

Leslie Gates

Reframing Assessment in Art Education

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Editor's Introduction

As I introduce this second book on assessment in the *Art Education in Practice* series, I recall what I wrote in 1997 in my introduction to the first, *Assessment in Art Education* by Donna Kay Beattie. I described how, while teaching a graduate seminar in art education curriculum, art teachers listed what they hoped their students would learn. I described the aha! moment when, asked how they might determine the extent to which their students had learned this, they surprised themselves with their own answer, “I guess we could figure out a way to check. Maybe something like a test.” It had never occurred to them that they might assess student learning. Most of these art teachers were required to assign grades for art, but when pressed, they reported that the way they determined grades was pretty much what they called “subjective,” and mostly based on students’ enthusiasm for and skill in art-making.

These days, thirty-some years after that discussion, art educators are no longer surprised by the idea of assessment as an integral component of curriculum and instruction. Author Leslie Gates explains that we now live in an assessment and accountability culture. Rigorous academic standards, annual test-

ing, and the use of test scores as measures of institutional and teacher effectiveness are consistent with a pervasive societal tendency to evaluate everything from a slice of pizza to a visit to one’s primary care physician. Within the context of education and schooling, and specifically in the art program, “How did we do?” or “How are we doing?” takes on many forms mostly dependent on school district and state requirements and practice.

Donna Kay Beattie’s book was a welcome addition to the literature on assessment in art education. It addressed the need to “figure out a way to check” student learning. Teachers aligned Beattie’s strategies and formats with their lists of what students ought to know and be able to do.

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Reframing Assessment in Art Education comes at a time when we need to do just that. Shifts in assessment practices necessarily follow shifts in how we think about learners and learning. In addition, assessment must align with what we believe is important for students to learn. Earlier, knowledge and skills took center stage as art teachers created curriculum and aligned assessment strategies. Increasingly, however, art educators joined others in edu-

cation to place emphasis on student understanding of concepts or “big ideas.” Teaching for understanding of art and art-making requires rethinking how we design curriculum and instruction; it requires that we rethink assessment as well. Evidence of understanding shows itself in certain kinds of habits and propensities. Once we seriously consider the habits and propensities associated with making and appreciating art, we recognize the need to teach toward their development. And, of course, if we believe that it is important for students to develop them, we need to construct ways to determine how this development is progressing.

Leslie Gates has been thinking and writing about assessment for many years. This book, long in development, shares important ways to reframe assessment as we teach for understanding and for the development of certain habits, propensities, and dispositions. The author offers a deep and insightful consideration of feedback—something art teachers are expected to provide but for which they have received little guidance. Throughout the text, a reader senses the author’s profound respect for the student as a partner in the assessment process. One also is aware of her high regard

for art teachers and her invitation to see the book as a catalyst for further investigation, conversation, and collaboration. My suspicion is that, as with its predecessor, this significant book on assessment will find its way into the hands of both novice and experienced art teachers who will be bookmarking and annotating its pages for decades to come.

Marilyn G. Stewart

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Author Biography

Leslie Gates is Professor of Art Education at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. She earned her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Maryland, College Park.

Leslie's scholarship primarily focuses on assessment and student-centered pedagogy. The topics of her presentations, publications, and graduate courses often emerge from educators' problems of practice, reflecting her long-standing commitment to provide educators with relevant professional learning opportunities.

Leslie's artist books, drawings, and text-based sculptures attempt to render the sacred aspects of everyday experiences. She is on a never-ending scavenger hunt for delights. Leslie and her family live in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

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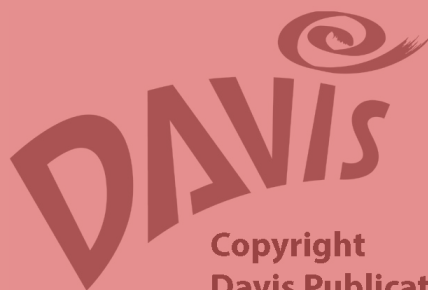
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When I interviewed for my first full-time teaching job, an administrator asked me how I grade students' artwork. I pulled an example scoring tool out of my bag and explained how I would adapt it for the elementary-age students at that school. I got the job. The administrator who posed that question later told me I was the only candidate they interviewed with an answer to that question. I was twenty-two years old at the time, and my ability to answer that question was not the result of my own robust understanding of assessment; it was because my confusion and curiosity about assessment had led me to Donna Kay Beattie's book *Assessment in Art Education* (Davis Publications, 1998) just a few months prior to the interview. The example scoring tool I pulled out in my interview was based on the rating scale on page 66 of Beattie's book.

About a year later, I met Donna Kay Beattie at the Governor's Institute for Art Educators in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Donna Kay was one of the featured speakers during this weeklong professional development opportunity for visual art, music, dance, and theater teachers from across the state. The venue where this weeklong professional development took place

had a large porch with many wooden rocking chairs on it. One afternoon, I saw Donna Kay sitting on a rocking chair and no one sitting beside her. I sat down. I thanked her for helping me get my first teaching job, and we struck up a conversation.

The time I spent sitting beside Donna Kay is etched in my memory. When I was a young teacher, I had read her book, and my first year teaching art to 820 elementary students left me with some assessment dilemmas that her book did not address, such as: What do you do when a student doesn't follow the project prompt or directions and makes an amazing piece of art? How should I grade that? What do you do when a student follows the prompt and all the directions but produces an uninspired work of art? How should I grade that? And could I do any meaningful assessment work with 820 students?

Donna Kay smiled at me. I relaxed a little, realizing she sensed my questions were asked out of earnestness. She told me that the longer I taught, the more I would learn to trust both myself and the subjective decisions I would make when I encountered an assessment dilemma. Like Donna Kay predicted, the dilemmas persisted, and I began trusting

myself a little more as I navigated each one. It's a tremendous privilege to be tasked with writing a new book on assessment that will replace Donna Kay's book in this series.

Notable Changes

This book focuses on individual and group student achievement in visual arts classrooms. Like all books, this one is an artifact of the context and time in which it is written. In the almost thirty years since Donna Kay Beattie's book was published, many things in the field have changed. The change most relevant to this book is the assessment and accountability culture that is now present across the United States.¹ The standards-based reform movement followed by federal policies (for example, No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, Race to the Top Act of 2009, and Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015) resulted in states:

- adopting more rigorous academic standards,
- mandating annual testing in certain subjects,
- using test scores as a measure of school effectiveness, and
- developing metrics for teacher evaluation based, in part, on student test scores.

In addition, corporate models of accountability have influenced the policies that govern

publicly funded institutions, like schools. Measurable outcomes are driving decision-making and funding in ways they were not thirty years ago.

A Culture of Assessment and Accountability

In a culture of assessment and accountability, schools prioritize what they are required to assess and report to gain necessary funding and other supports. Parent-teacher conferences, faculty meetings, and school board meetings now regularly include presentations of data related to student outcomes and school performance measures. The language and practices of assessment have become commonplace in public schools.

The impact of this assessment culture on art education is mixed. Because large-scale, standardized methods for student learning in the arts are not mandated, art educators are somewhat insulated from direct forms of accountability for student learning in art classrooms. Even with state-mandated standards and a district curriculum in place, many art educators have autonomy over what happens in their classrooms to a degree their peers in tested subject areas do not.

The autonomy art educators experience is not without limits. The current accountability measures present in federal policies require states to formalize the relationship between student learning and how educators, including art educators, are evaluated. In many cases, individual art teachers are required to identify and report student learning outcomes for one or more lessons and student performance on those outcomes as part of their annual reviews. In systems that use merit pay models, student performance measures are sometimes included in the formula used to determine each teacher's salary.

Choosing or designing a lesson that concretely demonstrates student learning can be a challenge. Art educators who are not well-versed in assessment, and who work for administrators unfamiliar with how learning in the arts is often demonstrated, may find themselves choosing what to teach based on what is easiest to assess and report. Unfortunately, the concepts and skills that are easiest to assess and report are often the least interesting things about learning in the arts.

The Call to Assess What Matters Most

Over the last decade, the National Art Education Association published a series of

white papers on assessment that capture the shifting reality of assessment in schools in the United States, and specifically, in art classrooms.² In her white paper, *Assess What Matters Most: Recommendations for Gathering Information About Student Learning*, Mary Elizabeth Meier wrote, “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.”³ One of the major goals in this book is to support art educators in assessing what matters most. This book offers a wide view of what assessment in the arts could be within the rigid, formulaic, and uncreative assessment climate in which art education currently finds itself.

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National Standards
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One other notable change in the field is a major update to the original National Standards, published in 1994. The current National Core Arts Standards, published in 2014, are evidence of the philosophical shift about learning in the arts that has taken place in the decades in between the two sets of standards, and in between Donna Kay Beattie's book and this one. The National Coalition for Core Arts Standards' conceptual framework document states: “The format and design of

this new set of standards will *reposition the way in which the field interacts with standards and assessments*. No longer will we talk about standards as lists of what students should know and be able to do. Rather, we will talk about standards as measurable and attainable learning events based on artistic goals”⁴ [emphasis added].

As of this writing, the standards have been adopted in forty states and the Department of Defense.⁵ Despite the reality that standards will continue to evolve over time, I have chosen to integrate and use the current National Visual Arts Standards throughout this book. Using the standards allows me to illustrate the necessary connection between goals for learning and assessment, using goals that have been authored and broadly accepted by art educators across the United States.

Overview of Chapters

The first three chapters of this book provide a foundation for a student-centered assessment practice. Chapter 1 draws on the Latin root word of assessment, *assidēre*, to envision an assessment practice from the position of “sitting beside” (rather than across from or away from) students. Chapter 2 offers work-

ing definitions for many assessment terms and outlines the components of a sound assessment practice as one that is aligned to instructional goals, meaningful to students and teachers, and responsive to the realities and constraints of classroom life. Chapter 3 delves into the mechanics of designing assessments that are aligned to clear instructional goals and supported with meaningful learning activities.

The next pair of chapters, 4 and 5, both relate to assessing habits and dispositions. Chapter 4 provides a rationale for assessing habits and dispositions, and Chapter 5 offers strategies for doing so. Chapter 5 also takes on the role of documentation and reflection in assessment and methods for sharing student achievement.

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Chapters 6 and 7 are focused on feedback as a vital aspect of an assessment practice. Chapter 6 outlines qualities of effective feedback and describes the relationships between feedback and assessment. Chapter 7 attends to the relational nature of feedback and offers three practices that can help educators foster a culture of feedback in their classrooms by engaging students in the work of assessment.

The final two chapters, Chapters 8 and 9, offer student-centered approaches to grading. Chapter 8 defines grading, outlines how specific elements of the definition can inform our practice, and includes strategies for de-emphasizing grading when and where possible. Chapter 9 focuses on aligning grading practices to instructional goals and allowing the realities and constraints of our classroom to inform our decisions. This chapter includes specific approaches, strategies, and tools teachers can use to assign grades to student work.

A Personal Note

The process of writing this book changed my own assessment practice in real time. I wrote this book as this book rewrote me. Writing is a unique way to wrestle with an idea, and the wrestling has proven to be transformative for me and my assessment practice. I worked many of these ideas out on paper and in my classroom simultaneously, and I suspect I will continue to work and rework these ideas until my career ends. I hope this book offers you the same invitation it offered me: a chance to slow down, to ponder your assessment practice, and permission and encouragement to revise as needed.

Notes

- 1 Jack Schneider and Ethan L. Hutt, *Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, & Rankings Undermine Learning (but Don't Have To)* (Harvard University Press, 2023).
- 2 Debrah Sickler-Voigt, "Assessment Papers for Art Education," National Art Education Association, 2018–2023. <https://www.arteducators.org/resources/assessment-papers>.
- 3 Mary Elizabeth Meier, *Assess What Matters Most: Recommendations for Gathering Information About Student Learning*, *Assessment Papers for Art Education*, Section I (National Art Education Association, July 18, 2018).
- 4 National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, *National Core Art Standards: A Conceptual Framework for Arts Learning*. (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014), 7.
- 5 For an updated list on State Adoption of New Arts Education Standards since 2014, see <https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/map>.

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