



9 June, 2017

Dear members of the selection committee,

I am very pleased to present this letter in support of Dr. Cristian Zaelzer's nomination for the Science Educator Award supported by the Dana Foundation. I first met Cristian last year following an enthusiastic email invitation to our Faculty to participate in the project *Convergence, Perceptions of Neuroscience*. As the Dean of Concordia University's Faculty of Fine Arts, I am committed to establishing significant collaborations with various partners inside and outside Montreal, so we were delighted when Cristian approached us with such a novel and thoughtful project idea. Cristian, Dr. Keith Murai, and all the students in the Brain Repair and Integrative Neuroscience program labs (BRaIN) welcomed us with open arms and introduced our art, design, and performance students to their worlds. It has been (and will continue to be!) an extraordinary experience.

One of the most impressive features of Cristian's vision was his absolute belief in meaningful cross-disciplinary exchange. At every step he scaffolded experiences for the students at both McGill and Concordia and worked with our three lead arts faculty to form an extended program of exposure, discussion, debate, and social exchange. Moreover, Cristian extended the work of *Convergence* beyond the two Anglophone universities in Montreal in order to establish links with other institutions that would benefit from exposure to the *Convergence* initiative. Thanks to his outreach, the Faculty of Fine Arts became part of a network that included the Research Institute of the McGill University Health Centre (RI-MUHC), the Canadian Association for Neuroscience, the Montreal General Hospital Foundation, the Association Francophone pour le savoir, and the Visual Voice gallery.

The collaborative character of Cristian's ideas permeated every aspect of the project. He envisioned *Convergence* as an initiative where knowledge could be disseminated in a transverse and equitable way by stressing the importance of sharing, and not just delivering information, across disciplinary boundaries. He stimulated and emphasized not simply the acquisition of basic neuroscience principles by our arts students, but also, reciprocally for the scientists, he insisted that they become familiar with the underlying dynamics that drive creative practice in the arts. The deep respect that this information/interpretation "loop" generated, and that Cristian himself demonstrated in every one of his own personal interactions, has created an ideal climate for our students to learn from neuroscience trainees, as well from each other. Our common purpose has been, through an extensive partnership, to bridge the arts and the neurosciences in order to generate conversation, to discover similarities, and to respect differences.

In my experience of working with Cristian, I have been inspired by his love and respect for the neurosciences and the arts that provided such a refreshing new perspective in our Faculty. Cristian's ideas are not only exciting, but also contagious. Together with colleagues, we created a new course within the Faculty built around the *Convergence* project. This three-credit course (Independent Studies DART 461) set the formal frame for some of our most talented and ambitious students to participate in the project. In our first semester, the class received extensive interest (85 students) with 20 selected individuals being chosen to take part. Those 20 students were then paired with 16

neuroscience trainees in the BRaIN labs. Cristian participated actively throughout the entire process not only as a mentor, but also as a neuroscience advisor. His passion has not been limited by the semester timeframe, as he continues to provide support to our students into the summer.

Setting out the framework for public dissemination, Cristian designed, produced and coordinated four different events, two dedicated to the teaching of the neurosciences to art students, and two devoted to the teaching of contemporary art concepts and practices to the neuroscientists. I was impressed that all four these events were open to, and attended by, the general public. The two neuroscience events he launched with the help of an extensive network of volunteers from the RIMUHC. His work as a facilitator stimulated the trainees to develop talks that transferred neuroscience knowledge to my students in a simple and exciting way. This experience also profited the trainees in helping them share their ideas and projects to audiences not familiar with current neuroscience research. Cristian was also key in creating similar events at Concordia in which the arts students shared with the scientists their work and methodologies. These four collaborative investigations did not simply provide an experience to learn about diverse fields of inquiry and to share concepts between disciplines; it also provided my students with an opportunity to visit the laboratory environments where neuroscientists perform their daily research. Their research spaces—like the studios, workshops, and rehearsal halls where our students work—were opened to us to explore and learn how neuroscience research is performed.

Throughout our partnership, Cristian emphasized how much *the students* were the key to bringing about better understandings between neuroscientists and artists, and how this understanding could, in turn, be communicated to larger, non-specialized communities.

Cristian has moved *Convergence* to a new level with his attentiveness and dedication. I often wonder how he contributes as many hours to the project as he does to his scientific career! The list of Cristian's achievements born through the *Convergence, Perceptions of Neuroscience* project is long but I would like to summarize just a few final points. He created and maintains the exceptionally dynamic *Convergence* website (www.convergenceinitiative.org) and also coordinates and continues the French translation of the website. He continues to establish links between other organizations interested in collaborating with *Convergence* and its mission.

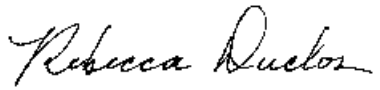
Cristian coordinates and facilitates as well, the collaboration of the news departments of the RIMUHC and Concordia University to give comprehensive coverage of the events developed by the initiative. He also established links to Visual Voice gallery and the Canadian Association of Neuroscience, which was fundamental for the final exhibitions where the results of this collaboration were presented to the public. His tremendous efforts allowed more than one thousand people to become familiar with the initiative!

His work has been presented in conferences (NeuGeneration 2017, 11th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Association for Neuroscience) and soon, at the Annual Meeting of Society for Neuroscience). Discussions and commentary about the initiative have been broadcast on CBC Radio Canada, Le Devoir, McGill Magazine, Concordia's The Link, NOW (Concordia newsletter), Montreal General Hospital Foundation website, and the Research Institute of the McGill University Health Centre website news. Additionally—and significantly—Cristian has designed and produced a beautiful catalog documenting the collaborative work that our teams completed during the DART 461 Winter 2017 semester which was disseminated to the public in April and May of 2017.

I cannot think of a more suitable person than Cristian for this award. I remember receiving his first email expressing interest in forming a partnership with the Faculty of Fine Arts and am astounded at how much we have already accomplished. With the energy that he has demonstrated and his genuine

effort in continuing to grow the Convergence initiative, I am truly excited to see where this project will go next! Cristian is already full of ideas to make *Convergence* even more accessible to the public and we are pleased to continue to work with him on this exceptional endeavour.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Duclos". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letter 'R' being particularly large and stylized.

Rebecca Duclos
Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts