

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

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SUMMARY OF *INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE* ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context

At Byram Hills High School, much of my work involves teaching beginning, intermediate, and advanced level sculpture and ceramics classes. I also teach a foundation level studio art class, yearbook production and, occasionally, drawing and painting.

One aspect of teaching I find especially challenging is grading student work. While I perform diagnostic and formative assessment, grading is largely product based and summative. While the application of good work habits will typically yield a product that meets learning targets, summative grading fails to capture important artistic processes that we want our students to learn and demonstrate. For example, a summative assessment might not measure how a student planned, explored options, or solved problems. While I often give progress grades to help students stay on track with assignments, they want and need more frequent grades for their performance. As I attempt to teach students to think like artists, I struggled with the question of how to measure--and grade--their learning more broadly. The Studio Habits of Mind seem like a possible answer.

Developed out of research conducted by Harvard University, the Studio Habits of Mind “describe eight dispositions students are taught so that they learn to think like artists”

(<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/the-studio-thinking-project>). They include

- Envision
- Express
- Observe
- Develop Craft
- Engage & Persist
- Stretch & Explore
- Reflect
- Understand Art Worlds

Action Plan

My initial research question was **How can I use the Studio Habits of Mind to assess student performance?**

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I realized that before I could begin to assess students based on the Studio Habits of Mind, I needed to make them a more visible and integral part of the classroom culture. In the same way Kristin Budden and Steve Borneman have their chemistry students ask themselves, “How have I grown as a scientist today,” I sought to use the studio habits as a framework for students to ask, “How have I grown as an artist?”

Among the many available visuals for the Studio Habits, I chose to print and display posters in my room (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Studio Habits of Mind Posters



The posters helped promote discussion of what habits students were using at various points in their artistic process. Another key factor in my project was the research art colleagues like David McMichael were doing on choice-based art education. As an art department, we visited the choice-based classrooms at a neighboring school district at the beginning of the year and so the question of how much choice to afford students was often on my mind. To think like an artist, students need autonomy to determine what they make. But what’s the “right” amount? Can there be too much choice?

Several presentations from the 2019 National Art Education Association convention also crossed my desk. One was from a presenter named Connie Shoemaker, the Western Region Secondary Art Educator of the Year in 2018. She writes, “Just say no to grades (sort of)... Grades can stifle creativity, innovation, and risk taking. Since grading is still required... I only grade what is really important--studio habits and engagement through portfolios and conferences.” I reached out to her and scheduled a web conference, where she discussed with me her Studio Habits grading practices. The other presentation concerned using Standards-Based grading in the art classroom, which I’ll discuss later.

I was also drawn to research around the issue of empowerment. An article entitled, “The Holy Trinity of Self Direction: Self Management, Self Monitoring, and Self Modifying,” relates strongly to what an artist does and to those executive function skills that I think students need to build. I had also taken an Innovative Designs for Education (IDE) class on Executive Function that influenced my thinking. Another article entitled “National Core Art Standards Meets the Studio Habits of Mind” argues that the

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Studio Habits are an excellent framework for teaching students self-direction and problem solving.

I focused my investigations on two classes: a full-year Advanced Sculpture and 3D Design class and a semester-long Ceramics II class. Both of these courses are structured to allow students a lot of choice and opportunities for putting the Studio Habits into action.

Results

Advanced Sculpture & 3D Design class

After introducing the Studio Habits of Mind, I had my Advanced Students write about those that they think they practice and what they think they need to work on.

Unsurprisingly, they identified Developing Craft as something they practice and Understanding Art Worlds as something they need to work on.

In February, I had them rate themselves on the studio habits by comparing their last two projects (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Mid-Year Survey

Considering the last 2 projects (shoe project and current project), how would you rate your performance in the following areas:

SHOE PROJECT	Rating			
Preparation (doing research, doing sketches, coming up with ideas, gathering materials)	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Stretching and Exploring (ambitiousness, taking chances, trying new things)	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Engaging & Persisting (getting right to work, being self motivated, managing time, solving problems as they arise)	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Developing craft (technical skill, attention to detail, willingness to revise)	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent

CURRENT PROJECT	Rating			
Preparation (doing research, doing sketches, coming up with ideas, gathering materials)	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Stretching and Exploring (ambitiousness, taking chances, trying new things)	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Engaging & Persisting (getting right to work, being self motivated, managing time, solving problems as they arise)	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Developing craft (technical skill, attention to detail, willingness to revise)	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent

On this assessment, most students rated themselves Good or Excellent in all areas, so I don't believe it was a very accurate assessment, but it did serve as another tool to raise their awareness of what behaviors are important. I did observe subtle shifts in student behavior after this assessment. While I have always

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encouraged students to do a project of their choice if they finish an assignment early, the Studio Habits promote an “artist mindset” that helped them to understand that during “free” time they were expected to continue working on their own.

Several students wanted to carve soap and one opted to carve stone. The students who carved soap were surprised by how difficult it is to do, because it can easily break. They discovered that if the soap broke, it can’t be fixed: they had to change their ideas and keep going. The student who carved stone was also motivated by how difficult it is to carve. He demonstrated a lot of engagement and persistence and independently solved problems in this self-directed project.

Other students got more ambitious in their materials choices for assignments. For example, in the case of the abstract sculpture assignment, three students chose to use wood and power tools and two learned to cut glass. Stretching and exploring was thus an area where students responded well. On the other hand, students still struggled with doing preparation and managing time, so those are areas where I need to provide more support.

In June, I created a new assessment format that includes 7 of the 8 studio habits of mind, which I administered to my Advanced Sculpture students (Figure 3). Some parts of the assessment are not that different from previous assessment formats, except in the more specific ways it asks students to discuss their process. (The missing studio habit--**observe**--was not appropriate to what most students did and so was left off.) To provide an incentive to students to reflect more fully, I assigned points to the reflection part of the document.

Figure 3: Trial Assessment Structured on Studio Habits of Mind

Choice Sculpture Assessment Your Name _____

Criteria	Evaluation (see scale)
Envision and Express, Understand Art Worlds	
You prepared a project proposal and preparatory drawings.	2 3 4 5
Your piece expresses a unique point of view.	2 3 4 5
REFLECT: Describe what you tried to express. In other words, what is your piece about? Or what is the mood? Or what do you want viewers to take away from it? How successful do you think you were? (5 points)	
Stretch & Explore	
You stretched yourself in tackling a new skill(s), approach, material, or size	2 3 4 5
You explored possible ways to use the materials or techniques	2 3 4 5
REFLECT: Discuss how you stretched and explored in this project. (5 points)	
Develop Craft	
You used materials appropriate to achieve your artistic goals.	2 3 4 5
Craftsmanship enhances rather than detracts from the expressive nature of the piece.	2 3 4 5
REFLECT: Discuss the pros and cons of your craftsmanship. (5 points)	

Engage and Persist	
You typically come to class on time, get right to work and work the entire period. You are self-motivated and efficient.	2 3 4 5
You enable others to work without distraction; you do not spend your time socializing, doing work for another class, or using your phone.	2 3 4 5
If you experienced difficulty, you didn't give up. You independently problem-solved solutions.	2 3 4 5
You fully participate in cleanup. You always clean your workspace thoroughly and put your tools away properly.	2 3 4 5
You finished your project by the deadline.	2 3 4 5
REFLECT: Discuss how you engaged/persisted. What obstacles did you overcome? How did you solve problems? Where could you improve? (5 points)	

2= well below expectations; 3 = below expectations; 4= meets expectations; 5= meets expectations well

FINALLY: What did you think of having this much freedom? Is the quality of your work better for your having been able to be self-directed? Why or why not?

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From this assessment, I observed that:

- Students graded themselves generously in terms of the numbers.
- Being accountable for reflection did prompt them to write more, although not with as much depth as I would like.
- All of the students liked the freedom of choosing their project. None of them answered the question “Is the quality of your work better for [being] self-directed.”



Ceramics II class

My Ceramics II class, which had a small group of students, three of whom were seniors, offered a good opportunity to give students a lot of choice and observe how they responded to the opportunity to “grow as an artist.” The first part of the course included two teacher-directed projects (or limited choice). The last 4 weeks they had complete freedom to pick what they wanted to make and learn.

Since they already had a foundation in ceramics tools and techniques, they had enough background knowledge to choose a direction to pursue. I also provided a multi-page document of functional and sculptural project ideas, with related artists to explore, though they were not limited to those suggestions. The ideas range from making a small stamp to use in pattern-making to constructing a working fountain.

While making their projects, they were required to keep a visual journal. They submitted a minimum of 3 slides each week that included **(1) Looking Back** (what they accomplished), **(2) Looking Forward** (what they planned to do next), and **(3) Takeaways** (what they learned). (See Figure 4.) I adopted this format based on a presentation by a teacher using a choice-based approach who I saw at the NAEA convention in NYC in 2017.

Figure 4: Example Journal Entry

<p>Ishmael wanted to make a unicorn based on the “Unicorn in Captivity” tapestry at the Cloisters in NYC (pictured below). This is a set of entries from one week in his process journal.</p> 	<h3>Looking back</h3> <p>Friday 4/5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I redid the front hooves as well today, making them the same way I made the back ones• I added more hair to the head and neck• I also added the beard today, using the same method I used to make the hair 	<h3>Looking forward</h3> <p>Where do you plan to go from here?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describe the next steps in your process. If you finished a piece, will your next piece use a similar concept or approach and be totally different?<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ I am definitely coming towards the end of this project. There are only a few things I have left to do now - I need to add the buckle around the neck, add the horn, and then any other detailing. I also need to add the tail.• Do you have problems to solve? How do you think you will solve them?<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ One problem I keep having is that the front legs keep breaking off. I keep attaching them with slip and putting props under them.• What resources can you use to help?<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ I just refer to the tapestry that it's based off of
<h3>Takeaways</h3> <p>Reflect on what you did.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What did you learn?<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ I learned how to make face details for an animal, how to add and blend hair, and how to make realistic animal hooves• Did you make mistakes? What were they?<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Yes, the hooves were originally not that great, but I fixed them this week. Also, the hair looked a little “worn”, but I blended them in better using water.• Did you try any experiments? How did that go?<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ I experimented with how I would put the hair on. The first method of just drawing it on to a chunk of clay didn't work for me.• Did you discover a new artist, resource, material, process?<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ I sort of discovered the clay extruder, but it didn't work for me. But it was still cool.		

The journal made the artistic process more visible, student thinking about their learning took on more importance, and it gave me another way to provide feedback.

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As part of their final assessment, Ceramics II students were asked the following question:

How would you summarize your learning in Ceramics II? In other words, how would you say you grew as an artist? Or, if you think you didn't, explain that.

Ishmael wrote:

I grew as an artist this year because I learned how to use a bunch of new materials and tools, like the white clay, and the dowels. I also took on a large project this year that challenged me a little more. Not only was it so big and required me to use new methods to sculpt it, but the concept was different too. This was an animal like I usually make, however, it was based off of another piece of artwork this time. That made me have more of a goal for this piece and it raised the bar that I needed to reach.

Ishmael's piece was as big as he could make and still have it fit in the kiln. The other thing that distinguishes his performance is that the piece developed a large crack in the firing. While I researched the best repair method, he implemented it, which took hours to complete and resulted in learning for me as well as him (Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 5: Ishmael repairing the crack in his piece with epoxy filler, a Dremel tool, sandpaper and paint.



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Figure 6: Finished piece.



Another student, Sabrina, set out to make a working fountain based on the art of Keith Haring. It is over two feet high. Near the end of the process, she changed the concept to make it a lamp instead of a fountain (Figures 7 & 8). This change made it easier to finish from a technical standpoint, but it was still ambitious and in the end more appropriate to the message she wanted to communicate. Sabrina wrote:

I think that I've grown [by taking] more risks in my art now. It's cool to take on new challenges.

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Figure 7: Keith Haring-inspired lamp in progress. Figure 8: Finished project.



The Ceramics II choice projects were more ambitious and successful than those in the Advanced Sculpture class. I think a few factors account for that:

- 1) Ceramics II students had done only two previous assignments and this was their “big finish.” It was timed in March and April before the beginning of senior internships.
- 2) The students happened to be more mature and capable of effective self direction.
- 3) The journal may have helped keep them accountable for regular progress.
- 4) The Advanced class’s final project commenced in May when the students had completed seven previous projects, were eager for school to be over and less motivated to push themselves.

Implications

Using the Studio Habits of Mind to promote awareness of artistic behaviors is a positive addition to my classroom culture. It relates closely to district initiatives around growth mindset and more student-centered learning. After my initial experiments with using Studio Habits as a framework for grading, I want to think about possibly doing so with standards-based grading. A presentation from the 2019 NAEA Conference on Standards-Based Grading in the Art Classroom was delivered by a group of teachers from Adlai Stevenson High School and provides details about their implementation. Their work was based in part on the work done by the authors of the books, *Pathways to Proficiency* and *Proficiency-Based Assessment*, who are from their school. I think I have a lot to learn, as well, from my Byram Hills colleagues regarding their experiences using standards-based grading.

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The mixed success that students had with the degree of choice they were given suggests to me that I should:

- Continue offering a spectrum of choice, from more limited to more open.
- Design lessons to target specific Studio Habits like Envisioning and Understanding Art Worlds, where students need more support.
- Continue to develop routines (such as activity lists and journals) to help students grow in self direction.
- Create more opportunities for classroom discussion where students can share ideas and respond to each other's artistic decisions.

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