

**New pedagogical approaches for engaging post secondary art school youth in learning to create community engaged, collaborative, new media artistic and documentary practices focused on environmental advocacy.**

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**Abstract**

*This paper describes a study of new pedagogical approaches for engaging art school youth in learning to create socially-engaged, collaborative new media art and documentary practices focused on environmental advocacy in community settings. As a component of the SSHRC funded project “Citizens of Tomorrow: Investigating the Impact of Community Media Arts Practice on Marginalized Urban Youth”, this research study examines a year long experimental educational community-based project, sited in a post secondary art and design institution. “Natural Capital” is a media arts focused education and environmental advocacy project organized in partnership with the David Suzuki Foundation and Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site of Canada. It is intended to enable learners to build meaningful community connections, to expand collaborative skills, to gain technical abilities and to express their values as “global citizens” through the creation of digital narratives on nature's benefits in the region in which they live. Presentation and exhibition of these creative works in a social history museum setting provide learners with unique opportunities to participate in public education presenting their perspectives, along those of members of the community who are featured in their productions, about issues concerned with nature and environment.*

*The paper reflects on teachers’ and learners’ experiences. It explores the powerful potential for digital media art practices to provide a forum for both personal and public expression as well as the development of advocacy skills for art school youth.*

## Key words

socially-engaged art, collaboration, pedagogy, art and design environmental activism

## Introduction

This visual essay presents a case study that examines the implications of curriculum and learning for post secondary art school youth in creating collaborative, socially-engaged creative production of new media art/design in out-of-school settings. This essay examines a newly established Community Projects course entitled “Natural Capital” within a Canadian post secondary art school that focused on environmental advocacy and integrated partnerships with museums, environmental advocacy organizations and community citizen stakeholders. It investigates the impact on youths’ new media through a study of pedagogical approaches to collaborative socially engaged art/design practices and community engagement.

It presents documentation of the creative production and exhibition outcomes of student work in the course and reflections by the teacher whose commitment to environmental advocacy helped to establish partnerships with the environmental activist David Suzuki Foundation and the Gulf of Georgia Cannery Museum National Historic Site of Canada and the Ontario College of Art and Design University.



“When we're looking at possible strategies to really engaging youth, there is something very important in providing an opportunity for students’ to express their passion and interests in creative ways but being a part of something bigger”. *Sarah Van Borek, Natural Capital teacher.*

Our study is a component of a federally funded Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada project entitled “Citizens of Tomorrow” (2011–2014), which studies the experiences of youth in the Canadian urban environments of Vancouver and Montréal. Since young people's lives are increasingly mediated by digital technologies, media arts such as documentary and other technologically supported art form help young people develop an understanding of the world and how they fit into it. Media arts education programs for youth in community settings, as well as an introduction to socially engaged art, enable young people to develop a sense of self-

advocacy and identity, as a way to respond to how social, economic, cultural, and political structures are affecting their lives (Horst, Herr-Stephenson, & Robinson, 2009; Hull & Nelson, 2010; Metzger, 2010; Taylor & Carpenter, 2007). While scholarly evidence indicate that community media arts programs attract youth who often do not have access to mainstream educational experiences (Herr-Stephenson, Rhoten, Perkel & Sims, 2011; Ito et al., 2009; Levy & Weber, 2011b; Lin, Grauer, & Castro, 2011), there is not enough research that examines what youth within urban communities are doing through media arts and what innovative curriculum involving media art can offer both community media arts and art school programs. Through exhibitions of youth media artwork, academic presentations and publications, and discussions with media arts professionals, the study is intended to provide an essential opportunity to share knowledge around a growing area of new media and learning in out-of-school settings. It is also intended to help policy makers, educational practitioners, and researchers understand the benefits of a media arts curriculum in economic and social terms. It will also suggest ways in which support and teaching infrastructure for media arts can be embedded more consistently across our society. The curricula and pedagogies for engaging young people from diverse segments of society will be useful for identifying strategies to promote learning, knowledge sharing, and creative inquiry in communities and out-of-school arts learning spaces. Moreover, it will help youth develop their use of media arts as an expressive medium to identify and articulate hopes and aspirations related to environmental and social activism, systemic barriers, personal challenges and dissemination of creative production outside of traditional art gallery venues. Through a program of field observation, interviews, visual documentation, and analysis of youth learning processes and artistic productions, using ethnography and image-based research methods, this study examines the impact of media arts practice related to teaching and learning.

### **Natural Capital Project**

This visual essay examines innovative curriculum for collaborative learning of socially engaged practices for post-secondary art school students that expands their creative professional possibilities beyond individual, traditional disciplinary practices. It addresses the implications of the Natural Capital course for art school youth in learning new socially engaged art and design methodologies of research and creative production of new media work and exhibition. This case study looks at new approaches to introducing valuable creative, technical, collaborative, social, research and professional skills for art school students learning in community settings. It also addresses the course objectives including developing an understanding of socially engaged art practice (Kester, 2006) and learning new media as a way to develop abilities and future preparedness for working collaboratively with institutional partners, within and through community settings.

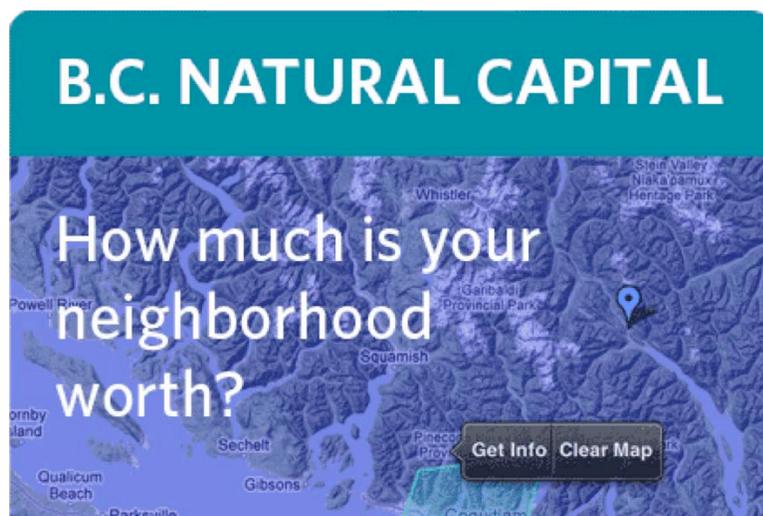
“When we're looking at possible strategies to really engaging youth, there is something very important in providing an opportunity for students' to express their passion and interests in creative ways but being a part of something bigger”. *Sarah Van Borek, Natural Capital teacher.*

The research site for this study is the Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, one of Canada's four art and design universities dedicated solely to professional education and learning in the arts, media and design, where the “Natural Capital” course was made available to students from disciplines across the university.



*Emily Carr University of Art and Design (ECUAD), Vancouver, Canada*

The course theme “Natural Capital” was based on “Natural Capital” of the David Suzuki Foundation (DSF) that advocates environmental sustainability. Natural Capital has a particular emphasis on the economic value of nature. Representatives from DSF provided information for the course's sub-themes of Wetlands and Beaches.



*screenshot from David Suzuki Foundation website*

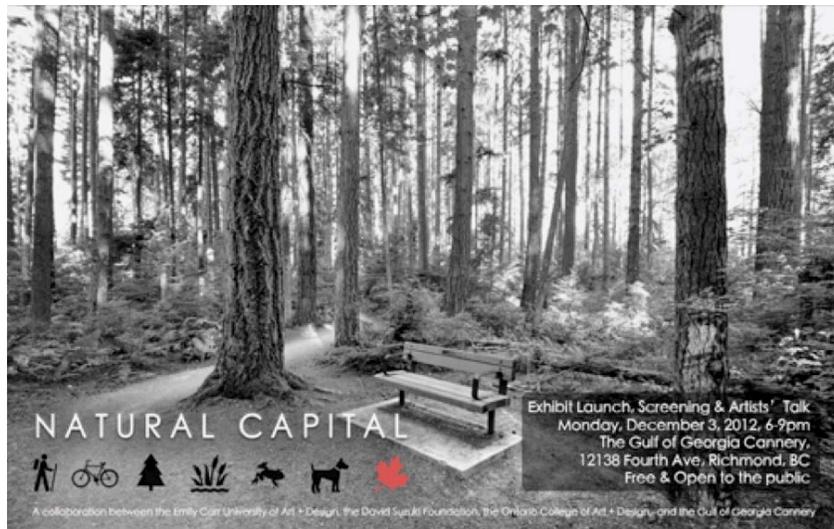
The course was intended to challenge students to become environmental advocates by promoting environmental awareness considering its aesthetic, social, economic importance through the use of digital media. The curriculum was designed to enhance students' ability to build meaningful community connections and create digital narratives featuring diverse community perspectives on nature's benefits in the region (Lippard, 1997).



*Sarah Van Borek, Natural Capital teacher*

“There is a real hunger among students for hands on involvement in sustainability practices and contributing to sustainable development through their artistic activities”

“What is so exciting for me is the way students are building relationship with specific places in the natural world.” *Sarah Van Borek, Natural Capital teacher*



*Emily Carr's Natural Capital exhibit at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery  
Poster by c.froschauer*



*Let a Bird Poop by Bianca Channer (OCADU)*

Students worked collaboratively to produce videos, posters and writing. Graphic design students from the Ontario College of Art and Design University in Toronto, Canada contributed posters to the exhibition.



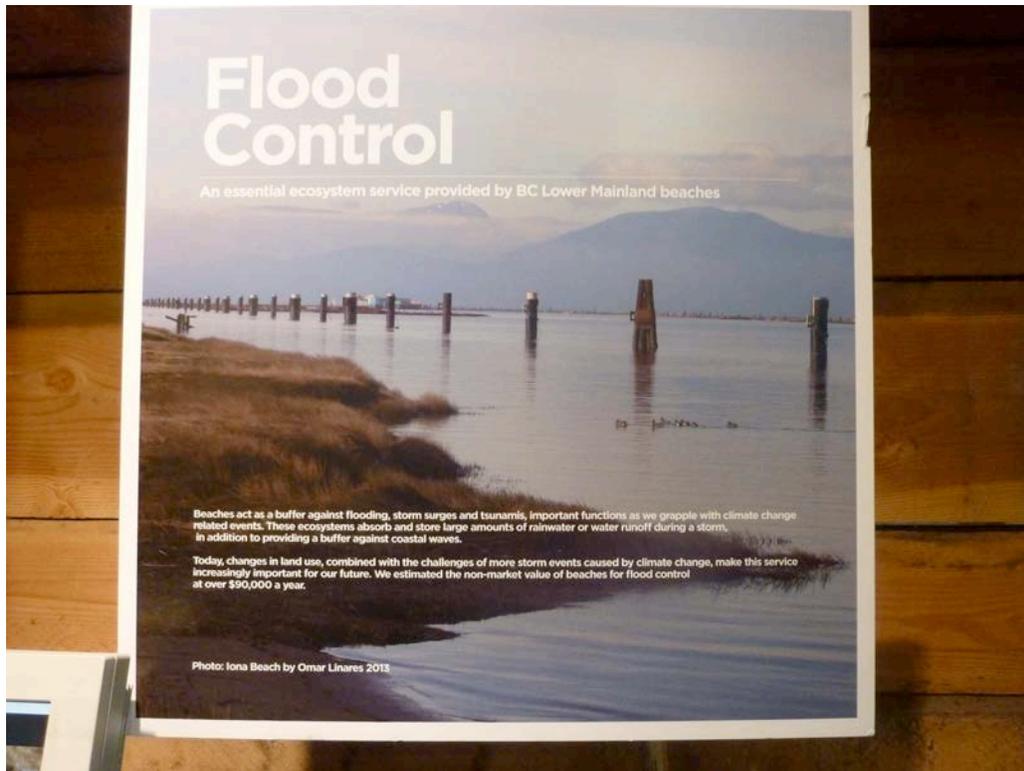
*Natural Capital Exhibition installation*

Students selected research sites within the region and conducted interviews with various participants with extensive knowledge about each of the sites, who provided their perspectives on the importance of environmental sustainability.



*Natural Capital Exhibition installation*

The course concluded with an exhibition of the students' interactive works and posters at the Gulf of Georgia Cannery Museum National Historic Site of Canada where they were on display for several months.



*photo by Omar Linares (ECUAD), design layout by Lauren Livingston and Anton Mwewa (OCADU)*



*Waste Treatment by Lauren Livingston (OCADU)*

The social history museum with its prominent role in regional identity, and permanent exhibits that focus on natural resources and industry, was an ideal site for engaging viewers around the issues of environmental/economic sustainability.



*Gulf Of Georgia Cannery Museum National Historic Site of Canada*

At the opening, students engaged in a lively question and answer period with the public. They spoke movingly about the positive learning experiences and the unexpected results of increased interest in advocacy through creative practice, confidence in working in and with communities and deeper personal commitment to the social fabric of their city and raising awareness of environmental issues.



*Natural Capital Exhibition installation*



*Natural Capital Exhibition installation*

## **Conclusion**

This study supports Ellsworth (2005) contention that new media has the potential to contribute to pedagogic disruption, new “routes” of relational thinking, and to establishing the ground of shared social interest drawing together artists, museum professionals and educators.

Our study speaks to a growing interest in the intersection or interrelationship of community-based learning in education, and contemporary art/design and advocacy practices that are turning to education and expanding their potential through merging of disciplines to broaden audiences/viewers/learners and developing new critical practices (Rogoff, 2008; Podesva, 2007). These disciplinary developments are relevant to community art programs and art school curricula. Our study underscores the important role of the museum for the dissemination and dialogue related to their creative work for the student participants. It promotes the importance of working in concert with museums for social change (Graw, 2006).

The Natural Capital exhibit contributes to understanding how new media art/design functions in the context of culture and heritage museum and takes into consideration how research/creation can take the form of “dynamic pedagogy” (Henry, 2010, p.11).

The pedagogical implications suggest important benefits for students of experiencing the impact of new media artwork *in situ* and assessing the work’s ability to engage museum visitors (Greenberg, Ferguson & Nairne, 1996). While there are numerous examples of this artist–museum collaborations there is little research on the pedagogical implications of this type of work on museum visitors or on the pedagogic

challenges facing artists, educators, and museum professionals who have embraced the form. Thus, the convergence of museum programming and art practice around questions of pedagogy (active learning) and community involvement, particularly in relation to new media works, points to an important area of research (Hooper–Greenhill, 2007).

This study of a environmental advocacy new media course for art school students contributes to discourse within education and creative practices and professions on collaborative generative ways for research–based creative inquiry (Gleinger, Hilbeck, & Scott, 2011), to advocate for positive change and give voice to environmental and other pressing issues.

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