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### Mentor's Introduction

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# *mentor's introduction*

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As with all professions, the field of art education is effective only to the extent that its practitioners possess high levels of expertise and exercise advanced abilities in the application of that expertise. Without adequate levels of art knowledge and delivery strategies, an art teacher's presence in the classroom is at best ineffectual and at worst quite damaging. It is therefore important for researchers in art education to identify some of the variables that influence the acquisition of knowledge by preservice art teachers--what helps and what hinders the formation of advanced understandings of art and the attainment of higher-order thinking that is characteristic of expert teachers.

This is precisely the research focus of Georgianna (Sam) Short's dissertation study. Sam has designed an investigation to detect some of the learning problems pre-service teachers confront as they design curricula around selected works of art. Sam's concern is that the successful adoption of curricular approaches involving the study of works of art hinges upon the art teacher's own understanding of those artworks. Sam is not alone in her conviction that teachers need to possess or pursue complex knowledge of the subjects they teach in order to nurture higher-order understanding in students (e.g., Holmes Group, 1990, **Tomorrow's Schools: Principles for the Design of Professional Development Schools**).

Sam's preliminary findings show that all too often, art education majors tend to form oversimplified and compartmentalized understandings of artwork. Because art meanings are often complex and ill-defined, even advanced learners tend to seek out cognitive paths of least resistance when forming interpretations. Unfortunately, this tendency to reduce the study of art to simplistic principles and superficial conceptions of meaning is counter-productive when the educational aim is to foster higher-order understandings.

Sam's research calls into question the adequacy of curriculum standards for teacher preparation in art education. Her study is important because it drives art teacher educators to ask themselves several basic questions, including:

- \* What should an art teacher know and why is the acquisition of that knowledge sometimes unsuccessful?

- \* What do we now expect future art teachers to understand that we didn't before?
- \* If new areas of understanding are required in addition to traditional ones, how much can we reasonably expect future teachers to understand before they graduate?
- \* At what point are we willing to sacrifice breadth of study for depth of understanding?

These questions cannot be adequately answered without more research on teachers as advanced art learners. The evidence Sam is gathering is extremely valuable towards that end, but it is only a small piece of a much larger research agenda. My hope is that future generations of researchers in art education will give thought to building on the work Sam has so ably begun.