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?
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).

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
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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CURRENT PROJECT</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation (doing research, doing sketches, coming up with ideas, gathering materials)</td>
<td>Poor Fair Good Excellent</td>
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</table>

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
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](image-url)
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**

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.
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.
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.
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.
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.

References


