Visual Voice Galerie

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Dear members of the selection committee

I would like to wholeheartedly recommend Dr. Cristian Zaelzer for the Science Educator Award. I had the pleasure of co-teaching the innovative two-semester course *Convergence: Arts, Neuroscience, and Society* with Dr. Zaelzer at Concordia University. This inter-university, inter-disciplinary course invited students to creatively explore the intersection of arts, neuroscience, and society, and how these domains shape the understandings of ourselves and others. Concordia Fine Arts students worked with the RI-MUHC Brain Repair and Integrative Neuroscience program (BRaIN) and McGill Neuroscience students to create self-directed, collaborative projects which converge artistic and scientific research.

The course culminated in two major exhibitions, one at Concordia University's Black Box exhibition space, the other at Visual Voice Gallery, which I own and run. Visual Voice Gallery specializes in presenting contemporary art exhibitions which create a dialogue between art and science, making the *Convergence* students' art projects a perfect fit for the gallery's mandate. The art exhibitions attracted much attention from the media and generated positive feedback from gallery visitors. Visitors were intrigued and compelled by the art exhibits, and spent an unusual amount of time in the gallery space interacting with each exhibit. The attendance of the *Convergence* exhibitions was excellent, and I noticed many repeat visitors, who often brought friends and family to see the exhibitions.
Dr. Zaelzer provided an excellent exhibition catalogue, outlining both the neuroscience research projects which formed the foundation of each of the artworks, as well as an artist's statement from each art student. The two *Convergence* exhibitions introduced the general public to cutting-edge neuroscience research in an accessible, compelling way, which lead to deeper understanding of complex ideas and many discussions about contemporary science in the gallery space.
Concurrent with the exhibitions, Dr. Zaelzer organized a Science Symposium which was open to the general public. Here, the neuroscience students presented their research in artistic and compelling ways, ranging from storytelling to showcasing artworks that were inspired by their research efforts. Both the exhibitions and the symposium were highly successful science communication strategies that reached a wide and diverse audience.

Dr. Zaelzer's visionary *Convergence Initiative* goes beyond the typical, formulaic, mainstream science outreach projects. The *Convergence* project connects art and science at the fundamental level of knowledge construction, information sharing, and idea translation. This comes to bear in the *Convergence* course curriculum, which frequently takes learning outside the classroom. I was impressed with the comprehensive series of lectures, workshops, and field trips offered to both art and neuroscience students, which included a visit to the research platforms of the MUHC Glenn site as well as workshops and visits at the Muséé d'art

contemporain de Montréal. This in-depth approach allowed the students from both fields to understand each other's knowledge bases, research methods, and vocabularies; a necessary prerequisite for a meaningful creative collaboration. The care and effort expended on these knowledge-sharing events resulted in the exceptional artworks presented later at Visual Voice Gallery.

The *Convergence* team assembled an impressive network of collaborators, all of whom contributed their expertise with great enthusiasm. Dr. Zaelzer inspired action in the students, colleagues, and sponsors through his infectious energy and determined vision. The project brought together seasoned professionals from the fields of neuroscience and fine art to help steer the collaborations between the two groups of students, but also to exchange ideas about the fusion of art and science in curriculum building and knowledge production.

Throughout our two-semester collaboration, Dr. Zaelzer was indefatigable, dynamic, determined, and inspiring, and involved in every facet of the project, from high-level organizational decision-making to hands-on tasks such as catalogue layout.

The success of the *Convergence* project is evident in the students' accomplished artworks, the excellent audience feedback, and the fruitful relationships which have formed between the collaborating professionals. The *Convergence Initiative* demonstrates the benefits of combining art with science. When artists create science-informed artworks they construct metaphors, translating intangible scientific findings into sensual experiences. Art contextualizes science and fosters a deeper understanding of the natural world, making contemporary science accessible to the general public.

Dr. Zaelzer has made a significant contribution to the field of neuroscience through his unique, visionary Convergence initiative. I hope that you will honour him with the Science Educator Award and support his future endeavours in neuroscience education and outreach.

Yours sincerely,

Bettina Forget
Director, Visual Voice Gallery
Art-science researcher, SETI Institute
President, English Language Arts Network