“IT’S KIND OF A GIVE AND TAKE THING”: CONDUCTING ASSESSMENTS BY SITTING DOWN AND TALKING TO STUDENTS

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Abstract

The current climate of evaluation and assessment in the United States is focused on standardized testing and the arts are not being tested in most states as part of this accountability movement. Because the visual arts are an important component of all students’ education, a case is made for assessing visual arts classroom instruction using interviews as authentic means of determining students’ reactions to their art learning. Two studies conducted with middle-school students that used interviewing techniques are discussed and suggestions are made for using such methods in art classrooms to determine students’ conceptions about their own artworks in progress and their final products, and how these were assessed.

In the United States today we are experiencing in education what some refer to as an age of accountability. I would recast this classification as an age of scrutiny. No matter how we refer to current times, one matter that
cannot be debated is a move in public education toward standardized testing. Some educators view such testing as a political necessity that can be used to report how students achieve in terms of general aspects of education. Only seven states in the United States, however, mandate visual arts testing as part of this emphasis on standardized testing that is taking place in other school subjects such as mathematics, language arts, and science (Boughton, 2004). In the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Consortium…., 1994), the arts were enacted into federal legislation by recognizing the arts as a core subject and having equal importance to education as all other school subjects. National standards and then state standards in these core subjects, including the arts, were developed as part of this Act. The current No Child Left Behind Legislation requires that schools demonstrate yearly progress or they may receive sanctions and ultimately be restructured. Pressure is on for teachers to teach to state standardized tests that are required in math and language arts and that subjects that are not being tested, such as socials studies and that the arts, might no longer receive needed resources.

A danger in the arts attempting to join the standards movement as a core academic subject is that assessment of learning in the arts has been justified in a number of ways that do not recognize art as a subject in its own right. Such justifications include study of the arts as contributing to emotional stability, providing better understandings in other domains, leading to a better self understanding and relationship to others, and contributing to cognitive development in other subjects such as language arts and mathematics (Feinberg, 2004). Assessment of learning in the arts also should include cognitive study of visual phenomena, both past and present that comprise the visual arts. Not to assess such student learning in the arts, would be, as Eisner wrote in 1974, “educationally irresponsible ... as teachers we are concerned not simply with bringing about change, but with bringing about desirable change” (p. 13). How can study of the visual arts in grades K-12 be assessed and at the same time be valued both intrinsically and extrinsically for what the arts contribute to each student’s education.
Assessment and evaluation

Whatever the nature of determining success of teaching and learning in an art program, a distinction needs to be drawn between evaluation and assessment. Fineberg (2004) makes a distinction between evaluation, the process of judging the quality of a program’s components, and assessment, the process of determining the cumulative effects of a program’s components on student, teachers, or other specified targeted populations. In an international context, assessment and evaluation can take on a different significance when applied in a variety of countries and defined by a range of scholars (Boughton, Eisner, & Ligtvoet, 1996). However assessment and evaluation are defined, authentic assessments of student learning should be grounded in practices that consider and include teaching strategies, curriculum content, student progress and achievements, and attention to the settings in which teaching and learning take place.

According to Fineberg (2004), there are three kinds of student performance assessment procedures that are employed most frequently in art education. These include testing that relies on verbal or mathematical responses to different items, critical analysis of student performance through portfolios of work or projects, and assessment in which work is examined in a true-to-life context according to various criteria and awarded a mark representing value. Soep (2004) reminds us that art making and artworks are social fields, populated by peers, critics, mentors, and institutions including museums, popular culture industries, and schools. This social character of arts experiences can be applied to assessment and the gamut of assessment practices that include high stakes reviews to fleeting moments when a student comments on another’s works.

Authentic assessments

There recently has been an active interest for art educators to use authentic methods to assess student progress and achievements in art. In fact, the current climate in the United States favors informal teacher judgment of student artwork (Boughton, 2004). Educators often get so caught up with testing that they do not take into consideration that what they want to assess often can be determined by fairly direct means for which a test is not needed.
Assessment instruments that approximate real-life situations and involve integrated, complex, and challenging tasks also can be used to assess individual achievement and higher level thinking skills (Clark & Zimmerman, 2004). According to Worthen and Spandel (1991), standardized tests should represent only a small part of assessing learning, whereas teacher-centered assessment should play the greatest role.

Authentic assessment can be viewed as a process in which students are actively engaged in learning and instruction is an integral part of determining their achievements. Most successful authentic assessment programs require collaboration between teachers and students, although the extent of such collaboration will depend upon the educational setting, nature and diversity of students, the teacher’s philosophy and teaching strategies, and local directives in respect to program content. Authentic assessments in classrooms should be designed to support instruction and be informal, teacher initiated, adapted to local contexts, sensitive to changes in learning, meaningful to students, capable of supplying immediately detailed feedback, and requiring tasks with instructional value. Such assessments also should consider that learners differ in their cultural backgrounds, interests, cognitive styles, rates of learning, patterns of development, abilities, work habits, past experiences, and temperaments.

Such authentic assessments should involve examination of processes as well as products of learning. Students are given opportunities to engage in learning activities that are integrated, complex, and challenging. Most standardized tests contain multiple-choice items and are simply based on recall of factual knowledge, isolated skills, and/or memorization of procedures. They do not require judgment, analysis, reflection, or higher-level skills needed for generating arguments and constructing solutions to problems. Standardized tests, however, are easy to administer and score, take a short time to complete, and carry credibility due to their popularity and long history of use.

**Small scale student assessments**

There are authentic assessment strategies in which student products are assessed with criteria developed by the teacher or in tandem with students.
Such small-scale assessments often are developed from moment to moment in classroom practice and not included the formal accountability movement (Myford & Sims-Gunzenhauser, 2004). There also are joint assessments among peers, as well as individual self-assessments by students. Boughton (2004) suggested that students should be the ones creating portfolio archives, including works in progress, sketches, and their own self-critical reflections. These assessment strategies couple art instruction with self-reflection and play a dominant role in helping students construct meaning from the processes and products of their artwork. These self and peer assessments can result in motivating and transforming art learning (Anderson & Milbrandt, 1998). Assessing student performance through students’ visual products and portfolios of their artwork, responses to items on teacher created tests, research papers and journals, group presentations, and peer critiques are not the only sources of information useful for determining success of an at lesson, a unit of instruction, or an entire art program.

Conversations about art making

In-process, formative assessments by teachers with students during their art making is another important means of assessing what students know and are able to do. When a teacher engages in conversation with a student about his or her artwork, the teacher’s response to a student’s reflections come from a fund of knowledge garnered from experience with looking and talking about art, creating art products, and from a life-time of experience (Clark, Zimmerman, & Zurmuehlin, 1987).

The word assess is derived from the Latin, ad-sedere, meaning “to sit down together.” Ross, Radnor, Mitchell, & Bierton (1993) proposed that teachers and students sit down together regularly through “shared acts of assessment through talk” (p. xi). Students, therefore, should have a voice in assessing their own art activities through conversations with their teachers in which they are able to convey meanings they have embedded in their art products. Students and teachers then can reflect, discuss, and present ideas in authentic classroom contexts in which students are actively seeking solutions to problems that interest and engage them.
The end product of such conversations is perceiving, interpreting, judging, and finally transforming one's own projects. Such a tradition actively engages individual development and self-expression. Students can generate their own projects, with guidance from teachers, based on personal visions and meanings (Soep, 2004). Student and teacher conversations often focus on subject matter, assigned topics, art elements and principles, and skill development (Hafeli, 2004; Kakas, 1991). Teacher suggestions may conflict with what a student is trying to convey in his or her artwork and a negotiated outcome involves collaboration between a student and his or her teacher; sometimes resistance to the teacher suggestions is apparent. According to Hafeli (2004), in a middle school study she conducted teachers’ objectives and goals and students’ art abilities and concerns about self-expression often were in opposition and instructional negotiation was required.

Authentic assessment methods can be both teacher and student-oriented and provide opportunities for students to revise and make changes in their processes and in their final products. Such authentic assessment methods also can provide understanding about a student's strengths and areas of weakness and conceptions and misconceptions through collaboration between a student and his or her teacher (Beattie, 2004). One form of authentic assessment that can provide information about students’ views about their teacher’s instructional strategies and an art program in general are conversations that between students and their teachers as interviews. A teacher can conduct interviews with individual students or in focus groups, by students with each other, or by researchers or others who are outside the classroom context.

Through such interviews, students and teachers can gain valuable insights about course content, assignments, grading procedures, and instructional methods employed in classroom practice. During interviews, students can address issues that they ordinarily would not have an opportunity to discuss in other school contexts (Wilson & Bumgarten, 1993). Sitting down and talking with students individually and in small groups in general, can generate student points of view about their own progress and achievements as well as those of an art program. These results are authentic forms of assessment that can be conducted informally in short conversations.
or in longer periods of time in which structured and/or non-structured questions may be asked of the students.

**IUSAI interviews**

I have used interviews with teachers and students to assess the strengths and weaknesses of art programs and classroom instruction and use of interviews by researchers in psychology and education to study teaching and student learning has suggested questions that can be applied in a variety of settings. In the late 1980s, Gilbert Clark and I interviewed talented art students at the IU Summer Arts Institute (IUSAI), a three week program at Indiana University taught by Fine Arts faculty members (Clark & Zimmerman, 2004). Participants were 20 students attending the Institute during the summers who were nominated by art teachers or other school personnel as artistically talented. All students interviewed were entering grades seven through 11 and ranged from 13 through 17 years of age. Of the 112 students who attended the 1986 and 1987 institutes, 20 students were chosen randomly to be interviewed. The majority of IUSAI students interviewed were from rural areas in Indiana, although five students were from other states and three were from cities outside the United States.

Clark and I conducted interviews following a protocol that allowed participants to respond to questions and add their own concerns as well. The interviews were implemented during out-of-class times, lasted from one and a half to two hours, and were tape recorded and transcribed, and content analysis was used to analyze the data. Results of these interviews included student assessments of their teachers and studying art as well as other topics.

Three images of their regular art teachers emerged. One was supportive, but not challenging. Another was challenging, but failing to reinforce or support accomplishments. The third was supportive, but not offering instruction about how to succeed. One students said, “I get sick of being told everything I do is good. I know it is not perfect, but she’s like ‘It’s great!’ and I never get satisfied with my work.” Another explained, “I work hard and think I’m doing my best, but she always tells me I could do better but won’t tell me how.” Students who lived in other countries reported their art classes
tended to be more crowded, were taught more formally with an emphasis on techniques, were based on specific assignments from workbooks, and were stricter and more rigorous. They also reported they had to pass examinations in both art and art history.

Most students found teachers at the Institute (1) challenged them more than those in their regular schools, (2) taught them to use new media, (3) made them think about what they were doing, (4) made them look more carefully and accurately, and (5) taught them to consider how to express themselves through careful use of techniques. One student reported, “I couldn’t draw … He said I was looking at what it was and my brain was drawing what I know it looks like. Once I learned that, my drawings got one-hundred percent better.” Most students enjoyed working at a high level of difficulty, felt they were doing better work than in their regular art classrooms, and realized how much they had learned.

Most expressed pleasure at the openness of conversations outside of classes, when they shared ideas and critiqued each other’s art work, “One thing, we enjoy ourselves so much that we want to work. I feel if I enjoy myself, I can do more and my work will come out better and better.” A number of students expressed awareness of having learned a lot about themselves socially and through learning new techniques and means of self-expression, “Sometimes, when we’ve been standing up and drawing for two hours straight, that’s kind of tiring and everybody gets all edgy. Later on, you think about it and it’s all clear.” A majority of students mentioned that they appreciated that grades were not given at the Institute. One explained, “I do better when the teacher critiques my work and gives me suggestions. This means more to me than receiving a high grade.”

Successful IUSAI teachers were viewed as supporting and encouraging, rather than demanding conformity and adherence to rules, and providing theme–oriented, accelerated and enriched opportunities for art study. These teachers also were seen as being flexible and allowing students to pursue personal interests, placing emphasis on art skills, having general art knowledge, and being empathetic with students. These teachers were able to communicate effectively and led their talented students to attain high levels of achievement.
Middle school interviews

I conducted the Institute study over a decade and a half ago and am now interested in determining whether contemporary students in middle school art classes held similar views about studying art as those at the Institute. Particularly, I wanted to determine what assessment methods their teachers used and what were her students' reactions to these procedures. I was involved in a research study, from 2002-2004, that was a multiple case study that took place at three sites across the United States. Focus was on how middle school art teachers developed curriculum content and teaching strategies and how regional differences affected teaching and learning in their art classes (Hafeli, Stokrocki, & Zimmerman, 2003). Part of this research involved interviewing middle school students and their teachers about assessment of student artwork, students' views about their art teachers, as well as the impact of their teaching on art learning. The middle school where I conducted research was suburban and the majority of students were Caucasian from middle and higher income families. This was an eighth grade elective art class and with a number of highly able art students. I conducted my qualitative research in a middle school teacher’s art class for two semesters during fall 2001 and spring 2002. The school is located in Indiana and has a population of about 1000 students. It is a newly consolidated school in an arts-oriented college town, in a small, city subdivision. My case study focused on an eighth grade elective art class with 30 students that met for 50 minutes every day for a year. As part of this research, I interviewed the art teacher and most of the students in her class. Student interviews lasted about one half to one hour each. I followed a protocol, although students were able to speak about any topic related to their art class and could discuss topics not included in the interview schedule.

The art teacher had been teaching in Indiana for 17 years at both elementary and middle school levels. In response to questions about awarding grades in art, she explained that she graded her students’ art products on five qualities: effort and attitude, understanding concepts, originality, technical skill, and design qualities. She also wanted her students to have a “base vocabulary so we can talk together and then they also can assess themselves on written assignments.” She admitted she was still
learning about rubrics but had not used them a lot. All her students projects “have thumbnail sketches, brainstorming, then planning, gathering resources, and doing research...students get checklists so they can confirm their work in progress.” If her students are not “happy with their grade on a project they can resubmit their project after I speak with the student and we talk about how to make it better.” All students are required to receive letter grades based on a point system.

I was interested in sitting down with the students and talking with them about how they assessed what and how they were learning about art. Students’ responses to the grading system evidenced they were aware of the grading process and criteria used to evaluate their work. Some of their insights are similar to those of the students in the IUSAI. Students discussed both positive and negative effects of assessment.

One of their assessments involved filling out a self-evaluation form and several echoed one student’s sentiments about her preference for sitting down and talking about her grade on art projects, “I prefer discussion so you know what you did wrong. On a form you just put a check or answer questions.” Another agreed: “A verbal way is sometimes a person’s opinion...but I like it when you can show what you understand.” The general sentiment was that, “I like her [the art teacher] talking to me about grades rather than filling out forms.”

Several did not like self-assessments because “I don’t like grading my own projects. I have a tendency to grade low and I always think I can do better. I’d rather she [the teacher] do the grading.” Other students felt, “When students do evaluations they take advantage and give themselves high grades they do not deserve.” High grades were also described as a disadvantage in one student’s explanation, “You feel guilty if you get an A and it’s not your personal best.”

Negotiation played a large role in how projects were assessed and a vast majority of the students mentioned it as part of in-process grading. One explained, “It’s kind of a give and take thing...I ask her opinion and if I like it I’ll do it. If I have another idea she’ll move on to something easier or harder...we go through the negotiating thing.” Most students agreed that when they needed help they could ask for it, “Asking for help doesn’t mean...
you are stupid, it means you are having problems and need advice.”

One student had a pragmatic view about grading artwork. He realized his art teacher didn’t have time to talk in-depth all the time to the students about grading each of their projects and that “she probably does some of the stuff she does because it’s easier for her and she doesn’t have to grade all those projects from the artists in all of her classes. But, sometimes it’s better to have the kids own opinions on it. Kids know when it is not their best. I think she can tell when I’m not doing my best.”

Students felt they were always able to question the final grade they received on a project. One said: “If I have a question about my grade, like I wonder why it was low or something and then I just ask her, then she can tell you.” On the other hand, sometimes the teacher and the student negotiated the final grade on a project. For example, explaining about a conversation she had with the art teacher, one student told me, “On my mask we talked about it and I didn’t think my mask was good. She asked my opinion about what grade I should give my mask. I said a C+, but she gave me a B for effort. She’s a good grader… not one of those hard teachers where you totally work hard and don’t get a good grade.”

Middle school students generally are at a stage of development where they are interested in developing their own interests and expressing themselves in a variety of contexts. When asked what they learned best in their art class the vast majority mentioned learning to express themselves through visual means, although many also mentioned learning about skill building, planning for their final projects, and gaining knowledge about how to solve problems. One explained: “I learned to express myself in a bunch of ways…you can write your feelings down or you can express them in art forms…I made a mask on how I feel fire and anger and just how angry everything is.” Another stated: “I got to describe myself on the outside and internally like my heart and feelings and that is more important than a grade.”

Through sitting down and talking about their art class and how their artworks were assessed, one student reminded me of the importance of the process of art making and finding meaning: “I learned more about myself. I’m into feeling about something, not talking about it.”
Results and conclusions

In both studies, students generally welcomed art criticism of their work both in process and as final products and enjoyed when teachers spoke to them individually about their accomplishments. They wanted to know what they had to do to make their artwork successful and were willing to work hard to achieve this success. They also found art making a means of self-expression and were able communicate their feelings through visual media. They liked teachers who were encouraging and supporting, had empathy with their students, based their teaching on theme-oriented and enriched activities, and who taught skills and techniques.

The IUSAI students appreciated not being graded and felt that they do better artwork when they did not have to consider being evaluated. The middle schools students were not keen on self-assessments and felt that they did not represent, either positively or negatively, the quality of their artwork. They thought students know when they are performing at their best and valued their teachers when they felt they were assigning fair grades. Hafeli (2000) found similar results about middle school art students who held in high regard being able to negotiate with teachers about their conceptions of artworks in progress as well as their final grades.

The authentic assessments reported here through student interviews were specifically designed for the contexts in which the Institute and the middle school art classes took place and the kinds of students participating in sitting down and talking to the researchers. Such interviews can empower teachers and students and supply teachers with effective tools and approaches for teaching and assessing their students’ art progress and accomplishments (Zimmerman, 1997). Results of the two studies should not be generalized to other populations of middle school students in different contexts; emphasis was on improving teaching and learning in specific art classrooms and in a particular institute program. Although conversations in these two studies were among researchers, teachers, and students, art teachers can interview their own students by sitting down next to them and asking them direct questions about a variety of topics including what their perceptions were about having their artwork assessed. Such interviews are time consuming, although the wealth of information gleaned by “sitting down
next to our students” and engaging them in meaningful dialogues that result in improved teaching and learning is well worth the effort.
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