigating their way through the necessary legal documents and permits, the challenges of time and budget constraints as well as unavoidable oversights, the instructors were focused on facilitating an authentic and sensitive response to any situation that would arise. The agendas of college and plant administrators, not always clarified but implicit, as well as our pedagogical ambitions, which would evolve as time passed and as our students struggled to integrate their encounters into art forms, all needed to merge into an artistic experience where none of us had ever ventured.

*The place.* In the fall of 2013, the CEO of a company managing a coal-burning power plant had approached our president at a New England college of art to propose that a team of instructors plan an experience where students would meet with workers at the plant and through their interactions, create artwork that would recognize their contribution in the community. Everyone understood that environmental and political perspectives could inspire the content of the students' artwork. As with many such coal-burning plants of the industrial era, years of environmental studies and increasing pressure from various non-governmental organizations and local activists' lobby resulted in the plant closing down. Built in the 1950s, it was to be partially demolished in July 2014, and its employees, laid off permanently. The project was to culminate in an exhibition of artworks and a poetry night held in the plant's great turbine hall that same summer.

### ***The People***

The course was entitled *Across the Bridge* as a way to point to the geographical location of the plant, which was separated from the art college by a small ocean inlet. More importantly, it suggested the facilitation of a creative, intergenerational dialogue between two community groups whose cultural views are typically perceived as divergent. In popular definitions, models of community are widely based on ideas of "centered, self-identical subjects coming into communion through the mutual recognition of a shared essence" (Kester, 2004, p.154), but as Lucy Lippard (1999) pointed out, "community doesn't mean understanding everything and everybody and resolving all differences; it means knowing how to work within differences as they change and evolve" (p. 24). In our context, participants and organizers were aware that the plant workers could be tempted to dismiss college students by associating them with the young environmentalist-activists demonstrating against what the workers saw as their legitimate livelihood. In return, our art students were likely to characterize plant workers as traditionalists who refused to accept the evidence of environmental studies pointing to coal burning as a major source of global warming and pollution. These perceptions were likely to influence behavior and, early on, exchanges between the two groups were imbued with suspicious reserve, as if anticipating disagreement. Keeping in mind the official project goals of memorializing the contribution of the workers, and our awareness of potential political discord, the two communities would need to earn trust in each other, along with respect and collaborative involvement (Helguera, 2011).

### ***The Course: Learning Goals and Methodology***

At our college, we looked for ways to provide experiential learning for our students with the hope of building their self-confidence, communication skills, and to help them see how creative abilities can transfer to endeavors beyond the studio. Like John Dewey (1934), experiential learning specialist David Kolb (1984) believed that learning is a process that

transforms experience into knowledge. Experiential learning, in its broad definition, defines a core approach of art education pedagogies. In setting up an art learning experience, one typically challenges students to actively engage their reflective inner-world and critical thinking capacities with the outer action and processes that allow them to construct and transform experience, including opportunities for reflection, and a final introspection where growth can take place and the experiential can be transformed into knowledge (Beard & Wilson, 2013). For us, this experiential learning would engage art students in active learning through the development of communication skills and relationship building in addition to their artistic practice, using weekly classroom seminars, studio engagement with materials, peer exchanges, and research as a way to reflect. Alongside our ideals of a production based on relational experiences, college administrators appreciated the term in a more pragmatic or “real world” entrepreneur understanding of working with/for a client, with the goal of producing a commercially viable product, an object of exchange.

With this project, instructors saw an opportunity to guide students past self-referential approaches to art making so fundamental to teens and young adults. As a rule, the identity-formation process that begins earlier in adolescence is marked by a redefinition of interests, talents, and values that continues into early adulthood (Kroger, 2004). During this period, students are interested in forming their own autonomous relationship with the world, a movement characterized by an attention to their own needs and the capacity of “chipping their own niche in the surrounding social landscape” (Kroger, 2004, p. 29). When given the freedom to explore artistic content of their choice in studio courses, students at that age often choose to investigate personal concerns of emotional import. Keeping in mind the goals of recognizing, documenting, honoring, and memorializing the experience of the coal plant workers, we wanted students to recognize the experience of others rather than their own. We hoped that they would listen, interpret, translate, and respond to others’ experiences within a creative forum.

The course learning goals included the exploration and experimentation of suitable research methods leading to the creation of artwork based on observations, interviews, conversations and various form of documentation of our selected site and community. The goals specifically mentioned ethnographic inquiry and narrative analysis, since these would lend themselves to the reflexive retelling of the workers’ stories. Ethnographic inquiry in this context is akin to what Ruth Behar (2008) understood as finding unexpected stories, listening and retelling, and bringing these stories to other audiences, not forgetting that one is also “searching for ways to evoke how inter-subjectivity unfolds as a fundamental part of the representation of social reality” (p. 535). Through narrative analysis, in the context of artistic research, we hoped students would ponder the recordings of conversations and their contexts, and in the journals they were expected to keep, imagine ways to re-present ideas through a self-reflective

interpretive account of their encounters. Analogous to ethnography, where subjectivity in the representation of others cannot be avoided, narrative research in the context of documentary and oral history would seek to preserve the complexity of the workers' experience (Josselson, 2006, cited in Leavy, 2015) while allowing our students to insert their own voices. We aspired to introduce students to various styles of narratives, teaching them how to regard their interviews and conversations as data that could be collected, reflectively analyzed, interpreted, and represented in the making of their artwork. In engaging in a process of re-storying, they would become aware of the stories' layered meanings, recognizing that narratives are co-constructed "through a reflexive, participatory, and aesthetic process" (Leavy, 2015, p.46). As instructors, we were also acknowledging, for example, bell hooks' conceptualization of art as a vehicle for channeling political ideas and beliefs, and for transmitting cultural information (Leavy, 2015).

In reality, we had left open the degree to which students chose to bear witness to the stories they collected. They could engage in a more distinctly personal interpretation. We wanted them to establish their own points of view and become aware that, even in documentary work, there was no neutrality possible. I believe that we took for granted our students' readiness for self-reflexivity. In retrospect, I realize that to be activated, we needed to demonstrate how this realization would be useful. As instructors, we were often mired in practicalities, while our students were reluctant to engage in philosophical deliberations and introspections. I revisit these ideas further in the paper, as I reflect on how our students' actions and accounts of their relationships with the workers revealed their points of views through emotional responses. Borrowing from Suzanne Lacy's (2010) categorizing of artists in their relationship to community with whom they create projects, I interpret our students' style of engagement.

Alongside interviews with workers, visits at the plant and studio work time, in-class activities included discussion of readings, a presentation on oral-history methods of interviewing as well as a demonstration of the journalistic approach to collecting stories, presented by a local journalist and documentary-filmmaker. We described interview methods as part of the narrative inquiry process. One particularly useful method, the oral history technique, demanded a clear focus on listening; establishing rapport and to some degree, intimacy; refraining from interrupting; and allowing for pauses and silences (Perks & Thomson, 2006). Another approach, the journalistic interview, suggested a different method of collection based on questions that were focused on a single issue of working life therefore the method could be shorter, and also more detailed (Perks & Thomson, 2006). The journalistic interview also could be used productively with small groups, where members ignited one another's recall. In these situations, "memories are triggered, facts can be verified or checked, views can be challenged and the burning issues of the past can be discussed and argued about again in the light of the present" (Perks & Thomson, 2006, p. 147).

Other learning objectives pointed to the exploration of various perspectives in considering one's intentions for artistic output, in the use of selected documents, readings and interview data when developing a concept. More detailed goals for this experiential project suggested that students learn the value of documentation and reporting through writing, journal keeping, drawing, photographing to develop a reflective and reflexive artistic practice. They would develop social skills in relationship with a community – who at the time of writing the syllabus was still perceived as an outside “referential social entity” to borrow Miwon Kwon's expression (2002, p.154). Finally, students would need to develop their ability to work independently and collaboratively and support their peer's work through group discussions.

### ***The Context***

Pragmatically speaking, the first difficulties building relationships between the workers and students, plant and college, emerged from the disruptions inherent to negotiating and planning schedules of visits in two institutional systems functioning with different constraints and priorities. Getting acquainted with and implementing the security and safety protocols of a Homeland Security-supervised site forced our students to reimagine their process: they would not be allowed to roam at will in the plant and, at first, were to be accompanied at all times by a designated employee. As a condition of participating in the course, our students agreed to and were subject to the legalese of contracts.

By asking us to create a visual memory of the workers' stories, the CEO had taken a risk. In all likelihood, he expected some artworks would be politically charged and it would not be farfetched to believe that he, perhaps, would have thought the possibility exciting, creating ideological friction and heat that would have given the plant and its history added visibility. Lawyers for the firm had written a contract that specified that *the project shall include the following aspects of the plant: The Power Plant, the Power Plant's relationship with the city, and other social, political, or environmental content that may arise through the college's artistic and academic process*. One of our project coordinators, hired for her legal experience and combined artistic background, suggested that, “The CEO was looking to us to fill in the blank and he was open to student/community activism as a component of the work produced. I drafted the final clause to suggest the project's broad possibilities” (K. R., personal communication, January 7, 2015).

It could be that the politically uncertain atmosphere was compounded by an antagonistic or at least strained relationship between workers and plant administrators. The prospect of being laid off surely affected the workers at a deeper emotional level than we could imagine. Little by little, the human story of hard-working people, their decades of service to a community that used and consumed every kilowatt of energy produced at the plant, and the wistfulness of a

group of workers that called itself a family transcended any politically critical or antagonistic artistic performance that we expected – and perhaps hoped for.

### **Out in the Field: Exchanges, Roles and Family**

Relationships introduce systems of exchange, and a system, wrote Donella Meadows (2008), is not just a pile of things and words. “A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something... a system must consist of three kinds of things: *elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose*” (p.11). Once the interconnectedness of the two systems (college students and plant workers) was physically understood, the flow of information created through the building of relationships determined the quality of relational and dialogical exchange. To understand its direction, one had to be attentive and observe how it behaved. For example, personal and contextual factors influenced the qualities of relationships established between students and workers. In addition to the artworks planned and produced, the written accounts by students and video recordings bear witness to the diverse attributes of these collaborative exchanges.

In *Leaving Art* (2010), Susan Lacy proposed a diagram to illustrate a sequence of positions as artists engage with a community. Hers is a sliding bar moving from artist as experienter to artist as activist, with the middle ground occupied by artist as reporter and artist as analyst. While students in our course adopted different roles during each visit, two models of engagement seem to consistently reappear.

#### ***Artists as Experiencers***

The first group resembled *artists as experiencers*, seemingly more preoccupied with “the domain of experience, the artist, like a subjective anthropologist, entering the territory of the ‘other’ ” (Lacy, 2010, p.176). These students interacted with the workers, the plant, and its many buildings and machines as with a theme park. They were the active tourist-explorers interested in experientially discovering all aspects of the place, with the workers acting as their hosts and guides (and assigned drivers). However, the documents produced within that spirit never quite reached the expectations that Lacy proposed. In their activities, the students were less preoccupied with becoming “a conduit for the experience of the ‘other’ ” (p.176) than with discovering a new environment and meeting its inhabitants. Their records focused on their own personal experience and entertainment.

#### ***Artists as Reporters***

Another category of students, approximating Lacy’s *artist as reporter* and filled with a mixture of wonder and curiosity, documented the plant as a temple to the Industrial Age.

Their photography evidences a sensual engagement with the endearing strangeness of the aging mechanical environment, accentuating a spirit of nostalgia, the same homesickness described by the workers in anticipation of their departure. In this category, students' photographs seldom represented workers but focused on machines. In this model, the information not only revealed, it also sought to persuade (Lacy, 2010); the students conveyed what they saw, implying a conscious selection for the creation of a visual metaphor that pointed to their aesthetic appreciation of the venerable alliance between man and machine.

A sub-group of the category *artist as reporter* (or documentarian), focused on the workers' stories and memories more than on the site. Moved to empathy by what they heard, these students concentrated on recording, describing, and bearing witness through listening. Closest to the intentions of traditional documentary work, their personal artistic interpretation remained discreet, perceptible through editing decisions rather than obvious manipulation of the material. Maintaining a distance from the analytical process, "the *artist as reporter* gazes at his subject apparently without prejudice" (p.177). Lacy (2010) suggested that, "after experiencing, revealing information is the next compassionate step" (p. 177).

### ***Artist as Activist***

With the first two modes of artistic relationships underscoring the "intuitive, receptive, experiential and observational skills of the artists" (Lacy, 2010, p. 177), the model of *artist as analyst* is described as reaching for skills more akin to journalistic investigations, where artists undertake intellectual labor that "shift[s] the aesthetic attention toward the shape or meaning of their theoretical constructs" (p. 177). This role leads to the use of skills traditionally wielded by social science or cultural theory researchers. Lacy (2010) noted that with this conceptual approach artwork aims at political theorizing and as a result, the textual properties of the work demand more attention than its visual qualities.

In a course project such as ours, when student-artists as analyst would show readiness to to reflect and theorize on their experiences, they would need to be guided to recognize their embodied perceptions and inherent biases when interpreting these experiences. From this identification we would help them articulate how they intend their voice and artwork to resonate with viewers. In acknowledging the artist as analyst one could initiate the conceptualization of relational approaches to the art making. In the project, students who felt most strongly the pull of the workers-as-family and who embraced the discourse came the closest to understanding that stage.

The role of *artist as activist*, which in Lacy's continuum is the last step, proved beyond our students' readiness and social interest. For example, the students' works did not attempt to address external financial, political, or environmental pressures despite the fact that the

history of the coal-burning power plant was well known, and it had received resounding opposition in the last decades. Environmental groups actively organized demonstrations and published letters and editorials in local papers.

As I finalize this article, I cannot ignore the changes affecting the country's current political climate. If we were teaching this course project today, the question of roles and responsibilities of artists, students and instructors, the call for civic engagement and awareness of one's social positionality, the workers' agency, their choice of employment, partisanship, globalization, natural resources, climate change, even the implications inherent in the type of relationships the two groups formed, would be amplified and highlight the unavoidable political dimensions of our endeavor.

However, at the time, the most salient concerns were environmental, and our focus, set on emergent regional political discourses, was narrower. Our students, perhaps unaware that a lack of political engagement is itself a political position, unwilling or unable to engage in contentious relations with the people who welcomed them, somehow did not contribute to the environmental polemic that seemed to us the obvious path, given their age and the prevailing media coverage. Instead, most chose to engage with the recognition of the familiar human working figure whose emotional voice was now heightened by impending loss of income and consequent threat to their identity. While much of the art objects produced during the course emphasized the "unfamiliar" culture of the mesmerizing industrial space, in general, these works remained inventories of what students saw. Much more artful were the moments of encounters and conversations where workers performed as storytellers for our students and where students received their words as gifts, unsure of where to go from there. Contemporary artists use conversation as medium and "conversation is the center of sociality, of collective understanding and organization" (Helguera, 2011, p.40). While the awareness of the role of listening as a creative practice involves a period of learning and attentiveness to place and people (Kester, 2004), something that the students intuitively understood, the subsequent "enunciative act of making art" (p. 107) proved a more elusive step.

As well, students showed sympathy for the workers' loss of work but none of their artistic research showed interest in advocating for the workers' future. I now wonder what other forms of activism might have been latent that we failed to see.

In his handbook, Pablo Helguera (2011) advised that participatory dialogue and the finding of mutual interests are of great importance for the success of a socially engaged art project. The artists must listen and be attentive to the interests of the community. Helguera states:

Opening a discursive space gives others the opportunity to insert their content into the structure we have built. As this structure becomes more open, more freedom is given to the group to shape the exchange. The main challenge is to find the balance between the investment of the participants and the freedom provided. This means that when we open a structure of conversation, we should be prepared to accept the participant input. (2011, p. 48)

In fact, the sympathy expressed for the workers felt as if the project were co-opted, the critical and political voices defused, the environmental damage of the plant's production totally ignored by our students. Witness a visit report that a student wrote following one of her visits:

Oh, my goodness! I just had my first interview with G. F. (which I recorded!) and it was such an experience! I fumbled a bit as I questioned him but everything went smoothly afterward (...) I learned that he planned to possibly work for the new company ... and that he wasn't the biggest fan of the protesters because he believed that they had the wrong idea about the plant in the first place. He was so passionate and I really respected how much he loved the company and the people he worked with; it's something I wish to feel in my future job. He taught me a lot of things so that I won't have any negative opinions about the plant myself. How could I? I love them all so much! The more often I visit the plant, the more I feel that I am a part of their family. B is so amazing. She promised to visit my senior show. I will miss her so much. (A.F., personal communication, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014)

Helguera (2011) warned against acting as an agent that completely obeys the interests of the community. In so doing, the artist "not only gives up the responsibility of creating a critical dialogue but proposes a dependent situation" (p. 49). The dependencies as well as affective wellbeing that emerged from a sense of family bonds appeared in many students' visit records. Students gave in to the feelings and seemed deeply moved by the generalized atmosphere of melancholy. After a visit at the plant, where a worker alluded to the ending of their tightly knit family and the closure of the plant that had been their 'home', a student reflected:

We should take pictures and remember it since it will never happen again. It saddened me a bit to hear that. The more often I visit the plant, the more I feel that I am a part of their family. (A. F., journal entry, March 2014)

Organizations and families are similar in many ways. They both are social systems existing within larger ones and their experiences of harmony or discord are often comparable. Both systems involve “detoured conflicts, tangled hierarchies, unproductive rules and rituals and triangles” (Brotheridge & Lee, 2006, p.142). When employees articulate the family metaphor, it echoes with deep significance. Teams who have worked together for a long time and interacted on a regular basis often develop emotional interdependence and siblings’ bonds with their peers (Brotheridge & Lee, 2006).

At the plant, predictably, where workers faced the impending loss of their work and life style, they tightened their ranks, feeling emotionally closer to one another. Having worked together for decades, they expressed their sense of belonging using family analogies. Students were attentive to comments such as:

When I first started, it was like I had 110 older brothers and a couple of bratty little brothers too. They kinda [sic] watched out for you. They thought of me as their daughter, a lifelong relationship and friendships. (M.G., personal communication, March 2014)

Students, in some testimonies, seemed to have not only accepted the family paradigm regarding the plant workers’ relationship, but they also embraced and internalized the construct as their own. One student stated:

I envision an oil/gas/water tank with a vast mural about the lives of the power plant family and their relation to their mother, the plant. Every time I step inside the plant, I feel the warmth of its arms embracing me as part of the family. She says, ‘Come, sit and eat with us’! Always, when I am done with my plate, she’s ready to give me seconds. (P. W., personal communication, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014)

Many students internalized the family trope because it was a highly recognizable (and desirable) pattern that they easily identified with and that moved them deeply. In this intergenerational relationship, they built around them a network that satisfied their conceptions of the world (Laszlo, 1973). This realization taught us an important lesson. As instructors, we assumed (or wished for) a critical outcome that could only be maintained if we were able to empower our students to shift perspectives between analytical examination and emotional response, leading the discourse to illuminate a bigger picture. The human closeness born of personal contact and human stories effectively trumped any political dissention. Somehow, I still don’t know if it was our responsibility to bring the students back to criticality and a comprehensive, clearer judgment.

### **Locating the Earning: Blind Spots and Hereafter**

“One trace element worth exploring today is the experience of learning as a medium”  
(Irwin & O’Donoghue, 2012)

#### ***Examples of Student’s Exhibited Works***

Many artworks produced during the course focused on what were already memorabilia, such as a collection of small objects and pieces of coal carefully bottled as gifts for visitors along with written quotes from conversations and an amalgam of disused objects that would have been connected with the daily life of workers.



*Figure 1. Sarah Graziano. 2014. Coal Stories. Photo: Robert Moeller.*

There were many photographic portraits of workers, and images of machinery, some of them processed to accentuate their historical character. Some gentle gestures included a series of stuffed shapes made to comfort workers –perhaps as one would for family members–and visually contrast with the steel and iron that predominated the working spaces.



Figure 2. Foreground: Claire Fenwick. 2014. *Beth, Larry, Wayne*. Photo: Robert Moeller.

Another artist-student wrote and made drawings on the subject of a fire-breathing beast, an apt metaphor that needed a different visual strategy to be effective in that immense space. Nonetheless, these works carried the seeds of “in-seeing”, an immediate recognition “based in the thickness of our own sensory experience” (Kozel, 2007, p. 11), that phenomenology enables us to unearth.

### *Art Object versus Art Experience*

Students’ emotional encounters, the pleasures of discoveries, conversations, and stories, which contained kernels of what we still remember today, were not to be found in the exhibition. The meaning and intensity of the experience did not translate in form. Perhaps Helguera (2011) was right when he proposed that the relationships created during a community-focused experiment *are* the “artwork” that matters. What we called artwork in the context of the project were a means, not an end.

In retrospect, it seems that interacting through a dialogical and experiential mode with the workers and their environment, instructors and students should have been able to conceptually convert the physical plant itself, the home and theatre where all this interaction took place, into an artistic idea as product. This would have underlined and commented on the plant’s sheltering role, or its commanding power, as its meaning was set to move from workers’ home or sublime machine to mausoleum. Since the students’ artwork was to be exhibited in the plant immediately after its scheduled shut down, the importance of the site-specificity of the exhibition was enormous. The plant as exhibition hall was not an empty shell but a fully equipped, albeit silenced, industrial site still infused with the vibrancy of the working life that had just been halted. It was inside the workers’ “home” that we were to complete the project,

the plant, having witnessed the development of their sense of “family”, made acute by the prospect of its ending, it followed that the work place became a symbol of home.

In-depth considerations of how the artwork would be installed and viewed inside the space ought to have been fundamental to our discussions with the students and the plant administration. Earlier, I observed that our students enacted the roles of artist as experiencers and as reporters. By and large, our students had been swept by the human family paradigm and responded by choosing personal empathy over a representation of environmental consequences. Ideally, instructors had to acknowledge the importance of these relationships in choosing the work exhibited and imagine how it would speak to its audience/viewership, and in so doing, translate the relational importance of the project for the viewers. That is, endeavor to make the space and its experience *the work*, and not to make artwork *about* the place (O’Donoghue, 2015). Instead of focusing their interest on “translating and conveying experiences through symbolic forms” (p.104), students and instructors needed to attune to how one can create “experiences by putting in place conditions that lead to actual experiences” (p. 104). In helping students to find a way to communicate their experiences, we might have also pointed out how to include the workers as subjects in the interactions, and not solely as objects of study. For example, how might one convey and stimulate the enveloping emotional qualities of family? What form might it take? A reenactment? A performance? An audio piece? A projection? Practically, the necessity of creating a spatial intervention; a celebration; an encounter; a guided memory tour; to acknowledge and replay the impact of the life of the place for viewers seems unavoidable now. But some projects appear too big and college students make choices. The work produced was small, intimate and quiet. Perhaps it was conceived as parting gifts. How could we have presented them as such?

### ***Exhibition as Complicated Space***

It was obvious when examining the reactions of the visitors that it was not the artwork produced for the exhibition (small autonomous objects displayed on walls or stands) that predominated, but the physical grandeur of the main turbine hall where the exhibition was installed. The awesomeness of the place had the same impact for the audience as it did for the students when they had first seen it. Predictably, this spectacular mechanical sanctuary dwarfed the artworks. The scale and the surrounding visual ‘energy’ of the machinery overwhelmed the private, book size objects.



Figure 3. Exhibition view (in background). Photo: Robert Moeller.

Moreover, the rare opportunity of looking for one's self inside a restricted-access (and therefore secretive and intriguing) space was one possible reason that visitors may have been underwhelmed by the artwork. Somehow the artwork did not tell the story it intended to convey. Photographing, video recording or painting the plant and its workers had been an act of exchange and connection that, viewed in that visually active space, lost its power. It would acquire its nostalgic meaning later on, in a different time and place, recalling a memory, bringing one back in time. But in this very space, the intention of the artwork was lost. Moreover, how should one look at photographs of the plant inside the plant, when the documents are presented without a strategy pointing to the irony of their double presence? If not a humorous nod at the question of representation like that of Magritte's *La Trahison des Images* (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*), what did it want us to see?

The heart of the project had been its dialogic and relational engagement. A careful examination of how these relationships could be re-animated for the audience would have made the plant and its great turbine hall our theatre.

### ***Pedagogy***

In all evidence, *Across the Bridge* lived through all the predictable steps of a first-time, community-focused experiment in teaching and learning. That initiation also revealed many blind spots. They involved everyone, from weekly instruction, to student preparation and

guidance, to plant administration and foresight. They involved time and weather—in a power plant, cold snaps and winter storms mean interview and visit cancellations. From a standpoint of instruction, some of these blind spots are now glaring: students needed a longer period of incubation between the collection of material and recorded interviews for the production of thoughtful work; more time to think and refine ideas; better and clearer guidance with debriefing their experiences at the plant, and the chance to reflect critically on outcomes in order to imagine ways to move to the next step.

Specifically, we needed to spend more time envisioning the fundamental differences between an exhibition in a “neutral” gallery space and work installed in a highly charged environment whose history and visual presence could outweigh any artwork not produced with that space in mind. As a group, we had to clarify the kind of experience we wanted to create. If storytelling and memories remained a focus, as they had been from the start in our students’ artwork, we needed to consider how memories and the act of memorialization are best conveyed in a space that already resonates with memories and history. We needed to bring the work in progress to the plant, to physically understand how it could best ‘speak’, reconstructing and reconfiguring concepts according to students’ intentions. We needed to teach experientially, not to simply tell, but to manifest and vividly actualize concepts for students.

Helguera (2011) proposed that any new art school curriculum with socially engaged art programs should include work to promote a “comprehensive understanding of the methodological approaches of socially centered disciplines, including sociology, theatre, education, ethnography and communication” (p.86). Where students have been trained in craftsmanship and media specialties, instructors of social and relational art projects need to adopt a pedagogy that bridges these traditional skills with the social realm where “knowledge of art does not end in knowing the artwork but is a tool for understanding the world” (p.80).

### ***Learning and Experience***

Experiential learning involves a large element of unknowing and risk-taking. As instructors we believed, like Freire (cited in Beard & Wilson, 2013), that learning takes place when one is provided with problems rather than solutions. Freire (cited in Beard & Wilson, 2013) maintained that problem-based education led to a creative and truly reflective response to reality. He commented on authenticity of action, a transformative self-inquiry.

When does one know what one has learned? Beard & Wilson (2013) suggested that the realization of what was learned from an experience happens mostly retrospectively. It was the case for me. Reflection is difficult to maintain as one undergoes the experience and is engaged physically and emotionally. As it stands, one learns from looking back on that Spring 2014

experience, contemplating the project goals and its outcomes. One learns from assessing not only the student artworks, but also more specifically, when one rethinks the intentions of the learning goals. Knowledge also comes through reconstructing how things were, compared to how they appear to us now, and how those things have changed us, when the long-term results of the experiment and what is now felt as “real experience” comes into view, “when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment” (Dewey, 1934, p.36).

In a discussion on what experience “does,” O’Donoghue (2015) replayed Dewey’s idea that a learning experience must include an active *and* a passive element. “Doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction – discovery of the connection of things” (p.107). It is in this discovery that the project *now* succeeds, when the realizations are integrated in knowledge that can be further activated and put to fruition if not in a new project, as a transferrable set of skills. This much I hoped for our students and know it to be so for me.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In writing this article, I examined the planning, development, and creative outcomes of an experiential learning course project, and investigated in greater depth its pedagogical and artistic implications. By contrasting the course educational ambitions, and our expectations of students as they interacted with workers in their working life and emotional circumstances, I was able to point out my/our philosophical and pedagogical blind spots that, until now, hindered my/our full recognition of the significance of the project.

In closing, I would argue that at a college-level studio, pedagogy for an experiential learning project connected with socially-engaged art must still be planned around a process that includes guidelines and outcomes, despite the fact that the wisdom of its transformational values might find fulfillment much after the project has concluded. I agree with Helguera (2011) that, beyond art techniques, we must spend time investigating the methods of other disciplines in order to prepare students to understand how a socially engaged practice needs to communicate and bear witness to its relational and dialogic meaningfulness. In that context, students’ production of artwork as objects can continue for it maintains a transactional relevance and relational purpose within the project. It is created as a goal towards the transubstantiation of an event into a new communicative art form.

Paradoxically, educators’ foreknowledge is never complete, and we learn through our own educational practice. We assumed that students would reach for political commentaries and they brought back words of family and belonging. As we remain open to unpredictability, our best teaching will be when we stay attentive to what arises in students’ actions, words, and visual objects, watching their changing plans at any given time, as well as helping them

recognize that what arises is entangled in a network of previous encounters and events. More importantly, as educators and learners, “we need to continue to remain alert to what experience does and to wonder if we make the world with experiences, or because of experience” (O’Donoghue, 2015, p.103).

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