

# The Incursion of Administrative Language into the Education of Artists

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**T**HE WAY THAT ARTISTS HAVE BEEN EDUCATED in the last thirty years is very different from the ways they have been educated in any previous century and in any other culture. It would be appropriate if the new form of education echoed the cultural and artistic changes in the last three decades—if it had to do with politics, gender, globalization, and postmodernism—and to a small degree it does. But for the most part what's new in the education of artists has no direct connection to artists' concerns. The current generation of artists is being evaluated according to carefully plotted spreadsheets, labeled as learning goals, outcomes, benchmarks, core expectations, assessment criteria, capstone achievements, and rubrics.

It is ironic, if that's not too weak a word, that the very same years in which art has moved so decisively from the studio out into the world, when artists have become so engaged with ethnicity, gender, place, and identity, when freedom of expression and thought have come to count for so much, are also the years in which student artists are judged according to pages of minutely tuned, incrementally quantified and impeccably bureaucratized criteria.

The purpose of the new criteria is not to limit artistic expression, but to allow teachers to make fair evaluations of their students, or deans and administrators to make justifiable assessments of their faculty and departments, or accreditation organizations to make measured evaluations of entire institutions. The new criteria are

all about fairness, accountability, and comparability. In theory, that wouldn't be a problem, if it were a process that ran in the background, without impinging on what happens in the studio or classroom. But the language of the spreadsheets is spreading into the classrooms, and from there into the way artists talk and think.

It's easy to get a sense of how widespread these new criteria have become. Run an internet search of "art rubrics," and you'll find images of hundreds of spreadsheets. A deeper search of art academies, art schools, and art departments will reveal that many have posted their spreadsheets online. A Google Books search of the words "assessment" and "rubric" shows a steep increase in those terms over the same three decades: the problem is accelerating.<sup>1</sup>

Measurable criteria are part of the streamlining of higher education that began in the UK and Australia in the 1980s, and has now spread to North America, the EU, and beyond. The center of the world's production of quantifiable criteria for evaluating students is the UK, which codified quantified assessment in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and its successor the Research Excellent Framework (REF). The UK model is currently under study for implementation in French and German universities, and it exerts a general and pervasive influence in the direction of greater complexity and the successive quantification of criteria of student and faculty achievement in all subjects. The UK's influence on the US is indirect and often unnoticed. When I'm trying to scare my colleagues away from implementing more criteria, I like to mention the h-index, invented in the UK, and its successors the i10 index and the g index. These are metrics that reduce a scholar's entire output to a single number, which can be easily plugged into formulae the university uses to help make decisions about the allocation of resources. This dispiriting administrative achievement has been the subject of many studies in the UK.<sup>2</sup> In my experience, most North American scholars don't know about it, except perhaps as an entertaining graph on their Google Scholar page.

When I first became aware of this problem, it seemed abstract and remote from my field. I teach art history and theory in an art school. Many of my students are artists at the BFA and MFA level. I talk to them in seminars and lecture classes, and I visit their studios and conduct art critiques. I only encounter rubrics and other quantified criteria when I participate in committees. But gradually, belatedly, I've come to realize that the language of the spreadsheets is becoming the language of the studio classroom and the art critique, and therefore also the language the students hear and speak. I see the words from the spreadsheets in the artists' statements we ask our students to write, and I hear them in their conversation. Quantified administrative literature is contributing to the art production of the current generation of students: it is now part of the art world, part of art history.

1 Or try "learning goal," "learning outcome," for example on [xkcd.culturomics.org](http://xkcd.culturomics.org).

2 See for example the entertaining account in Roger Burrows, "Living with the H-Index? Metric Assemblages in the Contemporary Academy," *Sociological Review* 60 no. 2 (May 2012), pp. 355-72.

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In my experience the faculty who write these spreadsheets usually work by looking at what comparable institutions have done. The slow work of developing quantifiable criteria happens in conversation in committee meetings. Words whose histories and alternative meanings may not be known are typed into the cells of spreadsheets, where they are divided into degrees of success or failure, and subdivided into further categories. The spreadsheets are built around a relatively small number of generative criteria.

For example, art students are expected to “synthesize” the form and color in their artworks; to create a “unified” practice; to “articulately” describe their work; to “clearly” set out their principal ideas; to have a good idea about their “message” or “meaning”; to develop a “position,” a “stand,” or a “perspective” on their work; to be “reflective” about what they do; to develop a “visual language” or “visual competence”; to formulate a “research agenda”; to be able to speak about their “inquiry” or what they intend to “interrogate”; to settle on a “field” or “subject” for their work; to be able to describe their “problematic”; and perhaps above all to create for themselves a “practice.” Words like the ones I have put in quotation marks sound innocuous enough, and they can be when they are used in ordinary studio conversation. But if an art department says, in its official literature, that its students will learn to “synthesize” form and color, then the meaning of the word matters. What should count as an inadequate synthesis? Are there stronger or weaker sorts of synthesis, that could be assigned grades or numbers? What form or strength of synthesis will count as an adequate fulfilment of the department’s criterion? And what is the opposite of synthesis?

Sometimes it’s form and color that need to be synthesized; other times it’s form and content, or ideas and forms, or just ideas. Students of the La Salle School of Architecture, in the Ramon Llull University in Barcelona are asked to “apply a spirit of synthesis of ideas and forms.”<sup>3</sup> In the EU, educational norms are monitored by a series of agreements known as the Bologna Accords. Among their documents are the “Dublin Descriptors,” which ask that graduate degrees should be awarded to students who are capable of the “synthesis of new and complex ideas.”<sup>4</sup> In the US, similar rubrics can be found in the literature of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD).

3 Quoted in *SHARE: Handbook for Artistic Research Education*, edited by Mick Wilson and Schelte van Ruiten, 2014, p. 195; [www.sharenetwork.eu/downloads](http://www.sharenetwork.eu/downloads).

4 See “Shared ‘Dublin’ descriptors for Short Cycle, First Cycle, Second Cycle and Third Cycle Awards,” October 18, 2004, online at [nvaio.com](http://nvaio.com).

The *NASAD Handbook* says one of a student’s “essential competencies” is the “ability to analyze and synthesize relevant aspects of human interaction in various contexts (physical, cognitive, cultural, social, political, and economic)...”. Under “Painting,” classified as an “essential competence,” there is an entry requiring the “ability to synthesize the use of drawing, two-dimensional design, and color.” At the MFA level, under “General Requirements: Art,” the *Handbook* lists a number of skills including “awareness of current issues and developments,” “writing and speaking skills,” and “advanced professional competence” in some area of studio work; that section is introduced with this description: “The elements outlined... should be combined and synthesized in an individual exhibiting exceptional skill in studio art or design and a well-developed personal aesthetic.”

In each of these examples, the word “synthesis” is key to the meaning of the criterion. Yet without a definition of “synthesis,” each of these criteria falls back on the instructor’s personal sense of the student’s achievement—which is exactly the kind of reliance on subjective and incomparable judgment that the entire edifice of quantified evaluation is intended to avoid.

It’s not hard to see how the concept of synthesis made its way into art education rubrics. In the studio, instructors are often on the watch for signs that the student’s work looks unified or coherent. It’s usually a good thing when an art student begins to make work that speaks with a single voice, that brings together a range of materials and techniques, or shows a coherent attitude toward the art of the past. We ask our students to think about parts of their work that don’t fit; we suggest which elements might work well together; we give advice about which works might go together in an exhibition. We say the parts and forms and ideas in their work should speak to one another. In short, we hope our students can assemble, from the bewildering range of possible influences and techniques, a coherent, more or less unified practice—what used to be called a style.

The institution where I teach, the School of the Art Institute (SAIC), is collaborating with the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing (CAFA) on a project called “Art Words,” which looks at the generative criteria such as synthesis, in hopes of providing useful information about their meanings and histories. The idea is to help administrators who build the spreadsheets, so that the key words can be used more accurately.

Synthesis, for example, has a long and complex history in philosophy. Concepts like unity and coherence have attracted attention from analytic philosophers, critics, and even theologians, and that literature can be very helpful in deciding exactly what “synthesis” should mean in any given case.

The “Art Words” project is assembling this sort of philosophic and etymological information, and we are also looking at the uses of the words in art history. One unexpected result has been that the historical uses of the words often point in directions very different from what the spreadsheets imply.

The unity of the artwork is an old ideal, which can be traced to Aristotle. But it was critiqued as early as the late 18th century, when writers like Novalis and Wilhelm von Schlegel advocated and practiced disunities.<sup>5</sup> The fragment was an ideal for art long before Freud’s division of the psyche or the deconstruction of intentionality in poststructuralism. Even though attempts at synthesis, unity, and coherence continued in many ways, the 19th century Romantic critique ended the period in which those properties provided the central model for an artwork’s structure.<sup>6</sup>

Some Modernist artists made a point of not synthesizing their historical precedents. Marcel Duchamp’s last “retinal” (that is, naturalistic) painting, *Tu m’* (1918) has elements of linear perspective, color theory, trompe l’oeil, and commercial art. Picasso, Hannah Höch, Kurt Schwitters, and others made intentionally disharmonious collages. The idea that an artist’s style might be multiple was already in the air in the 1920s. Francis Picabia, for example, experimented with a succession of deliberately disparate styles and media.

In the 21st century, techniques for producing fragmentation, ruin, and collage are part of the toolkit of contemporary artists. In effect we teach strategies of disunity in the place of the Aristotelian unities, and our students practice making disunified works as soon as they become aware of the possibility. And yet our spreadsheets continue to call for synthesis. It would be interesting to add criteria of Romantic, modernist, and postmodernist disunity. Synthesis could be a criterion for beginning and lower-level BFA art students, and specific forms of disharmony and incoherence could be criteria at the MFA level.

Except for small and independent institutions, there really isn’t an escape from the current quantification of art education. Unfortunately, it’s the period in which we live. The SAIC/CAFA “Art Words” project is intended to supply reference material that can help find the words that can supplement or even replace concepts like “synthesis,” so that our administrative literature can better represent the art that has been made over the last century or more, and the art that our students aspire to make. .A

5 See, for example, Elizabeth Harris, *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century* (University of Virginia Press, 1994).

6 It can be said, for example, that Jacques-Louis David synthesized 18th century academic forms and the newly formulated neoclassicism; that Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres synthesized the medieval “troubadour style,” David’s manner, and neoclassicism; or that Édouard Manet synthesized discrete historical episodes in art history, from Titian and Velazquez to academic realism. But the same century saw the rise of pastiche and incongruity in the choice of styles.