



Building Bridges

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Executive Editor:Dr. Beth Thomas
Layout and Design:Pat Groves

Additional Contributors to this issue: Macksie Warner, Vanessa Lopez, Dr. Samantha Nolte-Yupari, Jessica Bayer, Vida Sabbaghi, and the NYSATA Region and Committee Chairs.
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Connecting, reaching out, and overcoming obstacles: building bridges

Dr. Beth A. Thomas

On the eastern edge of the small town where I grew up there is a park where, when I was a child, my friends and I spent most of our summer days. A river defined the outer boundary of the park; to enter the park visitors could drive or wade through the river, which during dry times was only a few inches deep at that point, or cross a bridge by foot or bicycle. When heavy summer rains caused the river to swell, the road crossing through it to the park would close. Getting into the park on those occasions was possible only by crossing the bridge. As a child I loved walking across the bridge into the park, especially when the river was too swollen and the current too heavy to drive or wade through. It gave us a way into the park despite the otherwise impassable river; we could look down at the water rushing by just inches from our feet from the safety of the bridge. The bridge let us overcome the obstacle of the flooded river and cross over to the place where we wanted to be.

The things bridges let us do in real life form the basis on which the concept of the bridge can act as a powerful metaphor in speech and thought. Bridges are used as a way to talk about surmounting problems; creating connections between ideas and situations; and making overtures between people who may seem to be very different. We think and talk about building bridges to address questions of difference, inequity, and isolation. We often use the bridge metaphor to see ourselves as bridge builders, actively constructing a mechanism for making a difference in our lives and the lives

of others. As teachers, we think about building conceptual bridges that will help our students see things from new perspectives, understand themselves and others in new ways, and connect with their communities.

The bridge metaphor can help us consider other possibilities as well. A bridge is a platform that lets people from different sides come together and meet each other half way. We say we'll "cross that bridge when we come to it" to indicate something we're apprehensive about or aren't sure how to handle, and ideas that are simply out of the question are "a bridge too far." Bridges can be treacherous if they connect us to things that are dangerous, aren't built with care or aren't well maintained. And when bridges break, the result can be damage that is extensive, disastrous, or difficult to repair.

In this issue of the NYSATA News, contributors have drawn on the bridge metaphor to reflect on important aspects of art education. Some articles in this issue describe ways art curriculum and community art events can create connections between people, foster community and encourage sensitive engagement with the environment. Others explore ways art educators can move toward a more socially just educational system, span the broad divides our country is struggling with and provide insights into ways art educators are reaching out to young people in and outside of classrooms. Several features also demonstrate how art educators across New York State are crossing difficult terrain through professional development and advocacy.

Building bridges and forging connections between art educators, advocates and supporters across New York State is one of the primary goals of the NYSATA News. I hope that as you read this issue you find yourself recognizing commonalities between the bridges our contributors are exploring and those you build, cross and meet others on in your professional life.

Beth Thomas
Editor, NYSATA News

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Vanessa Lopez, Gr. 3

Building Bridges

Vanessa López
Maryland Institute College of Art

I grew up in Washington Heights on the corner of 180th Street and Cabrini Boulevard; the George Washington Bridge visible from each of our 10 windows. Growing up first generation Dominican-American, it became the first of many bridges I would cross, burn, and build.

That bridge has become the metaphor for my life.

First I built a bridge from Uptown to Midtown. I left the comforts of my 'hood', got on the "A" train, and landed smack in the middle of what felt like another planet – Midtown: Lincoln Center. I attended F. H. LaGuardia High School - met "Spanish" kids who didn't speak Spanish, Black kids with green hair, and "hard" White boys. It changed me, but I left feeling like art was for the privileged and the White. I was neither.

I love(d) Washington Heights, but growing up in the 90's, poor, with a single mother, was hard -by the time I finished high school, I needed to get out. I burned one bridge and built another.



Vanessa Gr. 6

Art wasn't on the list of approved professions for the children of immigrants, but Art History told stories. And stories are always important. They bridge time. Perhaps I could make a living that way [chuckle]. At SUNY Purchase I studied Art History and Latin American Studies, played with the idea of making things without the pressures of assessment, and became

the first person to graduate college in my family.
As valedictorian of my graduating class.
And a new, young mother.

Then I literally crossed the George Washington Bridge. With love and hope in my arms, I arrived in Baltimore where I built the bridge back to art and began working as a freelance photographer and not-for-profit administrator. I woke up everyday to planning parties for wealthy "patrons" and felt like I was eating my soul to feed by belly. I knew it was time to burn another bridge.

I found an alternative route into the classroom and spent eleven years building bridges between art, urban children and the community. I struggled, questioned and found my voice in the classroom. I became a bridge for my students. I said "look at what you could do with that fire, with that anger, with your voice, with art. You can build a bridge."

Then a new bridge emerged. And I decided to cross it. I left the public school system and came to the Maryland Institute College of Art -- little chicken head from Washington

My students push into the discomfort and find discoveries. They are learning to listen and hear, rather than just look. They are learning to build bridges.



Vanessa López with MICA students, 2015

Heights -- Who would have thought? And here I am. Still trying to build bridges.

As part of our program, students' first practicum experience in planning, teaching, and assessing art instruction in a classroom is a course called "Teaching Internship I". I model for my students' engagement strategies, classroom management, curriculum design and lesson planning. Students eventually take over and implement their own lessons. After spending so many years in the classroom and noticing how many new teachers struggled in urban settings, I felt it would be beneficial to have our soon-to-be art educators experience an urban setting and build their cultural competencies. With the help and support of my colleagues, I built a new bridge: this time between the small private elite arts college, MICA, I now work at and a new local urban charter school, Henderson-Hopkins.

Started by a local university, the intent of Henderson-Hopkins was to "breathe life back into the neighborhood" and serve as a community anchor. To serve, more or less, as a bridge. In the process, families were displaced, homes were knocked down, and promises were made. Then the housing market stalled and collapsed. The school was built, but the bridge was not.

The school is housed in a brand new beautiful building in a devastated part of town. The ride from MICA to Henderson-Hopkins is a snapshot of the issues of this city; segregation, extreme poverty, drugs, gentrification. A tale of two cities. The very issues I felt suffocated by on 180 Street and Cabrini.

No bridges exist between these worlds.

One day a week for 10 weeks, my students and I go to Henderson-Hopkins and try and build bridges. My students are Korean, Chinese, and White. The students at the school are not. They all feel the distance. They are all aware of themselves. My students push into the discomfort and find discoveries. They are learning to listen and hear, rather than

just look. They are learning to build bridges.

Author's Note: A lot happened between the time I wrote this essay:

Freddie Grey is dead.

People are mad. And tired. And disappointed. And frustrated. And confused.

The national media painted the same racist, classist picture for all to see.

And I have no answers. Just more and more questions.

How do we talk about race, class, in a still segregated city within an elite art school? How do we prepare student teachers to engage young learners with issues of race, inequity, and class? How do we prepare agents for change?

I feel the need to do more and talk less.

To build more bridges.

To cross more bridges.

To burn more bridges.

Editors note: Vanessa López is an artist and art educator originally from New York City. Vanessa taught art for eleven years in Baltimore City Schools, and is currently a faculty member at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), also in Baltimore. In addition to her work as an art educator in classrooms, she served as a member of the National Core Arts Standards writing team, and continues to focus on issues of race, social justice, and emancipatory education through her work with pre-service and practicing art educators.

To learn more about ways people are working at the intersection of art and social justice in Baltimore and in New York City and visit The Baltimore Art + Justice Project at <http://artplusjustice.org>. Art for Change (New York) at <http://www.artforchange.org>.

