

Quantitative is Useful, but Qualitative is Meaningful: Meaningful Assessment Measures in an Art Program

By Frank A. Pishkur and John D. Hogue

At Missouri Southern State University, we engage in assessment because we need to know what is happening with our students. Art is not an easy discipline to complete. If the student does not have the drive and the self-discipline to put in the time needed and, most importantly, does not enjoy doing so, we need something to let the student know in an organized and systematic way while we can still complete him or her in a potentially related field. We also have a great number of solid students who for various reasons do not have confidence in their abilities, and early career assessment gives us a formal place to tell them they are doing well and that they should stick with it.

In our Art department, the Foundation Review is the main assessment measurement our faculty currently discuss. In this Foundation Review, our sophomore students compile a portfolio of work from specific art classes, write a paper, and formally present their artwork to a panel made up of all of our art faculty to enter into the Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.) program. The faculty rate the students' work using 1 to 5 scales and provide written feedback. The scales were anchored using only column 5 in the attached rubric. We set aside one day of the semester for this review. About two-thirds of our students are ready for this in the spring, while the other third and incoming transfer students undertake this in the fall. We score the students on the oral presentation (overall quality, verbal concepts/processes, professionalism/engagement, and critical analysis), on the written paper (critical analysis and engagement on campus and with the discipline), on the preparation of the portfolio, and on specific skills developed in our two-dimensional design, three-dimensional design, color theory, basic drawing, and digital photography courses. The specific skills are scored on technical skills and conceptual ability. Faculty also grade the students on two additional courses from their specific areas of interest, which include technical skills, conceptual ability, and overall merit. Finally, all quantitative scores are accompanied with qualitative, personalized feedback.

We have been doing the Foundation Review for decades. It used to be a graduation check for our second semester juniors, but we found that by doing the review earlier, we can give feedback to students and help them decide if they really want to be in the field. It is also now early enough in the program that students can easily change from one degree to another within the department without having taken multiple courses that will not apply to the new choice. All students complete this review regardless of being an art education, studio, visual arts, or graphic design major and it serves as the entrance exam for enrollment into our capstone course. In addition, a high score on this assessment allows a prospective B.F.A. student to bypass submitting a separate portfolio for acceptance into one of those two programs.

For our 16 students in 2015-2016, we did a quantitative analysis of these scores. We found that for the Oral Presentation subscores, Critical Analysis had lower scores than the other three categories, and Overall Quality had higher scores than Verbal Concepts/Processes but not Professionalism/Engagement. See Figure 1 for means and standard errors. For the Written Response section, Critical Skills ($M = 3.92$, $SE = .12$) were significantly lower than Engagement ($M = 4.20$, $SE =$

Quantitative is Useful, but Qualitative is Meaningful: Meaningful Assessment Measures in an Art Program

cont'd

.17). When presented with these analyses, the main interpretations our faculty had were that students could not write effectively, did not have art history knowledge, and were not ready for the philosophical content. These were concerns the faculty have had for a couple of years, and the numbers reaffirmed these findings.

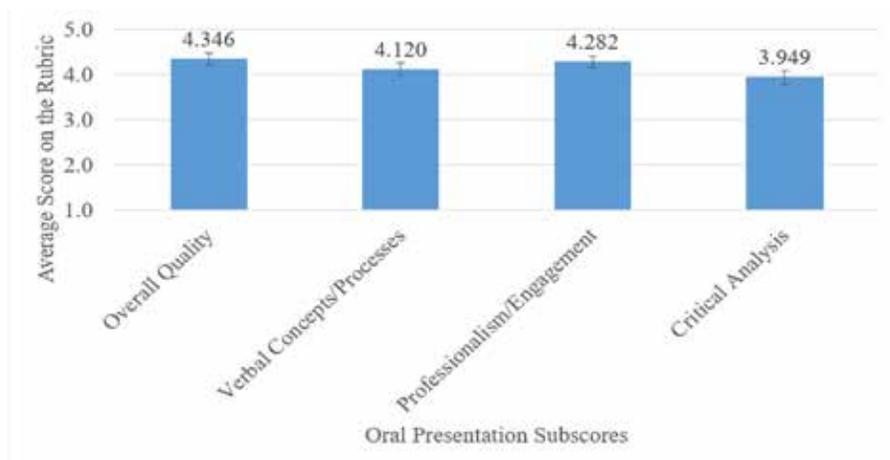


Figure 1. Oral Presentation Subscores. Students scored lower on the Critical Analysis section of their oral presentation.

Because of these interpretations, we moved the Art History survey classes from a 300 level to a 200 hundred level and moved the Art Theory class from a 100 to a 300 hundred level. We also made both Art History survey courses prerequisites for application into either of the B.F.A. programs as well as to take the now 300 level Art Theory course. Starting this semester, we moved our Foundation Review a month later (now early April of their Sophomore year) to give our students time to show works from the current semester, which should give us a better sense of where they really are. Portfolio materials are tied to different courses and some students were not having meaningful materials from their current courses. We also standardized the 1 to 5 scales in 2016 (attached) based on the qualitative feedback and have used it since. Long-tenured faculty did not care about the rubric as they felt like they knew what they meant when they gave a score. Having it for newer faculty members will be helpful, and the language will be useful for putting together a similar rubric for the capstone experience (Senior Exhibit), which will then be another meaningful assessment measure. At some point the rubric will also be good for consistency between the tough and easy judges to be consistent. We are glad we have it, and we are glad we have the language, because it will help moving forward, and it will be immediately helpful for the students as they try to interpret what their scores mean.

Quantitative is Useful, but Qualitative is Meaningful: Meaningful Assessment Measures in an Art Program cont'd

The Quantitative evidence is nice for us to have, but it is the qualitative comments that are more useful to the students. "You stuttered a lot" is more meaningful to the students than a low score. We consolidate the comments and sanitize them so the students cannot determine which professor said it. If we have them, we leave contradicting comments out of the feedback. There is a lot of coaching in the Foundation Review, and it is our one big opportunity to give them experience giving a formal presentation to a group. It is especially essential for our design students. Those students will be standing in front of a group and discussing their work as a job, so they need those skills. It is the only time in the curriculum where we can give them that.

Universal expressions do come across among different raters. It is hard to qualify it all in one language or standardized format. For example, one time I (Frank A. Pishkur) was in Korea evaluating a graduate student's artwork with Korean faculty. The Korean faculty gave their feedback in Korean, and I did not understand a lick of it. After about four or five reviews of me giving my feedback in English, a Korean faculty turned to me and said, "You always say same the same thing we do."

Our Senior Exhibit is our capstone course and major field assessment. The new measurement we are introducing is based largely on the Foundation Review, so that we can compare results. Previously, the assessment for it did not align with the previous review in any meaningful manner, making it quite difficult to compare early and late stages of the student's education. In this review, instead of an oral presentation, we assess their senior level creative research project, which is a physical, publicly viewable exhibition. Having an assessment that aligns with the Foundation Review will show us a score for specialized work in the specific degree area and will also show us growth from the foundation level. Students also submit a digital portfolio which shows the auxiliary work students do (typography, packaging design, identity systems, for a design major, secondary media or concepts for studio majors, etc.), which aligns somewhat with the previous instrument. There is also a written component based upon their professional writing: artist's statement, letters of application, press releases, etc. While the previous one was somewhat useful, the new instrument will be something truly meaningful that ties directly into our departmental objectives.

We are also looking into making our institution's newly revamped research fair an additional requirement for the Senior Exhibit. It might be a way to reinforce professional practices in a medium stakes area, and the students could win a gift card for doing it. We are also discussing about separating studio and graphic design from the capstone course. There are issues where the skills do not align, and separating the majors would get rid of that problem and focus specifically on what is important for each discipline. Separating the courses could also make assessment easier, but the separation will be difficult to manage administratively.

Our other meaningful assessments are informal but essential. BFA students have a three-faculty

Quantitative is Useful, but Qualitative is Meaningful: Meaningful Assessment Measures in an Art Program

cont'd

review panel. Students meet with those professors every semester for four semesters. Those faculty members are watching the students as they grow and are helping the students tailor projects specifically to what the students claim they want to do. Faculty point out what the students are doing versus what they say they want to do and help them figure out how to align. Committees talk about the students and do a lot of “super advising.” It is a pretty heavy commitment on our end, and some faculty are overwhelmed because they serve on a large number of the committees. It was designed to strengthen the quality of work that the students do so that they are better positioned to get into graduate school or to be hired for employment.

We find these assessment measures meaningful because a student can do well in each class individually, but the assessment process allows us to see how the students absorb the lessons and utilize them in multiple fields and directions. We want to know if the students have synthesized that knowledge.

In the Fall of 2016 we started giving the IDEA Teaching Essentials survey (Benton, Li, Brown, Guo, & Sullivan, 2015) as an end-of-the-semester faculty evaluation. It is not as meaningful as our homegrown assessments. IDEA is useful for broad-based information about what is working in the classroom while not so useful for individual student issues. Thus, we used it to compare our department's scores against the School of Arts and Sciences as a whole and then against the university as a whole. Our students scored our faculty higher than the school and the university on almost every item, such as finding ways to help students find their own answers, inspiring students to set and achieve goals that really challenged them, demonstrating the importance and significance of the subject matter, and explaining the course material clearly and concisely. The students, however, stated that their background prepared them for the course requirements less than the institution did as a whole.

After taking these results to faculty, we determined the dual-credit and some of the online Art Appreciation courses had scores in these categories lower than those of our other sections. Because of this realization, we are exploring a mandate to keep the Art Appreciation courses as similar as possible by having a portion of the final exam tied directly to learning goals for each chapter of the text. This is to be universal among all of the various sections. Then, by comparing this portion of the final exam, we will be able to tell if we are actually teaching these students what we say we are teaching them. We are also reviewing the stated course objectives to find out what is actually important to our faculty and will narrow down to specific course objectives we want and to actually teach, so we can revise them accordingly.

The IDEA survey will be much more useful when we have several semesters to compare against and when we have yearly averages. We are glad to have it though so that we will have a baseline for when we incorporate these changes to the Art Appreciation course. Being able to hand the results to the faculty and breaking performance down into specific categories are helpful.

Quantitative is Useful, but Qualitative is Meaningful: Meaningful Assessment Measures in an Art Program

cont'd

The Foundation Review and Senior Exhibit are more useful for us because we are a performance based, creative field. Each creative project is different than the last and unique to the student. There are some where the craftsmanship might be very important while others where craftsmanship is not important at all as it would detract from the concept. These measures allow for individualized feedback and how well students are doing specifically based on their unique performances. Other disciplines can use a specific measure for every student. For Art (creative fields), where every individual performance is unique, a standardized test breaks down. We reviewed a major field test in Art, but it was out of date and did not match the curriculum at all. We find personalized, qualitative feedback to be most meaningful.

Works Cited

Benton, S. L., Li, D., Brown, R., Guo, M., & Sullivan, P. (2015). Revising the IDEA student ratings of instruction system 2002-2011 data (IDEA Technical Report No. 18). Retrieved from IDEA website: http://www.ideaedu.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Technical-Reports/Revising-the-IDEA-Student-Ratings-of-Instruction-System-2002-2011-Data_Technical_report_18.pdf

[Access an oral presentation, written response, and foundation portfolio here.](#)

Frank A. Pishkur, M.F.A., is Associate Professor and Department Chair of Art at Missouri Southern State University and can be reached at Pishkur-F@mssu.edu.

JD Hogue, MTBC, MS, MM, is Assessment Coordinator at Missouri Southern State University and can be reached at Hogue-J@mssu.edu.