NATIONAL ART EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

Assessment PAPERS for ART EDUCATION

SECTION I

Assessment in Art Education: Building Knowledge

Assess What Matters Most: Recommendations for Gathering Information About Student Learning

Mary Elizabeth Meier

"Art teachers and students can design qualitative assessment approaches that promote more personalized and individualized methods of idea development."

There is a shift occurring in the field of art education to empower students and teachers to design personalized, classroom-based assessments to support rich, complex, and unpredictable processes of learning in K-12 art (Beattie, 1997, 2006; Hafeli, 2001; Gates, 2017). In this paper, I present three recommendations for gathering information about student learning using qualitative assessment principles and approaches. By orienting to qualitative assessment approaches, teachers can exert confidence in developing tools to gather information about student learning in ways that expand beyond numerical data. Qualitative data is rich with description and focuses on the unique qualities of experience. I advocate for qualitative assessments for use by teachers and students in K-12 classroom art studios who are working together to build a culture of creative idea development, in which students are engaged in individualized and cooperative research as part of the process of making and responding to works of art. We must move beyond overly simple assessments that take inventory of structured concepts in art (such as tabulations of the formalist characteristics of a work of art that focus solely on the student's use of materials, techniques, and elements and principles of design) and shift our efforts toward assessments that nurture ideas in the making.

Facing Challenges and Orienting to Qualitative Assessment Approaches

Sometimes art teachers feel limited by quantitative, numerical measures of student learning (e.g., selected-response quizzes, checklists) that ask students to show what they know or recite what they have learned. The term *assessment* brings to mind the quantitative—what is concerned with quantity and numeracy. This includes grading

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scales, objective testing, and standardized accountability measures. Relying solely on quantitative assessments can limit descriptions of student learning to what is most predictable. Predictable outcomes are not the only outcomes worth assessing. Assessment methods can also be qualitative, concerned with rich descriptions of quality. For example, teachers and students gather information about works in progress. Students can select assessment tools to identify and review their learning experiences (e.g., open-ended checklists, constructed-response journal entries, sketchbook analysis, and self-evaluation tools). Teachers and students can collaborate to build ideas and record information about various pathways of investigation (Rolling, 2006). Classroom-based assessment of student learning in art should include qualitative information that teachers and students gather in order to explore what is varied, emergent, complex, or unexpected.

Art teachers, as the primary stakeholders of assessment in art education (Dorn, 2002), often express frustration about assessment (Bensur, 2002). We grapple with the dynamic nature of the field of contemporary art at large and the nature of highly personalized work which student artists can and should undertake (Boughton, 1997). Yet, art teachers who work within the context of schooling also face the expectation of selecting criteria for assigning a grade in art (Gruber & Hobbs, 2002; Sabol, 2006). Forty years after Efland (1976) critiqued the *School Art Style*, the culture of schooling is still wrought with institutionalized expectations for highly standardized and replicable assessments that are rooted in the values and concerns of the industrial revolution (Robinson as cited by RSA, 2010). At present, Efland's *School Art Style* remains a dominant orientation to art education when the teacher evaluates and scores the "art project" as separate from the student and as an object of evidence that should comply with pre-determined formalist parameters (i.e., student must include and adhere to specified elements). Assessing by counting categories and criteria is a straightforward way to "score" a project and determine numerical point values for grading. However, when we

> move towards "scorable" student learning outcomes for studio work, we have in turn limited our scope for assessment to what can be seen in student artworks or observed in students' ways of working. In doing so, we have narrowed and in some cases diminished what we recognize as the nature of art making and of student learning in art. (Hafeli, 2001, p. 24)

Recommendations

In addition to my role as a university professor (teaching undergraduate and graduate level courses in art education) and as a supervisor of student teachers in art education, I often facilitate work groups and school-district sponsored workshops to explore assessment of student learning with in-service art teachers. In these workshops, I have joined with art teachers to discuss a variety of conundrums we associate with the administrative demands and public policy directives to measure student learning in art. Often, teachers must use data about their students' learning to justify their own effectiveness (Shaw, 2016). In my home state of Pennsylvania, state policy supports local teachers of non-tested subjects (i.e., art teachers) to author their own student learning objectives and student performance measures as contextualized, school-based assessments (Beattie, 2006). Supported by state policy, each art teacher designs assessment tasks and uses qualitative descriptions of student learning in their teacher effectiveness portfolio. As I discuss matters of assessment with teachers, I have noticed that art teachers are deeply interested in learning alternative perspectives related to qualitative assessment methods, which accommodate and embrace the unexpected events that transpire in their studio art classroom. Teachers also feel pressure to comply with policies in ways that are least disruptive to teaching/learning.

During workshop discussions, I have offered the following three recommendations to encourage teachers to hold true to what they believe about art education while they also work to discern assessment requirements that seem distant to the aims of art education: (1) Assessment can be defined as gathering information about student learning (Beattie, 1997); (2) Each teacher can design qualitative methods (Stake & Munson, 2008) of gathering information about student learning, which are well matched to the task of describing complex experiences with particular students in particular contexts; and (3) Each teacher should be empowered to assess what matters most, including the ways of working in the ambiguous, subjective, and emergent stages of creative idea development (Gates, 2017; Hetland, Winner, Veenema, & Sheridan, 2013; Rolling, 2006). These three recommendations serve as guideposts to encourage teacher-designed assessments that fuel rigorous, spontaneous, and emergent teaching/learning practices that center on students' artistic and creative exploration. Art teachers and students can design qualitative assessment approaches that promote more personalized and individualized methods of idea development. I explore each of these three recommendations in the sections that follow.

Recommendation #1: Define Assessment as Information Gathering

For the purpose of documenting experiences in studio classrooms, I adopt Beattie's (1997) definition of assessment as various processes for "gathering information… for the purpose of making an evaluation" (p. 2). I define *assessment as gathering* information about student learning, experiences, habits, and capacities in K-12 studio classroom contexts. The art teacher partners with students in employing a wide variety of methods to gather and share information about how students and teachers are engaged in individualized/cooperative, responsive, and contextualized methods of working. We can find our foundation for this work in the philosophies and methods of Reggio Emilia early childhood education, in which children and teachers are co-investigating and using pedagogical documentation (Kline, 2008; Turner & Wilson, 2010) to record and reflect upon experiences. We can apply the tenets of Reggio Emilia to all levels of art education by observing, listening, and documenting how students engage with learning experiences. Turner and Wilson (2010) wrote:

> Documentation is not about finding answers, but generating questions. It is a bit of a paradox because we do come to know

> things about the children and what we might do next, but this knowledge should not lead us to closure. Rather, it sparks more wonder and inquiry about the children and the teaching that follows. (p. 9)

Students who are working in artistic and creative ways may learn to gather information about qualities of their experiences as part of the journey of inquiring, making artwork, documenting practice, seeking feedback, and fueling the momentum of more investigation. The Studio Thinking habits of mind (Hetland, et al., 2013) are useful lenses for exploring the working dispositions that are prevalent among those who engage with creative work. For example, *engage and persist* is a habit of mind that could be a framework for designing assessments that record how students persevere in learning and making processes.

Recommendation #2: Adopt Qualitative Orientations Toward Gathering Information

The field of art education is advancing qualitative and arts-based research methods that can inform classroom-based assessment practices and are well-suited to studying the subjective complexities of experience (Meier, 2013). A qualitative orientation to gathering information about student learning can build on visual, narrative, and descriptive information as data. A qualitative stance of inquiry and questioning can help us attend to what is particular to each teacher, student, context, and situation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Teachers who design qualitative assessments are finding multiple ways to gather, describe, and interpret information about student learning by way of visual portfolios (Davis-Soylu, Peppler, & Hickey, 2011), sketchbooks and research notebooks (Thompson, 1995; Anderson, 1994), Rich Assessment Tasks as complex investigations that attempt to encompass the richness and depth of the discipline of art (Beattie, 2006), Visual Thinking Maps as graphic organizers (Fountain, 2014), and interpretive descriptions of important issues through student self-reflection (Hafeli, 2001). We can also work with students to use qualitative and mixed-method tools (e.g. notes of analysis, rubrics, continuums, surveys) to attend to both pre-defined and emergent criteria. It is important to recognize that many teachers are expected to present assessment data in specific ways that are consistent with the norms and culture of schooling. When the school administration requires a numeric format, art teachers can use a mixed-method approach (quantitative in partnership with qualitative) to gather information about qualities of student learning and also show data in numeric summaries.

Another matter of consideration among art teachers is how to remove bias from a rubric and how to avoid making subjective evaluations about student's work (Gates, 2017). The assumption that assessments of student learning can and should be designed as "objective" prevails from the positivist assumption that scientific methods of research, especially those based in numerical data, are inherently objective and therefore without subjectivity, bias, or judgment. Research (and assessment) is not without subjectivity. We strive to gather information about student learning in ways that are accessible and equitable. We do not pretend that an assessment is objective, neutral, or without motivations; however, we can investigate the assumptions, beliefs, and values that influence teacher and student actions (Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2007). To gather information about learning and experience is to work from the personal–professional perspectives of what teachers and students know (and have yet to know) about the world, ourselves, each other, and the varied process of artmaking, responding, and idea development (Kind, 2008). This commitment to assessment that emerges in the midst of classroom life and with particular people at a particular time leads to the next recommendation, which is that we must assess what matters most, not simply what is easiest to assess.

Recommendation #3: Assess What Matters Most

The nuanced qualities (qualitative nature) of art experiences are places of opportunity to exercise the human capacity of imagination. The capacities of imaginative learning can be observed and practiced by noticing deeply, embodying, questioning, making connections, identifying patterns, exhibiting empathy, living with ambiguity, creating meaning, taking action, and reflecting/assessing (Holzer, 2009). If these capacities of imagination are worth exploring with students, then they are worth the effort of assessing. For example, students can use these capacities for imaginative learning as the basis to analyze, reflect, and further develop sketchbook and research notebook explorations. When students lead the analysis of their work and annotate their notebook entries, teachers can find insights into the students' thinking and locate opportunities to encourage the next stages of investigation. "Creativity needs to be nurtured, not 'notched'" (Hardy, 2012, p. 154). It is by providing opportunities for specific and positive feedback that we help students seek varied pathways toward their learning goals. At the same time, I recognize that art teachers continue to be challenged by administrative mandates to present data in numeric ways that are alike to standardized test results. I encourage art teachers to find support in advocating for alternative assessment approaches that are better matched to study the complexities of learning in art.

Conclusion

It is necessary to think beyond assessing skills and concepts by quantification and give more attention to gathering qualitative information about what matters most in each unique context where learning in art education occurs. Let's spend less effort in designing assessments that "take stock" of what is predetermined and, rather shift toward gathering information about what is emerging. Ultimately, teachers and students decide what matters most in the "collaborative artistry" (Ewald, 2007, p. 23) of teaching and learning as reciprocity. To excel in the art of teaching in our field requires that we expand our understanding of assessment to include descriptions of the qualities of experience that are not easily quantified. ■

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SECTION I

Assessment in Art Education: Building Knowledge

Experimenting With Assessment: A Yearlong Process

Julie Etheridge

> "Several students claimed that the process of self-assessment asked them to be more honest with themselves and with the work that they had produced."

Assessment Can Be Stressful

Art teachers may find student assessment stressful when they fear that the rigid criteria might stifle creativity (Gruber & Hobbs, 2002), while others will see assessment as a valuable tool that sparks possibilities for future projects (Schönau, 2012). As a high school art teacher, I experience a high degree of stress when carrying out student assessments. My stress arises from parents questioning assessment procedures or from students demanding an explanation as to why they received a lower grade on their project than peers. To work through these challenges, I have developed rubrics to assist and measure students' learning. McCollister (2002) asserts that rubrics are valuable forms of assessment that provide specific criteria and expectations to students. While the rubric is an effective tool in clarifying objectives, I find that this form of summative assessment in my teaching practice slowly converted into a check sheet for success instead of a guide. Students would measure in-progress drawings or paintings against the rubric to achieve a perfect score and ignore the creative process. As a result, I found this method of assessment was no longer providing a reflection response in my students.

As noted by Bensur (2002), when students are provided with a set of objectives, they tend to suppress creativity to produce work that the teacher will find acceptable. Furthermore, a rubric may not demonstrate all the types of learning that occur while students work on a project. Per Winner and Hetland (2008), the learning process focuses on students and teachers continuously discussing the artistic choices and inviting students to observe, develop skills, welcome risks, and embrace failures while working on a project. This vibrant process is reduced when completing an assessment working toward a numerical grade.

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When focusing on assessment and rubrics, I realized that my students and I no longer engaged in artmaking that evoked wonderment—moments when I see my students becoming animated while forming their ideas for a project. My desk becomes a hub where students come to ask the question, "Can I?" and my response is always, "I don't know, but let's see what happens." What I treasure most about teaching is witnessing the passion and determination that my high school students display while working on a project. When I meet with each student, we discuss ideas and refine techniques. I encourage students to circulate the classroom during mandatory breaks to provide peers with helpful tips. The art room becomes a dynamic space of possibilities filled with conversations.

As noted by curriculum theorist Dwayne Huebner (1999), the curriculum should be ever-shifting in a conversation between the teacher and the student. It is through this dialogue that learning occurs. Interestingly, when developing summative assessment rubrics as a class activity, lively conversations and debates erupt over words such as "effort" and "creativity." In my classroom, I began to question what would happen if I embraced the idea of assessment as a conversation with my students. What would the assessment process be composed of and what would the likely outcomes be? I looked to Schönau's (2012) model of developmental self-assessment, with students defining the project and treating evaluation as a self-reflective process. A good grade is not perceived as the end goal. Instead, each evaluation is a springboard for the next project. Schönau explains that this process invites students to be responsible for their own learning and evaluation. Assessment becomes "an instrument in students' own artistic learning" (p. 55). Because I am required to assign grades, but also wanted to work with Schönau's model, I decided to have students assign themselves a grade after participating in a critique of their work to meet both of these needs.

The Plan: Renewing Wonderment With the Sketchbook

In September 2016, I decided that for an entire year I would focus on developing new formative and summative assessments that relied upon my students and myself engaging in conversations centering on the students' process and growth as an artist instead of the final art product. Formative assessment consisted of biweekly structured peer-to-peer conversations focusing on techniques. Summative assessment must result in a grade, so I decided that students would discuss their work with me only. Unlike traditional critiques where the teacher or mentor is viewed as having superior knowledge, I embraced a type of co-mentoring as described by Barrett (2000). Within this model, co-mentoring provides a fluid relationship between the teacher and the student in which a sense of caring emerges and where the student is heard. According to Barrett, when students realize that they are not being criticized, they respond more positively and engage in more critical reflection.

While I was enthusiastic about the idea of self-assessment as a path to bring wonderment back into the classroom, I also recognized that students need high marks for college entrance. I focused on the students' sketchbook for the two assessment processes while students continued to create other art projects. The sketchbook is a space where my students play with unfamiliar materials. As a class, we decide the overarching topics for the sketches. Critical inquiry is developed as students continuously review their sketches and reassess their work to create new drawings in reaction to the world around them. While working in their sketchbooks at home, students are expected to be self-directed and monitor their own progress over the term. Furthermore, since the sketchbook is perceived as a space for learning, I felt that it was a safe space for me to experiment with this the new assessment process. As noted by Smith and Henriksen (2016), art students need to make mistakes and develop a "growth mindset" (p. 9) where failure is part of the learning process. Students would submit their sketchbook three times over the course of the year. Every two months, I required them to create 15 to 20 sketches that included drawing and painting from the topic list the class had generated. My criteria invited students to experiment with mediums and with a variety of genres of drawing and painting, hopefully igniting wonderment into their artmaking. I instructed them to bring in their sketchbooks and participate in peer-to-peer formative assessment after the first month. At the end of the two months, students would meet with me to discuss their development as an artist and provide a grade for my mark book.

Students Self-Assess Based on Effort

After I described the sketchbook assignment to my Grade 11 students, I explained that they would self-assess their work. Several students grinned at one another. A few asked if they could give themselves a perfect score. I replied, "Yes" and saw more grins. I no longer felt stress but feared that I had selected a form of assessment that could call into question my abilities as a teacher. During the first peer-to-peer formative assessment, I instructed students to provide feedback regarding skill development and use of mediums. Students randomly paired up with classmates to assure that peers with different skills spoke with each other. Usually my students are reluctant to speak about their work, so I was surprised at how candidly they spoke to one another and how thoroughly they embraced the idea that the feedback was critical to their artistic growth. I circulated, listened to the conversations, and refrained from imposing my opinions. I happily observed that the more skilled students tended to appreciate the work of those students who found drawing or painting difficult.

At the end of the initial grading period, the students participated in a summative self-assessment with me at my desk; they discussed their sketchbooks and provided a final grade for my mark book. I expected students to discuss their progress in the way they had in the peer-to-peer formative assessment. Instead, most students described their progress in terms of effort. After each student revealed his or her mark, the student waited for me to protest. I simply recorded the mark. Students would then return to their seats and compare their marks with their friends, much to my frustration. While the marks were much higher than what I would have graded, I knew that the students were taking more risks, engaging in critical thinking, and applying strategies to solve problems in their sketchbooks. And the feeling

of wonderment began to re-emerge in my classroom as a highly animated group of students provided a new list of topics for their sketchbooks.

Alterations to the Assessment Process With a Class Vernissage

While the peer-to-peer formative assessments created more critical reflection between the students than I had anticipated, I was not satisfied with the summative assessment. Students focused on the final grade instead of seeing the assessment as a tool for growth (Schönau, 2012). Furthermore, unlike the co-mentoring that occurred in the peer-to-peer formative assessments, the summative assessment produced dialogue that resembled what the students thought I wanted to hear to justify their grades. In response, I decided to alter the procedure.

For the second summative assessment, we organized the classroom like a vernissage, with the students' sketchbooks on display. Unlike a class critique that is traditionally used for judging (Barrett, 2000), I decided that the celebratory atmosphere of a vernissage with food, beverages, and background music would create a space that was conducive to conversations. The students formed two groups: artists and critics. The artists sat at tables and waited for critics to sit beside them and review their sketchbooks. I revised the criteria for the conversations to include questions concerning experimentation, failure, and growth. Afterward, the critics wrote ideas for future sketches in the artists' sketchbooks. I invited teachers and administrators to the event. Several teachers had heard that my students were determining a sizeable portion of their term mark and were curious to see the process. Both teachers and administrators expressed amazement concerning my students' insightfulness, their sketchbooks, and how they handled various mediums—pencil, ink, and Sharpies—to create imagery that reflected their personalities. One English teacher commented how certain students' approaches to drawing, such as their use of whimsical or tight lines, reminded her of how these students articulated themselves in her class. After the event, students reflected upon their process and the conversations that they had with their peers and with the other invited guests. The students then wrote a numerical mark in the sketchbooks and handed them in to me. To my amazement, students had lowered their marks significantly. While I had found the sketches to be superior to those in the first iteration of sketchbook assessments, the students felt differently.

Discussions With Students

The students and I reflected upon the self-assessment process. Several students claimed that the process of self-assessment asked them to be more honest with themselves and with the work that they had produced. They had embraced the idea that artists can be their own best critics and accepted that students should not passively conform to a set of ideals set out by the teacher (Bensur, 2002). One student expressed that the self-assessment allowed him to feel proud of his work without worrying about failing or what I thought about it. He stated that he felt that I had not witnessed his determination because he was not as skilled as the other students (Winner & Hetland, 2008). It spoke volumes about how students perceive assessment and my role as gatekeeper concerning the final grade that appears on their report cards. I saw this too when several students insisted that I view their sketchbooks and provide them with my opinion as their teacher because I had not had time to view their sketchbooks during the vernissage. To respect their wish to share their sketchbooks with me, I invited all students to speak with me during the following lunch hour. While only two students dropped by, the entire hour was spent discussing their sketchbooks.

Conclusions

By embracing peer-to-peer formative assessments and self-assessments for summative evaluations, I experienced a personal transformation with regard to my relationship with assessment. Previously, assessment had been a chore that created stress (Gruber & Hobbs, 2002). By experimenting with conversation as a basis for the assessment process, it instead became an opportunity for discussions, learning, and celebration (Huebner, 1999). The students experimented more when they realized that they were in charge of their own learning (Schönau, 2012). Furthermore, for this process to work, I had to believe in my students. I continued to employ the new assessment processes throughout the remainder of the school year. By the final vernissage of sketchbooks, I knew from the growth in the students' work that I had stumbled onto an assessment process that had revitalized my classroom practice and returned that missing sense of wonderment. ■

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