Introduction to Art Assessment

Monday morning, Isabel Fuentes, ninth- and tenth-grade art teacher at Hamilton High School, found the following memo from the principal in her mailbox.

MEMO
TO: Isabel Fuentes, Art Specialist
FROM: Dr. Brown, Principal
SUBJ: Assessment of State Visual Arts Content Standards

Our school district is requiring that all educators, including art specialists, show significant evidence that their current curriculum is effectively meeting new state standards based on the national voluntary student standards in each of the disciplines. For this reason, you are asked to design and conduct an assessment that will yield evidence of student learning outcomes that meet the state visual arts standards. All assessment results, along with your interpretation of the evidence, will be submitted to the district curriculum specialist for review. If the results of your student assessment do not evidence sufficient learning pertaining to the new standards, then the district will require that your current curriculum be revised, or that a new curriculum, which addresses state standards more precisely, be written.

Ms. Fuentes' immediate reaction? A mixture of frustration and anger. She has worked very hard to get her classes and curriculum in shape. Like many other teachers, despite her best efforts, she frequently feels overwhelmed by the amount of work looming before her.

"Great. One more interruption," she thinks as she rushes down the hall for her first period class. "One more piece of bureaucratic busywork. One more thing to rob me of time I should be giving to my students. I've read this memo three times, now, and I still don't understand what it is he wants us to do. I just have no time for nonsense like this."

Words and phrases like "significant evidence," "state content standards," "assessment," and "learning outcomes" elicit a kind of numbness in Ms. Fuentes. They are far removed from her concerns and the needs of the students facing her at 8:10 a.m. in Room 17B. Her reaction is not unique. For many harried teachers, the world of assessment, with its peculiar jargon and complex rules and regulations, seems to have little bearing on the problems of instructional technique, curriculum, and classroom management they grapple with daily.

Why Bother?

What is assessment? What does it have to do with real teaching? Why does it deserve teachers' time and attention?

Simply defined, *assessment* is the method or process used for gathering information about people, programs, or objects for the purpose of making an evaluation. Assessments occur at the classroom, district, state, and national levels. Every educator, regardless of discipline emphasis, knows from experience the effect assessment outcomes can have on his or her students, program, or school curriculum. National assessments, for example, and their evaluation of what students across the nation do not know and are not able to do, have, in many cases, elicited public outrage. Public opinion has proven a powerful force in reforming the content and emphasis of the educational enterprise. In an educational setting, assessment provides a powerful tool for dictating institutional goals, initiating educational reform, and restructuring programs from the top down.

Classroom teachers daily make decisions about student achievement, the effectiveness of instructional methods and materials, and curriculum soundness. Students' progress depends very much on teachers making wise decisions about these issues. Information, on which to base sound decisions, needs to be gathered. Assessment is the means for gathering the information required in the classroom and beyond. Research has shown that most teachers spend nearly one half of their work day doing assessment-related work.[1] Understanding assessment and using the strategies and procedures suggested in this text will give art educators the tools they need to take the guesswork out of such decisions.

Finally, and perhaps less well understood, is the extent to which effective assessment techniques can improve classroom instruction, empower students, heighten student interest and motivation, and provide teachers with ongoing feedback on student progress. An effective art assessment program enables the art educator to diagnose student strengths and weaknesses early and on a regular basis, to monitor student progress, to improve and adapt instructional methods in response to assessment data, and to use information about students individually and as a group to manage the classroom more effectively.

In short, effective classroom assessment is not a meaningless task that robs teachers of valuable teaching time. Rather, it is an integral component of

quality teaching. Preassessing for prior knowledge, building on prior knowledge through instruction, reassessing, reteaching based on assessment findings, and final assessing are all part of sound classroom teaching practices. Properly handled, classroom assessment does not interrupt instruction, but blends seamlessly with the teaching process for the purpose of learning.

Recent Developments in Theory and Research

Just as assessment alters the educational system, so the educational system alters assessment. In response to reforms in education, the assessment community is itself engaged in a reform movement. The field of tests and measurements, for example, which witnessed steady growth and evolution through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is currently experiencing rapid and sometimes radical transformation fueled largely by an increased understanding of human growth and development and innovations in computer technology.[2]

As instruction today increasingly emphasizes thinking and reasoning processes, metacognitive processes, and other types of knowledge, assessment experts are responding with strategies for assessing knowledge related to content, processes, conditions, self, motor skills, attitudes, preconceptions, misconceptions, and expanded notions of intelligence and creativity. Today, the "thinking curriculum," with its emphasis on higher-level cognitive abilities, is seen not only as a means for achieving educational goals but also as the right of every student, regardless of intellectual ability.

Chart 1 (see page 132) identifies sample processes and products related to each visual arts discipline: aesthetics, art criticism, art history, and art production. The listing is neither exhaustive nor presented

Terms to Know

alternative assessment Assessment that deviates from traditional pencil-and-paper item formats.

authentic assessment Assessment that uses realistic, meaningful, open-ended problems, true to a discipline.

didactic assessment Assessment that informs or teaches during the actual assessment. Didactic assessment encourages students to make new connections while revealing exiting knowledge.

dynamic assessment Assessment that intimately links testing to teaching. A teach-test-reteach format is integral to dynamic assessment. Examiners look for obstacles that hinder the performance, mediate, then reassess.

Terms to Know

As the assessment landscape expands more rapidly into the field of art education, the art educator is confronted almost daily with assessment terms. Some of those listed here and at other points in this book will be new to the art educator, and others will refer to assessment practices intrinsic to the visual arts.

assessment Method or process used for gathering information about people, programs, or objects for the purpose of evaluation.

assessment guideline Formal preparation of an assessment.

attainment targets or exit criteria Less formal than the term "learning objectives," these terms encompass not only intended student outcomes but also teaching toward those outcomes.

criteria Characteristics of something by which its quality can be judged or a decision about it can be made.

criterion-referencing A type of score referencing system that compares a student's score on a performance to a whole repertoire of behaviors, which are, in turn, referenced to the content and skills of a discipline. Criterion-referenced assessments do not compare students' performances to that of other students but to the standard of the criterion.

evaluation Judgments of value concerning the worth of any aspect of the educational enterprise, including student learning, teacher effectiveness, program quality, and educational policy.

formative assessment Refers to judgments made during the implementation of a program that are directed toward modifying, learning, or improving the program before it is completed.

learning objectives What students should be able to know, do, value, or feel at the completion of an instructional segment.[3]

metacognitive skills A cluster of complex skills that refers to awareness and understanding of oneself as a learner.

multiple validations Assessments made over time.

preassessment Assessment implemented prior to beginning an instructional program for the purpose of establishing a knowledge base.

process Act of carrying something out; a series of established and orderly steps.

product Something that is produced as a result of a process or procedure.

standards Qualifying thresholds of what is adequate for some purpose established by authority, custom, or consensus.[4] Distinction should be made between content standards and achievement standards. Content standards specify exit learning criteria and achievement standards specify achievement levels pertaining to exit learning criteria.

summative assessment Evaluates a completed program, procedure, or product.

1.1 Australian high-school students assembling portfolios. St. Peter's Lutheran School, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. Photo: Donna Kay Beattie.

in a formal hierarchy or sequence. One thing the chart illustrates well is the crossover of processes among the disciplines. Practically speaking, this means that the art educator has many different opportunities for analyzing, observing, and measuring students' procedural knowledge. In addition, as the chart demonstrates, discipline-specific processes require that students use the most commonly identified complex reasoning processes: comparing, classifying, inducting, deducting, analyzing errors, constructing support, abstracting, analyzing perspectives, making decisions, investigating, inquiring, problem solving, and inventing.[5] Additional core thinking skills, based on those identified for cross-curricular assessment purposes in Queensland, Australia, are found in Appendix A (see page 131).

The Basics: What the Art Educator Needs to Know

Little of value is learned from assessment practices that are haphazard, inequitable, unrelated to learning objectives, or unjustifiable in terms of time required and information gleaned. Validity issues, such as test appropriateness, scoring, ethics, and equity are not esoteric issues of interest only to assessment scholars and theorists. In fact, they are intimately related to the everyday working of individual classrooms. Attentiveness to certain key, underlying principles, such as those listed in the following pages, will help the art educator ensure that he or she is moving toward effective, sound, and fair assessment practices.

One final, cautionary note: before attempting to address these principles, the art educator should first examine his or her teaching methods to be sure that they promote the types of learning prescribed in the principles. Planning a classroom assessment program responsive to these principles thus will have the added benefit of enriching the entire art curriculum.

Assessment Hint

If you are considering establishing a quality assessment program, then do not let the principles listed on the following pages overwhelm you. The assessment tools you currently use in your art classroom or studio, such as the art portfolio, the visual journal, or simple, quick questions during instruction, may well address many of these principles. In addition, not all of the principles are applicable to every grade level. You can decide which ones will work best for you and your students.