

Book Review

Title: *Arts, Culture, and Blindness: A Study of Blind Students in the Visual Arts*

Author: Simon Hayhoe

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Reviewer: Katherine Reid

The visual arts has the power to build confidence, molding a creator's worldview and perceptions of his or herself. Simon Hayhoe supports this theory in his extensive study on blind students involved with the visual arts. The students in this study vary in age, gender, causes of blindness, and self-confidence levels; however, Hayhoe suggests that the self-confidence instilled in these students by peers and mentors correlates to how successful their artistic and academic careers will be. The visual arts and self-confidence are a symbiotic relationship, exemplified by many of the students interviewed or observed in this study.

Hayhoe's study explores one of the most powerful myths in modern society: the myth that blind people are incapable of understanding and creating visual arts and how it relates to theories about self-worth and confidence of blind people. More specifically, Dr. Hayhoe's hypothesis is that "attitudes towards students who are blind in the visual arts radically changed after they were integrated into mainstream schools, making students more educated and thus more willing to undertake new arts" (p. 5), yet attitudes that yielded negative experiences affected students' behavior in the classroom as well. He supports this hypothesis by addressing two questions throughout this book. Hayhoe concludes with the questions "can attitudes towards blindness in art education merely be discussed in terms of a physical disability, or are they affected by social and cultural assumptions?" (p. 5) and "what does blindness stop people from doing in the visual arts?" (p. 5).

Hayhoe began his research in 1993 with a more anthropological perspective of research, observing students from Leicester and Bristol Universities in England. They were blind from birth or early childhood and had attended schools for the blind as children. Hayhoe tested his results using American educational psychologist Walter Doyle's theories on ambiguity and risk: the greater the ambiguities in the tasks given to inexperienced students, the less likely students were to try them as a result of their lack of self-esteem (1979, 1983). While Doyle's theories were observed in the classrooms, Hayhoe felt more information could explain the students' behaviors. In 1999, Hayhoe began to redesign his study to focus on students studying art at an advanced level since it would demand greater risks, for which the students may not have had experience. Hayhoe's study also considered a cultural approach to blindness. He reasoned the study would be conducted from the perspective of society's attitudes to students' blindness and test the premise that their educational and social culture would affect their willingness to try

tasks once they had entered the classroom. Students who were blind from birth or early childhood, as well as those who became blind later in life, were observed and interviewed in classroom settings.

The assumptions made about disability affect how people view others who are blind as well as how students who are blind are treated in art education. Hayhoe examined this social conception of disability and blindness in academic studies and characterized it into two perspectives: subjective disability, or what an individual can do or feels that he or she can do in a particular context, and objective disability, or what society tells a person what he or she can or cannot do given a particular context. Many societies define blindness as an objective disability, and blindness can be legally classified at different levels of severity, thus preventing people who are blind from most social tasks. A person is therefore judged according to a strict medical test at a particular point in time under certain conditions that prevents those who are blind from having a positive subjective view of their own capabilities based on their test results.

The most interesting aspect of the study is the experiences of the adult students compared to those of the young art students. The adult blind art students were interviewed and observed at Leicester and Bristol from 1993 to 1994. Both the Braille pianist and the sculptor who was afraid of clay shared similar experiences of being forced into music at a young age. The only visual arts allowed in their residential schools for the blind was basket weaving. It was not until later in life that met each other (and eventually married) but also found that the arts improved their confidence. Despite the fact that they had limited arts education and that teachers doubted their ability (taking the view of objective disability in regards to blindness), both the sculptor and pianist were eventually persuaded to pursue careers in the arts, but it took years to negate the negative influences of their past.

The younger art students who were blind had mainstream school experiences that greatly affected them later during their college years. The boy observed by Hayhoe felt psychologically excluded from many art tasks that his sighted peers had the opportunity to try, even though he was physically included in their classes. Hayhoe deduces that this “might have been a result of the lack of training on the part of his teachers[...].” (p.131.). The boy later avoided the same tasks required of him in college-level art classes at his mainstream school. However, if he were asked in one of those classes to try a completely new task for which he had no prior experience, he would. This drove him to find a subject he could excel in that bore no relation to those he had previously attempted and experienced negative experiences. Conversely, the female student who was also in a mainstream school did not have negative experiences and was presented with normal expectations that allowed her to take more risks when experimenting with new materials or methods. Hayhoe concludes this sense of experimentation became a trait she generated from within herself, from a sense of self-worth in her ability to create successful artworks, even when her assessments demanded a more cautious approach (p.133).

I recommend *Arts, Culture, and Blindness* to those interested in teaching students who are blind, especially in the visual arts field, art museum educators, and anyone interested in learning about blindness and the visual arts. Simon Hayhoe's thorough study was written in a language accessible to anyone in any field of study and Hayhoe's clear, concise writing style and formatting of his chapters made this an enjoyable read, which supported his hypothesis. As

quoted by Hayhoe in his introduction on page 4, John Steinbeck wrote in his book *Sweet Thursday*, “Looking back, you can usually find the moment of the birth of a new era, whereas when it happened, it was just one day hooked on to the tail of another...” This quote sums up how students who are blind find learning about visual arts from positive, encouraging teachers will be able to have self-confidence in their abilities in and out of the classroom.

References

Doyle, W. (1979). Classroom effects. *Theory into Practice*, 18, 138–144.

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