

## “The Whole of Human Relations”: Learning More than Art, More than Making

Susan Shantz

**ABSTRACT** The article discusses a six-week long experimental, inter-media art course organized at the University of Saskatchewan in partnership with Saskatoon Tribal Council. This community-engaged teaching initiative, *Project Charter: Call for Artisans, The Child Taken*, provided art students in a senior interdisciplinary studio course with an opportunity to partake in the creation of an art commission commemorating Indian Residential Schools. Focusing on various dimensions of the project the article discusses the professional and experiential learning generated in response to the partnership request from the Saskatoon Tribal Council and highlights project undertakings as “best practices” in community-engaged pedagogy.

**KEYWORDS** art, aboriginal engagement, Indian Residential Schools, undergraduate student engagement

In the spring of 2013, the Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC) approached me as Head of the Department of Art and Art History, University of Saskatchewan, with the idea of a partnership project: Would it be possible to involve students in the creation of an art commission commemorating Indian Residential Schools? The time line was tight, and the regular teaching term winding down, but it seemed like a project that might fit well in a senior interdisciplinary studio course I was teaching for the first time in May. After a series of meetings with the Saskatoon Tribal Council and university staff (the Office of Aboriginal Initiatives was closely involved in developing the details of the agreement which included a transfer of funds to support the project), Tribal Chief Felix Thomas and I signed the *Project Charter: Call for Artisans, The Child Taken* at a public event during Aboriginal Achievement Day on campus in March.

The six-week course began mid-May with nineteen senior students enrolled. Although it was initially intended to be an experimental, inter-media studio course, this special commission request provided, I felt, a strong thematic focus that students could approach according to their various media interests. The Tribal Council invited three elders as well as Saskatchewan’s Indian Residential School Survivor Committee (IRSSC) member, Eugene Arcand, to tell the students first-hand stories of attending Indian Residential Schools. I provided students with



**First row:** Studio classroom with sketches, commission proposal meeting with students, Elders, STC Chief and staff. **Second row:** Eugene Arcand, TRC Survivor and committee member, responds to students' preliminary sketches, May 21, 2013., Kayla Prive and classmates present commission proposals to Elders and STC Chief and staff, May 27, 2013. **Third row:** Tribal Chief, Elders and students present portfolio of artwork replicas in Bentwood Box ceremony, TRC gathering, Edmonton, Alberta, March 29, 2014., Corinna Wolf and classmates present commission proposals to Elders and STC Chief and staff, May 27, 2013.

Images by: Louise Barak (classroom photos), Dawn Deguire (TRC Edmonton photo)

copies of the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) publication, *Speaking My Truth: Reflections on Reconciliation and Residential Schools*, stories of Indian Residential School survivors, to read prior to our meeting with the elders. Dr. Jim Miller, Canada Research Chair in the Department of History, University of Saskatchewan, gave an introductory slide lecture

outlining the history and impact of the IRS and two undergraduate Aboriginal students, Rachele McHenry and Chelsey Stonestand, from the Department of Sociology, presented images created during a research project in North Battleford where Aboriginal youth were invited to visual “resilience” from their individual perspectives. As a class, we began to compile an “image bank” of photos, words and stories that could inform a visual response to the legacy of residential schools in Canada.

Like many post-secondary universities in the 2000s, the University of Saskatchewan has articulated community engagement as central to its direction and mission. Our university in Saskatoon, located on Treaty Six land, also identifies Aboriginal engagement as one of its key mandates. Opportunity to create artwork for external communities, however, rarely happens in undergraduate Fine Art departments, and is not a central pedagogical approach to studio art instruction. Undergraduate art teaching is typically focused on skill and concept development as these relate to a student’s personal interests, which reflect implicit Modernist notions of individual style and voice. Post-modern art has extended traditional media boundaries so painting can be off-the-wall and include found and fabricated materials just as sculpture can embrace a cacophony of forms, colours and spatial arrangements (this was the initial intention of my spring term course – to bring together students in our department from painting/drawing/sculpture/extended media to explore the cross-pollination of art media and ideas). Post-modernism has cracked open the edges of art in other ways, so it no longer belongs exclusively to galleries and museums but might take place in the street and include diverse communities of participants as collaborators and/or recipients. Contemporary art practices that have been informed by the latter include those artists working as facilitators rather than makers who might “take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” (<http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/r/relational-aesthetics>). French theorist, Nicholas Bourriaud, articulated an art that is based on social relations as “relational aesthetics,” first described in his book by that title in 1998. Some institutions have followed suit, introducing courses and programs where students are instructed in the professional procedures and ethical parameters of working with outside communities and collaborators (the relatively new Faculty of Culture and Community, with the embedded minor in Social Practice and Community Engagement (SPACE) at Emily Carr University, Vancouver, is an example of this kind of approach to art and teaching at an institutional level).

*Call for Artisans: The Child Taken* offered students unique learning opportunities within their studio art degree programs. While a number of them were aware of post-colonial and Aboriginal perspectives on art history through course offerings in our department as well as in Native Studies, quite a few knew little about Indian Residential Schools. The *Project Charter* articulated the hope that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students would work together on this commission which proved to be the case since at least three students indicated that they had had family members in residential schools. This did not mean they necessarily knew more of that history than the “settler” students as in many cases, the very painful and tragic stories had never been told either privately or publically (something the Truth and Reconciliation

gatherings in Canada over the past five years have changed). Another goal of the *Charter* as well as of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, was to educate all Canadians about the 130-year history of residential schools and their legacy for Aboriginal people and the rest of us in Canada.

This goal was met very successfully by *The Child Taken* partnership project, with students entering into heartfelt and impassioned dialogue among themselves and, on an ongoing basis, with the elders and Tribal Council staff who attended critique sessions of the works in progress on several occasions. All nineteen students brainstormed ideas after the input of the Elders, and from their readings and research. They listened carefully to each other and in some cases, debated another student's choice of image or material if they felt it wasn't appropriate. I offered the group the collaborative possibility that they were together creating a pool of imagery, akin to how a design or architectural team might work, rather than each of them owning their ideas (which is more often the perception in fine art contexts). A number of the students were quite moved, for example, by the elders' descriptions of traditional languages as a connection to the heart and to ancestors and they picked up on each other's responses to develop images to convey this. The stories and experiences told by the elders had a powerful impact on the students who heard first-hand of the profound loss of culture and family occasioned by the residential schools. The students' capacity for imaginative empathy and their desire to respond with the highest respect to what they had been given in stories were deeply moving. This was evident in the presentations they made of their works-in-progress to the elders and Saskatoon Tribal Council staff, which involved a level of public and professional practice few of them had engaged in before. Seldom do we have a dozen keenly interested outsiders attend studio classroom critiques!

Given the emotional and cultural sensitivity of the Indian Residential School subject, the students were nervous and anxious to ensure that their artworks honoured the elders' stories and served the goals of their commissioners. In the first meeting, each student presented his or her sketches and answered any questions; the IRSSC representative, Eugene Arcand, then responded to each artwork with his own comments and interpretations pointing out what had touched him in each work and asking for clarification. His commentary, as well as that of the Tribal Chief and staff, was overwhelmingly positive, supportive and enthusiastic at even this initial brainstorming stage – so much so that ten of the students chose to continue to develop their ideas further into formal commission proposals by the following week.

The timeframe of this spring course was very condensed with three weeks devoted to this partnership commission and a public exhibition and program planned for the end of the course in our departmental gallery. One student work was to be selected by the Saskatoon Tribal Council from the nine proposals (two students chose to work on a joint proposal incorporating sketches from all nineteen class participants). That work would then need to be enlarged to mural size in the final two weeks before the exhibition. Time pressures and deadlines can function to inspire creativity, and this seemed to be the case during this intensive course. Students presented their completed artworks to the elders and Saskatoon Tribal Council staff on schedule, leaving them with the challenging task of choosing just

one piece for enlargement (this piece would be displayed at a public site in Saskatoon to educate a broader public about the history and legacy of residential schools, and would also be replicated at the original scale for each of the seven member bands in Saskatchewan). While the seven Saskatoon Tribal Council Chiefs were initially tasked with selecting the final piece, they suggested instead that the elders, who had been involved in the teaching and learning process, make the final selection. In the end, the painting by Kayla Prive, *New Child*, was chosen for enlargement to an 8' x 12' mural and was unveiled during a program in our gallery in June 2013. The exhibition included a display of the nine commission proposals as well as all the initial sketches by the nineteen class participants.

The week-long exhibition and program might have marked the end of this successful partnership project as the goal of commissioning a commemorative artwork from a group of students had been achieved and the course was completed. My role as instructor had been largely one of responding, providing structure and guidance from the artistic side, and facilitating the connections with the Saskatoon Tribal Council partners who provided the content and impetus. Although one student's work had been chosen for the mural enlargement, the elders and Saskatoon Tribal Council were enthusiastic about all of the artworks which had translated their stories into moving visual images with a remarkable depth of feeling and understanding. A strong sense of connection and community had developed between me and the students, the elders and Saskatoon Tribal Council members over the few weeks of the course; after the exhibition, the students all decided to give their artwork to the Saskatoon Tribal Council for their future use and display. As a result, rather than ending with the class completion and exhibition, the partnership project gained a new momentum in the following year with requests to show all the artwork, with all of us in attendance, at Tribal Council and band gatherings, as well as community galleries. Ultimately, we were invited to present a portfolio of reproductions of the nine commemorative artworks in the Bentwood Box ceremony in Edmonton during the final national Truth and Reconciliation gathering in March 2014. While the initial goal of this project was the commission of a commemorative artwork, the broader and more important goal of reconciliation, the "forging and maintaining of respectful relationships" (Justice Murray Sinclair, Truth and Reconciliation Commission home page) was achieved through the bringing together of two communities which might not otherwise have met.

The professional and experiential learning generated in response to the partnership request from the Saskatoon Tribal Council might serve as an example of "best practices" in community-engaged pedagogy. This occurred, I often reflect, more by happenstance than deliberate intention as I don't teach in a department with a strong focus or curricular support for this kind of work, nor have I taught studio courses previously with this kind of social and community focus. The circumstances that gave rise to this partnership and its outcomes were in many ways fortuitous. My approach, along with that of my students, was to listen and respond—to the initial request, finding a way to fit that into the limited frameworks of our current curriculum and course structures, as well as to the stories of the elders, hearing these with deep feeling and respect for the truths they expressed.

Working with "the whole of human relations and their social context" (Bourriaud) was

a new experience for those of us on the art side of this partnership, and we all learned more about this difficult but important history and the impact it has had in Canada. In addition, the students learned ways to apply their developing technical and conceptual art skills to a subject not their own but given to them with the trust that they could succeed in making a professional and public contribution to their community. While some of the students were eager to return to their own subject matter after this project was completed, their larger engagement and responsiveness was evident in their willingness to participate in the numerous related events that unfolded over the following year, long after the course was over. The words of one student, Kayla Prive, who completed the mural commission and participated in presentations of her work at the seven band offices in addition to those in Saskatoon, reflect the sentiments, I think, of all of the students involved in this partnership:

I feel privileged to have shared such a special experience of understanding with Felix Thomas, Tribal Chief of the Saskatoon Tribal Council, the staff of the STC, the elders who met with our class and entrusted us with their words and painful memories, my professor Susan Shantz, and my fellow classmates. The experience has been an honour and a gift and I hope that Canadians will continue to open their eyes to the realities that surround us and work together towards a promising future.

[For an archive of the complete project with photos of all artworks as well as related events see the website of the Saskatoon Tribal Council, <http://www.sktc.sk.ca/the-child-taken-art-project/>]

### **About the Author**

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