Thought Question: How can choice, mobility, creative opportunities, and social connections increase student engagement in art?

Research Article: *Understanding the (Im)Mobilities of Engaging At-Risk Youth*

Subject Area: Student Engagement

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Summary
Researchers in Canada explored using mobile media combined with art to investigate the reengagement of at-risk students with their education. Students included in the study were at risk of dropping out of high school as well as students who already had dropped out. Researchers provided each student with an iPod touch device and mobile wireless internet hotspots. The researchers hypothesized that mobile media would augment student engagement and agency through the opportunity to learn anytime and anywhere. Results showed that mobility, choice of time and space to select images to record, and the opportunity to choose socializing with peers to review collected images were beneficial for learner engagement. Student participants shared that choice, movement, learning outside, and talking with peers and teachers was different than sitting at a table in school. The project demonstrated new ways of engaging at-risk students that art educators could consider.

Enjoy the article! **And remember**... when students experience choice, mobility, and opportunities to socialize with peers around their creative learning projects, they are likely to feel more engaged with learning.

Keywords: Student engagement, choice, learner mobility, mobile media, the arts, at-risk students

"When considering the educational engagement of at-risk youth, we must consider movement: how it is actualized, regulated, constrained, and enabled."

Understanding the (Im)mobilities of Engaging At-Risk Youth
Through Art and Mobile Media

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Teens in high school who have or are at-risk of dropping out of school confront a number of educational challenges. One of these challenges is the restricted mobility students face in school. Mobile media offers the potential to engage with art curricula inside or outside of the classroom. It also offers new ways of thinking about the role of mobility in learning and improving students' sense of agency. In this study, we present our research with at-risk youth, who typically associated traditional schooling with a low sense of personal agency and spatial constraints. To judge by their responses (visual and verbal) to our mobile media visual art curriculum, the physical mobility afforded by mobile technology heightened their sense of agency and opened them to the possibility that learning might be a positive experience, and that they might want to be at school.

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There are many young people who drop out because they need to do this and that, by obligation, but when you have a choice in life, it feels good. (Student participant mina0593)

Mina0593 reflected on her experience using mobile media to make images with a cohort of her peers. She participated in our curricular research project, entitled MonCoin, which in French means "my corner." Many of her peers in the project had similar feelings about the importance of choice—especially as it relates to schooling. mina0593's comment was in response to a question about her engagement with school and her feelings about the MonCoin project. She identified the positive effect of having and making choices in school. When we interviewed our participants, they observed that in their experience, schools sought to monitor and control their movement. As a result, our participants felt completely disengaged with their education. The initial purpose of the MonCoin curriculum and research was to investigate the efficacy of the visual arts, civic engagement, and mobile media to re-engage at-risk youth with their education. In response to the low school attendance rate of the students we worked with, we hypothesized that mobile media had the potential to engage students with learning anytime and anywhere, and that ubiquitious and asynchronous communication would augment student engagement because they would not have to be physically present at school.

The use of mobile media prompts questions regarding when and where individuals learn (Pachler, Bachmair, & Cook, 2010). The use of these media also elicit more subtle understandings of mobility in terms of the learner's sense of agency. In the cases presented in this article, we illustrate how mobile media provided a means by which students could communicate to organize events and activities on their own. New experiences of mobility related to learning shifted participants' attitudes toward school. In this article, and through our ongoing research project—MonCoin—we examine the positive impact of student initiated meetings and the role of field trips on students' sense of agency. Ultimately, the purpose of this article is to present the implications of mobility in the context of visual art curricula and its relationship to the engagement of at-risk youth with their education.

Engaging At-Risk Youth

Our research project was conducted with dropout youth who were returning to an Adult Education Center (AEC) designated to help them complete their secondary degree in Quebec. In the province, there have been long-standing concerns about the persistent number of dropouts at the secondary school level. In the province of Quebec, only 63.8% of students finish secondary school within 5 years (Ministère de l'éducation, du loisir et du sport du Québec, 2014). This results in a significant portion of the young adult population that is ill equipped to contend with real world needs.

We define "at-risk" students as those who are dealing with unstable and uncertain social, familial, and educational situations (Tourrilhes, 2008). The result of such difficulties is that these students do not progress well through secondary school or they simply do not finish. Many of these students face unique challenges to completing their secondary education (Bondu, 1998) and require varied approaches to better meet their needs (Archambault, 2006). Educational researcher Julie Marcotte's

(2012) study of at-risk youth in Quebec indicated that those young adults who return to the AECs face challenges related to three issues: the construction of identity, developing a sense of agency, and feeling empowered. Further, the degree to which a student feels engaged with their teachers and school is a good predictor of timely graduation (Archambault, 2006; Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Pariser, 2011).

Our definition of engagement is multidimensional (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). These dimensions include students' behaviors, affect, and learning. Engagement is associated with an increase in participation in school activities, positive attitudes toward school, and the students' own learning. Caring teachers, engaged peers, and a curriculum that draws from students' ideas and experiences foster engagement. Further, educational researcher Chouinard and colleagues (2005) found that when youth participate in these engaged kinds of learning environments, they feel competent and in control. These factors have to be a part of any attempt at re-engaging these youths with their education. Additionally, engagement with the arts has been shown to be a powerful means of addressing all three issues among teens and young adults (Catterall, Dumais, & Hampden-Thompson, 2012; Heath and Soep 1998). Engagement with the arts permits at-risk youth to address the three issues identified by Marcotte (2012) as key to the psychological health of the young adults: identity, agency, and empowerment.

Mobile Media and Learning

The use of mobile computing devices by youth in North America is almost ubiquitous regardless of demographic category. As of 2012, one in four teens and young adults owned a smartphone (Lenhart, 2012). Further, access to the Internet by marginalized youth is primarily through mobile computing devices (cellular and smart phones, tablets, or laptops) rather than computers in the home or school

(Watkins, 2009). The primary activity of young people using mobile phones besides texting (sending short messages) is the taking and sharing of photographs through their phones (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). It is at the intersection of these current trends that MonCoin operates: to engage at-risk youth with their education through mobile media and artmaking.

mLearning

The term mLearning, or mobile learning, refers to the ubiquity of mobile computing devices. Educational researchers Gunther Kress and Norbert Pachler (2007) stressed that these techno-centric terms are often construed only in terms of the mechanics of a specific technology with little regard for the affordances and shifts that these new forms of communication entail. Elaborating, Pachler and colleagues (2010) qualified the "m" in mobile learning as an appropriate prefix because it "qualifies aspects of 'learning' rather than representing a new 'kind' of learning" (p. 5). They added that mobile learning is not simply the delivery of content through a smartphone or tablet, but rather "the processes of coming to know and being able to operate successfully in, and across, new and ever changing contexts and learning spaces" (p. 6).

Advocates of mobile learning point to the current sociocultural practices of youth who interact through mobile media as a rationale that education should adapt to these practices of youth. Educational technology researchers Mike Sharples, Josie Taylor, and Giasemi Vavoula (2007), identified the dimensions of mobile learning as: physical space, technology, conceptual space, social space, and learning over time (p. 3). What connects these dimensions is an approach to learning that is dependent on knowing through social interactions across time and space amplified by mobile media (Sharples et al., 2007).

(Im)mobilities

Building on existing definitions of mobile learning, our research has supplemented them

with concepts from the field of mobility studies. Mobility studies is more than the study of the use of mobile phones, it is interdisciplinary and attends to the mobilities and immobilities of people and material through time and space (Cresswell, 2010). Specifically, we have referred to the implications of physical movement and stillness as a frame of reference within which to consider mobile learning with at-risk youth. Here we have adapted geographer Peter Adey's (2006) relational politics of (im)mobilities to movement in schools. Adey argued that everything is essentially mobile, from buildings to living breathing organisms. Using Henri Bergson's (1911/2005) theorization of the fluidity of perception, Adey (2010) contended that stability is a product of human perception that creates a dialectic between mobility and immobility.

Further, Adey (2006) used an airport as an example of this dynamic relationship. He compared the movement permitted to the "high-risk" passenger with that of the "elite status" or low-risk passenger moving through the airport. Elite flyers were defined as those who can use expedited security lanes, exclusive lounge access, and priority boarding of the plane. Elite status and mobility has been more often afforded to wealthy travelers. High-risk passengers were defined as less affluent travelers who are subjected to more thorough and longer security checks, general waiting areas, and are often the last to board the plane. Referring to the elite status traveler, Adey stated that "their improved mobility is not only visually contingent upon the slower movements of economy passengers, but it is asymmetrically related to it" (p. 89). In other words, the free flow of the mobile elite means that airport security has more time to constrain high-risk passengers. Adey's relational mobility vignette of the airport states that power and control govern the flows of people and material.

We have used Adey's relational politics of im/mobility to understand schools, specifically when we are working with "at-risk" students. If we substitute "elite-flyer" with "elite" students and "high-risk" flyer with "at-risk" student, we begin to see similar controls and affordances offered to privileged and at-risk students. For example, elite students found in private day and boarding schools have often been afforded abundant autonomy in their movement throughout the school (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Khan, 2012). Marcotte's (2012) research found that at-risk youth in school struggle with a reduced sense of agency as the result of the limits imposed by the school on their mobility in physical movement and ideation.

In many of our interviews, the MonCoin participants made the link between their engagement with school and their mobility. They explained that one of the factors that contributed to their dropping out was how they were segregated from the rest of the school and how they were placed in special classrooms and subjected to strict control of their movement via punishments like detention. In most of their schooling experiences, restricted mobility only amplified their alienation from school. In what follows, we illustrate how using mobile media fostered increased student mobility, which stood in contrast to the students' accounts of their past experiences in school.

MonCoin

MonCoin is a curricular research project that investigates the efficacy of mobile media and the visual arts as a way to engage at-risk youth with their education. It consists of a curriculum that uses the visual arts, primarily digital photography, in a social media network accessed through mobile devices. By way of illustration, we present overviews of two student-initiated events: after school meetings and field trips. These descriptions, coupled with our analysis of interview data from the students, give insight into the ways in which these activities and the use of mobile media contributed to students' growing sense of agency.

Design-based research (DBR) provides the methodological framework for the MonCoin project (Barab & Squire, 2004; Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Squire, & Newell, 2004; Design-Based Research Collective, 2003; Wang & Hannafin, 2005). DBR is an interventionist qualitative methodology that enables researchers to test curricular, technological, and pedagogical designs and develop theories of learning related practice (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). DBR offers the opportunity to empirically research theoretical questions of learning while also developing educational designs. Most research in the area of school engagement uses surveys and test scores to measure student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Fredricks and her colleagues call for more thick descriptions of context and student learning to better understand the impact of interventions and engagement. For this reason, our data are drawn from extensive and repeated interviews of students, teachers, and staff. Our interviewers asked open ended questions (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) related to mobility, identity, empowerment, and agency. Interviews were conducted in French, transcribed, and then translated to English.

Our research objective for MonCoin was to investigate the efficacy of using mobile media to explore questions of civic life and engagement with the purpose of increasing the educational engagement of at-risk youth. The data set we draw from in this article reflects two 6-week phases in an academic year. We worked primarily in between the day and evening sessions at the Centre des 16-18 ans located outside of Montreal, Quebec. The educational priority of the Centre des 16-18 ans is to establish a positive learning environment for youth in order to assist them with their schooling and to offer socioprofessional guidance.

In total, 32 students participated in our study over the two research phases; 17 for the first phase in the fall and 15 in the second phase the following spring. The participants were recruited through the visual arts program within the Centre des 16-18. Overall, the participants had either dropped out of high school or were at-risk of dropping out. Their purpose at the Centre was to complete their high school diploma requirements and return to the work force or apply to a technical school or college. Because our participants were recruited through the Centre's visual arts program, most were amenable to image making and digital technology.

Curricular Missions of MonCoin

We created a quasi private Instagram group. In order to protect our participant's identities, each had a unique and masked profile. Instagram is a photography mobile application designed for the production and sharing of images with other Instagram users. In essence, it is a social media platform that is image driven. Given the purchase of Instagram by Facebook and its problematic change in the Terms of Service regarding the ownership and use of images on the platform, we have ceased using Instagram in our current research.[1]

For many students, this was their first time using Instagram. To conform to University Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC) requirements, participants were required to create a pseudonym/Instagram user profile name that was not linked to their physical identities. Some of the participants had their own Smartphones, but for most, we provided iPod Touch devices to use for the duration of the project. We also provided a mobile wireless Internet hotspot for the participants to upload images and participate when near the art classroom at the Centre. Through the mobile app, Martin Lalonde, another instructor for the project, posted weekly missions. Each mission was posted as an image with overlaid text accompanied by a longer textual description in the comments section (Figure 1). Figure 1 shows one of the teacher/researcher's first posts during the second phase of the MonCoin study. The teacher's mission suggests that the students should do a visual documentation of the places where

Figure 1. *Mission Où je me tiens*, by Martin Lalonde. Screen shot with the instructions and the hashtags in phase two.

they hang out. This image was taken at the subway station that serves the neighborhood. For the students who live in the area this is an important geographical point in the city. On the public sign we can read what is the English equivalent of "Assembly Point." In both phases, such posts were the primary means of communication method between the instructor and participants.

The missions were designed as constraints that enable (Castro, 2007); these are questions, prompts, or tasks that ask students to reconsider habitual ways of knowing and perceiving. The missions in MonCoin asked participants to critically examine their civic environments through image making. Participants were asked to make images on specific themes and post them to the Instagram group. In phase one, the missions were scaffolded to invite participants to move from examinations of personal space to civic space culminating in a critical look at their neighborhoods. The first mission

suggested themes such as, "Where is home?" and "Who makes you feel at home?" These prompts were then followed by others that suggested approaches to the students' neighborhood, such as "in my street, my school, my favorite park, my neighbors." In phase two, the missions focused more on mobility through civic spaces culminating in a peer-driven exchange of missions and independent inquiry. The phase two adaptations were based on our analysis of participation rates and participant feedback from phase one. Thus, we placed an emphasis on a more playful, more open, and less literal approach to the task of developing themes and goals for doing photographic investigations of their neighborhoods. Typical missions were: (a) "where I have fun"; (b) "my routes through the neighborhood"; (c) "strange and unique"; or (d) "my favorite place." These more open-ended missions came before students began to explore their self-generated mission statements.

Movement, Meeting, Synchronous, and Asynchronous Exploration

We expected that participants would positively respond to using mobile devices to make and post images in a closed online group. One of the core questions when considering using mobile media in visual arts curricula for us was "What does this technology disrupt in our conventional ways of thinking about artmaking?" Our curriculum was designed to take advantage of the mobility and movement that mobile media permit. As a networked tool, we designed social interaction into the curricular missions that were primarily focused on responding and posting to each other's images.

Our initial hypothesis was that mobile media would provide students the opportunity to engage with the MonCoin curriculum at anytime and anywhere outside of school. We expanded our understanding of mobility in relationship to student agency when we found that the more students felt in control of their physical movement and their learning activities, the more engaged they felt with the curriculum and school.

Les Rencontres (Meetings)

During phase one, there were weekly after school meetings. These meetings were an opportunity for Lalonde and a research assistant to meet with participants to discuss the project, address any concerns, and to conduct interviews. After phase one and an analysis of the interview data, it was determined that the participants preferred more meetings after school. For phase two, the curriculum design included twice weekly meetings of shorter duration that were advertised through the app. Using tagging, a system of associating users with an image, we tagged each participant so that they would be alerted of meetings through the app (Figure 2). Figure 2 shows two different types of posts that serve to invite the group to get together. The left hand image illustrates the instructor/researcher's post, which shows a view of the courtyard from the classroom where meetings were held regularly. The photograph is taken at the point where the meeting is about to start. Participants may recognize some members of their group in this exterior shot. The right hand image shows a detail of the classroom also at

Figure 2. After school meeting announcements were posted to the group's mobile network.

the point where the meeting is about to start. The photo shows the snacks that are customarily shared during the meeting. When asked what the main motivation for participating in the MonCoin project was, revo dc referring to the after school meetings stated, "My motivation came from seeing the support we gave to each other."

Further, the after school meetings were cited as one of the major factors in participants' learning. Another impact factor was learning through looking at each other's images in the mobile application. At the start of each meeting, participant's discussions would often deal with issues such as technical and aesthetic concerns in each other's images. When asked about where they learned best, participant djulye_in_the_sky referred to the after school meetings:

> I had some very interesting discussions with some, while with others, it was more mundane, but I still tried to talk with them about how they took pictures, what kind of filters they used, etc. ... [I]t allowed me to work and talk with people I liked less, put my pride aside and accepted it.

Social interactions between participants coupled with the visual art content of the project were critical components which influenced participants' positive responses to the project as a whole. Having a shared project enabled participants to encounter creative differences in constructive and mutually accepting ways. Participant zelexy stated:

> When we had meetings, sometimes we looked at the photos and that's where you see what people thought. It brought about conversation, a continuity. Sometimes you get along well with some people, in the way of seeing things, and sometimes it's fun to see how another person can think in a totally different way from yours, about what you do. So, it helps to know people better.

Participant zelexy articulated a common sentiment among the participants: that the online conversations in the app were important; however, the physical meetings and field trips created a social continuity between the asynchronous virtual and the embodied synchronous conversations. In other words, the after school meetings were a place where participants wanted to congregate while working through the project. Given the mobile and networked capabilities of the technology we were using and the thematic focus of the MonCoin curriculum, participants requested field trips together.

Les Sorties (Field Trips)

Field trips in MonCoin were student initiated. During phase one, a group of five participants self-organized a road trip (Figure 3). Figure 3 is a collage consisting of (on the right) two of many photographs posted during this much appreciated and referenced road trip. On the left is a map geolocating the places along the road where other images were captured and posted. A recurrent element associated with many of the posts documenting the road trip to Rivière-du-Loup is the velvet plush stuffed animal. This stuffed animal became the mascot associated with the trip and is shown in different settings such as in the car, at a gas station, and in a park (as in the upper right image).

Images from their trip were posted to the group through the mobile application. When the other participants viewed the images of the smaller group's road trip, they inquired with Lalonde about instituting a larger group field trip in phase one. An after school meeting was held to discuss possible destinations. It was agreed that there would be a field trip after school to the old port area of Montreal and one in the neighborhood of the Centre. From our analysis of phase one interviews, the research team determined that in phase two more field trips should be held and that the app, along with the after school meetings,
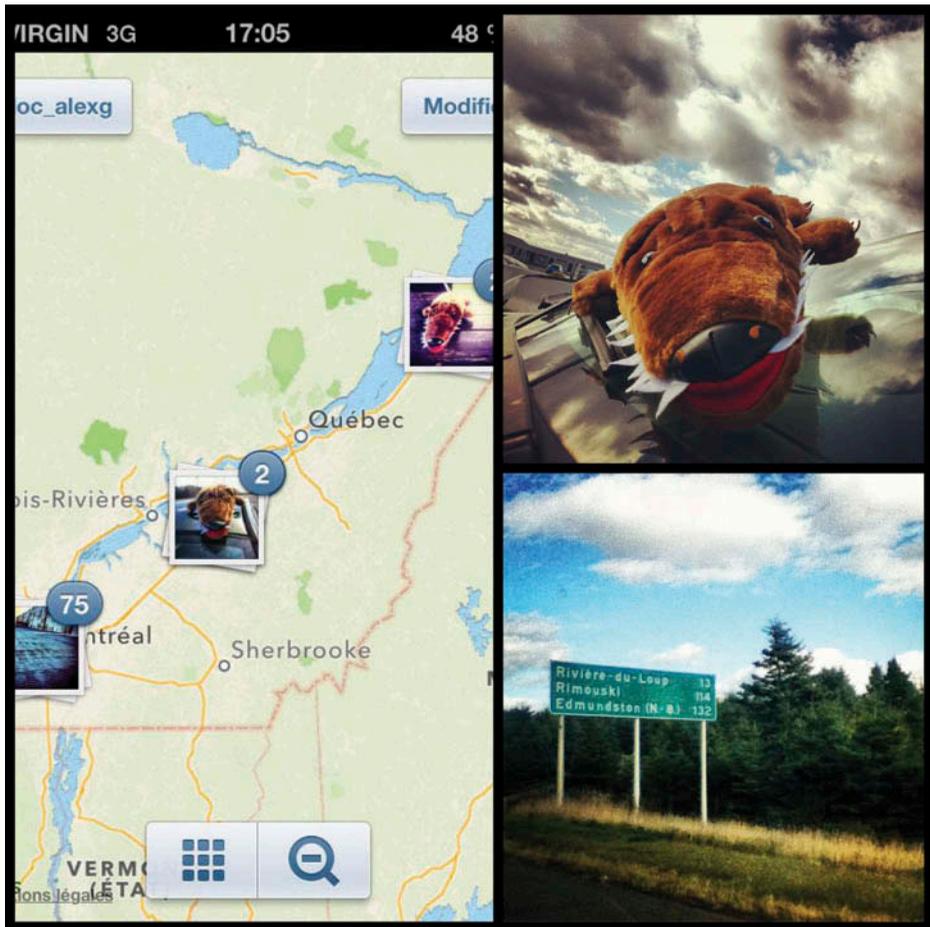
Figure 3. Clockwise from left: Geolocation of "field trip," Puppet mascot by doc_alexg and sidviscious584 in phase one, and field trip road sign.

would be used as the place to collectively generate and vote on locations for the group field trips. In order to facilitate the collective decision-making process, we designed missions in which participants were invited to post images of possible field trip destinations (Figure 4). Figure 4 shows four posts that suggest photographic field trips. The uppermost photograph on the left was made by the instructor/researcher and was intended as an invitation for participants to organize a field trip. The three other photographic-invitations are by participants and suggested expeditions to unfamiliar territory—the island of Montreal.

From our data analysis of both phases, participants explicitly stated that the field trips were important to their learning and positive engagement with the MonCoin project. We

Figure 4. From left to right, top to bottom: Martin Lalonde's prompt "My proposal for our photo field trip"; "Le mont-Royal" by mina0593; "Hochelaga-Maisonneuve" by zelexy; "Prairies" by karilaregal6.

identified two broad categories of responses. The first were about the effects of socialization and community building that came about from moving through a space while engaged in a shared creative project. The second were about the impact of learning by viewing each other making images. These two categories were the results of participants' freedom to move and plan together.

When participants moved through space together, they often photographed the same subjects, be it wildlife or architecture (Figure 5). Figure 5 is a collage that shows two images, one taken by a participant, the other taken by Lalonde. One shows participant doc_alexg at the point of composing a photograph while on a field trip. The right hand image shows the photograph that he

Figure 5. Left image: participant doc_alexg photographing on a self-organized field trip. Right image: untitled, posted image by doc_alexg.

composed and then posted on Instagram. Due to the way the Instagram group was organized, participants could quickly view the images posted by their peers after they had all visited and documented the same environments. Looking at these posts was a valuable, if understated, lesson in discovering the variety of approaches that observers may have to the same experience. This valuable lesson in differences in perception was frequently mentioned in participants' interviews. Participant doc_alexg stated how this activity impacted his learning individually and with the group:

> The field trips brought the group together, to learn to know ourselves better, to see different angles of view when we looked at the pictures of everyone because we often took the same photos at the same time, but they look so different, which was still very good.

By watching each other photograph the same subject and then seeing the results posted to the mobile application, participants understood a process in a way that would not have been possible in an entirely asynchronous virtual mobile learning group. Participant zelexy

reinforced this observation when she stated the following in regard to viewing how others make images: "To see how a person can work. ... [I]t makes us see things differently."

Coupled with the learning that took place through the field trips, there was also the motivation that arose from seeing others making images. Participant coco_lauzon stated: "It's a bit competitive, when you think about it, so when there is competition, it pushes you a little more to give everything you have."

Through the social relationships that were formed, the students were able to motivate each other through their creative practices. In essence, this was an organic process predicated on freedom of movement, loosely constrained through the jointly determined parameters of the field trip.

Just as significant as viewing each others' artwork was the freedom to self-organize and self-determine working relationships on the field trips. Participant zelexy reflected on the community building in the field trip, when she stated: "It taught us how to act in community, how to act together: it is done or not. ... [J]ust share our photos, give our opinion, the fact

that we all found in small groups, we shared beautiful moments. If we had been anywhere else, it would not have happened."

What is important in zelexy's statement is that the field trip was the occasion for new social relationships to form. Most promising is the fact that these relationships carried over from the MonCoin projects into the movements and encounters between students outside of the project and in the school. Participant coco_lauzon stated: "When we all went out as a group, it is sure that there is a bond that was made, when I see people pass in hallways, now I recognize them, I pay more attention and again, I wave to them."

Summary

When considering the educational engagement of at-risk youth, we must consider movement: how it is actualized, regulated, constrained, and enabled. Again, Marcotte (2012) emphasized that a lack of self-autonomy and agency often inhibited youth's ability to engage with their own education. Participant drop665 contrasted his past experiences of schooling with his experience of MonCoin. He stated: "It's not like when you are in school, that you're sitting at a table to learn and work there, you can move, you can move outside, you take pictures, then you can talk with your teacher, do a lot of things, it's very lively."

The comments by drop665 and his peers acknowledged the importance of choice, in planning activities, and in responding to other students and their work. The tension created by institutional control in schools has demotivated many of our participants in the past. With MonCoin, they had the opportunity to engage with creative production predicated on movement, both individual and collective. This helped them to build strong interpersonal relationships with each other.

Our work with this group of at-risk youth suggests that mobility in a learning community is not solely an individual or an asynchronous activity. The movement of youth in a mobile learning network accounts for the desire to gather together. The social interactions that we noted in the MonCoin study are the basis for this observation; as such, interactions provided opportunities for existing and new social relationships to form and strengthen. Social relationships are an important component for identity formation and development online (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). As Marcotte (2012) noted, positive identity formation is a key factor for engaging at-risk youth.

Underlying the formation of our students' social relationships was their freedom to choose to gather and move autonomously. To judge by the positive effects noted in mina0593's statement about choosing learning activities and moving through physical space, it seems that using mobilities with at-risk youth is helpful for their educational engagement. The technology in use allowed participants to make images on their own time and in their own spaces; yet, these same participants wanted to gather, not only to socialize but also to discuss each other's images and to watch each other make images. The (im)mobility of youth in relationship to the structure and culture of traditional public schools has a damping effect on their engagement with their education. We entered into this research with the supposition that being networked asynchronously with their peers and making art would engage at-risk youth with their education. To our surprise we found that our participants desired social contact around the act of artmaking, both in virtual and physical space.

The mobile technologies used in this project were not the cause per se of our understandings of (im)mobility; rather, it was the affordance of these technologies that challenged us as researchers and teachers to consider what these new ways of image-making and communication enabled. Art educators need to take into account the use of mobile media in schools, not just what the technology does but how it reframes the student's relationship to space, movement, power, and control.

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ENDNOTE

[1] See Poletti, T. (2012). Instagram users: You ARE the product. Retrieved from www.marketwatch.com/story/instagram-users-you-are-the-product-2013-01-02. Instagram has since retracted its claims of ownership of users' images; however, this exemplifies the problem of using commercial apps in education.