

office of **Academic Planning & Assessment**
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Faculty Focus on Assessment

“One of the things that assessment has helped us to do better is to make explicit what we want students to learn...After all, what we're after here is providing the very best education that we can.”

— Laetitia La Follette



In 1998 Laetitia La Follette, Associate Professor of Art History, and a team of art history faculty received a FIPSE grant to develop an interactive instructional CD-ROM to supplement introductory art history textbooks. Part of their challenge in developing “A History of Art for the 21st Century” was showing the effectiveness of learning in an electronic medium. La Follette and the team turned to assessment as a way to determine the effectiveness of their project. In the following interview, La Follette describes some of the unexpected benefits that assessment has had on the CD-ROM’s development and in the teaching of the introductory survey in Art History.

The Project

According to La Follette, philosophically and practically, traditional textbooks for art history are no longer effective study aids for many students. These textbooks describe rather than analyze works of art. What students today need – especially the majority of students who have never stepped into an art museum before – is

to learn the processes of art historical analysis. Consequently, La Follette and her colleagues set out to develop a textbook supplement that would show students *how* art historians approach works of art as well as the way art serves to express cultural and intellectual ideas.

Developing an Assessment Plan

La Follette says that she initially resisted including assessment in the CD-ROM’s development process. She integrated assessment into the project plan only because she “had to” as part of the FIPSE grant. La Follette explains that with FIPSE grants, “you need to prove that there is an impact from your experiment. We set out to show that *multimedia can be used to educate*. Assessment was a way of showing that multi-media is more than ‘edu-tainment.’”

After a few false starts, La Follette, with the help of the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment and other on-campus resources, developed methods of assessing

the effectiveness of the CD-ROM. As part of the design, students in the introductory course were divided into control and “treatment” groups to compare the effectiveness of the the CD-ROM to more traditional course packets. La Follette says: “I particularly resisted the idea of having control groups. We need assessment to see *how effective* tools are, particularly at the development stage. Obviously if something is not working, we don’t want to devote more time and resources to it. I think assessment helps you fix what’s broken *and* helps you assess new tools that you are developing in terms of their efficacy.”



The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) provides service to the campus community in evaluating student learning and program effectiveness. OAPA can assist departments and individual faculty members in several areas: ■ **Developing evaluation plans** for new programs, grant proposals, and externally and internally funded projects ■ **Exploring and articulating** student learning outcomes appropriate to a course or program ■ **Finding useful ways** of assessing student success in achieving program goals ■ **Developing strategies** for ongoing reviews of program effectiveness for quality improvement, accreditation, and other purposes ■ **Contact:** Martha L.A. Stassen, Director of Assessment, phone: (413) 545-5146, email: mstassen@acad.umass.edu

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Assessment Discoveries

La Follette says candidly, “Assessment is the one piece that initially I thought, ‘ok we hire an outside evaluator. They take care of it and that’s it.’ Of course, you can’t do that. It has to be very closely integrated with the content of the course.” She says incorporating assessment into the “A History of Art for the 21st Century” project has required her to learn more about students through questionnaires, to reassess learning objectives, and to reconsider teaching methodology.

One of the exciting findings of the student questionnaires was that students love the art history lectures. In fact, La Follette says that her research has shown that “without that human voice, the material becomes dead for the students. Part of the problem that students have ‘getting into’ the material is that the textbook is so impersonal.” As a result, La Follette has included a voice track on the CD-ROM with different experts analyzing artwork from various theoretical or methodological perspectives. With the soundtrack, the material comes alive, in an individual art historian’s approach.

Another outcome of the assessment process has been that it asks faculty to reassess learning objectives. La Follette explains, “One of the things that assessment has helped us do is to make more explicit what we want students to learn. I think there is the perception out there that assessment is just a lot of number crunching. Yet, one significant aspect of assessment is that it asks teachers to reflect on their goals for student learning.” In La Follette’s case, assessment helped the team clarify the skills that art historians have and that art history students need to learn.

In addition, the assessment process has asked faculty to reconsider teaching methodology. La Follette explains, “There’s a disconnect between the way professors learned and the way the students are learning now. I think assessment can be very helpful in showing us where that gap is and then we can start devising ways to bridge that gap. Such an approach to learning is much more in keeping with the ideal of the public university and public education.”

Advice for other faculty

La Follette offers this practical advice about assessment:

“Frankly, I think that we will all have to do this. It’s a question of sooner or later. We are accountable for the way we teach. Assessment can help us identify some of those ways that we need to change. We’re trying to make learning a more interactive experience. As a Lilly fellow, I’ve learned from the Center for Teaching how to engage students in the classroom. Part of this project is to get

students to leave the classroom with a series of skills that they can use to analyze other works.

In the end, La Follette says that assessment has been an important, albeit at times a frustrating, part of the “A History of Art for the 21st Century” project. She says, “I come from a department with a strong commitment to undergraduate teaching. Assessment has become a useful way to reaffirm that commitment.”

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This issue:

Professor Laetitia La Follette discusses how she uses assessment to improve learning in Art History.