

(continued from front cover)

CONNECTING STUDENT ASSESSMENT TO ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT

tools along with their final reports, which is the first step in creating a clearinghouse for sharing resources and tools.

Herpin and two Guild member organization leaders spoke with the Guild about their perspectives on student learning assessment in community arts settings—current practice, areas for improvement, and the importance of creating a culture of evaluation. **Elizabeth Whitford** is executive director of the Seattle-based **Arts Corps**, which provides access to high-quality, multidisciplinary arts experiences for youth ages 5 to 19 through out-of-school-time classes, in-school residencies, and teen programs. **Joanna Massey** is director of school programs at Carnegie Hall's **Weill Music Institute**, which produces classroom- and community-based programs and resources that reach audiences in New York City, across the nation, and around the world.

Creating a Culture of Evaluation and Reflection

Most organizations assess student learning. Shortage of resources or limited staff training may influence the depth or frequency of some assessment efforts. But others are constrained by indifference to the concept of evaluation or to the notion that reflecting on the results is the impetus for improvement and change. Without an organization-wide culture of evaluation—the common beliefs and behaviors that make doing and learning from evaluation an integral part of mission and values—it may be difficult to get the traction needed to fund, design, conduct, and use assessment results in an ongoing way. Organizations “need to value assessment more,” Sharon Herpin says, and make the case at all levels for a culture that values continuous learning and improvement. The impetus for such a culture needs to begin with leadership, and all stakeholders—faculty, staff, and volunteers—must be on board. Joanna Massey suggests a simple exercise for contemplating the role of evaluation: “Ask what you would do if it could do only one thing. What does that say about what the organization values?”

Both Weill Music Institute and Arts Corps have cultures of evaluation in which developing metrics and collecting data that demonstrate student learning are seamless parts of teaching and learning. They are also committed to using evaluation findings to understand student gains, to improve programs and teaching practice, and as an overall indicator of organizational impact on arts education and community engagement.

Characteristics of High-Quality Assessment

A culture of evaluation provides essential grounding for a successful approach to assessment, which has these characteristics:

Internally motivated. Assessing student learning is a proactive choice, not just a response to funder requirements. Assessment is designed to collect valid, meaningful data that will improve and change teaching practice and student learning. Ultimately those data may be useful in making the case to funders, but the basic point of assessing student learning should not be lost. In today's standards-based environment, “we forget about the ‘why,’” Massey says. By that she means assessment “helps us learn whether students are doing the things we want them to be able to do.” Arts and cultural organizations in the NEA study reported that internal motivations were their top reasons for evaluation: measuring student progress (76.3 percent), contributing to



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program evaluation (73.1 percent), and implementing program improvements (67.8 percent).

Goal directed. The desired outcomes are identified from the beginning by deciding what the organization wants to know and why. Goal-directed outcomes and criteria reflect the changes in skills, attitudes, knowledge, behaviors, status, or life conditions that you would like to see in students. What does a successful student experience look like? A periodic review makes sure that assessments pose questions and use methods that yield useful results. Sometimes *less is more*; if the outcomes are too complex, they can produce more than you need to know, while a smaller, realistic list can yield thorough and useful results. Outcomes for learning in the arts can be highly specific (learning lines for a scene in a play or playing a piece of music in the correct tempo by a particular date), or they can be more general (learning new skills and techniques, understanding concepts and vocabulary). For classroom-based programs, Common Core Standards might be a factor in developing outcomes. For creative youth development programs, the outcomes might relate to noncognitive, psychosocial goals such as personal growth. Assessment in Arts Corps programs, for example, measures not only artistic learning, but four Creative Habits of Mind that emerge from participating in arts classes. Whitford describes the Creative Habits as “what we learn through the arts that we carry with us for the rest of our lives”: imagining possibilities, critical thinking, courage and risk taking, persistence and discipline, and reflection.

Multiple measures. Assessment types are chosen to match the goal-directed outcomes of a class or program. “When you look at a big picture like student learning, you may miss something if you’re only using one type of tool,” Massey says. Several methods—not just teacher-scored assessment, but self- and peer assessment—“give you a much more holistic picture of the learning that’s happening.” The five assessment types used most often by organizations in the NEA study were observation protocols (80.9 percent); performance-based assessments (74.7 percent); student self-assessments (69.4 percent); teacher/artist surveys of student skills (68.5 percent); and rubrics (54.3 percent). Massey describes two types of assessment tools. A traditional paper-and-pencil approach features different types of questions—multiple choice, matching, true-false, and so on. What Massey calls “an authentic approach” might include observations, interviews, and student efforts such as performance tasks and portfolios.

Teaching artist involvement. Teaching artists (and classroom teachers, in in-school programs) lead the development of outcomes, assessment methodologies, and tools. Because they will be conducting student assessment and using the results to improve teaching and learning, they need strong ownership in the entire process. In the Weill Institute's programs, "teachers are not just our partners, but the drivers of our tools," Massey says. "They know best when you're talking about student learning. They could look at an assessment task and immediately know how it needed to be refined." In Arts Corps' out-of-school programs, teaching artists are also key players in developing and refining assessment plans and tools.

Pilot tested. Testing, reflection, and refinement are incorporated in the development of methodologies and tools. Even a small-scale, short-term pilot assessment makes a difference because it reveals information about the validity of an approach before implementation. Testing may show that a process has too many steps, takes too long, needs more specific instructions, or simply is not answering the questions you need to answer. Testing can also help organizations adapt available tools from arts education or other sectors to fit their own needs. Arts Corps, for example, has been developing and testing its own observational tool, based on the Creative Habits of Mind, to supplement the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA). This nationally validated, evidence-based tool is used to evaluate and improve the quality of youth experiences in workshops, classes, and programs offered in community organizations, schools, camps, and similar settings.

Using an Evaluation Consultant

An experienced outside evaluator can bring a broad perspective on arts education in general or arts learning in community settings, along with expertise in collecting, understanding, and using assessment data. An evaluation consultant can be an asset from the start by helping to focus an evaluation on key questions, design the right tools, and produce results that can be easily implemented for program improvement. Cost may be an issue in organizations with limited budgets, but keep in mind that in-house evaluation requires having the right staff expertise, which also involves committing resources. Arts Corps has a long-term relationship with a consultant who manages the evaluation process and has "been growing along with us," Whitford says. Staff handle some tasks, such as survey administration and data entry, but it would take significant internal capacity to handle the process entirely in-house. "If we couldn't afford an external evaluator, we would do it ourselves. But our consultant offers a higher level of analysis," enriched by her knowledge of the organization's values, goals, and students, which enhances the process and the results.

When cost drives the decision, one option is to bring in an expert as a short-term guide to get the staff started in designing, conducting, or improving student assessment or to run a pilot program. Some organizations use a research colleague or graduate students at a local university who can serve as mentors and "thought partners," as Massey describes it. Herpin suggests exploring partnerships with organizations that have similar missions and values. "For small organizations, partnering and sharing resources is a great way to expand what you can do, especially in terms of developing assessment tools."

Assessment Designed around What Matters

In today's data-driven educational environment, it may be tempting to look for one-size-fits-all solutions, but that is a risky route to take. "Just because it's good doesn't mean it's good for your purposes," Herpin cautions. "When reviewing assessment tools and resources for the NEA study, we found a lot that were not very good. But even some good ones are not applicable to all

organizations. You need to tailor tools to your goals, objectives, and mission. There is no cookie-cutter template that works for everyone." Arts and cultural organization staff need professional development that helps them become "better consumers of what is available" and gives them the skills to adapt existing assessment tools to their own needs.

Whitford urges practitioners to design the assessment of student learning around "what matters to your organization instead of to your funders. What are the things that will change your practice? What are the direct impacts on students? How do you measure those impacts? How do you use the resulting data to improve and change your practice?" Ultimately those data will be useful in making the case to funders, but the primary focus should be on continuous reflection and improvement within the organization.

Ultimately, effective assessment of student learning in a community arts setting must center on the organization's core values, which allow staff and faculty to articulate the kinds of learning they consider important and the knowledge, skills, and proficiencies they want students to gain. Then compatible assessment tools and frameworks can be designed around those values.

Contributing to Collective Impact

Beyond individual organizations, assessment of student learning is a meaningful part of the continuing conversation about shared delivery of arts education in communities and schools across the United States. The statement on "Arts Education for America's Students: A Shared Endeavor," issued by the National Guild and 12 other national organizations in 2013, says community arts education providers' contribution to the conversation is their "career commitment to deep expertise in an arts specialty, connecting real-world practice to arts standards and the classroom." By using assessment findings to demonstrate their impact on students in terms of artistic knowledge and skills and individual development, community arts education providers can communicate with prospective partners in other sectors—including business, health care, youth development, and workforce development—about the potential of cross-sector endeavors. In joint advocacy efforts with other arts organizations they can bring hard data about student learning to the table to demonstrate collective impact. Both inside and outside organizations, the results of high-quality assessment of student learning are potentially transformative forces for student growth, teaching artists' practice, and community benefit.

Resources

Visit the National Guild's Community Arts Education Resource Center for more about assessing student learning, including sample assessment tools from Guild members in all artistic disciplines:

<http://resourcecenter.nationalguild.org/Topics/Evaluation.aspx>

Improving the Assessment of Student Learning in the Arts: State of the Field and Recommendations, National Endowment for the Arts and WestEd, <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/WestEd.pdf>

Arts Corps

Impact and Research: www.artscorps.org/programs/impact-research

Annual evaluation reports: www.artscorps.org/news-events/publications

Weill Music Institute at Carnegie Hall

www.carnegiehall.org/Education/

<http://resourcecenter.nationalguild.org/Topics/Evaluation/Evaluating-Student-Development.aspx#1>

Creating Quality: Tools for Improving Arts Education (Big Thought) www.creatingquality.org/Home.aspx