

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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**School/Grade:** Byram Hills High School

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SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

**Context:**

As a high school art teacher, my instruction is often two-fold. First, my students need to learn and practice the requisite set of skills needed to create art because these skills usually define the class. Also, these skills define the common language we use in order to create and communicate with each other. Second, students use practical experiences for self-expression and personal experience. I believe that these ideas are two separate proficiencies that need to coexist in order for students to get a rich and robust understanding of the curriculum.

So that got me thinking, and questioning. Like most teachers, I've made the assumption that students understand any and all direction or content that I may present. These assumptions are based on informal conversations, interactions, student progress and portfolios. Secondly, in all my art classes we have a number of critiques, quizzes, and final projects that rate student performance. Most of these experiences are evaluated according to a rubric that the Byram Hills Fine Art Department developed collectively several years ago. For the most part the system works, but I had some reservations that all my formal assessments were at or near the end of the experience.

I then wondered, "Could I create a series of short "formative" assessments that could look for language and understanding in 'real time'?" In this way I could better tailor my instruction to the needs of the class or the individual students in a class. I also wondered, "What do these assessments look like and how can I best use them?"

Inspired by conversations with my facilitator, I collaborated with my high school colleagues, Jayne Karlin and Lila Horn, to create a "RATIONALE."

*We said: Students in the visual arts produce work of various qualities; we believe that students oftentimes lack the ability to articulate and internalize what is technically and conceptually strong artwork. We would like students to have a better understanding of how to improve their artwork through various feedback methods. We would like to explore multiple methods of feedback that will help students make more mature and appropriate decisions that will strengthen their processes.*

Jayne and Lila wanted to focus on the "terminal" feedback of *grading rubrics*. I decided to study ways to gather and use quality feedback using "snapshot" types of formative assessments. Moreover, I wanted to see if it improved student understanding and the overall quality of the work.

## Action Plan:

The question we decided to explore was: What are the characteristics of successful feedback methods that help to motivate and enable students to grow authentically and improve as visual artists?

I specifically wanted to know, *What is a good approach? What can it look like? Whom am I observing and for how long?*

The District course, *Investigators of Practice*, created a structure off which I could build. I decided to gather and look at the data within the available literature. This was used to provide background information for my inquiry project. With the support of my colleagues and facilitators, I began looking for the best ways to collect data, code it, and analyze the results to guide my questioning.

I then asked, “What is the latest research on feedback and assessment for the visual arts?”

For the current methods, I use:

- Anecdotal Records
- Portfolios
- Photos
- Rubrics
- Critiques
- Gallery Presentations and Shows

I then gathered a number of useful articles from the Internet that supported the validity of my inquiry.

I read a really great article from a website called *fairtest.org* which effectively summed up the value of gathering student data throughout the process. Moreover, I thought that it provided the best direction that I should go in.

*“...formative assessment occurs when teachers feed information back to students in ways that enable the student to learn better, or when students can engage in a similar, self-reflective process. If the primary purpose of assessment is to support high-quality learning (principle one in Principles and Indicators for Student Assessment Systems), then formative assessment ought to be understood as the most important assessment practice.*

*The evidence shows that high quality formative assessment does have a powerful impact on student learning...(research done by) Black and William recognize that standardized tests are very limited measures of learning. Formative assessment is particularly effective for students who have not done well in school, thus narrowing the gap between low and high achievers while raising overall achievement.”*

While collecting support material, I also spent some time collecting raw data from my classroom through three completed projects. I decided to create an index card for all of my students and divide these cards by their respective classes. I kept a formal/informal log of class projects.

These logs included raw records of important, yet informal data that I thought might provide meaningful information. I wrote down anything that I thought might be significant to my students’ learning. I included information on student absences during project due dates and occurrences of missed homework. I looked at the understanding of specific skills & processes and the quality of finished work. I made notes of those

students who were dealing with concerns outside the classroom. For example, two students unexpectedly lost relatives during the semester. It was interesting to me how each student dealt with his and her grief. When faced with this stressful situation, Student A required extra time to complete assigned tasks. Student B found comfort in completing assigned work within the timeframe. I was initially surprised at how different Students A and B managed difficult situations. However, after looking through my “messy data” I discovered the best method each student used to best handle stresses and deadlines.

Throughout the semester I continued to record my data and think about what I could learn about what my students were learning from this ongoing feedback. I will continue to collect data that can be used to better differentiate instruction now and in the future.

## **Results:**

Overall, I discovered that keeping a mini-record of student progress and understanding served my students and me well during these informal one-on-one discussions. I was able to isolate students that were habitually late with classwork, identify repeated mistakes in process-related techniques. I think that I was better informed before offering advice to students on artistic direction based on information that I recorded on my index cards. Moreover, instructional clarification developed during the lesson could better illuminate concepts and techniques the next time I introduced the lesson.

In one of my classes I also developed an exit interview form. It was designed as a specific formative tool that students could fill out during a pivotal point in my lesson. Students checked off the boxes of the things they were still not sure of. This again provided me with some current and effective re-tracings of what went on in my *classroom / studio* during that day in a much broader yet formal way. Again, I liked the ability to tailor the “feedback assessment” to one particular part of the learning process. I similarly designed my forms based on some of my informal questions and discussions I was recording with my interview cards. I thought that this sheet worked better than group quizzing or polling students individually about his or her understanding of art vocabulary and technical process. I now wanted to know if they really understood the language well enough for more aesthetic discussions.

Art classrooms have the challenge of bringing together students of different technical and conceptual levels. As an art teacher, I make sure that students have the technical acumen that can be applied to create thoughtful artworks. Artwork may look good, but I think it’s as important that students know that they can infer meaning through their creations. I’m wondering what ways I could gather data in index-cards that promotes useful aesthetic assessment. I think that the card process could be even more effective if I were able to explore the subtle intellectual qualities of good artwork.

## **Implications:**

Overall, I liked “investigating” using this particular approach because I was much more focused on modes and value of improvement rather than a grade. My initial goals were attained.

1. I identified the characteristics of successful feedback and then field-tested student progress through informal and formal index card conversations.
2. I gathered and coded data to effectively develop an exit card-targeting student learning in technique and concept.

Working through this process I learned that there are several reflective and formative ways student data can be collected for applied instruction. From the student sample I used, a variety of formative assessments allow me to much better tailor my instruction to my students' individual and collective needs. I found out that good teachers actively pursue and employ similar approaches in almost every type of classroom.

I also discovered that when skills, tasks and techniques were specific and definitive, my introductory level students performed very well. However, students were successful, but not as comfortable, at expressing inference and subjective thought during critiques. I found that students were still a little less sure when asked about the conceptual qualities. Even when exemplars were offered, a few students seemed less enthusiastic at answering an open-ended question.

I'm now thinking: what kinds of formative, yet open-ended, questions could encourage multiple interpretations and answers about the meaning of an artwork. As I move forward, I will wonder about what ways I can encourage students to better express what they think aesthetically.