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Mentor's Introduction to Sohee Koo

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When and how did you engage for the first time in meaningful art making? At what point did you realize that your beliefs about what art is and can be about need not to be tied to fixed conventions? That your perspectives can instead be permeable and elastic—open to challenge and expansion, subject to new ideas, confrontation even, and change? When did you identify as an *artist*, and what were the critical incidents that sparked your artist identity to evolve, to become what it is today?

Artist-teacher-researcher Sohee Koo takes these questions as a starting point for her qualitative case study of studio art learning among non-art majors, a population that is sorely under-examined in art education research. Her conceptual focus is transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and the ways in which purposely teaching for transformative learning through art making may lead to “perspective transformation” in students’ understanding of themselves as artists and learners, their changing aesthetic beliefs and belief systems, and their evolving art-related behaviors and lifestyles.

The power of Sohee’s research lies in its slyness and stealth. For while the study is rooted in seemingly simple, foundational questions of art teaching and

learning, the evidence she provides for what transformative learning looks like, from her own teaching meant to bring it about, is multilayered and nuanced. Her data are drawn from ongoing class observations, examination of students' work processes and artworks over time and their written and oral reflections. Sohee details how certain kinds of visual arts teaching may prompt changes in students that surprise them. These changes in turn can empower students to stretch their views of themselves as learners in art and other areas—and of themselves as artists—and dramatically enlarge their perspectives on what art is and might possibly be. At its core, the study documents the ways in which visual arts practice, where there was little or none before, opens people to see the world and themselves in it “as if they could be otherwise” (Greene, 2000, p. 19). Being able to see things as otherwise is, indeed, the basis of transformative learning.

In a field where well-intentioned but often inflated advocacy claims for the benefits of learning in the visual arts lack necessary, research-based evidence, Sohee's fine-grained portrayal of art student learning outcomes is a welcome addition and direction. For too long, the field's student learning focus has been on the question “What are the benefits of visual arts teaching and learning?” The question we really need to address right now, as Sohee shows us, is this: “What are the benefits of *particular kinds* of visual arts teaching and learning, and what do these look like in practice?”

References

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