

REACHING BEYOND CLASSROOM WALLS: PARTICIPATORY CULTURE USING  
TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN A HIGH SCHOOL ART CURRICULUM

By

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A CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE PROJECT PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS  
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**Abstract**

This capstone project is based on a case-study involving student use of social media in a public high school art classroom. In this research project, I studied a host of learning activities in which my students and I advocated for a local charitable event called the “Relay for Life,” which is a sponsored walk for cancer research. We collectively reached out into the local community for monetary sponsorship using social media networking, to gather as many donations as possible. This project is relevant to art education in the way it uses new social media in a public high school setting where those particular applications are often blocked from the school computers. Therefore, we are entering rarely explored territory to implement a media campaign. Also, the *Art Heroes* program strategy implemented in this project combined service learning and a collaborative team effort to go beyond our classroom setting to accomplish an outreach project that enhanced the local community. In this way, the project is not only applicable to the field of art education, but also to art and the theory of relational aesthetics, or the orchestrating of a social experience as art. I also included in my literature review scholars who write about

participatory culture and social networking in education. Finally, I have studied what occurred over the project timeline of five months using a collection of qualitative data for this action research methodology; mainly from the products and posts my students contribute to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest.

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## **Introduction**

As a high school art teacher, I frequently have to tell my students to put away their cell phones or digital tablets in class. When I get a chance to look over their shoulders before scolding them, I've noticed that the majority of them are using social media programs such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest or other sites that I just so happen to use myself. I personally use these social media sites for displaying my artwork to generate sales and to attract buyers. What if I could let my students use these same social media sites to show the world what we're up to in my classroom?

It's hard not to notice how connected we are with these devices. The online world seems to make the physical one even smaller. I believe there is a world beyond my school walls that could benefit from my students' astounding creativity and tenacious energy! The school I teach at has the title of being a center for the "arts and media," but I'm not sure if it lives up to the name when using social media and mobile devices is not allowed in the classroom as stated in our student handbooks: "Student use of iPods and digital media devices are prohibited during regular school hours. Cell phones may not be used during class."

## **Research Questions**

I believe that social media networking is propelled by unique individuals who discover each other through similar interests and collaborate through posts, tags, photos and other specific exchanges within their online communities. This leads me to conclude that our students could also connect to public forums and achieve civic service goals in the same way. It is *backwards thinking* when the school establishment prohibits electronic devices and programs that can mobilize our students in such a way. In my research, a case study of student use of social media

in my art program, I have examined how new social media sites extend student reach beyond the classroom walls and out into the real world.

Using social media as a tool for civic engagement has proven to be an effective way for my students to use social media creatively, reach their personal goal of generating as many sponsors as possible for funding cancer research, and engage in community service. This research project endeavored to find out how. The following research questions guided this inquiry.

1. How do my students utilize their art making and other creative abilities on a public performance platform as well as a social networking format to advocate for a charitable cause?
2. How can I disseminate my research in a way that inspires other art educators to utilize social networking and engage their students in community events and charitable organizations?
3. How does this media campaign as a whole fit into relational aesthetics, and when do these social events between myself as ringleader and students as performers become “art” in itself?

### **Goals of the Study**

The goal of this study is to engage my students through the use of digital and social media with the local community for a civic cause. I was motivated to do this project during one of our staff meetings, when some representatives from the American Cancer Society came to talk about the *Relay for Life* ([www.relayforlife.org](http://www.relayforlife.org)) The *Relay for Life* is a local charitable walk for cancer research. This event takes place annually on the same days throughout the US. It is an eighteen-hour long journey, in which participants form teams and take shifts walking throughout the day and night around a track. Each relay team petitions local businesses or individuals to sponsor their walk. Individual team members also seek their own sponsors independently by

networking through whom they know. Any amount contributed from a member on behalf of his or her sponsors applies to the entire team's monetary total. The American Cancer Society provides a team page where sponsors can easily donate online, by check to the American Cancer Society, or cash through the school bookkeeper. Our school was the host for this year's event and my art students showed great interest in being members of their own relay team. I thought it would be fun to do an "Art Heroes" team for the walk, and just after asking my art classes if they were interested, nearly 90 students signed up! When I asked them why they were so enthusiastic, they told me about relaying for their family members or friends that have been affected by cancer.

With such a massive group with a drive to work for a good cause, I wanted to devise a way so that their conviction matches their desired result. The goal was to raise as much money as possible for cancer research. It seems that social networking has proven to be a resourceful and creative way for my students to reach out in the community for increased sponsorship contributions. In my project, with special permission from the principal, we have used new social media networks and sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and Pinterest (through school computers or students' personal mobile devices). These social media sites are normally blocked in our school, and this project required reconfiguring the technology access in my art classroom to make these sites accessible to the team.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study has given my students a model framework for using digital and social media to creatively and artfully reach out to their local community for any civic cause they become involved with in the future. Students have also gained firsthand experience in an approach I see

as *connected learning*, “connecting what takes place outside the classroom with the kinds of assessments and certifications that will create future educational, economic, civic and creative opportunities” (Losh & Jenkins, 2012, p. 19). It is apparent through this project that these connections bridge what occurs in the classroom to the lives of my students outside campus grounds. The immediate impact outside my classroom is the charity, the cancer patients, the local community participants and my students mutually benefitting by working to raise money for this cause. As the primary investigator of this research, I consider myself an artist as well as an educator. I have been a working artist in my local community and consider this media campaign as art within the context of *relational aesthetics*, or art as social practice, “Art as social practice is concerned with relationships between people and the transformations of societal structures of conditions within the world” (Deleuze, 1995, p. 176). Leading my students in this journey to reach our civic goals of raising donations for cancer research and my students using their existing social media knowledge in a charitable application have yielded a result that blossomed into a social art piece via the attention we cultivated in our audience.

### **Assumptions**

The main reason why schools in my district do not allow cell phones in the classroom is the belief among policy makers that cell phones might cause a distraction from the lessons being taught by teachers. Some feel that students will play around with social media on their cell phones while ignoring the teaching and the physical space inside the classroom. But, what if we could utilize students’ media devices for the benefit of education instead of blaming them for the decline of student attention to classroom instruction? What if we could follow our student’s cue

of emphasizing the importance of what's happening in the community instead of the classroom we contain them in?

Prior to this project, I assumed that my students had not yet used social media in a coalition or team format, as we did with the Art Heroes media campaign. I also assumed that they had posted pictures of their artwork online before, but not as a tool or team identifier. Art is the way they bring public attention toward their cause as well as the binding commonality between the teammates. I know that my students play around on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram and experiment creatively, but I assume that they have not utilized this talent for a charity venture.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This research has not included online literacy lessons, because my students have demonstrated significant social media skills already based on our class blog. I have also observed them taking pictures of their finished art projects with Instagram and simultaneously uploading those pictures to their Facebook statuses independently. It is evident that my students they are fully aware how to compose a photograph, tag, upload and instantly share with several social media sites at once. They even casually suggested smart phone apps with each other that they enjoy using during class. Based on these behaviors, it is clear that my students are capable and adaptable to new media and are independently learning more about them on a daily basis. This entire research project was not possible without administrative approval, and I am fortunate to have an open-minded principal who approved this project beforehand.

### **Literature Review**

The focus of this literature review is on how participatory culture is facilitated through the use of technology in the art classroom. In order for this to occur, social media must be accessible and utilized in instruction more often in schools to make its classroom use more mainstream and accepted. I will discuss what participatory culture is in the context of new technology and how selected scholars and educators have investigated or researched use of social media networking in the classroom. Most importantly, I will focus on the implications of what these considerations for educators wanting to implement specific uses of social media in their classrooms, particularly in the face of resistance from school districts that might not know about or appreciate the benefits social media offers our students. I will discuss existing literature that supports linking students to their local community using social media. It is my hope that this research can be used to inform other art educators to prompt their principals to open up the same social media sites used in this project. Perhaps it will afford other students besides my own a similar opportunity, “those acting as agents of cultural change must be cognizant of how a participatory culture will drive our future institutional missions” (Russo, 2011, p. 327).

### **Progressive Authors Lead the Way**

Posting art and other creative productions on social media websites where photos and comments are publicly accessible has been used for some time now, because students can easily exchange information with numerous specific audiences. Doug Blandy implicates (2009) engaging with the community in a creative way by using art displays to bring together other art makers or appreciators. For Blandy, “art responds to local concerns; the identification of resources to support such work; how art builds community; the contemporary and historical

context of such work; and the links between this work and democracy” (p. 107). Related to Blandy’s views are those of media scholar and communications professor Henry Jenkins (1997), a pioneer of educating students to create an online presence, “Children often do their best writing in the digital realm, developing there a self-confidence and a personal expression that rarely surface in class papers. Educators must help students value the writing they do on-line as part of what it means to be a socially-committed communicators” (p. 34). Opening up the websites that offer students a chance to circulate their thoughts through photos, blogs and tweeting help students recognize the collective weight their posts carry. Art classrooms can open up their lessons into the online realm, which carries more value in the candid way our students potentially convey their ideas.

When it comes to social interactions between other students on social media sites, Professor Elizabeth Delacruz (2009) says, “...online collaborations between students separated by geography or background take these students out of the classroom and into the sphere of public engagement... Isolation behind classroom doors and within school walls dissipates... social networking increases... social and intellectual capital” (p. 9). This aligns well with civic goals, as students can band together from their classroom seats or anywhere they have a mobile device. This tool would enable them to carry the power of many fellow supporters in their pocket. Finally, the benefit of electronic participatory component is best expressed by Lane Jennings (2003) “wireless communication offers... an individual to locate and cooperate with others to achieve desirable outcomes great and small” (p. 8), so that students can utilize the reach they have beyond campus. It seems that my students’ interest in benefiting a civic charity, would be even more successful by using social media networking to seek donations.

Support for the project can also be found in the work of Nicolas Bourriard, and other scholars Bennett Simpson and Anna Dezeuze of the modern art movement known as relational aesthetics and art as social practice. Dezeuze (2006) studied Bourriard and concluded from her findings that, “Focusing on the relations between... the guests and the atmosphere created... shifts the emphasis away from the finished object towards the process, the performance, and the behaviors which emerge from the artist’s everyday intervention” (p.146). This means that the object as art is no longer as important as the artist who acts as a ringleader and catalyst to stimulate a result whose action and reaction becomes the focus. Simpson (2000) describes art as spectacle culture, “The elevation of communal satisfactions, along with the mechanisms of pleasure and ideology driving such satisfactions, has become one of the recent moment's defining gestures” (p. 71). Therefore, it is invaluable to discuss the culmination of this media campaign as the art of many types of social interaction, blossoming during the relay, with myself as the instigator and catalyst-artist.

### **Terms to Know**

Some terms that require definition in this research project include **participatory culture** and how it applies to technology, **voice** and **relational aesthetics**. Participatory culture occurs through the Internet where private account holders publish and disseminate their contributions, collaborations and exchanges online. There is a plethora of possibilities when social media sites become participatory platforms to our students as Delacruz (2009) explains they, “facilitate ...doing in ways unimaginable a generation ago—promoting new forms of creative expression and inquiry about diverse art and other forms of creative cultural expression and social action, networking across spans of time and distance, and moving classroom learning into

the global public sphere (p.14).” The potential for collaboration seems endless with the classroom lessons opening up to an unrestricted environment where the individual counts.

Blandy (2011) goes on to talk about the nature of participatory culture:

...forms of participatory culture include affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem solving, and circulatory strategies. Participatory culture is challenged by participation gaps, ethical issues associated with privacy, profile management, and discordant views on property rights. (p. 250)

Our students editorializing freely connect them more genuinely with others of similar interests or affinities. These exchanges can lead to more social partnership and a generation of traffic through the momentum of dissemination.

Blandy is also specific about the fact that there are two sides of the coin as far as the fruitfulness of what those student contributions would bring, yet the challenges we educators might face in opening up those doors into a very public sphere. Educators should know what their students are facing and use other examples of good teaching to guide their own lessons as Delacruz (2009) adds, “A handful of scholarly articles written by techno-savvy K-16 art teachers give encouraging descriptions of what is possible in art classrooms . . . Conference presentations and dissertations provide further indication of how some teachers are using technology, but many of these have not reached wider publication” (p. 13). This is where I step in as a researcher, so I can contribute my findings to a progressive movement in hopes of reaching other art educators. One such art teacher using social media networking is Sarah Cress (2013), who discusses her students’ reactions to online learning, “Students have become so closely intertwined with these online personas . . . Students’ technological practices have the ability to highlight very real

sensibilities and create wanted identity” (p. 41). This means that the efforts of students through social media networking could have real and impactful implications for themselves and the community they reach. Another notable set of educators are Judith Wilks, Sandra Wilks and Alexandra Cutcher (2012) who wrote that, “learning technologies are offering a platform through which visual arts teachers can infuse global content and a scaffold for expanding learning dimensions in their classrooms” (p. 55). These teachers have seen their own students engaging a worldwide audience and new realms of art lessons beyond the classroom walls. Using social media for civic engagement in the *Relay for Life* is certainly a type of participatory culture that extends beyond sharing artwork online

Our student’s *voice* both as an individual and within the team construct is another concept that is essential to this research project, because it is that voice that will be publicized on a social media platform. Rheingold (2008) defines this voice as, “...the unique style of personal expression that distinguishes one’s communications from those of others, can be called upon to help connect students’ energetic involvement in forming their identity to their potential growth as engaged citizens” (p. 25). Having a voice on social media sites means posting a unique expression by one individual, being shared to many others affiliated with the website or another account holder. Our students’ voices could also be a guiding concept for the contributions they post on social media sites. Delacruz (2008) explains, “Our job is to find meaningful connections to the things students care about and to make that the content worthy of study” (p. 12). This indicates the value of our students finding empowerment in their voice by sharing their unique art work and creative posts on social media sites. Delacruz (2008) talks about the democratic arena online as a learning environment, “Developing collaborative efforts both face-to-face and

on-line are a logical and effective means of creating innovative models for action” (p. 13). It is indeed worth getting our students using and discovering their voice now to inherently encourage them to contribute to discourse in the future. Similar to Delacruz, Rheingold (2008) goes on to say, “Moving from a private to a public voice can help students turn their self-expression into a form of public participation” (p. 25). Since each student’s voice is unique, they are worth listening to so that common voices are found and linked. Potential alliances can be formed toward a similar interest or goal like civic service.

### **Relational Aesthetics**

To understand relational aesthetics, it is useful to look at the Fluxus art movement. Dezeuze (2006) mentions that the Fluxus group was focused on the fluid line between art and life, “it is clear that their concerns lay specifically in the realm of everyday life, and in particular the everyday life that had been excluded so forcefully by the abstract expressionist generation of painters” (p.142). For the Fluxus artists, Art is no longer viewed as a precious artifact that can only be seen hanging on a gallery wall; it is now about recognizing the ordinary experience. According to Dezeuze (2006), the Fluxus group defines their work by the commonplace activities we normally perform as art, therefore one must consider, “the absence of differences between artworks and mere things” (p.145). The contrast created between the everyday object and the art object recalls the work of the Pop Art movement, now being revitalized as a performance or experience based media.

Shortly after the Fluxus art movement, relational aesthetics came into existence because it focused on what Fluxus overlooked— the social interaction that yields from the artwork. Now the question is, how do performances and experiences impact the viewing audience from a

sociological point of view? Deuze writes about how Bourriard describes that relational aesthetic artwork, “should not be considered as spaces to be walked through but instead as durations to be experienced” (p. 146). Now the Art is away from the object and the artist is merely the agent for the art as the reverberation from the audience is now the central design. Social reality is what separates the Fluxus from the Relational Aesthetic artists.

### **Our Students Online: It Isn't all that Scary**

Participatory culture online is something that is relatively unexplored, as Merchant (2009) states, “...a culture that connects its members in new and potentially powerful ways... as they become more involved in online communicative interaction in a shared space related to joint endeavor” (p. 112). Participation on social media websites is defined by Merchant (2009) as, “Rating, ranking and commenting are all ways of giving and receiving feedback and developing content, whereas features such as friend lists, blogrolls and favorites become public displays of allegiance” (p. 109). Therein lies potential for our students to express themselves through their personal editorials and affiliations. Those affiliations connect them with other online participants in ways that could enhance their knowledge about the topic being exchanged.

Engaging in online collaboration means considering privacy and ethical lines in an online presence, as Rheingold (2012) elaborates, “Now we need to know how to behave in an online community, grow a personal learning network, and ethically share cultural productions” (p. 53). This means that educators must know and guide our students in the social boundaries so that they compose those web expressions appropriately and thoughtfully. Not only is there inherent caution with what my students say, but what others might be destructively capable of saying to them. Similar to Rheingold's point, Delacruz (2009) also describes the dangers on the Internet as,

“A virtual Wild West... the digital divide, privatization and commercialization of the Internet and its contents, loss of privacy, copyright restrictions that limit access and uses of information, censorship, fear of litigation, cyber-bullying and Internet sexual predators” (p. 5). It is no wonder most school districts and educators are wary of social media sites being used when students can quickly perform interactions without supervision.

### **Let’s Play Online, Ethically, Purposefully and Safely**

Enterprising educators suggest using student-safeguarded Internet and social media sites in schools. These social networking sites are used specifically for educational purposes, to focus or connect other teachers for collaboration and see what other classrooms are doing in real time. For example,

Edmodo . . . (is a) social networking tool that . . . provide(s) a secure environment for teachers, students and parents to work collaboratively . . . Social Media Classroom and Collaboratory provides social media tools, including forums, blogs, wikis, social bookmarks, and lesson plans . . . Diigo, Facebook, Wikispaces, Edublogs, Wordle, and Classtools.net” (Pelt et al., 2011, pp. 84-85).

Illinois art teacher, Tricia Fuglestad (2011) has some suggested activities using social media sites to, “solve art room problems or teach an art concept . . . using video . . . online digital art gallery . . . personal learning network . . . which allows others to connect to our classrooms and do collaborative projects” (p. 9). Other instructors doing these kinds of innovative lessons provide resources for others who might have little to no experience in the digital classroom. As Rheingold (2012) explains, “cultural participation depends on a social component that is not easily learned alone or from a manual” (p. 53).

It seems to me that art educators should recognize how others are using activities that would be appropriate for sharing artifacts from the art classroom such as Jenkins (2009) who suggests as a preliminary activity, “develop their skills and confidence in creating, distributing, and sharing digital content . . . catalogs of students' collections . . . using Flickr, Photobucket . . . or similar photo sharing application... a blog or wiki to share information” (p. 27). Flickr, Photobucket and a class blog all offer ways students can post photos of their art work to an audience in an organized format unique to each website. Students sharing artwork to gather a following is discussed by Blandy (2012), “arts-based solutions can represent significant components of responses to community challenges” (p. 274). Blandy is saying that the art making our students catalogue online is likely to gather acknowledgement from others interested in creating or appreciating art. Even though it is through a digital format, art is working as a bridge for bringing people of like interests together. Similar to Blandy, Delacruz (2009) explains that connecting to others via social networking allows students to, “make meaningful connections to the culture, stories, and experiences of others. The Internet may embody and foster this kind of public work” (p. 15). In other words, my students' posts on social networking sites have the potential to encourage action and gather their needed patrons.

### **These Sites Are Blocked**

It is inevitable that educators who use social media in their lessons might receive push-back from district or administrative authorities, “Beyond issues of basic access to resources, many schools and school systems block access to some of the key platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, or Livejournal, where participatory culture takes place” (Losh & Jenkins, 2012, p. 18). There are ways through new electronic media to reach and speak out on a global

scale to, “congregate, exchange news, and share personal experiences in real time without physically meeting” (Jennings, 2003, p. 6). Apparently, there are ways to encourage administration to open social media websites to classroom access, as Blandy suggests:

. . .taking responsibility for learning about the political process, policy analysis, strategies for exercising influence, creating arguments, effective communication through multiple medias, listening, building coalitions, negotiating competing interests, maintaining civility, and finding common ground . . . a willingness to engage in the political process and to not shrink from taking leadership roles associated with policy development. (2008, p. 276)

Although these blocking policies exist in many schools that filter their Internet browsers, the merit of community service and participatory culture outweighs censorship. “I can imagine no more important work than inspiring and facilitating civic engagement among future leaders with the capacity to advance the arts and culture within democratic societies” (Blandy, 2008, p. 276). For now, educators can request more social media access in the classroom to seek, “new contexts and venues for the practice of art . . .that leave behind the traditional and limited context of the schools” (Congdon, Hicks, Bolin, & Blandy, 2008, p. 7). If Internet blocking social media websites in schools is limiting the classroom to a singular setting, one must consider the democratic and pedagogical benefits these sites offer our children. Delacruz (2008) discusses how the combination of voice and public engagement are tools to promote civic enterprise in our modern society, “The skills of both argumentation and consensus building are now more important than ever in an age of political polarization, escalating ethnic conflict, and crass mass journalism...” (p. 11). It is my belief that students who are offered the opportunity to express

their voices to contribute to critical issues is a valid reason to allow social media to find acceptance in the art classroom.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Blandy and Fenn's vision of art education in the future is one that seeks to culturally sustain the local community through a commonwealth, "coalitions that include arts and cultural organizations, along with social service, health, and business organizations, should be formed to negotiate community problems" (Blandy & Fenn, 2012, p. 275). I think Blandy's 2011 article, "Sustainability: Sustaining Cities and Community Cultural Development," applies well to my research because it demonstrates how art classrooms could effectively impact our community and our students' lives in a way where it is mutually empowering. We are teaching our future leaders and decision makers to assemble, engage and move their audience to positive civic action. Participatory culture can be easily developed through joining up with charitable foundations and social networking sites. The instructor's role is no longer a "taste-maker," dictating to students what their opinions should include, but rather a guide to, "mentor free-agent learners" (Blandy, 2011, p. 249), encouraging our students to create their own niches in these formats. Blandy's hopeful message of creating change through democracy is encouraging to any teacher such as myself to feel confident that the new electronic media art classroom is well on its way.

### **Methodology**

I have performed a case study for this research project. The case study is a qualitative method that concentrates on a small group of people and records a single person or the whole group's experience in a particular situation or setting. As Lodico (2006) explains, "information or data through multiple sources and perspectives is another key characteristic of the case study approach" (p.15). My research project focuses on students that I teach in my own art classes at a Southwest Florida public high school, and how we used social media and artistic skills collectively to promote a community event called *Relay for Life*. My students' target audience for this media campaign was the art-aficionado public at large, but focused locally within our community.

Since all social media websites are blocked at our school, I secured permission from my school administration and parents to allow my students to have the opportunity to create accounts (or use current ones) for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest so that they could reach out to their community for public sponsorship. With an abundance of photos taken during and in preparation for the *Relay for Life* event, writing samples from posts online, interviews and video, I have accumulated a wealth of qualitative data to analyze. I have focused on both my own journey and activities as the teacher along with my students' activities and their journey for a period of about five months. Some of the public performance elements were to attract sponsors while doing various activities such as going out into the downtown community to have a public art sale and face-painting super hero logos both on campus and publicly to bring attention to their cause. The story begins from the first parent meeting in my art classroom when students commit to the team in mid January 2013, to the relay event on our campus on May 10th, 2013.

## **Subjects**

My own art students that voluntarily formed a team for the *Relay for Life* are the subjects in this research. There were approximately ninety interested students that initially signed up and about forty students who committed to the event. I asked each of the classes I teach, if anyone was willing to stay after school or work on relay advocacy extra time in class, during school hours and to attend our bi-weekly meetings.

## **Research Site**

The research site is my own classroom and our local community. Conveniently enough, the final relay was held on our school campus track on May 10th, so the entire study was conducted at the public high school I am currently employed at. We also traveled to our downtown area to do public art displays, sales and face painting for charity donations, which is approximately 7 minutes by car from campus.

## **Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentation**

According to Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle (2006), case studies entail, “. . .focus on small groups or individuals within a group and document that group’s or individual’s experience in a specific setting. In addition, the gathering of this information or data through multiple sources and perspectives” (p. 15). This is an appropriate research method for my project because it involves a select group of interested art students who desired to voluntarily form a relay team. This study took place over a period of about 5 months. This is so students had a long enough time period to prepare, advocate, and gain as much support as possible from the public to sponsor their relay walk. I have aggregated several types of qualitative data, including writing samples from online social media posts from my students and the photos they included in those

posts. The photos show students creating posters and online posts intended to generate buzz, students painting faces on campus and downtown and displaying their personal artwork during the events to appeal for sponsorship. I conducted interviews during the relay event to see how the students felt being a part of the *Art Heroes* team. Videos and photos taken by my students are also shared and uploaded to these social media sites, ([Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [Tumblr](#) and [Pinterest](#)) which can also be considered audio/visual artifacts of this study.

I wanted my students to manage the team accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr and Pinterest, edit them, add updated news, information, pictures and video to the sites frequently. I have only moderated their posts and encouraged them to keep the momentum forward through our bi-weekly meetings. I didn't want to delegate things too specifically online, as I wanted my high school students to problem solve and try to think of their own ways to disseminate information. I only wanted to reiterate that their posts should be as professional and organized as possible based on their interests and artistic artifacts they share online. I worked in the "background" by managing the monetary account for the team, kept track of timelines, set up and prepared meetings with the team in coalition with the American Cancer Society, got approval with administration and parents and organized supplies for creating art work. Keeping students' activities online has made their social media activities easily shared, documented and tracked in progress until completion of the event.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

By pulling information from several sources, including my own notes, the students' online writing and photo posts as well as interviews and video, allowed me to analyze this qualitative data by mean of triangulation to augment the validity of my research. The principle of triangulation, as explained by Waters-Adams (2006), involves "the careful choice of a range of

data gathering techniques, each of which might illuminate a different aspect of the same issue: observation of interactions, analysis of children's work, interview with children" (p. 7), all of which I used to collect data in different aspects of the project. I have access to the archive of students' online activities and can see how many comments, likes or follows my students receive from public supporters and how frequently my students responded to that feedback.

I had to carefully scrutinize all the interviews with the students, consider my personal notes and categorize all my data while the study was being conducted to see if any patterns or relationships form. As Maxwell (2004) explains, "reading and thinking about . . . interview transcripts and observation notes, writing memos . . . developing coding categories . . . analyzing narrative structure and contextual relationships are all important types of data analysis" (p. 96). As a researcher, I kept in mind how any of this data answers my research questions of how I incorporate social media in my classroom so that my students are engaged in participatory culture, and how my students utilize their art making abilities in social networking format to advocate for a charitable cause.

As far as coding my work as my study moved forward, I organized my visual data from Instagram (I used Instagram for my data because the majority of the photos are there in one place) into the following categories: "Campaigning," "Team Bonding," "Art Making" and "Posing." The Campaigning category includes any photos taken and uploaded to Instagram where my students are at an event to raise donations when they are being captured selling art, painting faces (or the face paint work itself), or seeking audience attention for donations. The Team Bonding category include any photos captured at a team meeting where we are practicing face painting, sorting artwork to be sold, any of the relay activities done as a team at the relay

event and evidence of being a team player— such as wearing a hero costume on the team’s behalf. The Art Making category includes photos that have pictures of their artwork in general or them actually creating the artwork in class to be sold for charity. The last category is Posing where the photo does not fit any of the aforementioned ones and is just a photo that might just be students posing for no particular reason.

Moolenar (2012) is a scholar who has scrutinized social media data in the classroom before, and explains how relationships online can reveal, “By embedding . . . individual behaviors in the pattern of their interpersonal relationships, social network analysis can capture the multilevel nature of . . . collaboration to an extent that conventional methods and measures cannot” (p. 9). This means that the number of Instagram photos lumped into each specific category can explain patterns otherwise unseen in a classroom setting without access to social media. By seeing the connectivity between the photos and the four categories, they reveal how my students used an electronic social network structure to exchange information interdependently towards a common goal. The focus is that my observations and data would inform theory to improve teaching, learning and change toward utilizing social media and personal mobile devices in an educational setting.

Not only did my findings prove that social media is useful for educational purposes, but also meaningful in the way that it empowered me as an educator to become a public education advocate for student use of social media. The Internet is an open and transparent platform that I can use to share my personal teaching journey, in hopes that others are learning from my experiences. During the time I used social media in the classroom, it was highly scrutinized by the public school system because of the visible presence online the Art Heroes created. Although

school districts like mine might be wary of young people out in the open, parents and/or students do it on their own quite frequently, whether I teach it in my classroom or not. My project also proves that students can be guided and successful towards a more civic, charitable and creative application, rather than them learning social media networking on their own with either little or no instruction at home. On the more social side, my students have proven themselves to be living examples of how unselfish and empathetic teenage youth can be when highly motivated by a cause they care for alongside their fellow team members.. I cannot fathom a more personal interaction than to go outside of one's self and volunteer time, labor and creativity for a cause that is bigger than adolescent personal needs.

### **Limitations**

One of the main limitations of my study is the time span it was confined to: about five months to collect data. Relationships being analyzed and photos or posts online come from a select group of interested and artistically talented high school students who were available after school hours. Some students who had other commitments and sports after school could not commit to this time frame. Also, my students and I have worked specifically with the local Fort Myers community that can afford to participate in sponsoring the event and volunteer their efforts.

## Findings

Using social media as a tool for civic engagement proved to be a compelling and competent way for my students to engage social media, reach their charity goals and participate in community service. I will now review the original research questions, followed by my findings, how my high school students performed and how we accumulated and collected our activities as a viewable outcome.

### Student use of Social Media Tools

My first research question asked, “How did my students utilize their art making and other creative abilities on a public performance platform as well as a social networking format to advocate for a charitable cause?” My students had a plethora of options, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and Tumblr. (see figure 1)



Figure 1. This is one of the posters my team used to advertise around campus and during public events to reach a broader public audience so anyone can follow and “like” us during the charity campaign.

Some students preferred some sites over others, so I divided the relay team into “committees,” so that students could claim their favorite to post on behalf of the team. I noticed that the more “effective” as far as the public audience “liking,” “sharing” or other forms of digital dissemination was Instagram. Instagram allowed my students to disperse to Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook all at once, so there was no need to create separate posts as it reached a broader audience with one click and an image to go with it as well (see figure 2).

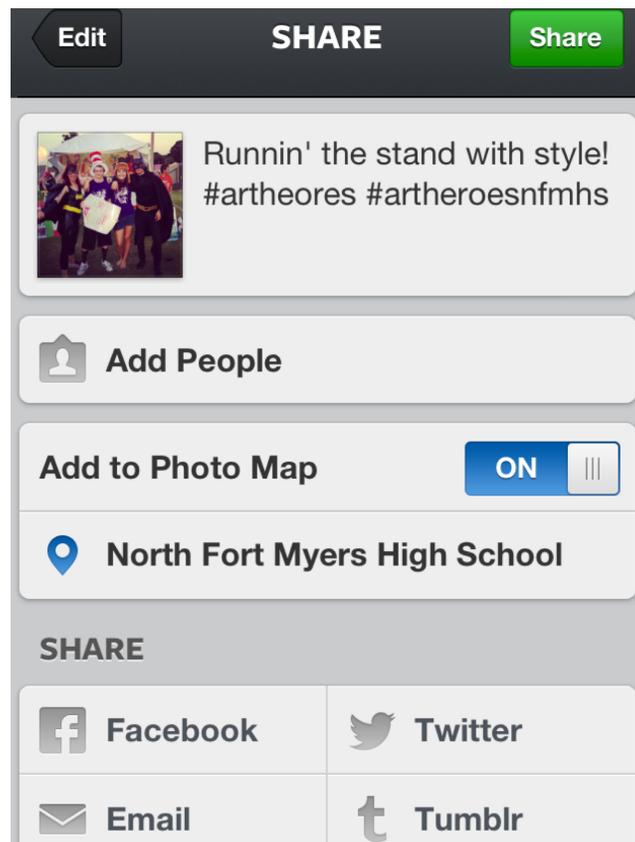


Figure 2. Top left: Students using the school library computers to post, upload and share photos on our team pages after school during a team meeting. Bottom left: A screen-shot of a selected team Instagram photo to be posted. Right: A screen-shot of how students are able to post on multiple sites at the same time, such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr simultaneously.

Our image posts really showed what my visual art students were capable of, whether it's their talent for the photography within the framing of the shot, or what they were photographing; face painting for a dollar donation, them interacting with the public and selling artwork for charity, or simply the new social bond my students found with each other through the project (see figure 3).



Figure 3. Top left: A student photograph of the face painting stand along with donation jar we used during on-campus and public charity events. Top right: An Art Hero team member face painting a sponsor's face for a one dollar donation. Bottom left: An Art Hero team member selling student artwork to a sponsor to benefit the *Relay for Life*. Bottom right: A group photo of the Art Hero team present at one of the public charity events in the local downtown area.

The more significant Instagram photos were not only my team interacting with the student body on-campus, but especially when when we visited downtown Fort Myers where they went into the local community and gregariously connected with an audience they've never met. After categorizing all the data from the Instagram collection of photos into campaigning, team

bonding, posing and art making, the result shows that my students were focused on the charity above all other interests. With a total of 184 photos, most photos were dedicated to the campaign category, where 92 photos capture action of students working toward raising donations. The second highest group of photos was in the Team bonding category, where 51 photos show my students' commitment in being a part of a team and working together with a common goal in mind. Next was the art making category, where 26 photos show the team's common interests as talented artists and enthusiasts who use their skills to enhance their charity work. Only 15 photos fell into the posing category, which are pictures my students took frivolously as many of the events the team engaged in were fun and resulted in some silly photos. Evidently, my team has displayed unselfishness and a focus to apply their energy toward gaining as many donations as possible for the *Relay for Life*, while keeping their team identity as a sense of pride above just being art students or playing around with social media and technology. (see figure 4)

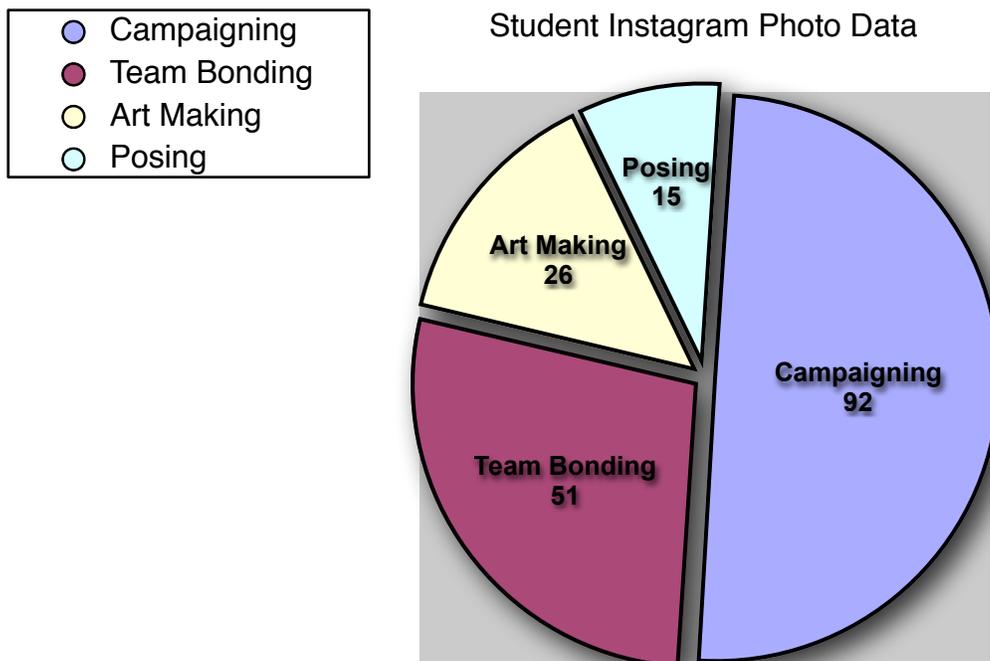


Figure 4. Pie chart explaining the value my students placed on their charity goal, versus more frivolous concerns.

My second research questions asked, “How can I disseminate my research in a way that inspires other art educators to utilize social networking and engage their students in community events and charitable organizations?” My students previously posting and adding to the team accounts online made it easy for me to share the journey from recruitment to fundraising to relay event. Using the same social media sites to connect with other educators is as simple as using an educational hashtag or posting to a teaching forum (see figure 5).

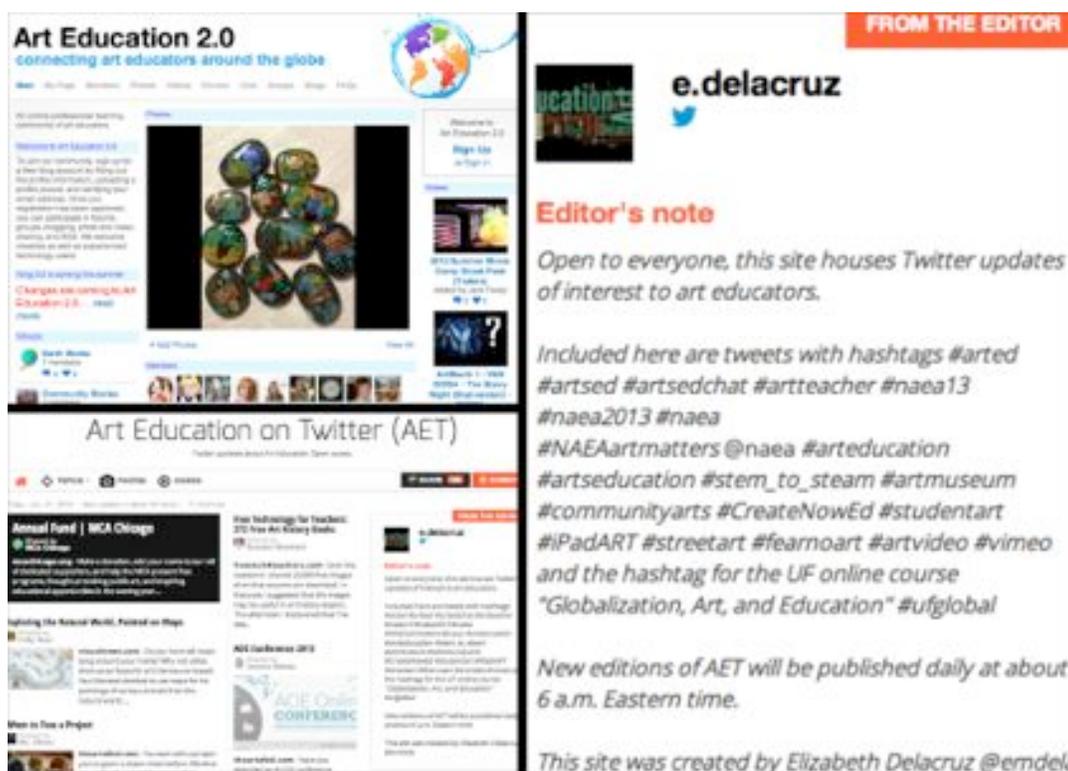


Figure 5. Top left: Screen shot of a website frequented and used by Art Educators to connect and share information through forum exchange. Bottom left: Screen shot of a website where art education tweets are aggregated and shared. Right: The editor’s note from the aforementioned art education twitter share website that indicates which hashtags are being used to collect information from twitter onto the website.

In addition, I have also created a website that is a central “hub” for all things Art Heroes. It can be found here <http://www.hooliehuffer.com/#!/art-heroes/c19m4> (see figure 6)



Figure 6. Left: A screen shot of the top of the Art Heroes page, which shows the mission statements and purpose for the project. Right: A screen shot of the bottom of the page, which shows an Instagram collection of curated photos and a panel of options to join Art Heroes on various social media platforms.

Anyone is able to connect with our Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and Tumblr from one site, as well as view the student-made video of our journey from start to finish, via YouTube.

My third research question asked, “How does this media campaign as a whole fit into relational aesthetics, and when do these social events between myself as ringleader and students as performers become “art” in itself?” The “everyday” life as art belief of relational aesthetics fits the *Relay for Life* event as the culmination of my students’ efforts. During the event, I have observed all the work my students have accomplished up to that point crystallized during the event as a performance piece within itself. This is also evident in the photos my students took during the relay event, which show my students’ enthusiasm, interacting with other teams, the

public and generally never losing momentum for committing to charity work. The public and the American Cancer Society were present and rewarded my team with five awards: the “Golden Pillow,” which is for the team staying on the track the entire 18 hours, the “Best Costume,” which was for our superhero ensembles that some students wore the whole event, the “Power of Purple,” which is for the team who wore or displayed the charity’s symbolic color the most during the relay laps, the “Ain’t He a Drag,” category for my male team members and their theatrics, and finally the “Box Car Lap,” where my students had the most aesthetically pleasing and large car made out of cardboard. These awards show that the American Cancer Society organization admires my team’s efforts for the cause.

My team made a total contribution of \$784 dollars, which doesn’t include overhead or other team expenses. This is pure profit they have earned themselves through using social media to cast a wider net for donations, face painting for one dollar and selling student art for a donation contribution of any amount the patron wishes. All the events leading up to and during the event have shown social engagement as illustrated through students’ photographs, posts and video. It is apparent that my orchestration of the *Art Heroes* team and the socialization occurring between my students, the charity and the local community have yielded an impressive result. Although I acted as a ringleader and agent for this artistic social arrangement, my students were the real vehicles to propel this effort forward with me encouraging them along the way. (see figure 7)



Figure 7. Various examples of the teacher/ team captain/ ringleader roles I performed as the researcher.

The “Art” ultimately lives on within the evidence of pictures, posts and videos uploaded to the Internet; but the day of the relay that my high school team experienced was one fleeting night that will hopefully resonate with my students for years to come.

### Summary and Conclusion

The main goal of this project study was to change the way my school and the students in the art classroom utilize technology for participatory culture-oriented learning, and to study the efficacy of such efforts. Through diligent art sharing and tenacious advocacy on an online platform, my students promoted the *Relay for Life*, cancer awareness and fundraising for this cause. Using the penetrating flow of information that social media sites offer, I have observed how my students have gained support from the local community. I believe that my students’ design savviness and artistic talents have given them an edge in their design and implementation

of their media campaign in ways that have attracted many sponsors. This is evident through the awards from the American Cancer Society that the team earned, the popularity of the face painting and art sales while on and off campus, and the total profit amount of \$784. Through the success of the Relay for Life event, not only will their efforts go to a good cause, but my students will have gained knowledge their sense of “connected learning,” that is learning that connects to real-world issues and civic actions for the greater public good. The fact that I have used these social media sites on such a broad scale for the first time on our campus, it is my hope that the success of this project will encourage school administrators to reconsider banning cellphones and social media from classroom use, and instead encourage teachers to utilize these tools for educational purposes. The success of our students exemplifying charitable efforts and encouraging community advocacy online could possibly yield an imperative change of how our school uses online media and technology.

I believe that the kinds of skills and attitudes embedded in this project are essential to students’ future success. More importantly, I have seen my students become an essential part of a social art piece and a thing of beauty. Over the relay events, I’ve seen students who were shy and felt out of place among the student body come out of their shell, express themselves artistically and take action for something they believe in, all while making new friends. *Art Heroes* gave the social misfits and a diverse group of high school students a place where they felt like they belonged and felt a part of something bigger than themselves. From the student interviews, the number one thing my students said was that their favorite part of being on the team was the people they met and the friends they’ve made all while having fun and doing something good for the community. For those skeptics who criticize modern youth who bury their attention into their electronic devices and who are “all about themselves,” my project proves otherwise. These

students have become more connected, more about serving others and using those same electronic devices to accomplish unselfish goals. I think what I gave my students is a leader and visionary to push them to take action and a forum to do so. I have demonstrated both to my students and to my school that we can use social media creatively, purposefully, and educationally for charity that involve their community in positive ways. I think that the most important result is the fact that the Art I've composed with this research project is my students transforming into more innovative, extroverted and generous humanitarians who have experienced a way they can make a difference in this technologically advanced world of seeming disconnectedness.

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### **Author Biography**

Juliana “Hoolie” Huffer is an artist and an art teacher in Fort Myers, Florida. Being an artist comes first, doing original and custom work in fine arts including painting, drawing and photography on the weekends or during a vacation break. Her goal is to raise enough money to have a steady flow of commissions to purchase more art making and welding equipment to go back to her love of sculpture metal working. She also shows and sells her work at the ArtWalk in downtown Ft. Myers twice a year as well as Howl Gallery, Space 39 and the Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center.

She is content with her current job as an art instructor at North Ft. Myers high school, where day-to-day teaching is a joy. After she finishes her Master's degree at the University of Florida, she hopes to attain a more advisory and curatorial position developing education programs at one of Ft. Myer's Art Leagues, non-profit agencies or museums. Key professional appointments include: 3 years at Six Mile Charter Academy, 4th-8th grade Art classes, 2 summers at The Art League of Bonita Springs, 3rd-6th grade Art camp, 3 years at North Ft. Myers High School, (9-12 Art classes). Professional Associations include: LAEA, Lee Arts Education Association Vice President. Grants and Recognitions include: Golden Apple Nomination, 2011 and 2012. She has lived in Florida all of her life, (Tampa for twenty years) without intentions of leaving the state, "It is a diverse place with people from many cultures, which is ideal for a student of art to embrace and appreciate other unique points of view besides their own." she says. She is a resident of the Ft. Myers area with her husband.