

## Teaching poetry using Instagram: An international, interdisciplinary study with adolescents mobilizing literacy and the arts

Amélie Lemieux, Georgina Barton, David Lewkowich, Boyd White and  
Stephanie Ho

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Article abstract

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*Teaching poetry using Instagram: An international, interdisciplinary study with adolescents mobilizing literacy and the arts*

AMÉLIE LEMIEUX  
University of Montreal

GEORGINA BARTON  
University of Southern Queensland

DAVID LEWKOWICH  
University of Alberta

BOYD WHITE  
McGill University

STEPHANIE HO  
St. George's School of Montreal

*Abstract*

Young people engage daily with various social media platforms to communicate with one another across the globe. Adolescents not only share text, but also use images and sound to express themselves on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok to provide access to user-created content. The recent emergence of InstaPoetry—poetry with images on Instagram—has been part of such communication and provides an entry point into adolescents' engagement with literature and the arts. Limited research exists, however, on how this literacy practice, paired with virtual and in-person museum visits, influences young people's self-expression. In addition, there is little known about how teachers can incorporate these literacy practices in the classroom. In this article, we offer ways of integrating and involving these dynamic dimensions into research projects based on four sites of inquiry located in Canada and Australia. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, this research project provides concrete teaching to foster adolescents' engagement with literature and the arts (i.e., contextual design, procedures, environment) in post COVID-19 times.

*Introduction*

Social media platforms such as Instagram are used worldwide by both adults and adolescents. For example, 67% of Canadian adolescent users go on the app daily (Media Technology Monitor Canada, 2020) and 70% of Australian youths do the same (Australian Government, 2018). With close to two billion monthly active user visits (Dean, 2022; Rodriguez, 2021), Instagram generates an abundance of traffic through algorithms and visual content. Native to this platform, the InstaPoetry movement has gained noticeable momentum and interest in literacy communities, from the daily publication of short, imagery-laden poems, to dedicated hashtags in English (e.g., #InstaPoetry) and French

(e.g., #InstaPoésie). The InstaPoetry movement, driven by the rise and discovery of such poets as Rupi Kaur (@rupikaur\_) and Mathias Pizzinato (@mathias.pizzinato), blends together everyday literacy practices (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020) by rendering literature and the arts accessible, thereby providing endless possibilities for shared notions of meaning-making through visual and literary arts.

This article as well as its findings are in line with *Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada*'s position statement, within the framework of "The Nature of Language, Literacy & the Literacy Learner." Specifically, this study showcases how the InstaPoetry movement addresses both how language and literacy are "complex activities that involve the interplay of various individual and social factors" and "on-going, interrelated, and individualized processes" (LLRC, 2023, p. 1). That is, the present study showcases how both literacy teachers and their students have used Instagram as a segway into poetry teaching and learning as part of a literacy unit touching on broader social justice issues in four research sites: Montreal (French, English), Edmonton (English), and Brisbane (English). Across these sites, we are interested in answering the following research question: How might teachers engage adolescents in poetic writing following a unit that involves InstaPoetry, museum-based artwork viewing, literary analysis, and social media use?

As a "more-than" literacy practice, we define InstaPoetry as the flexible and permeable practice of writing poetry, either collectively or individually, and sharing it on Instagram. Accessibility thus factors into this definition, as this social media platform allows for considerable poem shareability with all kinds of users who are interested in literature. This feature was an asset to various communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the fight against social isolation (Masciantonio et al., 2021). For example, during the pandemic it was difficult for people to visit museums and art galleries in person. As a result, and since many artistic institutions still needed to reach their audiences and mobilize knowledge across communities, online museum exhibitions, already in vogue, became even more popular and progressively the norm. In these venues, people were invited to respond similarly through web-based interactions, such as on Instagram. These interactions were rendered possible due to Instagram's accessibility, as this social media platform bridges the written with the visual, inviting the sense-laden specificities of the arts into adolescents' mobile screens.

There is notable potential in including artworks in this research as sites for poetic inspiration. As aesthetic objects, artworks hold properties that promote the embodiment of subjective, sensuous, as well as reasoned interactions with one's socio-cultural identity. Museums and art galleries are transformative sites for learning (Sinner et al., 2024). As communities of practice, museums and galleries, whether they are virtual or physical, shape new understandings about learning with objects and nurture the development of relevant teaching practices oriented towards important topics like social justice (Robenalt et al., 2023). Art galleries' primary sources—photographs, paintings, drawings, multimodal compositions—facilitate this social practice, and provide a common ground for personal development and collective knowledge based on self-in-relation (Rowsell & Schamroth Abrams, 2022). In addition to the potential of artworks for literacy engagement, we argue there is much relevance in looking at how adolescents engage with social media as a complex literacy event. Specifically, there is value in acknowledging the current shift in research from observing literacy practices to taking account of more entangled, rhizomatic

understandings of how adolescents engage with literacies and, reciprocally, how social media platforms dictate human behaviours (Ehret, 2024; Low et al., 2023) in ways that are simultaneously affective and uncontrollable (Ehret & Rowsell, 2021).

In this article, we overview four research sites involved in a study, funded by a *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Development Grant* led by Lemieux, that centres adolescents' engagement with InstaPoetry in classroom settings as prompted by virtual museum visits. For the purposes of this research, we draw on Lemieux and Berthiaume (2023) and espouse a definition of engagement that is all-encompassing, holistic, and comprised of relational entanglements when it comes to literary reading. Furthermore, this article presents the pedagogical potential of including InstaPoetry in literature classrooms, as exemplified through teachers' feedback collected at the end of the InstaPoetry project. This research spans four sites of inquiry over three cities: Montreal and Edmonton, Canada, as well as Brisbane, Australia. Our shared research interests in literature and the arts have brought us together to study adolescents' poems in response to visual artworks, specifically photography and paintings, found in publicly accessible virtual art galleries and museums. With this research, we report on teachers' feedback regarding adolescents' involvement with poetic writing in the classroom and with online spaces, inspired by the viewing of digitized museum-based art. With such reporting comes an explanation of the context and pedagogical activities designed in each site. The rationale for this project is the pervasiveness of adolescents' presence on Instagram, worldwide, and how everyday literacies (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020) serve as springboards for further engagement in the literature classroom (Lemieux & Berthiaume, 2023), taking the InstaPoetry movement as a place to foster such interpretive conversations. Such themes as accessibility, artwork diversity, transdisciplinarity, and democratisation of learning are addressed in each site of inquiry with students.

#### *Methodology and Data Analysis*

The larger framework for this study is action research (Baumfeld et al., 2012; Efron, 2019) used as a collaborative practice where teachers, researchers, and research assistants contribute to lesson planning, design, and implementation to generate a research project that speaks to both curricular and project objectives. Implementation is used as a site of knowing/becoming/doing (Kuby et al., 2018) where parameters can be adjusted depending on the results as they unfold. Schools were selected as per approved university and school research ethics procedures. Researchers at each of the sites shared an invitation to participate in the project as well as an information sheet detailing the aims and objectives of the study. All teacher participants signed a consent form to participate in the study and adolescents were asked to sign an assent letter; their parents signed a consent form.

At each of the four research sites phenomenological data analysis was used to examine interviews of 6 high school language teachers (3 Montreal [2 French site; 1 English site]; 1 Edmonton; 2 Brisbane). Stephanie, a doctoral student and teacher, facilitated this study at the Montreal English site. Each lead researcher proceeded with this analysis by adopting a phenomenological research design (Groenewald, 2004). Specifically, we drew on Lauterbach's (2018) study using phenomenological semi-structured interviewing with expert literacy teachers to demonstrate how their lived experiences can be understood through qualitative thematic analysis (Barton et al., 2013). This three-step procedure included: 1) a loose reading of each transcript within each site,

2) a cross-reading by the researchers of each others' sites, and 3) a final close reading to identify the patterns and themes within the data.

In our methodological approach, interview transcripts were analysed qualitatively by identifying key themes in teachers' experiences of using Instagram as a springboard to generate students' art appreciation and poetry writing. Then, we moved to identify transcript statements and quotations that reflected these themes. Finally, an integrated description connects our interpretations with teachers' interview transcripts to illustrate the use of InstaPoetry in the literature class. This illuminating description of phenomena is ultimately driven by the lived experiences of teachers, who are often asked to integrate new media into their teaching practices to stimulate student engagement.

### *French School Setting in Montreal: From Virtual Museum Visits to Poetic Compositions*

In March 2020, in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, most Canadian institutions entered a government-ordered lockdown. School boards resorted to emergency online teaching, and educators were left with little to no resources to adapt to this situation, as they experienced increased workloads (Kaden, 2020), while students were faced with drastic learning losses (Engzell et al., 2021). In Québec, teachers raised numerous concerns regarding the effectiveness of online learning, as a study involving the perspectives of children and youth aged 5-14 pointed to significant losses in student socialisation and learning (Whitley et al., 2021). At the international level, online learning has led to increased inequities and widened achievement gaps (UNESCO, 2021) despite related issues known well before the pandemic (Collin & Brotcorne, 2019; Rowsell et al., 2017).

In 2022, schools in the Greater Montréal area resumed in-person teaching and learning, with mandatory masks imposed at all times except when eating and drinking in designated areas like school cafeterias. Art galleries and museums, such as the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) where the artworks of our research inquiry come from, followed public health guidelines and required limited visitor capacity, mask mandates, and online ticket bookings. Similar to schools, university research ethics board guidelines were concerned with limiting the risk of COVID-19 contagion and, as such, did not agree to allow museum visits as part of research projects. Moreover, health regulations rendered impossible any type of spontaneous access to art galleries. For the InstaPoetry project with a francophone school in the Greater Montreal area, the research team resorted to a virtual artwork viewing using the online MMFA platform. The rationale was that the instability generated by the switch from online to in-person teaching would create local and global microcosms (Ferguson & Lemieux, 2022) familiar to students, and providing them with a virtual museum visit would contribute to reconcile poetry classes with artworks and the digital world, concepts that have proven to be creatively driven (Lemieux, 2020).

In Québec, the language of primary instruction is French as a first language (FFL) in French schools or English as a first language in English schools. One of the Montréal research sites mobilizes six groups of 35 students enrolled in 10<sup>th</sup> grade FFL classes and who are undertaking French language arts classes in the regular Quebec Education Program (MEQ, 2009). As part of this provincial curriculum, Competency 1 (*Reading and appreciating diverse texts*) makes up one of three key competencies assessed at the grade 10 level. Working with the two teachers responsible for these groups, the project was designed around this particular competency. Therefore, in this project, the research team used a collaborative framework for action research in French literature classes (Burdet &

Guillemin, 2013), emphasizing collaboration among the researcher, research assistants, teachers, and students to design a lesson plan based on direct instruction and explicit teaching of a poetry unit featuring diverse Québec authors. The chosen authors reflected the diversity, both ethnic and linguistic, of the city in which students lived (Magnan & Lamarre, 2016). These diverse texts thus echoed students' identities, allowing them to embrace their own ethnocultural and linguistic heritage (Miquelon, 2022, 2023) and develop their reading engagement during French classes (Lemieux, 2020). Miquelon's (2022) scholarship rightfully demonstrates how students' interpretive stances are highly influenced by knowledge-based capacities, linguistic abilities, and cultural representations of symbols that pertain to specific customs, for instance. It became evident, in the InstaPoetry project, that interpretive activities such as in Miquelon's (2022) study were useful to understand how diverse high school students in the Greater Montreal context might benefit from *seeing themselves* in the poems they read as well as those they produced in French classes. In addition, Miquelon's (2023) research has also shown how the Quebec French curriculum would strongly benefit from implementing serious measures to include students' diverse identities and worldviews, as influenced by intersecting languages, cultures, ethnicities, races and genders they encounter and live on the daily. Her framework proves useful in thoroughly understanding the implications of French literature teaching in Quebec in light of equity, diversity, and inclusion strategies put forth not only in institutions, but also by the provincial Ministry of Education. The analyses we present in this article fit in one of the recommendations of her scholarship, which encourages teachers' responsibility in centering students' diversity in French literature classes (Miquelon, 2023).

Art appreciation, in conjunction with literary reading, was a driving force in this study. The main pedagogical activity focused on having students view selected virtual museum artworks as inspiration to write a 100-word poetry composition. These poems, selected randomly by the research team and the teachers, were meant to be anonymously published by the research team on Instagram, under the research project account @insta\_poetik. This participatory approach entailed muting Instagram comments and anonymising students' poems, as a means to protect youth against potential bullying. Considering the measures outlined above, the artworks were shown in class using the classroom projector for collective appreciation, and individual devices were used to write poems. This strategy was concurrent with worldwide efforts to increase access and public engagement in museum spaces (UNESCO, 2020), matching the increased social media presence of Canadian adolescents (Moore et al., 2020). Randomized interviews were conducted with 13 students and two teachers. In the following analyses, we report on thematic excerpts from one teacher's (Linda) interview.

Linda was a new teacher who taught 11th grade French literature and suggested core poetry texts for students to read as part of the InstaPoetry unit. The semi-structured interview focused on direct instruction of visual codes and poetry analysis, with the use of Instagram and the virtual art visit as catalysts to stimulate student engagement. Among the themes emerging from the thematic analysis, Linda reported on the novelty associated with the use of Instagram as an entry point into the poetry unit, and the use of visual art as a springboard to poetry writing. When we asked students to scroll through Instagram accounts that showed poetry, she noted how she discovered new accounts that gave her a sense of student interest in the poetry unit, "Some presented InstaPoet accounts I did not

know of, so I was able to see if some students were initially invested or not.” As a language arts teacher, Linda found that introducing visual art prior to poetry writing was a key element to encourage literary analysis and a way to do it effectively:

All the visual aspects were really interesting. What I liked about the artworks was that it allowed me, as a teacher, to go beyond poetry. It helped with the analysis in general, because right after we covered the novel *L’Orangerie* and I did a foreshadowing exercise with students. We started by analysing the title, and from there we predicted themes. Then with the cover page (and I literally said, ‘We will do like we did together during the visual art exercise. We will observe, analyse the colours: what can we see?’). And they said things I was not expecting. You know, I was asking them to make links with the title, and then they said that the colour orange was present, and they said, ‘Oh, it’s complementary to the colour blue.’ Then they associated this with complementarity, which led to the theme of duality that always resurfaces in that novel... they were able to make anticipations.

Linda then provided examples of how guided instruction and the introduction to artwork interpretation helped students make these connections between art, literature, and literary analysis. Her commentary shows how collaborative work helped in having students interpret images and InstaPoetry profiles:

The artistic and visual aspects, I found them, you know, from a general literary analysis standpoint, it gave them ways to name things. But your position as an interpreter who is used to viewing and reacting to artworks really helped... you know the saying ‘an image is worth a thousand words.’ You know, this rings true. I felt like we were supported in this exploration. If we had told them for the first poem they wrote in groups of two after contemplating the first image, it would have been really difficult to make something out of it if they had not been accompanied. Really.

In conclusion, according to Linda, guided instruction of the poetry unit, which initially started with the exploration of Instapoets and InstaPoetry and then moved on to visual art appreciation and literary analysis of thematically linked poetry pieces, was an effective teaching practice. In there, “more-than” literacy practices, a strong recognition of entanglements between the material, the immaterial, the fleeting and the visual were certainly constitutive of “little sparks” (Lemieux, 2024) that took place in the research site. These moments shed light on the need for both structure and flexibility when using social media and artworks in the literature classroom, with the aim of both engaging students and meeting curricular objectives.

### *English School Setting in Montréal: High Potential for Diversity of Responses and Cross-curricular Integration*

In this section, we (Boyd, a university professor, and Stephanie, an English Language Arts teacher) discuss the goals of the InstaPoetry project with particular attention to the context of the school— an English-language, independent, mixed-gender, non-denominational school in an affluent neighbourhood in Montréal, Québec. The class used for this study was a 10<sup>th</sup> grade group of 19 students.

The three-week poetry unit was preceded by a unit on the history of artistic movements; therefore, it seemed advantageous to build on learning from one unit to another. To that end, the teacher relied on digital reproductions of works from the

collection at the MMFA to initiate poetry writing activities. The reason for using reproductions as opposed to visiting the MMFA and looking at the actual works was a matter of time management; using reproductions was just easier for all concerned.

As the administrative process of approving in-person visitors to Stephanie's school was rather cumbersome, Stephanie invited Boyd to join the class via Zoom, in which, for the first class of the poetry unit, Boyd introduced a poem, *Recess*, by Maria Hummel. The poem is about being an outsider and how one might cope with this challenge, a topic (an exploration of diverse outsider figures) that matched the students' English Language Arts curriculum for this grade. However, despite this connection, the visceral nature of the poem, and its ability to elicit sounds associated with school (playground noise, school bells, adolescents talking, binders closing, lockers doors banging, etc.) while recalling personal memories of loneliness, seemed foreign to the students. Nonetheless, upon debriefing the poem, Boyd was able to generate some discussion that moved towards students' memories and experiences. Students appeared to ease into the unfamiliar process of engaging with poetic works. The class then discussed how a poem is different from an essay, and how the poet's intention encouraged the students to imagine how a school bell might mean different things, depending on who hears it. Boyd then introduced a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting by Benjamin Constant, *Evening on the terrace*, which features a number of male and female figures relaxing at the end of a Mediterranean workday. He encouraged the students to choose one figure and write a monologue from that figure's point of view, keeping in mind a key point that *Recess* was meant to introduce: show, don't tell.

After this initial exercise, in successive classes, Stephanie introduced four images (one per class), and had students respond to them in poetic form. She began this practice of response with Natalya Nesterova's, *Gleam*. As a class, students were encouraged to react to the painting in an automatic, instinctive manner in order to foster what the teacher deemed, "verbal diarrhea." Students started with naming-style observations, describing the central figure of a man and moving sequentially around the piece to highlight the furniture and the objects surrounding him. The teacher then noticed students moving from identification-style engagements, such as, "Is he holding a cookie? It looks like he's holding a cookie to me," to more emotive, passionate responses such as "Everything is out of balance!" This gradual shift suggested a movement from telling to showing.

Independently, students explored three subsequent works of visual art, with Stephanie highlighting the importance of emotions and senses, and with an overall objective: to try to paint an experience with words. Students would often work through their ideas out loud, and on several occasions, expressed significant degrees of honesty and personality in their responses. Students also often appeared surprised at the "success" of their work, which suggested a relatively serendipitous process of poetic reflection and composition, and how a work has not been premeditated, thus also reflecting the learning and discovery of its creator. Focusing briefly on the structures of poetic form, as well as on the practice of evoking thoughts and emotions through expressive language, Stephanie noticed how students appeared to doubt the worth of their efforts within their fluid, haphazard brainstorming. She aimed to model a process of "word jumble" synthesis, encouraging students to become acquainted with their own language sensibilities and methods of meaning making. She also encouraged students to be more accepting of how their poetic processes could lack concrete direction. The ensuing destabilization, however, pushed the students in new directions—to explore and express their personal feelings, thus



allowing for creative and authentic engagement. Stephanie and the students struggled to establish a comfort level with the uncertainty inherent in expressing themselves in an unfamiliar form. Given the relatively brief time allocated to the development of a poetic sensibility, initial results were somewhat predictable, often displaying typical teenage angst or rebellion. Still, they tackled the writing challenges enthusiastically, sometimes displaying appreciation for nuance. For example, in response to Emanuel de Witte's, *Interior with a woman playing the virginal* (about 1660 – 1672), a student captured the mood of quiet attentiveness:

Notes

like a little

stream flowing

over pebbles and

through the house

everyone is listening

As the focus of the InstaPoetry unit relied heavily on visual art to initiate personal engagement, Stephanie's encouragement to move beyond "what we see" to "what we feel" provided an introduction to poetry and an invitation for further exploration, which students initially embraced enthusiastically. The burden of refining their writing, however, was met with far less enthusiasm. For their final submissions, for example, Stephanie noticed that students were simply cleaning up their first drafts. Perhaps this was due to students' lack of willingness to put forth additional work beyond a "fun" experience, or such resistance to editing could indicate a degree of apprehension with regards to discovering what their own sensibilities could reveal. Had the unit been longer, Stephanie might have been able to pursue these challenging questions.

When soliciting participants for the InstaPoetry study, Stephanie initially received seven or eight volunteers. The final number of participants fell to five students. This is a reasonable number, given the class size, and an indicator of the potential for exploration of poetic expression within an English Language Arts class.

The poetry unit offered a brief departure from the regular English class. While students initially appeared familiar with the general idea of poetry, they also noted that previous engagements focused heavily on such details as form and rhyming schemes, with an especially heavy emphasis on syllables and beats. In general, they found such emphasis complicated, confusing, and alienating. While tone and flow played a significant part in our current exploration, the students' experimentation with senses and feelings helped in reconceptualising poetry as a form of expressive play, rather than solely a study of structure and rules.

At the beginning, however, the departure from definitive rules, word lengths and approved formats was somewhat destabilizing. Writings based on interpretive experiences, affective responses and self-reflective practices, were a whole new venture. Some students would struggle with starting their pieces, and others felt frustrated at how their work didn't seem to "sound right." But gradually, students began to gain confidence in playing with language, creating images with words, and becoming acquainted with their emotional-expressive capacities. Engaging with visual artwork provided a springboard for these new experiments with language.

*Navigating the Gallery Site for Adolescent Engagement and Aesthetic Intervention in Edmonton, Canada*

In Edmonton, the InstaPoetry project involved students from Edmonton Metropolitan Regional High School (or EMRHS, an anonymized title), and the context of the Art Gallery of Alberta (AGA). At the time of conducting this research, high schools had returned to in-person teaching/learning and cultural institutions were receiving visitors. That said, similar to other educational and cultural institutions across North America, the 2020-2022 period was one of perpetual flux with respect to typical educational activities. During this time, and despite the highly politicised and polarising discourse surrounding the question of school closures and re-openings in Alberta, there was a recognition across the political spectrum that the challenges brought by COVID-19 were unpredictable and unfixed. This shared recognition was also tempered by a sense of fear and suspicion held by teachers, parents, and students alike, that the socially conservative provincial government (the United Conservative Party, or UCP) tended to give precedence to a neoliberal economic outlook, “Once again, the UCP prioritises politics over the health and safety of students” (Small & Mertz, 2022). In other words, public health was neglected in favour of the economy during this time, thereby hindering the education system in Alberta.

As part of the Black Gold School Division, a title that represents the historical importance of oil and gas production to this area of the country, EMRHS is located in a suburban city outside of Edmonton proper and serves students from a variety of socioeconomic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. There is, however, noticeably less diversity than may be otherwise found in a non-suburban environment. The school’s philosophy stresses such factors as student success and achievement, and the development of a diverse teaching and learning environment for students registered in grades 10-12. The students who participated in this study were all in grade 12 and had developed a close and trusting relationship with the participating English Language Arts and Creative Writing teacher, Ms. Kayla Galton. Having what she describes as “the luck and unluckiness” of having been both a teacher and a student of EMRHS, Ms. Galton nonetheless admits she has:

...a really good understanding of what the community is like. I often describe it as suburban rural, because we’ve got a lot of folks who live out in the country, or even if they don’t, they feel really tied to rural Alberta as a part of their identity. But we’re also so close to Edmonton – to an urban centre – that students could drive there on a spare block and come back. I used to do that as a student. So, it’s this weird mixture of being very suburban, but so close to rural and so close to urban that it kind of stretches [these categories] in an interesting way.

Describing the political and cultural climate of the community in which EMRHS is located, Ms. Galton also emphasised its nature as awkwardly, though perhaps also productively in-between, “It’s mostly conversative, but I think because we’re so close to Edmonton, which is the most liberal place in Alberta ... the students draw on that and drive out to Edmonton to do things that would never happen here.” As Kayla noted, examples of such activities that may appeal to the students recruited for this research, who were mostly queer-identified, include protests and 2SLGBTQIA+ Pride-related activities. The majority of the students in this study had also never been to the AGA, which is located in downtown Edmonton.

Reflecting on her relationship with the students, Ms. Galton noted, “A lot of them wrote me letters on their last day, and a lot of them mentioned that they felt [my classroom] was a space where they could be themselves; that there wasn’t any judgement from me or anyone else.” As an ELA teacher who had initially proposed and personally developed the creative writing program at her school, Ms. Galton also stressed the importance of creating a sense of community in her classroom, while noting that this spirit of collaboration is sometimes compromised by the larger needs of the government-mandated ELA curriculum. Though the ELA senior high curriculum in Alberta (Alberta Learning, 2003) is relatively progressive, flexible, and works deliberately to expand the definition of text to include a variety of oral, print, visual, and multimedia/multimodal forms, it is also admittedly dated, and from the grade 12 teacher’s point of view, constrained by the unavoidable fact of a standardised and provincially mandated diploma exam. In such a context, and comparing her experiences with the ELA curriculum against those of creative writing, Ms. Galton stressed the position of teacher as one between pressures of desire and constraint. “I think,” she said, “I’ve always felt a little strangled by the English curriculum. . . . I feel like my English courses have become increasingly less fun in the quest of getting them prepared for everything they need to be prepared for curriculum-wise.” On the other hand, she describes her creative writing course as “a space where I can really do whatever I want and be focused on the fun . . . and [where] students can do whatever they want to do and not have to meet an exact thing . . . marked by Alberta standards.” Predicated on the needs and desires of the student, rather than the disembodied needs of a broader curricular standard, Ms. Galton articulated her preferred understanding of education, “You write the way you want to write, and I’m going to help you make it the best that it can be, the way *you* want it to be, not the way *I* want it to be.”

Moving into a description of the different activities that student writers were introduced to and involved in as participants in this study, and since four of our five meetings took place in the context of EMRHS, it is important to recognise the affective atmosphere created through the relational dynamics of Ms. Galton’s creative writing classroom, where such conditions as vulnerability, honesty, impulsivity, and hospitality, were valued above curricular expectations that often fail to take the individual student into account. “In the English classroom,” Ms. Galton emphasised, “if things get too off track, I shut it down and bring it back to what we’re supposed to be doing, whereas in creative writing, I might be more willing to be like, *Well, this is a fun thread, let’s see where this goes.*” As a visitor to this classroom, I (David) hoped to participate in the conditions that Ms. Galton had already worked so hard to create.

In the first meeting, which took place at the end of the EMRHS school day, I began by describing the broad purposes of this research project. “In terms of what we’re going to do in our time together,” I told student participants (7 in total), “we will be looking at InstaPoetry, but more importantly, we’ll be thinking about how to look at art, and the practice of responding poetically to visual art of all kinds.” This first meeting involved a number of interrelated activities:

- 1) I introduced participants to a critical practice of guided looking, using artistic examples from René Magritte, Nick Drnaso (a contemporary comics artist), and Edvard Munch. Beginning with a series of simple interpretive questions (*What do you see? What do you feel? Does this artwork have any personal significance for you? Are you especially drawn to any particular details?*), we then

discussed the concept of literal reading (making an inventory of an artwork's literal qualities, including compositional devices and relations), and the difference between surface and metaphorical meaning.

- 2) We then discussed the practice of poetic response, or ekphrastic poetry, and to encourage such writing, I asked participants to first engage closely with a large sculpture that I'd brought in (Figure 1). This sculpture and wooden base (Figure 2) is twenty inches high, and was made sometime in the mid to late 1970s by George Lewkowich (1913-1986) (David's grandfather), a self-taught artist from Winnipeg's North End, who otherwise worked as a carpenter, custom designing and building fine furniture. Merging his knowledge of carpentry and art, George's sculptures (such as this one, unnamed) were made from hardwood – laminated as necessary, carved, sanded and spray lacquered.

I encouraged the students to approach the sculpture, touch it, and move around it. I then asked them to write uninterruptedly for seven minutes, considering such questions as: *What is the history of this sculpture? When was it made? How did it come to be? What is its purpose? Who is its creator? What does it mean? What would you title this sculpture?*

- 3) I then asked these writers to think about how they would transform their initial responses into something resembling poetry, noting: "You do not need to remain explicitly faithful to your original object of inquiry. The object has done something to prompt your thinking, and in this way, the object is still there, alive in your poem."
- 4) For our next meeting, I asked participants to come prepared with a poetic response to a piece of artwork by Marion Fayolle (Boothby, 2017).



Figure 1. Adolescents engaging with Lewkowich's sculpture



Figure 2. Sculptural work by George Lewkowich (David's grandfather)

In our second meeting, we began with a discussion about the aesthetic and thematic qualities of InstaPoetry, looking at examples of such work by Rupi Kaur, Amanda Lovelace, and Lang Leav. I then asked participants to share their poetic responses to Fayolle's drawing, subsequently asking what they might do if they were to change their poems into Instapoems. As another mode of response, we then moved into a discussion of collage, and I described this artistic practice in three steps: selection (of materials); deconstruction (cutting, tearing, etc.); and connection/recombination. After sharing an example that I had created in response to a poem by Ocean Vuong, I asked participants to give their poetic response to another person, who would use this response to craft a collage. Participants spent the rest of this meeting choosing materials from a number of magazines I had brought in.

Our third meeting began with participants sharing their collages while we, as a group, looked closely at a particular collage, I asked the writer of the corresponding poem to read their piece out loud. The collage artist was then invited to discuss their process of creation and recombination, while the poet was asked where in the collage they recognised their poem, and how they felt about how the artist had interpreted their words.

Our fourth meeting took place at the AGA, where participants spent time considering and responding to artwork by Haitian-Canadian artist Manuel Mathieu, and Caribbean-Canadian artist Curtis Talwst Santiago. In this gallery visit, my primary question was: *How might students use the aesthetic implications of InstaPoetry to engage with art in gallery spaces?* I handed each participant an empty Moleskine notebook, and as they toured the gallery space – marking “a shift away from studies of languages and literacies in place to studies of language and literacies in motion” (Nordquist, 2017, p. 15). I asked them to write as many short poems as they could, and while doing so, to try to access and articulate their impulsive, immediate, and embodied responses. After about an

hour, I had a short discussion with participants about their gallery viewing and writing experiences, after which each participant took us, as a group, to a piece of artwork that they felt especially connected to. Standing in front of this artwork, they then read their poem, and shared with us any considerations they made while crafting their response. After this meeting, I left participants with a notebook, and asked them to spend an hour or so with their social media feed while also focusing on “the multiplicity of ways in which the material and immaterial are caught up with one another” (Burnett et al., 2014, p. 101). This process allowed them to respond poetically and impulsively to what they saw.

In our final meeting, back at EMRHS, participants shared their social media poetry, and considered how this experience of poetic response differed from that at the AGA. I then posed four final questions to the group as a whole: *What have you learned in this project? Has your understanding of poetry, InstaPoetry, and visual art changed over the course of this project, and if so, how? What is poetry? What is art?*

Speaking to Ms. Galton after the final research meeting, she noted the difference that this project may have made in the lives of student participants, remarking that what this research offered students was a new way of looking at art and the world, and a recognition that anything at all (including social media) could be a source of inspiration and aesthetic intervention. “It got them thinking,” she expressed, “about the way they engage with anything they look at ... I feel like [they] are going to carry that with them; this idea of looking at something and letting it inspire them.” Regarding this research project’s larger consideration of InstaPoetry, this notion that anything at all could be a source of inspiration for creative work, including poetry, implies that the relationship between modes of artistic appreciation in gallery spaces, and in spaces perhaps not necessarily associated with art as an institutional category, is potentially more fluid and interconnected than we might otherwise imagine it to be. As such, an important finding of this research involves a recognition and celebration of the aesthetic possibilities of online culture, and that, often, adolescents are deeply receptive to the idea that poetry can be a quality of everyday life, no matter how seemingly banal, no matter how insignificant.

#### *Brisbane, Australia: Art Gallery Visits and the InstaPoetry Project Impact of COVID-19*

Since the beginning of 2020, COVID-19 has impacted many schools and educators worldwide, including in the Australian context. As such, the pandemic has been experienced differently from state to state. Queenslanders for example, were relatively untouched by hefty restrictions aside from a single serious nation-wide lockdown of six weeks. After this, the state’s Premier Anastasia Palaszczuk, strongly protected Queensland by closing its borders to Australians from southern states where COVID-19 cases, and subsequent deaths, were increasing at a daily rate. As such, Queensland schools and cultural institutions such as art galleries and museums remained largely open but did experience significant declines in attendance (Flew & Kirkwood, 2021). With these restrictions, schools and teachers were discouraged to attend external exhibitions but rather share curatorial designs online with their students (Hoffman, 2020). The Queensland Gallery of Modern Art for example, had a number of substantial lockdowns, but upon re-opening to the public, encouraged people to register their intent to visit to comply with Queensland Government COVID-19 requirements, including all visitors to wear masks and to be vaccinated as per the COVID-19 rules.

Sunny Heights is a private school located in Brisbane. The geographical location in which the school is situated is known for its cultural diversity and richness. For example, in Australia, Indigenous or First Nations refers to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. With over 1000 students from preparatory to senior year, the school has a slightly below average Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value with around 45% of parents/carers in the bottom quartile and only 4% in the top quartile of average income earners. Around 50% of the students are from a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) and approximately 6% of the student population are First Nations (Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander) students. The leaders and teachers at the school make tremendous efforts to acknowledge and embrace students' diversity. As such, a Community Hub has been established at the school for families and community members. The Hub offers English conversational classes for adults and a child-minding facility. At the time of the study, unfortunately, the local art gallery was closed for refurbishment, so the students explored artwork online to inspire their poetic practice.

All classes in Sunny Heights School follow a national curriculum in learning and teaching (ACARA, n.d.). In the Australian Curriculum, English has three strands that are studied: language, literature, and literacy. The language strand involves students learning about the English language and, in particular, Australian Standard English. The literature strand is concerned with understanding, analysing, and creating literary texts that support students in expanding their repertoire of English usage. In addition to the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACE) a general capability of literacy is required to be embedded across all teaching areas. *The Literacy: General Capability* (ACARA, n.d.) features knowledge about grammar, words, texts, and images (though all modes are implied). Highly influenced by the work of Michael Halliday, the curriculum in Australia has as its basis a functional grammar approach whereby students learn how language is shaped to influence readers (Halliday, 1973). They also learn that as readers, we critically analyse texts to construct meaning (Derewianka, 2012).

In their senior years of schooling, where this project is centred, students have the option of studying standard English, English as an additional language, essential English (for students not bound for university studies), and/or do a major in literature. The standard English program “focuses on developing students’ analytical, creative and critical thinking and communication skills in all language modes. It encourages students to engage with texts from their contemporary world, with texts from the past and with texts from Australian and other cultures” (ACARA, n.d.). Subsequently, students have the opportunity to study poetry. The *Australian Curriculum: Senior English* includes four units involving various content descriptions. Related to this project are the following:

Table 1

*Content descriptions from the Australian Curriculum: Senior English* (ACARA, n.d.)

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● the use of literary techniques, for example, poetic, dramatic and narrative structure and devices</li> <li>● the use of a combination of sound and visual devices in literary texts, for example, soundtracks, cinematography, iconography</li> <li>● experimenting with different modes, mediums and forms</li> </ul> |
|---|

- integrating real and imagined experiences by selecting and adapting particular aspects of texts to create new texts
- using analysis of literary texts to inform imaginative response
- transforming texts studied in one medium or genre to another for different audiences and purposes and
- reflecting on the significance and effects of variations to texts.

Concurrent with all other research sites, the goal was to prompt participants to engage in poetic writing in response to artworks. Participants included early adolescent students across Year 6 as older students were unavailable to participate due to heavy assessment periods. Ms. Ellis, the students’ teacher, described her students as keen and enthusiastic and whose strength was social awareness. I (Georgina) worked with Ms. Ellis because she provided consent to participate in the study, and there was an already established relationship between her and I through previous research projects. When asked if engaging with art might improve the students’ literacy development, Ms. Ellis stated:

Yeah, most definitely. I think we are trying really hard to get that multimodal approach...their last assessment piece is an artwork, that speaks nostalgically to who they were as a reader and what's shaped them. And you can just see how empowered they feel by that, and how emotive it is. So we are trying to do that. And I think the other thing that we are doing, because from a teaching perspective, we look at art and go, do you know what? Visual art in particular is only a very small part of the curriculum, and we reflect and thought, we actually probably do too much. But then personally as a teacher, I think that what you get from the students outweighs that curriculum element...I think the importance is there.

We can see that even though Ms. Ellis feels as though visual art is a “small part of the curriculum,” students are still empowered by the arts. She also believed that engagement with art improved the students’ general literacy skills, including composing multimodal texts.

With regard to the process used to support the students to create InstaPoetry, the teacher discussed with them the importance of knowing about aesthetic literacies (Barton, 2023) when creating multimodal texts such as InstaPoetry. They learned about the metalanguage related to each mode of meaning to gain a deeper knowledge of how to use them effectively (Barton, 2019). Next, we worked with the students in the classroom and shared a range of artworks related to the theme of water (e.g., Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies*, J.M.W. Turner’s *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*, Brett Whiteley’s *Balcony 2*, JeMs. Ellis Mills Pwerle’s *Yam Dreaming*, and *Transcending Nature* - teamLab’s *Universe of Water Particles*, 2013). These artworks, among others, were selected and prefaced because our bodies are made up of more than 60% water, so it is an important element of our well-being. When the students were shown each artwork, they were asked to answer questions in a visual art diary. The questions were based on an art criticism model (Barton, 2023) and are displayed in Table 2 below.

Table 2  
*Prompt Questions for Engaging with the Artwork*



<b>Prompt questions</b>	<b>Further detail</b>
Description – What do you see?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Make a list of anything you see in the work</li> <li>- Study all of the details</li> </ul>
Analysis – How is the work organised?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pay further attention to the specific elements of art and principles of design</li> <li>- List all the ways the artist/s has used these separately but also together</li> </ul>
Interpretation – What is the artist’s intent? What is the artwork saying to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Begin to explain the meaning of the work</li> <li>- List what emotion/s the artist is trying to evoke</li> <li>- Interpretations will involve your own experience of the world</li> </ul>
Judgement – Is the work effective?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Here, as an art critic, you make a judgement as to whether the artwork has merit</li> <li>- Provide an opinion based on the previous three steps</li> <li>- Refer to various aesthetic theories when developing your ideas</li> </ul>

Students were encouraged to use relevant vocabulary or metalanguage related to such analyses as well as to their everyday social and cultural lives (Barton, 2019).

Once the students engaged with the artworks, they explored a number of InstaPoets’ work including Rupi Kaur, Atticus, Lang Leav, and Cleo Wade. They worked in small groups to discuss different poems and the images associated with them. Students were recorded during these discussions. Students then created their own InstaPoems using water as a theme. After the lesson, the teacher and learning leader in the school were interviewed about their students’ participation. Ms. Ellis noted a number of important considerations for their future practice related to the arts and literacy:

I did not realise how powerful actually viewing and discussing artworks could be for the students. They showed so much maturity in talking about their feelings and how they were experiencing stress at this time of year...I think the water theme really showed them that there are many struggles you will face in life, and we should savour the small moments of stillness and reflection.

Ms. Ellis also noticed that some of their current pedagogical practices may be stifling students’ creativity:

We have so much curriculum to cover in such a small amount of time I feel like I need to control the learning all the time. This project has shown me how I should trust the students more and give them more time to think. They clearly enjoyed the process of having freedom and flexibility to choose how to do their own work. They definitely showed they are ready for this.

Many have noted the impact that assessment-driven teaching has on learning in the classroom (Kruger et al., 2018; Stecher et al., 2004). Indeed, high-stakes testing in literacy has often been blamed for such teacher-directed approaches (Cormack & Comber, 2013). The InstaPoetry project, while introducing some parameters, was largely based on the

students' needs, interest areas, and suggestions. The water theme rose out of their sharing of feeling tired and the pressure of having to do well in their assessment.

What became apparent with the students is that they were able to draw on the subject matter, but also the metaphor in each image to reflect on their own lives. Interestingly, the students found the lessons using art to inspire poetry, as something 'free of the stress of work' despite these lessons being based on curriculum and effective learning. One student for example said that, "This activity was freeing from all the work we do in class. That little bit of fun and free from the stress of work" (Student 1).

Further, the students commented on the sense of freedom they had in being able to decide what they wanted to do or how they wanted to express themselves rather than being told how to do this. "I liked how you could just let what was on your mind and just draw into this. Often if we ever do art class, there's always a certain thing you have to draw. It makes me think about art in so many different ways. You can do poetry, or Insta art, or you can design dresses or something like that. There's endless possibilities of what makes art" (Student 2). Student 3 added, "I guess here in this environment it was fine to just make a mistake and knowing that we can make mistakes. Sometimes in the classroom it's a bit frustrating or scary when you can't. In here it's like oh, you can learn how you do your aesthetics and how you think of things without having the boundaries, as people are set. Feeling free to make mistakes whenever just naturally comes and happens" (Student 3).

The students also valued the artform of Instapoetry as they indicated how it enabled them to express their thoughts and feelings in a way that was authentic. The students did confirm some of them used social media, but they had not heard about Instapoetry before so learning about certain Instapoets was inspiring for them. "The Insta art is a good way of combining thoughts, feelings and then what you see into one" (Student 4).

When I shared these comments with Ms. Ellis she reflected on these and noted that the comments were "pretty profound." She noticed that the students engaged positively with the art even though a lot of their discussion was on the stress they were feeling in their daily lives. She also noted the importance of making mistakes when you learn and felt that many of the expectations on teachers require them to set exactly what they want to see from their students in assessment. She did not realise that the students felt they could not make mistakes along the way:

You do a bit of self reflection, and the comment about making mistakes resonates a little bit because I'm very much big on, you make mistakes to learn, because how do you know you are doing it right if you don't make a mistake and then work through that process. Yeah. The other thing is, I think one of them said that they could make dresses and things like that. So, I feel like that child's made connections to realise that art comes in many forms.

### *Summary*

From the perspective of the teachers at the different research sites, we can see that the adolescents enjoyed learning about Instapoetry and how specific artworks can influence the creation of poems to be published on Instagram. The participants found the approach to be new and innovative, allowing them to make individual choices around both the art and literary development. An important finding from all sites was that despite lockdowns due to COVID-19 and hence limited access to art museums and galleries, students and teachers could still engage in meaningful learning involving quality artworks. Online

access was considered thoughtfully by several galleries to ensure all members of the public could still enjoy art while being at home. Further, the online engagement meant that students and teachers were safe and it allowed more freedom in choices related to selected artworks.

Students felt it empowering to be able to make their own choices about which art to engage with but also how they might go about creating response poetry. Known as pedagogic voice, it became apparent how important it was to provide students the opportunity to make their own decisions about their learning and engagement. While a focus on student voice might seem idealistic, we argue that our process enabled students to express agency in making decisions about their learning and guiding how the process might unfold.

Enhancing pedagogic voice also allowed students to have deep discussions, share their ideas as well as engage authentically with art with the aim of improving literacy practices. The intersection between literacy and the arts therefore showed that accessibility for all students as well as improvements in their engagement with poetic artforms was increased. The use of the social media platform, Instagram, also allowed students to see an essential purpose to the work they were doing as they were following explicit instruction in the classroom and beyond while engaging with this specific platform (Lemieux et al., 2022). Working at the intersection of literacies and the arts (Barton, 2019; Lemieux, 2020) and inviting social media use for that purpose (Lemieux et al., 2022) was insightful in that regard.

Therefore, in answering our research question, “How might teachers engage adolescents in poetic writing following a unit that involves InstaPoetry, museum-based artwork viewing, literary analysis, and social media use?” we found that students were able to draw on their implicit knowledge of aesthetics to compose effective Instapoems inspired by quality art through the online gallery spaces. The idea behind sharing these was also important as students were able to see other responses to compare their own work to. Also, implications for teacher practice show that access to quality arts online can be a powerful tool in the classroom, students do not necessarily have to attend art museums in person to learn about art and literature. Further, students were engaged due to the fact that Instagram (a platform they were familiar with) was used as a way of sharing their work. This enabled a stronger link between their out-of-school literacy practices with in-school ones.

### *Conclusion*

This article has laid the ground for investigating adolescents’ engagement with literary and visual artworks during the COVID-19 pandemic through the virtual or in-person discovery and visits of museums. This engagement is first prompted by adolescents’ daily use and exploration of Instagram. This initial hook and navigation with teachers in the English language classroom entices students to discover how literature and art can be found on Instagram through the InstaPoetry movement. In each of the research sites, we provided examples and guidelines to help teachers and researchers engage in museum-oriented language arts activities. It is our hope that these student-centered activities will be generative for adolescents and their teachers inside and outside the language arts classroom. Further avenues for research include teachers’ feedback on evaluations based on students’ poetry productions.

Self-expression through platforms such as Instagram can be powerful for adolescent students from vulnerable backgrounds. It is important, though, that the skills to respond to art, such as well-developed meta-language, creative processes, and critical thinking, are taught explicitly to students. Given the prevalence in young people's lives, we hope that Instagram can provide a positive platform for the students involved in this study to share their personal and cultural lives.

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#### *Author Biographies*

**Amélie Lemieux**, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at the University of Montreal's Faculty of Education, in the Department of Teaching and Learning. Her research interests include: reading research, literature teaching, and multimodality, all informed by critical social justice epistemologies and posthumanist perspectives. Her work has been published in such journals as *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Literacy*, *Professional Development in Education*, *Discourse*, *Language Arts*, and *British Journal of Educational Technology*.

**Georgina Barton** is a Professor in the School of Education at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. At USQ, she is the discipline lead for literacy and pedagogy and has experience as an Acting Head of School and Deputy Head of School as well as Associate Head - Research and Program Director in education. She has taught English, literacy, and arts education courses in both primary and secondary pre-service teacher programs. Research areas include literacies, modalities, arts education and international education. She has utilised a number of research methodologies and methods including

ethnography, arts-based research methods, case study and narrative. She has over 150 publications including 14 books, 40 book chapters, 70 peer-reviewed journal articles, and a number of reports impacting policy development.

**David Lewkowich** is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, Canada. His research interests include teacher education and identity, adolescence, popular culture, cultural studies, young adult literature, psychoanalytic theory, noise-making, comics and graphic novels, and the emotional, affective lives of education.

**Boyd White** (Ph. D. Concordia University), Associate Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education, Faculty of Education, McGill University (retired as of Aug 31, 2023). Teaching and research interests are in the areas of philosophy and art education, particularly on the topic of aesthetic engagement, both within and beyond formal education. While his particular focus continues to be on the visual arts, Dr. White has broadened the scope of his research into the other arts areas as well, such as in fiction and poetry and their potential to inform and respond to visual culture. Dr. White is the author of numerous journal articles, has chapters in various texts, and has authored, co-authored or co-edited six books, including *Mapping Reactions for Holistic Learning: An Introductory Guide to Aesthetigrams*. Peter Lang. Co-author: Amélie Lemieux (2017).

**Stephanie Ho**, PhD, is a practicing English Language Arts teacher at a Montreal independent school. She completed a Bachelor of Arts with a specialization in English Literature from The University of British Columbia, and a Master of Arts in Teaching and Learning with a focus on ELA education from McGill University. Her research interests include qualitative research, arts-based pedagogies, critical pedagogies, and literature studies.