

### A Picture's Worth A Thousand Words; Tracking Student Growth Evidence In The Visual Arts Pamelia Valentine



"I don't think I learned that much this semester," began one of the self-assessments I was reviewing. I was dumbfounded! He didn't learn much? Doesn't he remember coming in here drawing really lousy stick figures, I thought? How can he think he "didn't learn much" when, after 12 weeks of study, he finally got 100% on his Elements and Principles of art test? How could he possibly decide that he "didn't learn that much" when he now knows the major art history movements and time-periods? When does he think he learned all about art styles and gained his deep understanding of twenty historically important artists? What did he mean by, "I didn't learn that much"?

It was 2003 and I had just realized my lifelong quest of becoming a Visual Arts teacher after teaching U.S. History for three years. I had used self-assessments for both the students and myself with what I thought was great success. Students had the opportunity to evaluate their own learning and to reflect on improvements they had made or still needed to work toward.

I carried several general ideas about educating middle-level students into the art room as well. Learning logs helped students organize and record their progress through the curriculum. I brought problem solving and evidence-gathering strategies into the discussions about art and I felt like the students were learning and growing as a result of their visual arts experience. But I had clearly not provided my students or myself with tools to evaluate or measure their progress accurately and reliably. I was still dismayed when students didn't think they had, "learned that much." It was obvious I needed to create and implement a more effective way of tracking student growth.

But, there was a problem. I could not find examples of assessments that made sense for the breadth of learning my students were engaged in. In fact, I surmised, most elective classes probably faced the very same dilemma! In order to track and reveal the steep learning curve in knowledge gained, I would need to provide tangible evidence and actual data directly connected to the work we were doing in the classroom. This insight led me to ponder how other subject areas tracked student growth.

The math teachers had their weekly quiz, the science teachers could rate lab performance improvements, the language arts teachers tracked vocabulary acquisition but I was teaching a subject that wasn't used as an exemplar in most of the books I read about tracking student growth. Even in statewide testing the arts assessments were not reported in the news headlines. So who cared if students took an elective class in which they could exhibit growth and learning? It turned out that even if no one else was interested, I cared. I wanted my students to understand that they were learning important things in art, that they could track and articulate their own progress, and that it mattered.

In 2005, I decided to have students create preliminary drawings BEFORE I began instruction. Eight weeks later, I laid the beginning drawing beside their beautiful Graphite projects and had them complete a self-assessment based on their improvements. It was eye opening! The

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students correctly identified their areas of weakness and their enormous growth over the course of nine weeks. Viola: I had discovered one way to show student growth!

I implemented Washington State visual arts standards, taught students the elements and principles of design, and developed ways to reveal the creative process as projects unfolded. Students were involved in cognitively complex tasks and engaged in their learning, but I still had this nagging feeling that I wasn't tracking student growth over time in a clear and efficient manner.

I began to make changes and to intentionally track real student progress with quantifiable evidence as I moved to standards-based grading systems. On the new learning graphs, students could see the true incremental growth they were making over time and also have a tangible goal to shoot for as stated on the unit rubric. Every piece of learning was shown on the graphs and all projects were tracked with photographic evidence.

Today, my students still create a preliminary drawing on the first day of class. In addition, they take a pre-test on Principles and Elements of design and they fill out an information sheet about their expectations and their current arts knowledge. The intake form includes a brief history of their art experiences to date and their interests in art and the world.

I gather multiple data points throughout the semester and students are responsible for tracking their own progress. They keep graphs of their assessment scores; create video and photographic timelines of their individual artwork, research online via cell-phone, iPad and computer and, of course— they create beautiful artwork in class. The big difference as the semester comes to an end is that they know HOW it happened and I do too.

I have continued to use self-assessments but now my students work directly from their own goal sheets and rubrics that show the learning progression in both skills and knowledge. Students give their own opinion and reflection of their progress and provide photo evidence that backs up their conclusions. But it doesn't stop there. We work together to create an authentic body of work that reveals concrete, irrefutable student growth and shows authentic, sometimes dramatic changes. For the students, it helps them put their learning in context. For me, it is a wonderful and infinitely useful tool for reflection and professional growth.

In this TPEP evaluation driven day and age, evidence and data are the Holy Grail of my effectiveness as a teacher. Finding multiple ways to showcase the student growth as a result of taking an art class seemed an insurmountable task but when I considered where I wanted students to be as a result of instruction in the arts, I was able to show both artifacts of student growth and actual data evidence.

A student who came back to visit after going off to college confirmed the value of this approach. "Wow, I knew I was learning a ton of information and I was writing better as a result of our weekly art history essays," he said, but I didn't realize that I had gained so much practical information that I would put to use in my college art appreciation class. I had your class as a



high school freshman and I can't look at art without noticing how the artist used the elements of art and the principles of design.

"The other students were struggling to understand why Jackson Pollack caused such a stir in the art world when he created his first 'drip paintings.' I knew from our freshman art class that when an artist does something unique they gain notoriety and cause a change in the way other people think about creating and experiencing art. When I raised my hand and gave my answer, the professor smiled the biggest smile and said, 'Somewhere in your life, you have had a pretty good teacher or two!' I came by to let you know, that guy was talking about you!"

Of course tracking student growth looks good on my evaluations but more importantly, it looks good on my student's faces. Students know when they have kept track of their own progress that they actually do learn important information in their art class. They also understand there are many ways to continue to grow and reflect on their learning long after they have left the art room at Oakland Bay Junior High School.

Watch Pamela's video... <http://tpep-wa.org/student-growth-case-studies>

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