

# RATs in the Ranks of Visual Arts Education

**Marianne Hulsbosch**  
Faculty of Education & Social Work



## Learning in the Visual Arts

Interesting myths and misconceptions abound in discussions of learning, and the assessment of that learning in the visual arts. Parents of school children preparing artwork to be submitted for the HSC in particular will quiz you at length about the subjectivity of assessing aesthetics. They (and not only parents of HSC students) will impress upon you how artmaking is considered an exploration of the human condition and as such, is a creative impulse that should be appreciated and respected but that the art object itself is beyond judgment. They will argue that artefacts are imbued with personal symbolism and meaning, contextualized within certain cultural values which elicit a personal response and therefore are impossible to evaluate without prejudice. And they will tell you that therefore, the only learning that can be assessed is the process, not the actual outcome of artmaking. The physical object can only be objectively assessed when examined from a technical perspective. Interestingly, these sentiments are rarely expressed about art history or art critiquing, or in looking at the written or spoken word. It appears to suggest that there is a rational basis for the appreciation of art that can avoid subjective opinion, and which makes the product easier to assess. Using this argument people tend to divide learning neatly in the visual arts into art making (practice) and art theory. Thus, the perception is that in order to critically assess and evaluate the learning that takes place in visual art education, one has to examine the process (art making) as well as the product (artefact and written tasks such as tests, theses and essays). However there is more to learning in art education than products and processes; it is the extended art experience that is the most valuable learning experience of all. The question then is this: how are we to assess the nature of students' learning experience?

## The Importance of Visual Arts Education

A plethora of investigations into the validity of learning in, and through, the arts is testimony to the recognition of art experience as meaningful, authentic, critical and constructive learning (see for example (Catterall, 2005; Eisner, 2002; Sullivan, 1993). Catterall noted that 'arts-rich' students outperform 'arts-poor' students by 'virtually every measure' (Catterall, in Fiske 1999:viii). His findings provide a strong argument for an art-rich curriculum. Eisner (2002) makes the link between

art-based learning and the creation of mind. He suggests that engagement in the arts assists students in making excellent judgments about qualitative relationships. It also facilitates critical thinking through materials because it involves students in complex forms of problems solving (Eisner, 2002:72). Furthermore, art education allows students to develop visual, linguistic, mathematical, audio, sensorial, interpersonal and intrapersonal, multi-literacy, communication skills. Artmaking goes beyond technical processes, because the students employ the qualities of creativity, self-expression and communication to express the highest aspirations of the human spirit. Art education requires students to be creative, enterprising, flexible, and technologically adaptive.

## What is the ultimate learning opportunity?

The challenge for lecturers in visual art education then becomes the devising and implementing of assessment activities and strategies that measure student engagement and disposition to learning about, in, as well as through, the visual arts. The learning experience has to be authentic, non-linear, meaningful, integrated, considerate and relevant to the student cohort. It has to represent a set of strategies that exemplify students' individual application of knowledge, understanding and skills.

The learning experience serves two purposes. Developmentally, it needs firstly to challenge, motivate, stimulate, guide and reinforce students' deep approaches to learning. Secondly, the tasks that make up the learning experience should be designed in such a manner that they provide a valid and reliable basis for student performance and the improvement of student learning. Assessment then is not considered as a way of testing the end of learning in a particular year or component of a course, but rather as an integral means for continually shaping student development (James, McInnis & Devlin, 2002:1).

## What are RATs?

Students are considered active and reflective learners who engage in research and are capable of articulating their learning journey in order to learn to 'know', to 'do', to 'live together', and to 'be' (Delores, 1996:131-132). Enter Rich Assessment Tasks (RATs). RATs offer students a complete learning experience

that allows them to express their diverse opinions and values with integrity but also adheres to this university's Learning and Teaching Values: excellence in students' learning experiences and opportunities to engage in intellectual inquiry and academic freedom (University Teaching and Learning Plan 2007-2010). These assessment-for-learning tasks (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005) will have to be rich in content, multi-modal in approach and mediated, so that they cater for different learners and allow them to analyze and evaluate their learning throughout the process of the task. RATs need to be structured ways that are developmental and that facilitate positive criticism and judgment to achieve the aims of learning to know, do, be, and to live together and be tolerant of one another. They are mediated learning experiences that are guided by the learning community of students and their peers, lecturers and tutors, the education community and the wider community. The interaction between these parties will allow for learning to take place within a diverse community of learners.

## The Features of RATs

It is the trans-disciplinary integration of learning that makes RATs unique and rich. In collaboratively negotiating outcomes that provide opportunities for students to construct their own knowledge, rich tasks facilitate different approaches to learning. Throughout the development of the task the student is able to demonstrate a variety of different knowledges, understandings, values, skills and achievements, making rich tasks truly student-centred. Therefore, RATs provide meaningful learning opportunities and experiences for all students. Furthermore, the tasks are relevant to real-life situations as they recognise and

build on lived experience. RATs are problem-based and model various learning theories. They require group and individual work combining cognitive and affective learning.

For students, the development and presentation of a RAT involves putting to work various communication skills and multi-literacies. This is because all components are interrelated so that earlier information gained is continuously revisited and revised. Students need to engage in critical analysis and evaluation, and to demonstrate superb interpretation skills as well as overall application and dedication to the task. Complex and higher levels of thinking are necessary in order to achieve the aims and goals of RATs and to simultaneously motivate and engage students whilst providing deep learning experiences.

The RATs allow students to develop and articulate their conceptual understandings, along with their ability to transfer knowledge between different contexts. These higher-level thinking skills and attributes directly align with Bloom's taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002) and Biggs' SOLO (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome) taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982).

## Assessing RATs

In order to assess both qualitative and quantitative learning outcomes of RATs, it needs to be recognized that these outcomes are "determined by a complex interaction between teaching procedures and student characteristics" (Biggs & Collis, 1982:15). The structure of Biggs' SOLO taxonomy is developed in such a manner that teachers can develop



Artwork and photo: Lila Afiouni

programmes that enable students to “enhance the depth of their learning” (Hattie & Brown, 2004:7). SOLO is a hierarchical taxonomy that is based on an analysis and evaluation of “structural characteristics of questions and answers” (Hattie & Brown, 2004:26). Appropriate use of SOLO allows for the identification of increasing qualitative and quantitative dimensions of understanding. Biggs and Collis have developed a taxonomy that not only assesses content knowledge but also provides students with an opportunity to explore the full range of understandings related to a given task (Hattie & Brown,

*RATs allow students to develop and articulate conceptual understanding, together with the ability to transfer knowledge between different contexts.*

2004:28). A RAT is complex, challenging and authentic, and links together sub-tasks situated within Bloom’s higher-level thinking. It is underscored by Biggs’ SOLO framework that describes constructivist learning.

#### A RAT in Visual Art Education

The multifaceted, flexible nature of RATs ensures that students perform at different levels. They need to be creative, resourceful, entrepreneurial, inquisitive and critically reflective and take risks and think laterally. The high quality, deep learning that is shaped whilst undertaking these tasks is on-going and constructive and involves outcomes that are trans-disciplinary, with practices and skills that are transferable to other contexts.

To develop an understanding and assess the whole learning of students during their final year of the Master of Teaching degree in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, the student submits a Body of Work (BoW) ready for display at the Annual Creative Arts Festival. The BoW should demonstrate the understanding of artmaking as a practice and represent ideas and interests through the interpretation of subject matter and use of expressive forms. The BoW must represent a coherent point of view in relation to conceptual strengths and meaning and it must be executed in a media not familiar to the student. This criterion is crucial to student learning as the students are forced out of their comfort zone and placed in a challenging position where they need to develop new and appropriate technical skills and know-how. Additionally, by positioning the student teacher in a situation similar to that of their future pupils, they are able to critically analyse and evaluate their own learning throughout the developmental processes of their BoW.

This empathic learning is documented in a self-reflective diary that demonstrates clear and sustained reflection on the implication of the development of the BoW on matters relating to teaching and learning in the visual arts. Furthermore, there should be evidence of research within the creative process, investigation of subject matter, interests, issues, processes,

expressive forms and conceptual challenges within the reflective diary. The diary is intended to be a documentation of learning, a clarification and justification of sustained critical reflection, together with an analysis and evaluation of creative processes and decision-making.

Once the BoW has been completed, students present their work in a public art gallery. The curating, management and marketing of this exhibition is a collaborative effort that is entirely student-driven. In addition the visual art students invite their peers in drama, design and music education to perform at the opening night. The students organize all fundraising, catering, the selection of opening speaker, and the planning and coordination of the entire event.

When assessing this RAT, the focus is on all processes, progress and products of learning. The key ingredients of RATs are depth, breadth and applicability. Throughout the task, students’ learning processes are self, peer and tutor/lecturer assessed, according to collaboratively designed assessment criteria. The final presentation is self-assessed and evaluated by the lecturer. This ensures that the students, under the guidance of staff, are able to define and articulate specific task criteria according to the set learning outcomes. This RAT is valid and has relevance because it accommodates a range of student learning. The tasks are research-based and collaborative, and involve critical self, peer and team evaluation and continuously offer the student the opportunity to refine achievements after on-going feedback. Furthermore, this RAT, the BoW and its attendant processes, not only focus on the development of education skills and content in the visual arts, they also focus on empathic student teacher learning, as all aspects of teacher preparation (education and training, research and management) converge. Below is an example of the BoW and the accompanying artist statement of one of the Master of Teaching students. Her statement is indicative of the research and conceptual stages she uses to frame her work.

#### Conclusion

Rich Assessment Tasks encompass a spectrum of authentic, flexible learning experiences that are inclusive and respectful of current and future contexts of the individual student. The learning throughout these tasks is based on prior learning and challenges students at various levels. The tasks assess aspects of student growth and maturation as equal members of a dynamic learning community, and offer the opportunity to construct individual learning aims and objectives that facilitate all aspects of whole student development. They are true to the philosophy and vision of the degree, the course and the individual.

#### References

- Afiouni, L. (2006). Artist Statement and photographs. Personal correspondence.
- Biggs, J. & K. Collis (1982). *Evaluating the Quality of Learning: The SOLO Taxonomy (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome)*. New York, Academic Press.
- Catterall, J. (2005). Conversation and Silence: Transfer of Learning Through the Arts. *Journal for Learning through the Arts: A Research Journal on Arts Integration in Schools and Communities*, 1(1),12.
- Delores, J. (1996). *Learning: the Treasure Within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty First Century*. Paris, UNESCO.
- Eisner, E. (2002). *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*. New Haven CT, Yale University Press.

Fiske, E., (Ed.) (1999). *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning*. Washington D.C., The Arts Education Partnership and the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities.

Gibbs, G. & Simpson, C. (2004/05). Conditions Under Which Assessment Supports Students’ Learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, Issue 1*, 3-31.

James, R., McInnis, C. & Devlin, M. (2002). *Assessing Learning in Australian Universities*. Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne.

Krathwohl, D. (2002). A Revision of Bloom’s Taxonomy: An Overview. *Theory into Practice* 41(4), 212-218.

Sullivan, G. (1993). Art-based art education: Learning that is meaningful, authentic, critical and pluralist. *Studies in Art Education* 35(1), 5-21.

The University of Sydney, University Learning and Teaching Plan 2007-2010. Available at: [http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning/planning/uni\\_plan.shtml](http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning/planning/uni_plan.shtml)

Marianne Hulsbosch is Course Director of Visual Arts Education (Secondary). Her research is focused on the social contexts of identity construction in dress design. Email: [m.hulsbosch@edfac.usyd.edu.au](mailto:m.hulsbosch@edfac.usyd.edu.au)

#### LILA AFIOUNI: ARTIST’S STATEMENT

There is something inspiring about reconnecting with the past in order to move forward. My work takes its cue from alchemical objects in medieval Europe and the Arab lands. The word ‘Al-kimia’ is Arabic for ‘alchemy’ and translates to ‘the black soil art’. The Arabs in the 12th Century practised alchemy in secret, hidden away from their Islamic faith. Alchemy is often known as a ‘hidden or occult’ art and many philosophical texts have been written about it. I find it intriguing that growing up within a Western culture, I have turned to my own heritage to look for more substance about who I am, where my people came from; which caravans toured what lands and deserts, in search of jewels, magic, philosophy, art and science. I define alchemy as always searching, always questioning and trying to discover something better than what lies in the present.

This survey of work allowed me to consider the artefacts of my own culture and the ruptured heritage that was never passed on from my own family (since emigrating to Australia and bringing limited possessions). Although my own history is fractured, I would like to create a new quilt of informed cultural identity, which I can pass on to future generations, an identity that is informed and inspired by organic, decorative and functional forms of ancient times, but unlike the original inspiration, my forms are non-functional. The vessels are hollowed and feature cracks, which have become a metaphor for the imperfections of human existence.



Artwork and photo: Lila Afiouni