

# Feeding the Availability Heuristic: Leveraging Assessment as Advocacy

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We all know that assessment done well is more than just a grade recorded for report cards. Effective assessment involves timely communication and rich feedback to students and, in turn, to parents, and even administrators, concerning the learning happening in the art classroom. Effective assessment can also serve as an integral component of your ongoing advocacy efforts. As we have discussed in previous newsletters the best advocacy practices are deployed as embedded components in your daily teaching and program administration. They work to highlight and emphasize the learning happening in the art room. In the past we have talked about how the art show advocates (Nolte-Yupari & Savage, 2023c), and about how consistent positive parent communication (e.g., example monthly/quarterly newsletters) (Nolte-Yupari and Savage, 2023a, 2023b) help us to make the learning of the art room highly visible and on embracing assessment as advocacy (Nolte-Yupari and Savage, 2025). In this article we extend this conversation and review why we should embrace assessment as an advocacy practice and address ways to navigate/remove the barriers we often encounter when trying to maintain consistent routines for timely assessment and thus timely advocacy.

## Why Is Assessment Part of Advocacy?

Advocacy is the process of speaking up for a cause to create change. In art education, our advocacy efforts involve *ongoing discourse about the value and importance of maintaining consistent and regular access to high quality art experiences in the form of curriculum, contact time, and monetary support for curriculum*. In a standards-based assessment environment, consistent data on learning outcomes create powerful ongoing visibility. Unlike one-off advocacy efforts like lobbying a representative or even the art show (if you only have one/year), consistent assessment and communication of learning objectives and thus learning outcomes create a *persistent and regular message* centered on the growth, progress, and value in the art room.

For assessment to be used as an advocacy tool, art educators must recognize the challenges we face on the topic of assessment in the arts. First, there are many common misbeliefs and misconceptions that surround the assessment of art. Conversations with stakeholders that hold untrue beliefs regarding assessment can often leave us feeling attacked, defeated, and disempowered. The following are a few statements you have probably heard:

- Art is a gift or talent and cannot be taught.
- Everyone should receive an A in art.
- Art teachers look for an unachievable “wow” or “special something” in student work.
- Art is an “extra” and the grade should not count or bring down a student’s GPA.
- Art cannot be graded.
- Grades in art are subjective.

Secondly, many stakeholders do not understand the learning that takes place in the art classroom. Providing information on the NYS Standards for the Arts, Studio Habits of Mind and the NYS Portrait of a Graduate (discussed in the context of art education in our fall 2025 article (Savage and Nolte-Yupari, 2025)) are key to helping stakeholders understand student learning in the art classroom. Knowledge of these challenges can help art educators use assessment as an advocacy tool when they connect with stakeholders. Dialogue can be focused on what the student is doing well, what challenges the student overcame and what they learned. This leaves you, the art educator, feeling empowered—confident in the regular systems and routines that you have in place to capture student learning, and able to articulate how grades are earned in your classroom.

## Leveraging the Availability Heuristic for Art Program Support

Timely and consistent assessment plus feedback to students and parents relating to the learning and progress is crucial and leverages the *availability heuristic* to our advantage. The concept of the *availability heuristic* reveals that when information is repeated our minds overestimate how much something is happening. For example, if a major car accident occurs and is reported by the news at 9AM, and then the same accident is discussed at the top of the hour over and over again by the news until 4PM, the *repetition is processed as increased frequency of multiple accidents rather than recurring information and updates one accident*. The repetition creates ease of recall, so we give more weight to the information. “By altering our

perception of probability, the availability heuristic significantly impacts our ability to make accurate judgments and assess risks in our daily lives” (The Decision Lab). The availability heuristic is often leveraged in conversations about risk. But the heuristic exists no matter what. It’s a mental shortcut, it means we make decisions on the most available and most easily recalled information. In a less dramatic example, if you are interested in minimalism and start liking minimalism posts on Instagram, the algorithm feeds you more of what you like. The ready availability of lots of posts on minimalism to you can trick you into thinking everyone else likes minimalism too. But it may mean that you miss that many are interested in maximalist design decisions. As an advocacy strategy, the availability heuristic means that stakeholders and decision makers will support content areas and programs for which they can easily access and recall information. So, if you are not regularly making your art program visible then it will not jump to mind when discussions about budgets and policies come up and when stakeholders get to that budget line, they will not be able to recall any particulars about art learning. The lack of available information creates bias against that particular topic (The Decision Lab). Therefore, regular and consistent assessment and feedback and regular and consistent communication of such reinforces what art educators already know: that learning is common and persistent rather than aberrant in the art room. Making art learning consistently visible counteracts the availability heuristic by positioning information about art learning as highly available and thus highly important. The net effect of the availability heuristic on our advocacy efforts increases as well—there is so much happening in the art room! We are always making, always creating, always thinking, always learning! Arts learning is implemented daily! (Not coincidentally).

**Removing Assessment Barriers to Feed the Availability Heuristic**

Since we need to assess students’ artwork, why not make it a priority for you, your students, and thus your program? While this sounds logical and, in some ways, easy, there are a number of barriers that often prevent us from implementing clear, consistent assessment practices. We often try too many different ways to assess—this is confusing to students and requires time we do not have. The recording and assessing process is often forgotten as we struggle to tackle daily classroom management tasks. We are left with nothing to display alongside finished work thus preventing us from informing parents and administration of the artistic learning process. We often find it challenging to implement time for student reflection and struggle with grading when students do not finish work at the same time. The accompanying chart identifies five keyways we should assess student growth, barriers we often face, how this affects our advocacy practices, and possible solutions to overcome these barriers. We hope while reading the chart, you can recognize the barriers you face regarding assessment and find the solutions you need to elevate the belief and understanding of the learning occurring in your art classroom.

Should	Barrier	How it affects advocacy	Fix
Formatively assess regularly	-We try to change it up too much...or we forget to document	-All the little moments of learning that are amazing do not get captured -Students have a hard time seeing how one skill builds on another	-Create routines around formative assessment. 1-2 options for closure/exit slips. 1-2 ways for looking at/responding to work. Document conversations during critiques etc. (For help on routines such as these, we recommend Nolte-Yupari & Hanning, 2026) -Give graded guided practices back regularly so students can use it as a reference -Use guided practice in portfolios and the art show to illustrate learning -Document learning of the Studio Habits of Mind: develop craft, stretch and explore, engage and persist
Document in-progress work	-We forget, photos take time, we have SO many students, photos seem to take forever...	-We lose the growth and the changes as work moves through the messy middle—we miss the risks and the beauty of spontaneity	-Purchase a Chromebook and/or simple camera -Set up a documentation station and teach students to regularly document their progress -Use Artsonia to provide parents with a way to see and respond -Reference the Studio Habits of Mind: observe, reflect, engage and persist, understanding art worlds -Point out how the Create and Respond Art Standards are met

Featuring process as well as product in displays and the art show	-Additional work to track and to hang	-Viewers/stakeholders see finished work but not the sweat equity and learning that it took get there -They miss the point. Significant learning takes place during the process/journey -Students make creative choices, the art has a student aesthetic instead of an adult aesthetic—adults can lack an understanding of the learning	-Provide information on how art is created in a choice-based environment where the process reinforces the learning that occurs during the making -Show process examples, envision handouts during the show...even a sampling or a deep dive into one prompt/project -Provide student written reflection on their work
Provide timely feedback with explanations (not just a grade and not just when grades are due)	-Students do not finish at the same time -We dislike grading and it feels overwhelming	-Students may not understand the assignment, cannot make corrections, and may voice frustration to others -If artwork is not given back, the grade becomes the visual reference point and is seen as separate from the artwork -Parents may not understand the grade, students may not understand the grade, art is seen as subjective	-Provide rubrics for students with clear expectations and guidelines -Provide opportunities for discussion such as in-progress, group, and individual critiques -Use rubrics and criteria and have students self-assess their work -Involve students in critiques of artwork completed by established artists to help them learn vocabulary and how to discuss art
Give students time to reflect on their own work as part of the critique process or portfolio reflection	-Students protest "writing" in the art room -Making time for this feels like stealing from creating time	-Feedback and reflection feels "top down" from teachers or an expert rather than from the student -Minimizes/discards REFLECT as Studio Habit and RESPOND as an Arts Standard leaving gaps in learning -Students left unable to articulate the "why" or artmaking and creative processes	-Make a routine for "critique" and reflection -Actively have students reflect on the rubric and provide examples -Build reflection into the "artist statement" process -Leverage Studio Habits comprehension v. inclination

## Conclusion

Assessment becomes a strong advocacy tool when standard based assessment practices on artistic learning outcomes are used purposefully as a tool for creating consistent and ongoing visibility. Timely communication and rich feedback to students, parents and administrators on the learning occurring in your art classroom can remove barriers and misbeliefs. Advocacy should not be a role we wait for others to do for us. When it comes to using assessment as an advocacy tool only you can take on the responsibility.

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