Assessment *in* Practice

Fine and Performing Arts Program Assessment: Getting Past the Subjectivity Myth

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Years ago, when one of us (Neil) was new to the role of Director of Assessment at Columbia College Chicago, he was intimidated by the prospect of leading faculty in assessment of performing and visual arts disciplines. "These areas can be so subjective," was a dominant line of thinking. "Assessment results are sure to be uneven, all over the place, and not truly reflective of student ability or program effectiveness," were others. In his first yea , however, Neil was fortunate to attend an assessment workshop where his mentor was Donald (Don) Farmer, then Vice President of Academic Affairs at King's College (Pennsylvania) and one of the acknowledged assessment "experts" in the late 1990's. Assessment in higher education was in its salad days at that time, with many institutions struggling to comprehend what they were supposed to be doing, especially to satisfy regional accreditors. Don provided the perfect perspective, and wisely explained, "Assessment in the arts is in no way as difficult as you make it sound. It's easy. Think about it: artists are continually assessing work, asking themselves, 'Is this any good? What makes it good? How might it be better?'"

Don Farmer's point is obvious—once it is articulated. Assessment and evaluation are ever-present processes in the arts, so organizing assessment in arts programs is not as subjective or fraught as one might fear. In fact, if we take the skepticism at face value—that *no one* is capable of making a sound judgement on a series of photographs, a dance performance, or an actor on stage—then why would we hire faculty to work with students, especially if they were incapable or unqualified to make reasonable evaluations? We know this is *not true*. Faculty rely on sharply-honed judgment to provide feedback to their students and frequently discuss standards and expectations with their colleagues. To be sure, there can always be nuanced and admitted biases in evaluation. But overall, faculty are professionals who possess experienced, and critically-developed, judgement. Additionally, self-assessment as well

as assessing and evaluating the art of others is an ability that, optimally, all art students should develop by the time they graduate and enter their professional worlds. Assessment is a fundamental part of the creative process. This piece explains some of the ways we have approached assessing arts programs at Columbia College Chicago.

While assessing student learning in creative and performing arts disciplines can present unique questions regarding approach, there are also several assumptions to correct. Trite axioms like "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and "art means something different to everyone" are antithetical to the level of objectivity that assessment practices strive for. Without readily-made standardized exams for courses like Musical Theatre, Dance III, and Printmaking II, some might struggle to know where to start. Assessment in the arts is, on the contrary, often intuitively embedded, since evaluation and reflection are ongoing practices of art and creative education and professional practice, even if they are not always called "assessment." Critiques in which instructors and/or other students provide feedback have been rightly described as "one of the most consistent activities of pedagogy in creative disciplines" (Chase, 2014, p. 7).

Furthermore, it might be assumed that criteria related to aesthetics are more difficult to articulate, especially in a way that is unanimously understood by a panel of reviewers. Rather than avoiding defintions of complex concepts like aesthetics, art and performance courses often give significant attention to creating definable categories and criteria related to qualities like form, technique, and content. Robert Stake and April Munson have claimed that arts faculty who "sometimes cringe at the technical jargon of testing" often "mirror it" in their own assessments (Stake & Munson, 2008, p. 16). To Stake and Munson's point, assessment practices can certainly get bogged down in debates over scientific precision; however, the practice of working with students to define what might seem like difficult-to-pin down criteria, and even drawing up a rubric together as a class, can aid students in developing their abilities to articulate their own goals and processes, a skill at which students across higher education often struggle to excel (Chase, 2014, p. 11). In other words, rubrics in arts programs are often readily made from longstanding and fruitful conversations that seek to define qualities of form, content, execution, and creativity.

OUR CONTEXT

Columbia College Chicago is a private, not-for-profit institution in Chicago's South Loop with degree programs in arts (Theater, Dance, Music, Photography, Art) and media (Film, Television, Communication, Audio, Interactive Multimedia). Enrollment is approximately 6,800 undergraduate and 380 graduate students. While Columbia, like many institutions, has, at times, struggled with its efforts at institutional and programmatic assessment, a faculty perspective that "assessment cannot be done well in arts programs" has not been a prevailing theme. In fact, formalized assessment in some departments (Dance and Marketing Communication, for instance) made perfect sense as an act of collective inquiry, and conversations on how well students were performing had always been part of the departmental ethos.

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In the past decade, Columbia has adopted a distributed model in its program-level assessment efforts. Instead of a central body, such as a college-wide Assessment Committee, assessment is led and supported by an Assessment Office, which works closely with department and school leadership. On a regular basis, the Assessment Office partners with departments to identify program outcomes that the department believes are important or in cycle to assess and to identify the courses and the artifacts and methods that will be used in the upcoming academic year. The ultimate expectation is that department leadership leads faculty in the dissemination and discussion of the results within the department at subsequent faculty meetings.

Among the most beneficial approaches are faculty and/or professional panels to assess student work using rubrics crafted to reflect program and course learning outcomes. These panels are valued because of the real-world perspective they bring to the process. Examples include fashion professionals assessing Fashion majors' clothing designs. Advertising majors have their advertising campaigns assessed by creatives from Chicago advertising firms. Video games designed by students are assessed by industry game developers. Television majors have their work in their culminating sketch comedy Practicum class assessed by local comedy professionals (including two from The Second City).

FINDING AGREEMENT

Our presentation at the 2018 Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education Conference, *Fine and Performing Arts Program Assessment: Challenges and Opportunities*, represented our attempt to demonstrate that assessing student work in the arts, while certainly contextual, isn't as subjective as one might think. If individuals from non-arts backgrounds could come to an even consensus reviewing student work in arts and communications disciplines, then we might dispel the notion that assessment is "in the eye of the beholder." We shared student work from two capstone courses at Columbia: one in Photography and one in Television.

Photography
Students in the Photography program take Portfolio Development during their senior year. Students in this course present a curated portfolio of their work, and these portfolios are reviewed and assessed by professional photographers. These professionals complete rubrics, developed by the department, which include criteria such as "Originality of Work" and "Attention to Detail," for each of the student portfolios. For the conference, we selected two portfolios: one that was impressive to both of us and one that underwhelmed us. At the conference, we displayed samples from these to attendees who then completed versions of the rubrics used by the professionals. After completing these on their own, they shared their results with attendees at their tables. Not only did attendees express no difficulty in understanding the categories and criteria in the rubric, but the ratings had a high level of consistency between groups on the portfolios: in their assessment, the portfolio we had gauged as superior scored far higher than the underwhelming one.

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Television

Television majors at Columbia have a capstone experience in which a series of related courses culminate in the production of a sketch comedy show, complete with multi-camera filming and a live band. Writing students develop the scripts; Production students design sets and manage filming; Audio students coordinate the audio; Comedy Studies students perform in the sketches. This live-action show is assessed by television and comedy professionals using a rubric with 11 criteria. For AALHE, we showed attendees brief portions of the filmed show, and similar to the activity with Photography, attendees reported no difficulties in completing the applicable parts of the rubric. Again, scores were decidedly similar on all rubric items. We regret that we did not have the foresight to save the spreadsheet of attendees' scores, but the correlation coefficient calculated on the spot was well into the .80s for both activities.

In both instances, the rubrics were created by department faculty and program coordinators, with support from the Assessment Office. No campus-wide committee was needed, and no one came to fisticu fs over what is meant by "originality."

CONCLUSION

This is not to say that anyone, regardless of discipline, should serve as reviewers on assessment activities. Those involved in the academic and professional life of the field are, of course, far better suited to provide meaningful and relevant qualitative comments to complement numerical scores, and are also better suited to offer commentary to departments regarding program curriculum. A major advantage to assessment in creative disciplines is that it provides invaluable opportunities to involve external professionals and industry partners as reviewers. In addition to part-time faculty who are often engaged full-time in their respective industries, external voices can readily speak from current practices and allow for more experiential-learning-style opportunities, where students have the chance to work on long-term projects with industry partners. The point has been simply to say that assessment activities are both possible, and necessary, for healthy and thoughtful arts programs. Once we get past that initial stage of skepticism, we get to focus on how to share and interpret data and put it to thoughtful use for programmatic assessment and evaluation.

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About NILOA

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.

The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.

The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
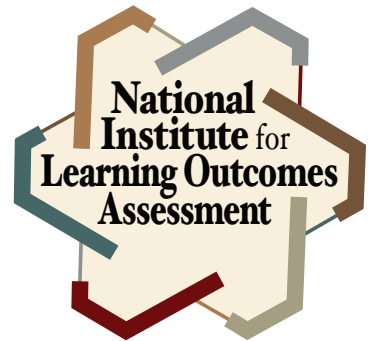
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