How can you possibly assess in a choice-based classroom, when students are going in so many different directions and working on so many different projects? This is a question that comes up a lot!

At first glance, assessing in a choice-based classroom seems like an invitation for confusion and frustration. But step back and ask “what is it that needs to be assessed?” What do teachers and students need to know in order to evaluate growth? What are the objectives? The objective is embodied in concept of “Teaching for Artistic Behavior.” In this construct, assessment is not an evaluation of one finished piece of artwork; it is an evaluation of how students go about creating art work, what they think about it, and how they connect to the art work of others. In other words, authentic assessment needs to evaluate artistic behavior.

We are fortunate to have an excellent tool to use to assess artistic behavior in an organized and logical way. The book, Studio Thinking 2 (Hetland, et al; 2013) delineates eight “Studio Habits of Mind” (SHoM). These are ways of thinking and working present in a good art program. The studio habits describe the artistic process: stretch & explore, engage & persist, express, envision, reflect, observe, develop craft, and understand art world.

The authors of Studio Thinking strongly note that these habits are not used in isolation, but work together in all aspects of the artist’s work. You can observe students at work through this lens. SHoM can provide the framework to organize the disparate strands of the choice-based classroom, or any art room, into a clear structure that enables students to understand the creative process and art in a larger context.

When considered, SHoM accurately describes the way that “real” artists work whether they are in elementary school, college, or beyond. They describe the way artists work and relate their work to the world. These artistic habits and behaviors apply to all of us, no matter where we are on the artistic continuum. Whether a student is painting a landscape, building a robot, drawing faces, or weaving a bag, evaluations can be made about students’ demonstration of persistence, exploration, envisioning, and making connections.

How might this look? In my classroom, I post the studio habits as the objectives, using “I can” statements:

1. I can stretch and explore with materials and ideas and challenge myself in my work.
2. I can envision what I want to do in art.
3. I can engage and persist in my artwork to solve problems and to take the time to do my very best.

The Eight Studio Habits Align with our State Visual Art Standards and with the new National Core Art Standards. All students, no matter what materials or ideas they are working with, work from these same objectives. The studio habits provide a rich understanding of artistic behavior because they apply across many contexts. “I can envision what I want to do in art” could pertain to creating a planning sheet before commencing a project or it could mean envisioning a next step in the middle of making a work of art, or maybe envisioning a way to present a finished piece.

Demonstrations or Skill-Builders Can Focus on specific studio habits. Learning to attach clay is developing craft. Idea-generation exercises are based on a discussion of envision. Students immersed in their own projects are working with artistic processes that can be described by the studio habits. This, then, becomes the language for talking with students about art: “I notice you are observing that stuffed animal very carefully while you draw.” “I can see you really had to persist in your work to figure out how to attach that cylinder to the box.” “What idea are you trying to express in this piece?” The objective “I can understand art in the world around me” focuses on the relationship between artists as viewers and makers and the necessity of making connections with the art of others in many myriad contexts.

In the choice-based art room, students learn to work as artists work. In my huge, diverse, highly mobile elementary school, I appreciate having the framework that SHoM provides. It unifies the classroom artistic experience into a coherent process for all students of all grades. It provides the necessary academic language to encourage rigor and facilitates student ability to create and to make connections. Authentic assessment in a choice-based classroom is shared between teacher and learner, even (or especially) when everyone is pursuing their own learning path.

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