

*The Most Unnatural Act:  
Interdisciplinarity and Working  
Across the Arts*

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper we report on our initiative over the last several years to articulate and deepen our understanding of interdisciplinarity across disciplines, but particularly through the arts. In this paper art and analysis attempt to speak across disciplines to one another. By incorporating our ideas regarding the interdisciplinary properties of art in an alternative article form - one unlike the traditional formal schema of academic publishing - we invite readers to engage in an intertextual interpretation, and to consider the many forms that may express research. Reading across, over, behind and in the margins of the intertexts we have provided, may contribute to a better appreciation of individual and collective ways of understanding, being, and acting.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Ici nous racontons que, depuis un bon nombre d'années, nous essayons de comprendre plus clairement et plus en profondeur l'interdiscipline qui règne entre les différents domaines et notamment celui des Beaux-Arts. L'article révèle une tentative d'analyse pour communiquer d'une discipline à l'autre. Avec une présentation distincte et à l'aide de nos idées sur les bienfaits de l'interdiscipline dans les Beaux -Arts, nous invitons les lecteurs à participer en donnant leur version, à travers des textes interactifs, et en envisageant les différents aspects que la recherche peut revêtir. C'est sans aucun doute un travail écrit différent de ceux émanés du schéma traditionnel strict des publications universitaires. Lire en détails, à travers les lignes et dans les marges des intertextes que nous avons apportés, peut permettre de mieux percevoir les moyens de compréhension, d'existence et de comportement de l'individu et de la collectivité.

### *Introduction*

In 1999 several colleagues at the University of Calgary established a fledgling research group devoted to the study of arts as an interdisciplinary mechanism of communication. This group, our group, was committed to the notion that art has the inherent ability to transcend boundaries and leap disciplines.

One of our first initiatives together was a project entitled "Developing a Faculty Cohort: Toward Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Teaching and Learning through the Arts." Funded by an internal University of Calgary Fellowship Grant (2000), we sought to construct an innovative curriculum, designed to develop faculty expertise in the area of arts integration and teaching through the arts.

In May 2001 we presented our findings at the "Paradigms Gained and Paradigms Lost Symposium" (May, 2001), hosted by the Faculty of Communication and Culture at the University of Calgary. Highlighting contemporary concerns, theorization, and the practice of interdisciplinarity, this conference offered our group the ideal opportunity to share our findings, but it also posed a challenge. If we were committed to using the arts as a tool for research, shouldn't we also attempt to express these findings through the arts? It seemed to us essential that we not only "talk the talk" in our research, but "walk the walk" in our means of dissemination. As a result, the presentation utilized an approach that seamlessly blended formal paper presentation with improvised theatre, dance, and fictional narrative in an attempt to push the boundaries of research expression.

This paper is a continuation of that impulse. In it, art and analysis attempt to speak across disciplines to one another. By incorporating our ideas regarding the interdisciplinary properties of art in an alternative article form – one unlike the traditional formal schema of academic publishing – we invite readers to engage in an intertextual interpretation, and to consider the many forms that may express research. Reading across, over, behind and in the margins of the intertexts we have provided, may contribute to a better appreciation of individual and collective ways of understanding, being, and acting.

Before proceeding in our discussion, let us first set the stage. We want to make a very crucial distinction between: learning about the arts, learning with the arts, and learning through the arts. The first, learning about the arts, is our traditional disciplinary approach to the study of arts, while the second, learning with the arts, suggests that learning

may occur when students are introduced to the arts as a way to study a particular subject or topic. The third definition, learning through the arts, is a method that encourages students to grapple with and express their own understandings of subject matter through an art form. An excellent example of this was a self-generated assignment by one of Panayotidis' grad students, a well-known singer, songwriter, and high school teacher, who set her final paper – an examination of postmodern theory and attendant conceptions of epistemology and ontology, to song.<sup>1</sup>

### *Setting: A Busy Operating Room*

Neuro-surgeon, Dr. William Gessler, readies himself for surgery. Ann Driscol, his patient, lies upon an operating table. In the background we hear the bustle and noise associated with preparation for surgery.

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<i>Narrative</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Ann:	(*1.) What exactly constitutes this <i>unnatural act</i> ? Our ways of attending to these issues are grounded in post-modern frameworks, which structure and shape educational practices. Advocates have prioritized the aesthetic and qualitative – that is, the dramatic, artistic, and non-rational intuitive dimensions of human life. Consequently, learning through the arts has greatly influenced curriculum inquiry. Its absence is inconceivable to many. On this point, Donmoyer suggests that “some things cannot be said or thought with the ... [traditional jargon-laden] language of social science. To say (and think) certain things we must turn to the arts ... to music, dance, painting,
Dr. Gessler:	<i>Dr. Gessler, I'm experiencing anxiety.</i>
(The Doctor continues readying himself.)	
Dr. Gessler:	<i>Entirely understandable.</i>
Ann:	<i>I keep thinking that this is an unnatural act (*1) and then I realize it is an unnatural act. It's the most unnatural act I will ever go through.</i>
Ann:	<i>Having the top of my skull cut, the skin peeled back, and the bone lifted like the hood of a car.</i>

*Having strangers stand and stare into me. Literally, into me.*

Dr. Gessler:

*That's fine. Keep talking about it. Feel free to talk about anything you like.*

Ann:

*Me, talking through it. So you'll know if I'm suddenly rendered unable to talk. All entirely. Unnatural.*

Dr. Gessler:

*It's going to be fine.*

Ann:

*Don't say that unless you know for sure.*

(Beat.)

*Could you hum something?*

Dr. Gessler:

*Now?*

Ann:

*Yes please.*

(Beat.)

*It doesn't have to be complicated.*

(Beat.)

Dr. Gessler:

*I'm drawing a blank.*

Ann:

*It can be anything at all. A lullaby. Anything. Doctor?*

sculpture, and drama" (1991, p. 91).

Educational theorists such as Maxine Greene, Elliot Eisner, and Merryl Goldberg claim that the arts are an important mode of learning, which have an intrinsic value and which provide a critical source of knowledge, beliefs, and values about the self and the world. These visual, aural, and kinesthetic illiteracies enable students to develop imagination, critical thinking, perceptual, and higher order cognitive skills.

Perhaps more importantly, learning through the arts is conceived as a methodology that allows students to think more broadly about the subject matter and the world around them. The arts, in this regard, are critical tools in constructing knowledge. We suggest that through a critical analysis of the potential contributions and limitations of teaching and learning through the arts, university teachers can add a powerful new dimension to their teaching repertoire and participate in the on-going conversation on interdisciplinarity.<sup>1</sup>

These images and practices of teaching and learning, as anthropologist Levis Strauss would say, "are good to think with" (p. 104) – in fact, they can be contemplative entry points to our own interrogations about how learning through the arts might enhance our own teaching practice. Engaged in these diverse

Dr. Gessler:  
(in a lower voice)  
*I can't hum.*

Ann:  
*Pardon me?*

Dr. Gessler:  
(Slightly louder)  
*I can't. Hum.*

Ann:  
*Try.*  
*I need you to try.*

Dr. Gessler:  
(lowering his voice)  
*I'd rather not.*

Ann:  
*Just, try.*

Dr. Gessler:  
*Not now.*

Ann:  
*Please.*

Dr. Gessler:  
*No.*

Ann:  
*Then. Stop.*

Dr. Gessler:  
*What do you mean?*

Ann:  
*I mean, stop. Stop. Everyone  
stop.*  
*Until I hear you hum.*  
(Beat.)

representational ways of knowing the world students exhibit an increased motivation for learning, a heightened critical awareness, and a reflective orientation towards inquiry-based learning. This approach has also prompted a rethinking of the representation of that sacred text – the graduate thesis. Eisner and others have particularly noted the need to broaden the forms of representation that are available to our students to think with and communicate through.

Interdisciplinarity or *curriculum integration* (a more common term in schools) has intensified over the last decade and a half, arising from multiple theoretical and methodological trajectories. Resultantly, aesthetic practice and artistic ways of knowing have become central to a postmodern integrated curriculum. This has coincided with a critical rethinking or fracturing of traditional understandings around the social and cultural function of curriculum, education, and teaching and learning. Both curriculum and educational theorists (from a variety of theoretical persuasions) have challenged the traditional scientific and technical rationalist modes of analysis and the simplistic, reductionistic, linear, and explanations of what constitutes educational experiences and contexts.

Dr. Gessler:

*Can I have the room cleared  
please?*

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(A hush falls over the room as it is vacated. Silence. Dr. Gessler and Ann are left alone.)

Dr. Gessler:

*What's going on?*

Ann:

*Hum.*

Dr. Gessler:

*Don't ask me to do this.*

(\*2.)

Ann:

*But I am, asking.*

Dr. Gessler:

*It's like this.*

*My inability to, hum, was cause of considerable, hurtful, scarring, humiliation when I was younger. I am, completely, incapable of humming even the smallest musical phrase. Asking me to hum would be, like asking a jellyfish to knit a sweater.*

Ann:

*I'll have to teach you.*

Dr. Gessler:

*You mean now?*

Ann:

*Yes.*

(\*2.) This *disciplinary approach* is remarkably resistant to change, and promotes:

- a rigid ordering of subject areas which are seen as separate and fixed bodies of knowledge with little relationship to each other;
- goals and objectives which are predetermined and described as essential to student learning – regardless of the individual learner;
- subject matter that is content-driven – promoting particular perspectives, methods, and subjects of inquiry – taught by specialists who are trained in particular / specific areas and further delineated and fragmented in schools and universities, squeezed into segmented scheduling blocks of 50-120 minutes.

The above scenario is unlike what students encounter in their lives outside of school – whether they be in elementary school or university. For example, to solve problems and to inquire into a

Dr. Gessler:

*No, I mean. I mean, I'm afraid that won't be possible. I mean, it won't be possible. I mean that's out of the question. I mean, it's not like others haven't tried in the first place.*

Dr. Gessler:

*And we can't delay this operation. It's critical to your health. It's essential. And the room is needed immediately after. There are many other operations booked into it. It's like an airport, as one plane is leaving there are others taxiing on to the runway. It's –*

Ann:

*I know all that.*

Dr. Gessler:

*So there's no time.*

Ann:

*There's all the time in the world. All the time in my world. I know the risks of this operation.*

topic requires that we gather data from a variety of sources to generate solutions. Clearly, the fragmentation of the educational structures in regard to time / personnel / and subject, does not reflect the actual way in which we make sense of our world and its discourses and practices. As British philosopher Lionel Elvin, has aptly noted “when you are out walking, nature does not confront you for the three-quarters of an hour only with flowers and in the next only with animals” (1977, p. 29). Needless to say, outside of school, problems and concerns occur in a flow of time that is not divided into knowledge fields or disciplinary frameworks – we confront the complicated and contingent whole.

While contemporary curriculum and educational theorists are generally diverse in their beliefs for explaining a host of educational problems they are unified in their opposition to a traditional approach to curriculum and education which does not critically address common-sense ideologies, the *turn* toward interpretation and meaning and to new multiple conceptions of the self.

An orientation towards *context* has shifted discussions around the need for critically informed theories which highlight multiple forms of representation, culture, and educational discourses and practices.

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**Dr. Gessler:**

*I'm, just. I'm afraid what you're asking, is impossible. No one can teach me. The best paid music professionals abandoned the task when I was still quite young. (3\*)*

*If you're not, talented, in that, that way, they pass the information along, you know. They tell each other everything. There's no, confidentiality, among music teachers. My mother would call people from out of the city, and be left with the receiver humming in her hand – they had hung up that quickly. They knew. They'd been warned.*

*My first, and last, singing coach said I had, how did she put it? – "savaged" that how she phrased it, "savaged" her eardrums. I was ten. I never hummed again.*

**Ann:**

*That's harsh.*

**Dr. Gessler:**

*If I so much as whistled, my mother wept. My father would get visibly irritated. Our dog Skipper ran away and never returned.*

*I've accepted all this. There are some people who simply cannot hum.*

(\*3.) Contemporary educator's, particularly, have adopted constructivist and complex modes of learning which have stressed multiple perspectives and representations of concepts and content and encouraged the examination of the natural complexities of the real world. Constructivist learning theory promotes a range of activities, opportunities, tools, and environments to invite metacognition, self-analysis, reflection, and awareness. Learners are encouraged to view knowledge as a construction – not as a reproduction – construction is seen to occur in individual contexts and through social negotiation, collaboration, and experience. The learner's previous knowledge constructions, beliefs, and attitudes are considered in the knowledge construction process. The students thus play a central role in mediating and controlling their learning. Collaborative and cooperative learning are favoured in order to expose the learner to alternative viewpoints. And finally, knowledge complexity is reflected in an emphasis on conceptual interrelatedness and interdisciplinary learning.

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Ann:

*I believe you're wrong.*

Dr. Gessler:

*Why is it so critical that I hum  
for you now.*

Ann:

*Dr. Gessler, you are entering  
my brain. My God, my brain.  
The temple of my body, so to  
speak. Now I'm a musician.  
Music is all I know, it is the  
way I understand the world,  
it's my sight, my smell, my  
touch, my taste, my thought,  
my soul, it is everything to me.  
How can I trust you to  
rearrange the alignment of the  
most vital part of me if you  
can't connect with me on this  
most, elemental level.*

*Let me teach you to hum.(4\*)*

Dr. Gessler:

*Ah, no.*

Ann:

*Yes.*

Dr. Gessler:

*This is a bad time, do you  
understand? This is the very  
definition of a bad time, it  
makes every other time look  
like a really good time in  
comparison, it's very, very -*

Ann:

*Look. Humming is something  
that comforts me. I'm nervous.  
I'm tense. I've fasted for*

(\*4.) For those accustomed to the more formal mechanisms of expression, the changes asked of them may seem radical, and as foreign as being asked "to hum," however, developmental psychologist Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences has enhanced our understanding of the very notion of intellectual development. Previously seen as static, pre-determined, and skewed toward logical-linguistic models, Gardner has theorized that intelligence does not relate to a single property or capability. Thusly, he has identified eight multiple intelligences, logical-linguistic, being only one, through which students learn. This theory, has been adapted by educators, with some revisions, to account for students' diverse learning styles and the need to provide students with a variety of tools in order for them to represent their learning.

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*twenty four hours, so I'm hungry as well. That throws off my blood sugar and makes me cranky and irritable too. I'm not naturally belligerent or argumentative or cantankerous but I don't normally have the top of my skull lifted or metal probes inserted in my brain or have a tumour the size of walnut removed. So I'm inclined to have my way in this matter. Now nature has seen fit to include humming in the idiom of the peaceable kingdom – the ruby throated humming bird, some species of owl, and even the normally very busy, no nonsense straight by the books honey bee hums, so to paraphrase the song, Birds do, Bees do it, even Surgeons with degrees should do it. It doesn't have to be painful. It doesn't have to take long.*

*Humour me.*

Dr. Gessler:

*Fine. Try.*

Ann:

*So what will it be?*

Dr. Gessler:

*I have no idea.*

Ann:

*What would you choose to hum?*

Dr. Gessler:

*I wouldn't even know where to start.*

Ann:

*What sort of music do you enjoy?(\*5)*

(Beat.)

Dr. Gessler:

*Contemporary.*

Ann:

*Contemporary. That's a start.  
Let's try to draw the focus a  
little tighter. Can you think of  
a title or an artist?*

(Beat.)

Dr. Gessler:

*Billy Joel?*

Ann:

*Billy Joel? All right. I can  
work with that.  
Breathe in. Exhale. Feel your  
throat vibrate.*

(He breathes.)

*You'll have to allow it to make  
a sound.*

Dr. Gessler:

*I'm hyper-ventilating.*

Ann:

*It's fine. Breathe. Slowly.  
Breathe.  
You have to put yourself back  
in sync with the music of the  
spheres.*

(\*5.) There are many activities associated with daily life that are celebrated in dance and music; major events of the past are preserved in dance, as are details of the environment. In Guinea society, for instance, artists are revered. There, culture recognizes that creativity is a vital aspect of our existence as human beings.

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Dr. Gessler:

*I suppose.*

Ann:

*Keep breathing.*

Dr. Gessler:

*Of course ...*

Ann:

*What?*

Dr. Gessler:

*Well. It's just that. There is no music of the spheres. There are no spheres. That's strictly remnant terminology.*

Ann:

*"Remnant terminology."*  
*What's that mean?*

Dr. Gessler:

*It's a completely discredited way of thinking. It dates back to Aristotelian philosophy prior to a solar centric model of the universe.*

Ann:

*Can you just talk? (6\*)*

Dr. Gessler:

*There are no spheres is what I'm saying.*

Ann:

*Of course there are spheres.*

Dr. Gessler:

*Where?*

(\*6.) Is it possible any more to just talk? Obscure terminology and cant, rampant in the academy, are impediments to clear communication, and bar access to an audience unfamiliar with the code. The arts may free up the discussion and invite new voices into the conversation. The arts may, in fact, represent a kind of contemporary dialogue, capable of transcending cultures and class.

Ann:

*Not spheres you can see, necessarily, and they're not anything you can touch or hold in the palm of your hand, but they exist. Spheres of space and time, spheres of influence, spheres of the human heart and soul, and the vibrations they emit, I'm telling you, they are shimmying up and through you right now.*

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*Water flowing over rocks and into pools generates its own musical composition. In the desert, prevailing winds arc across dunes producing something like harmony. Can you honestly believe with solar winds sweeping through the vast expanse of the universe, through quarks and quasars, molecules and space debris, dark matter and subatomic particles that there is no music?*

*Feel it. (7. \*)*

Dr. Gessler:

*I can't. I'm sorry.*

Ann:

*Close your eyes.*

Dr. Gessler:

*I make it a rule never to close my eyes while in the operating room.*

(\*7.) We all express ourselves in complex ways each and every day and yet many feel fearful to express themselves with, or to music. This is especially true in centres of higher learning, and more and more it is the unfortunate reality we deal with when we consider the education of our children. There is a general belief that real learning, that deep knowledge and understanding takes place only in the mind.

Ann:

*But you're not in the operating room right now. You're somewhere else. Close your eyes.*

Dr. Gessler:

*But -*

Ann:

*Sh. Close them.*

(He does.)

*There.*

*You're sitting on the porch at the very edge of the world. You're looking over the edge, and can see everything dropping away at your feet. The cosmos. The stars. Nebulas expanding. Black holes contracting. And there's a rhythm like the intermittent howling of coyotes across the prairies echoing up from this void. And if you sit very still and don't bang your legs against the deck you will hear that sound, feel the rhythm of it surge through your spine and the force of it blow your hair back.*

*Listen.*

Dr. Gessler:

*I'm listening.*

Ann:

*Are you?*

Dr. Gessler:

*I am.*

Carla Hannaford, neurophysiologist and educator believes, that "learning, thought, creativity, and intelligence are not processes of the brain alone, but of the whole body" (1995, p. 11). Somehow we have come to believe that reasoning is the major sign post of human intelligence and this activity takes place in the mind therefore, giving it dominance over the body.

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Ann:

*Can you hear it?*

(Beat.)

Dr. Gessler:

*Yes.*

Ann:

*There's nothing there but ...  
that sound ... your voice, and  
you.*

*Breathe in.*

*Breathe out.*

*Now hum.*

Dr. Gessler:

*Will you hold my hand?*

(They hold hands and begin to hum. A Billy Joel tune as it turns out.)

Ann:

*That's not so bad.*

(They hum a moment longer.)

Ann:

*So, let's recap.*

*You're going to enter through  
the top of my skull, penetrate  
my frontal lobe and remove  
tissue from Wenicke's area in  
the left hemisphere.*

Dr. Gessler:

*Yes.*

Ann:

*And it's likely that I'll  
experience, some hearing loss  
after.*

Dr. Gessler:

*The way the foreign tissue is placed, I'd say that's a probability. Yes.*

Ann:

*Then I would prefer it if you continued humming please.*

Dr. Gessler:

*We'll hum together.  
Are you ready?*

Ann:

*I am completely ready.*

Dr. Gessler:

*Can I have everyone back in now?*

(The rest of the crew re-enters and the sound of preparations begins once again.)

Ann:

*Keep humming. (8.8)*

(Lights narrow to a single spot on Ann)

*Keep humming.*

*Keep humming.*

(Music rises – music by Billy Joel, of course. The lights dim and go to black.)

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The End

(\*8.) Clearly music and dance represent a kind of communication beyond words. They are creations originating from our minds, spirits, and bodies, and as such are expressions of us, our imaginations, our hopes and dreams, fears and joys.

“Some say that participatory encounters with paintings, dances, stories, and the rest enable us to recapture a lost spontaneity. By breaking through the frames of presumptions and conventions ... by becoming aware of

ourselves as questionnaires, as makers of meaning ... we may be able to better communicate to students the notion that reality depends on perspective, that construction is never complete, and that there is always more." (Greene, 1995, p. 382)

In the end, those interested in interdisciplinarity should be aware that the story, or the song, or the dance may very well be the process, and the product of research, both.

To fully grasp this notion, and to utilize it in our workplace we must be vigilant that we maintain an open mind about what constitutes research as well as what constitutes the expression of research ... and through it all, keep humming.

#### NOTES

1. There has been wide-spread interest in visual and arts-based methods of inquiry and as a form of representation and dissemination of research. See for example, C.T.P. Diamond & C.A. Mullen (Eds.) (1999). *The Postmodern Educator, Art-based Enquiries and Teacher Development*. New York: Peter Lang; Fineley, S., & Knowles, J.G. (1995). Researcher as Artist/Artist as Researcher, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 1, 110-142; D. Harper. (1998). "On the Authority of the Image: Visual Methods at the Crossroads." In N. Denzin et al. (Eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 119-130). S. McNiff. (1998). *Art-Based Research*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kinsley Publishers. Jon Prosser (Ed.) (1998). *Image-based Research: A Source Book for Qualitative Researchers*. London. Falmer Press.

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est divisé en cinq grandes sections: une brève présentation des CFER, la problématique de la recherche, le cadre d'analyse, la méthodologie et l'analyse, et la discussion des données. La première, met en contexte les difficultés et les enjeux de la construction de l'identité professionnelle pour les enseignants. La deuxième fournit les informations nécessaires pour comprendre ce que sont les Centres de formation en entreprise en récupération (CFER). La troisième pose les balises conceptuelles de l'identité professionnelle et de son processus de construction. La quatrième partie présente brièvement la population étudiée, la méthodologie utilisée pour le recueil des données et les procédures d'analyse du matériel récolté. Enfin, la dernière section, l'analyse et la discussion des résultats, fait ressortir les principales catégories du discours identitaire des enseignants du CFER.

### *Problématique*

L'identité professionnelle des enseignants fait problème dans de nombreux pays (Gohier & Alin, 2000). Une partie de l'explication de ce phénomène se trouve dans le fait que notre société a perdu de nombreux repères culturels fondamentaux (Dubet, 1994; Legault, 1999; Lyotard, 1979; Simard, 2004). Notre époque se caractérise en effet par le relativisme, l'individualisme (Dumont, 1983; Lipovetsky, 1993) et le nihilisme que plusieurs auteurs dénoncent fortement (De Koninck 2000; Finkielkraut, 1987; Grand'Maison, 1999). Cela n'est pas sans poser plusieurs problèmes en enseignement. On sait par exemple que les périodes de transformation peuvent désorganiser l'identité d'un sujet (Tap, 1986). Un second élément d'explication prend son origine dans une certaine crise du professionnalisme. Celle-ci se présente sous différentes formes: crise de l'expertise, crise de la formation professionnelle, crise du pouvoir des professions, crise de l'éthique professionnelle (Tardif & Lessard, 1999). Enfin, un troisième élément de réponse se trouve dans les bouleversements que connaît le monde de l'éducation (réformes des programmes d'enseignement et de la formation à l'enseignement), bouleversements qui ont remis à l'ordre du jour la question de la professionnalisation de l'enseignement (Gauthier & Martineau, 1998; Gauthier & Tardif, 1999; Martineau, 1998; Martineau & Simard, 1997). Ce contexte général de "crise" et de changements profonds n'est pas sans répercussion sur le travail de l'enseignant et sur son identité professionnelle (Simard, 1995; Simard & Martineau, 1996, 1997, 1998).

Pendant des siècles l'enseignant a construit son identité professionnelle sur la base de sa qualification et de son affiliation à une