

RESEARCH AND TEACHING: AN AMBIDEXTROUS PRACTICE OR SELF-PORTRAIT OF A TEACHER AS A RESEARCHER*



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Imagine, if you will, a scene from the beautiful film by Agnès Varda, *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*). A wrinkled hand is playing at capturing highway trucks or watching the other hand filming it. At the beginning of this documentary, while manipulating a small digital camera, Varda is explaining the meaning of her own project to herself: “using one hand to film the other” — she gleanes, in a way, gathering remains of herself or those of the world. “It is always a self-portrait”, she says.

As I write this article on research and its relationship to teaching, I am inhabited by the image of this gleaner deep in speculation and contemplation.

My teaching and my research meet within what I would call an *ambidextrous practice*, a practice that I increasingly feel cannot be adequately defined by simply one or the other. Indeed, the relations between my various teaching activities and the diversity of my research activities are woven ever tighter — creative tensions whose focus lies elsewhere, perhaps closer to the existential plane, to the living.

For the past several years, I have been pursuing this process aimed at connecting my research and teaching practices while also developing course content.

I need to be studying in order to teach, just as I have to feel hungry, literally, before entering the classroom. In other words, I teach with questions. Research is one of the pathways that brings these inquiries towards my teaching. The objects of my studies and analyses, that which I don't understand, that which concerns me, all that I am working with — whether individually, as part of various research teams, or in collaboration with a host of different communities — and all that works on and labours within me have an impact on my teaching.

My research activities, materials and processes, enrich the content of my courses, they allow me to diversify the pedagogy that I put into practice, and they contribute to my teacher-student interactions as well as to my relationships with colleagues and the college community in general. Additionally, my commitment to doing research contributes to positioning my teaching practice within an expanded context not only in academic or institutional terms (such as by creating links with other courses or teaching institutions), but also in social, cultural, economic and political spheres.

I have been a teacher in, and a researcher associated with, the French Department at Collège de Maisonneuve for almost fifteen years. During this time, I have often focussed on working with students who were having difficulty with the written-French upgrade course and with the first course in the compulsory sequence of

French courses offered to students who have failed it one or more times.

My research preoccupations have led me to explore different ways of presenting the subject matter and to frequently use a pedagogical approach based on cooperation — both of which have proven to be effective with these students. This involvement with students experiencing difficulty coupled with my research on ethics has also led to the creation of a working group called *Groupe de travail sur le métier d'étudiant*¹. This collaborative structure involving teachers and other professionals has helped us to cast a critical eye on our own practices, to seek original pedagogical answers to problematic situations, and to implement some of the alternative support measures and resources needed to renew our teaching métier. For the past several years, I have been pursuing this process aimed at connecting my research and teaching practices, while also developing course content. I have been teaching multidisciplinary creativity as part of the *Integration Project* in the *Arts et lettres* program, as well as contemporary literature and culture, within the *Science, lettres et arts* program amongst others.

* I would like to thank Devora Neumark for her help on revising this translation, my colleague Élyse Dupras for her comments on a preliminary French version of this article and Danielle-Claude Bélanger for sharing her thoughts on the subject.

¹ This work has also been conducted over the years by Élyse Dupras and Jean Sébastien. For some of its activities, the group received support from the Collège de Maisonneuve as part of the Success and Graduation Plan, and this work was the subject of a presentation at a round table session entitled *Teachers and Students: A Mutual Learning* which was moderated in collaboration with Élyse Dupras, at the 2005 annual AQPC symposium held in Rimouski, Québec.



These reflections on the possible relations between doing research and teaching have led me to weave new connections. My choice of courses and teaching contexts have also been directly influenced by the issues common to, or even the shared contradictions of, my own teaching and research practices — each potentially disturbing the other. In short, this involves developing a critical relationship with culture; a will to examine our cultural practices from an ethical standpoint. Existence does not necessarily become “more human” through *our* various cultural expressions.

After working on the gift problematic and the process of giving in the context of a creative practice, my research moved to “the house” as a figure and expression of certain anxieties and tensions that currently characterize our relations with the world. How to inhabit *together* the contemporary world? The house is a figure of the imaginary, a focus of symbolic investment, but also an art form and raw material for artwork.

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Entitled, “This should be housing/*Le temps de la maison est passé*”, this body of research focuses on: certain housing imagery and configurations that are specific to works of the past and to foundational texts; a literary, artistic and cultural corpus; some traditional ways of inhabiting; contemporary manifestations of houses and exemplary places such as the city of Berlin, Ground Zero in New York, and the city of Jerusalem. In the continuity of this research, my teaching is characterized by a cross-disciplinary approach both in terms of methodology and content.

I tend towards a pedagogy that supports critical reflection and creative dialogue between “co-researchers” within a teaching space conceived as a workshop. To illustrate this pedagogical stance, two of its simplest manifestations come to mind: the decision to completely eliminate lectures from my practice and the choice to organize the classroom spatially in the form of a dialogue circle. This approach to teaching and research expresses a desire to address radical questions (in the sense of root problematics) and the necessity to respond to the present with concrete gestures: how to inhabit (the world) together today? This is an age-old question. In the face of different realities and exigencies, how are we to respond?



Just as I feel the necessity to study in order to teach, it is sometimes necessary for me to not teach. This phase of my teaching practice — these periods dedicated to study and research, to reading and writing, this field work and these various professional collaborations — has fairly recently been called “research”, a designation based on a distinction from this “other” form of collaborative learning, inquiry, reflection and speculation that “teaching” represents for me.

So, although the articulation between teaching and doing research seems indispensable to me, that is, the very foundation of the specific quality of my presence in class (meaning, its necessity for me), I find that trying to link these practices is often subject to the pursuit of a dual or parallel path. When considering the conditions favourable to doing research in colleges, institutions and researchers generally focus first on the importance of the availability of time (release from teaching responsibilities), and of financial backing and institutional support (both internal and external, from the college and funding bodies). In my opinion, the integration of research and teaching activities is not raised often enough as an issue and deserves greater attention. This issue is often under-recognized by institutions, which would, however, benefit from better understanding (and communicating) the function of this integration in the college’s Educational Project. This is all the more so since students immediately recognize the potential of this “cultural resource” whether because the teachers’ interest in research fosters their interest and their motivation towards the discipline, original objects of study or research, or alternately, because they are interested in and find out about their teachers’ “extra-curricular” activities.

Reflecting on my own experience, I realize today to what extent the quality of the conditions for research in college has a determining influence on the vitality and integrative character of the “research and teaching” relation, in my own practice but also within the college community to which I belong. This dynamic is confirmed by what I have witnessed of the commitment to college life on the part of many of my colleagues, researchers who, in addition to their teaching and research activities, also contribute to the development of pedagogical tools and methodologies or to conducting and implementing various projects and measures in support of student success. Together with teaching, these diverse forms of involvement are an essential contribution of research to the college community. This contribution, whose responsibility is shared between the researcher and the college, is at least as meaningful if not more so than the ‘institutional visibility’ associated with the researchers’ public activities/events or dissemination of their work. In other words,



improving the conditions for research possibilities in colleges is not only linked to the role that research *can* play in the Educational Project, but, in my opinion, such an improvement in the conditions for research constitutes an acknowledgement of the role it already plays, and provides greater leverage for promoting further integration of research into the college's Educational Project.

At the beginning of my teaching career, the “dual path” that I mentioned earlier was a daily reality that referred to teaching at the college level while simultaneously pursuing doctoral studies. This meant that I shared with my students the reality of balancing work and study! Scholarships and support from Collège de Maisonneuve's Professional Improvement Committee allowed me to take the leaves of absence (without pay) that are indispensable for writing a thesis. After completing my doctorate in 2001, a different posture was developed, that is, the other side of the *working student* model: namely, the *studying teacher*, a condition “favourable” to the emergence of a *teacher/researcher* insofar as the teacher manages to survive as a researcher in the interim: that is to say, thanks to “self-funding” measures (leaves with anticipatory or deferred payment), if she manages to pursue her research activities — a group of activities which, by the way, can also benefit teaching insofar as teaching and research are not felt or perceived to be interfering with each other. On this point, I would like to take a moment here to express my gratitude to the students, particularly those who worked with me during this “interim phase”, when the relationship between the researcher and the teacher was being negotiated. Although I personally felt a strong need to bring these “research” questions and methodologies into class, it is the students, through their motivation and interest, who confirmed that this need resonated with them. The way the students welcomed these materials and these forms of teaching, their ability to appropriate the questions and to make them meaningful, provided me with precious stimulation and support. As my colleague Élyse Dupras puts it: a researcher's passion can make a significant contribution to one's effectiveness as a teacher. The students' pleasure and curiosity are just as contagious!

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To date the latest variation of posture is one of a *funded teacher/researcher*. In 2003, I was invited to join the *Équipe de recherche sur l'imaginaire contemporain, la littérature, les images et les nouvelles textualités* at the Université du Québec à Montréal's Centre *Figura*, directed by Bertrand Gervais. This integration of my own research into a research team's program meant, for one thing, that starting in 2005, I received research funding (in the form of a grant awarded to a research team having one college researcher) and was partially released from teaching duties thanks to the *Fonds de recherche sur la société et la culture's* programs.

Since 2006, I have also been collaborating, as an Adjunct Professor, within the Master's Program in Architecture at the *École d'architecture* at l'*Université Laval*, and as a researcher in the *Groupe Habitats et cultures*². This collaboration with André Casault, Director of this team, was developed following his participation, by invitation, in the project for a special issue of a literary magazine I developed in the wake of my early work on the house as a figure (“*Habiter hors de*”, *Liberté*, n° 266, November 2004).

The dual path of teacher/researcher can, under certain conditions, give rise to a creative ambidextrous practice, a source of theoretical and practical learning wherein professional improvement can become an opportunity to deepen and diversify one's teaching and research practice as well as one's engagement as a citizen. However, the tensions that characterize this ambidextrous practice are not without risk or conflict; they also have their breaking points, where healthy and structured integration can turn into scattered energy and exhaustion.

At the same time as my research received some “external” institutional support, Collège de Maisonneuve was embarking on a research revival plan (*Plan de relance de la recherche*). After years of research support being mostly limited to the Professional Improvement Committee, the College, supported by some researchers and the ARC (*Association pour la recherche au collégial*), took steps towards increasing its support for researchers. This meant providing them with what is often their most basic need: time.

In this endeavour, I get the impression that the process of mutual learning, so characteristic for me of the teaching and research relation, also speaks of my relationship with the office of the Academic Dean and the Pedagogical Development Service. In regard to the question of research, we learn together within a common process dedicated not only to improving the possibilities for research in college, but also to affirming research as an integral part of the College's Educational Project.



² We are currently supported by grants from the International Development Research Centre and by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Community University Research Alliance Program.



By focusing on the way that culture responds to the question of coexistence today, the research cycle entitled “This should be housing/*Le temps de la maison est passé*” helps to bring forth new insights into the contemporary imaginary and various forms of artistic and cultural practices. This process combines writing, photography and field work — particularly in Berlin where, for several years I have been in dialogue with a community of Carmelite Nuns; or in Israel and Palestine where the layout of the Security Fence and proposals for a different way of responding to this oppressive situation are being studied. In the context of Action Research which characterizes the activities done in collaboration with the School of Architecture, this process also contributes to an inquiry about habitat, cultural landscapes and built environments, as well as to the development of a cross-disciplinary, intercultural and collaborative approach to contemporary inhabiting, whether in the Innu communities of Quebec’s North Shore or in the community which lives in or near the Mbeubeuss garbage dump of the Dakar suburbs in Senegal.

Entitled, “Habiter: exister, résister, subsister” (“Inhabiting: Existing, Resisting, Subsisting”), this research and teaching problematic introduces a questioning process relative to the way in which we inhabit the world today.

Thanks to the “internal and external” support that my current research receives *at the present time*, the conditions under which *This should be housing* can now be sustained allow the integration of my teaching and research activities to increasingly manifest itself. Similarly, there are more possibilities for “transfers of competence” between

research, teaching and creating, between the disciplines, and between the different forms of pedagogy practiced, whether in college or university contexts, in popular education or in community training. This is the case because in the same way that research eventually finds its way into teaching, at times the different research contexts also offer some stimulating teaching environments.



The problematics related to contemporary inhabiting proposed in the course *Littérature contemporaine d’ici et d’ailleurs* of the *Sciences, lettres et arts* (SLA) program, are representative of this fundamental integration of research into a pedagogical project in the context of my own practice. Generally, this course consists of the study of foreign literary works (novels and essays) from the 20th and 21st centuries and of *Quebec literature* from 1980 on. In the specific context of the SLA program, it contributes to the development of a multidisciplinary approach by fostering the interrelation between literary, artistic and philosophical works and, eventually, by showing the reciprocal influences between science and the arts.

Entitled, “Habiter: exister, résister, subsister” (“Inhabiting: Existing, Resisting, Subsisting”), this research and teaching problematic introduces a questioning process relative to the way in which we inhabit the world today. This general theme leads us to reflect together throughout the course on the ethical issues involved in creative work as well as in our own gestures and actions; to work with concepts that relate to ethics, economy and ecology, and with literary, philosophical and artistic works (visual arts, cinema and architecture). For example, the specific choice of literary works under study immediately brings into question the meaning or even the relevance of identity categories such as *Quebec literature* and *foreign literature*, *d’ici* (from here) as compared to *d’ailleurs*, (from elsewhere), which appear in the course title and description. This is already one way of opening up this inquiry into the contemporary world that we are called upon to inhabit together.

The semester is divided into three parts: *exister* (existing), *résister* (resisting), *subsister* (subsisting). Each part is characterized by the selected reading material (some common to the entire group and other of personal choice), by the objects of study (many of these originating from the research fields and materials mentioned earlier), and by the questions raised within the perspective resulting from the general problematics of the course: *Habiter?* (Inhabiting?). In addition to the discussions and exchanges that characterize each meeting, a more formal seminar is held near the end of each part, as a preparatory stage leading to a final reflection on the overall process.

At the end of the winter 2008 semester, the group of students produced a CD-ROM collection of texts which included some of their works³. A first series of texts consists of creative works written at the beginning of the semester, at a time when reflection on the course theme started to take shape. This first series corresponds to a succession of pastiches that creates an original crossing of the American continent, inspired by Noël Audet’s novel *Frontières ou tableaux d’Amérique*. The second series of texts groups together the essays produced at the end of this semester-long process

³ Design and production of the collection entitled, “*Habiter: exister, résister, subsister*” by Alexandre Huot and cover page visuals by Arièle Dionne-Krosnick. This project received funding from the *Fondation du Collège de Maisonneuve*.



of reflection, research, reading and writing on the problematics of inhabiting and related ethical, ecological, economical and, of course, cultural dimensions.

I have often experienced the extent to which the orientation giving to a course by presenting such a research problematic opens the way to freedom and creativity as much for the teacher as for the students. Beginning a semester by raising a number of working questions related to a theme, questions to which we return to periodically throughout the different stages of a course, provides a tremendous opportunity for more profound learning; and also, on methodological, critical and reflexive levels, it provides the possibility to deepen and to internalize the questioning process. Thanks to the time devoted to exchanges during end-of-stage seminars, amongst other critical moments, and also to the time dedicated to the overall process throughout the entire semester, students become aware of the possibility (and the necessity) to define, in an increasingly autonomous manner, their own trajectory for reading, analyzing and reflecting, and their own critical perspectives and problematics.

Despite the complexity of this proposition (and also perhaps because of it), the act of grounding one's teaching within a structuring theme or problematics — such as this broad examination of inhabiting — proves to be an approach allowing the introduction of a wide variety of contents into the course that becomes a workshop in the process. The juxtaposition of literary objects with other works, in its diversity, reveals points of connection in the multidisciplinary of forms, practices, languages and ethical stakes. Students quickly begin proposing topics and links for collective reflection, thus actively inhabiting the workshop we are creating together.



To date, “This should be housing/*Le temps de la maison est passé*” has generated particularly satisfying experiences in terms of both research and teaching. It is important for me to share these experiences with students and colleagues.

Conducting research allows teachers to develop ways of knowing and various competencies while participating in the renewal of knowledge. In so doing, they provide materials that can be adapted and transmitted for teaching.

The transmission of knowledge that is in the process of being developed also fosters an indispensable individual and collective critical reflection on the processes of producing knowledge, on the ways of framing (or not framing) problems and on the demands — oh so very multidisciplinary! — of today's world. ◀

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