

## Mentor's Introduction to Alexa R. Kulinski

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As an arts-based researcher, I have long been concerned with the importance of establishing a criteria for quality in arts-based research. As a teacher educator, I'm also deeply committed to the development of new creative leaders favoring a model of succession based on the aerodynamic principle visible whenever a flock of birds in a classic V formation soars overhead. *Drafting* is when the leader of a flock at any given moment navigates the brunt of the wind resistance, creating an area of low pressure behind in one's wake. The low-pressure air creates a small vacuum, a pocket of lesser drag allowing those who follow just behind to vault ahead in the slipstream.

The same thing happens in any good mentor-mentee relationship, and I am absolutely delighted to introduce the scholarship of Dr. Alexa R. Kulinski as she vaults ahead as a leader in the field of arts education, especially in the realm of arts-based research. Having just presided over her very successful dissertation defense, I know that Alexa's research is propelled by her goal "to better understand the various approaches to matter (raw materials, found objects, manufactured artifacts, constructed spaces, and assemblies of humans) in artmaking," journeying improvisationally from the perspective of a very traditional fine arts training as an oil painter, toward a new outlook envisioning

*Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education 2023*

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the intertwining of contemporary art and artmaking practices into PK-12 pedagogy and curriculum.

What Alexa does so very well in her dissertation, titled THE MATTER OF ARTMAKING AND TEACHING: EXPLORING PRESERVICE ART TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND USES OF MATTER IN ARTMAKING, REFLECTION, AND CURRICULUM-MAKING, is to present a thoroughly arts-based inquiry (which ultimately takes the form of a visual journal in and of itself) exploring the ways five preservice art teachers (three undergraduate and two graduate students) perceived and used matter in their responses to studio artmaking and visual journaling prompts to create and develop the frameworks for their own first-year PK-12 art curriculums. I emphasize again that what Alexa has accomplished in this dissertation has been done well, meeting the highest standards for arts-based research and research in general.

In 2013, I published a textbook on arts-based research which explained that all research is representation, or theory-building—i.e., constructing representations of the realities and ideas that matter to the researcher, with each research act generating its own methodology and validity. During the essential work of *making visible* a selected focal point of inquiry, the researcher shapes a methodology. Simultaneously, during the work of *making sense* of a selected focal point of inquiry through applied strategies and mediating instruments, the researcher adds to and extends the prevailing discourses. In arts-based research, this back and forth between *making visible* and *making sense* (since not everything visible makes discursive sense, and not everything that makes sense is plainly visible) draws heavily upon arts-based strategies and/or aesthetically crafted mediating instruments. By the time the arts-based researcher or artist arrives at an emergent theory, their work has already established its own rigorously resolved internal validity. That Alexa was able to accomplish all of this in the space of the dissertation research project that will launch her scholarly career is nothing less than impressive.

One key criterion for quality arts-based research is that it should authentically reflect a researcher's positionality, subjectivity, and affinities to any one of a spectrum of art + design processes as a starting point for systematic replication and elaboration. In her dissertation, Alexa describes her affinity for collage and how creating collages “was an iterative process of building and tearing away layers as I analyzed data and gathered more information, building knowledge while also revealing what laid beneath the surface.” The

development of such repertoire makes sense of prior discourses even as it makes a creative practice visible in the process of theory-building. Readers of this collection of *Marilyn Zurmühlen Working Papers in Art Education*, as well as many articles and books yet to be crafted by Alexa, have much to gain from following in her slipstream as an emerging frontline leader in arts education research, pedagogy, and practice.