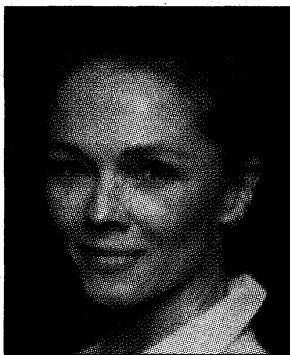


# Arts Educators Should Embrace Standards for Learning

Janet Eilber



“Assessment” is a provocative idea in the arts community.

Too many of us in the arts shudder at the thought of measuring a student’s creation or performance. We wonder: How can you nail down creativity? How can you box up a performance that is by its nature outside the box? There is a widespread suspicion that if we look at the workings behind the curtain, the artistic wizardry will not be as effective.

Before the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) went into effect, I had a conversation with Uri

Treisman, a noted educator of math and science who was named the Harvard Foundation’s Scientist of the Year in 2006 for his outstanding contributions to American science.

He told me back in 2001 that we were entering an era of heightened accountability that would last for at least a decade. Appreciative of the importance of arts education, he warned that the arts needed to stand up and be counted: learning in the arts had to become more measurable to avoid being pushed aside by a concentration on the school subjects that could readily be tested.

At the time, the Dana Foundation conducted a search for the best practices being used to measure arts learning. We heard a lot about the down side. One argument was that the tasks of assessment would fall to the classroom teachers since there were so few arts educators in the schools. How could those untrained in the arts judge artistic accomplishment? Even more problematic: What would be assessed? Would students have to play the clarinet well, or simply show improvement (and how to define those terms, “well” and “improvement”) or just have to know who Mozart was?

Could there really be a checklist for educators to judge whether a student in a school play was a “good” actor or dancer? And finally, who in education has the time to make these assessments?

But Treisman’s warning was all too accurate. Because NCLB based a school’s success and support on math and reading test scores, many schools left the arts in the dust. As the law reaches its sixth birthday, some arts and education advocates still bemoan the fact that so many schools dropped the arts and other “semi-solid” subjects, from foreign languages to physical education and social studies. (see “Testing Fails the Arts” on Page 2).

Nevertheless, there has been real progress toward measuring arts learning. A successful teacher is both an inspiring mentor and a constructive critic. But for criticism to be fair and constructive, it must have standards of judgment that

can generally be agreed upon.

Certain savvy organizations have led the charge, wrapping their heads around creating tangible tools:

- ⇒ Leading arts education organizations such as Education Through Music, the Manhattan-based provider of music in the schools, have developed detailed rubrics used to chart students’ weekly progress.
- Many states have retooled or implemented standards in arts learning and continue to work toward supporting them. One notable example: The California Department of Education has formed the California Arts Assessment Network to assist school districts and individual schools in student assessment in the arts.
- Certain school systems have in effect hammered out that “checklist” for teachers of what students should know—such as the Blueprints for Teaching and Learning in the Arts created by the New York City Department of Education in collaboration with arts organizations throughout the city.
- Both education groups and arts organizations have created professional development strategies, such as “Looking at Student Work” by the Center for Arts Education in New York City, that connect the goals of classroom teachers and teaching artists, giving them a common language and shared measurements for student learning in the arts.

A recent fine example of evaluating arts learning comes from the Theater Communications Group. This national theater service organization has developed 15 different models for assessment of theater education. Each addresses the challenges of responding to funders and school districts asking for documentation of student achievement.

The flexible models are adaptable for almost any type of theater education project. That makes sense. “One size fits all” does not work when measuring student achievement. What’s more, the group offers training both in-person and via phone conferences to help educators understand how to use these tools effectively.

Not everything about the arts can be articulated and measured. Much of what we strive for in the arts is intensely subjective. We wait and hope for that mysterious synergy that comes about when the arts experience transcends technique and intellectual understanding.

But arts and education advocates should embrace the measurable standards that will help secure arts education in the schools. Critical guidance is the basis of quality arts learning. It stimulates the moves behind the curtain that, when well-executed, unleash the unpredictable and immeasurable thrill of artistry.

*Janet Eilber, artistic director of the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, serves as advisor for Arts Education in the News.*