

## Rubrics as a Tool for Objective Assessment in Art Education

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### ABSTRACT

The paper describes the importance of a rubric as an assessment tool in art education. The assessment of a work of art, for example, a landscape or a portrait painting usually consists of a combination of objective information and a subjective point of view, which makes it difficult for educators to assess students' learning outcomes. The use of rubrics is considered an innovative way for educators not only to measure the student's comprehension and skills but also as a teaching method to increase learners' engagement in order to bring the creation of art to the forefront of the learning process within school art education.

The relevance of the subject of this paper is defined by the changes in the evaluation system during the ongoing education reform in Latvia. The rubric, as an assessment tool in Latvia, was first introduced in 2020 as a part of the reform of the school curriculum. Rubrics for creative art assignments observe the main stages of the learning process, including sketching, expression of original ideas, creative work, documentation of the creation process and self-evaluation. It can be used for both, summative and formative assessments of learning outcomes. The criteria are based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Visual Literacy which was developed by The European Network of Visual Literacy. Therefore, the research aim is to determine the optimal way to evaluate students' work in art lessons within the framework of school art education.

The research involved two stages of data collection. During the first stage (2021) there was conducted a survey of 60 Latvian secondary school teachers that identified several problematic issues concerning the evaluation criteria. In the second stage (2022) the in-depth analysis was performed to investigate the connection between the feedback from educational practice and recommended rubrics in new curricula.

*Keywords:* art education, assessment, formal education, rubric, analytical rubric, learning process

## Introduction

For several years now, large-scale reforms of curricula, instruction design and assessment system have been carried out around the world in order to prepare the children most efficiently for the higher education, requirements of life and work in the 21st century (Darling-Hammond, 2012). By rethinking the role of assessment in the learning process, student assessment has gained new meaning and importance. Current educational guidelines state that assessment is done not only by the teacher, but also by the students themselves. Students use assessment criteria to improve learning, set learning goals and track their performance. In this way, they are aware of their level of skills and knowledge precisely because they are informed of how the judgments about their learning outcomes are made (Gardner et al., 2014). The curriculum was also revised in Latvia, at all levels of education, implementing a competency-based approach. Thus, the questions are rising about the assessment practice and its role in the learning process in all school subjects, including art education.

Due to the educational reform implemented in Latvia, two types of assessment are used in the current school evaluation system: formative and summative. The formative assessment is used to assess student performance on a daily basis, and it can be documented in percentage or levels, while a 10-point scale is used for final or summative assessment starting from the third grade. Both types of assessment are implemented together in correlation with the student achievement at four levels (beginning, developing, accomplished, exemplary), which are defined by specific learning objectives in each subject. In order to determine the achievements of students by level, the rubric as an evaluation tool was introduced in Latvia for the first time in 2020 as part of the school curriculum reform.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to determine the optimal way to assess students' work in art lessons within the framework of school art education. In accordance with the aim of the study, two research questions have arisen:

- 1) How to evaluate art in formal education?
- 2) Are teachers receiving sufficient support to understand and acquire the necessary skills to master the use of the new assessment tool?

## Problematics of art assessment within the framework of school education

“Art is eccentric, emotional, touchy-feely. Assessment is mainstream, scientific, rigorous.” (Soep, 2005, p. 39). This observation was relevant around a decade ago and remains relevant today (Soep, 2005; Douglas, 2012; Burnard, 2011; McArdle & Wright, 2014), and it accurately describes why evaluating a study work of art is quite a difficult task. Teachers are still confronted with the fact that the mastery in the arts within the framework of school education is not easy to assess, as for too many teachers art and assessment may seem contradictory as “the first is free and expressive, while the second is calculating and institutionalized” (Soep, 2005, p. 40).

The difficulties to assess students' work in art lessons may be as follows:

- 1) the evaluation of a work of art usually consists of a combination of objective information, such as mastery of a particular technique and the number of sketches required, as well as more subjective information, such as points of view or perceptions of originality (McArdle & Wright, 2014);
- 2) each student makes his personal creative path, develops and performs in different ways (Hobdell, 2014);
- 3) there are opinions that too strict criteria and focus on evaluation can negatively affect the student's creative work, interrupt self-expression and experience of his personal creative process (Douglas, 2012).

Although expression in art is difficult to measure and evaluate, assessment plays an important role in the learning process. It could be used to communicate what is expected of a particular learning experience, so that the learner has clear information about the aims and outcomes of the learning process and understands how their achievement will be assessed (Gardner et al., 2014). Furthermore, the school education system determines the need to monitor and evaluate students' knowledge and skills in all subjects, so it is necessary to find an objective way to evaluate students' achievements in art curricula as well (Douglas, 2012). And the evaluation strategy must be designed so that every student, teacher and school administration can be confident about the validity of the results, teacher must be able to explain and justify his opinion about the students' achievements (Black & Wiliam, 2012; Binkley et al., 2012; Hoge & Butcher, 2014).

### **Rubric as an assessment tool**

The rubric as an assessment tool in pedagogical practice was introduced in a language classroom to analyse writing in 1912 (Brooks, 2013). It is defined as "a scoring tool for qualitative rating of authentic or complex student work." (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007, p. 131), which also corresponds to the work of students in art classes, the focus of which is on the development of students' creative abilities, their originality and innovative thinking (Burnard, 2011).

The rubric was created to reduce the teacher's personal, subjective opinion when evaluating the student's achievements. The subjective view on the quality of the students' work made the assessment unclear and imprecise, as it depended on the opinion of a specific individual (teacher). For this reason, the need of an objective evaluation tool was expressed, which would be unambiguous, transparent, and clear to all involved in the learning process and would not depend on the opinion of one individual (Noyes, 1912 in Turley & Gallagher, 2008).

Rubric splits a task into its components and goals and gives a detailed description of the acceptable and unacceptable level of performance for each criterion (Stevens & Levi, 2005). It helps to assess the quality, creativity, and conceptual basis of the work, defines what is expected, how it will be assessed, and provides

an overview of the criteria that determine whether the required level of knowledge and skills has been achieved (Whitton, 2015). There are two main types of rubrics for evaluating the final product (Luft, 1997; Whitton, 2015):

- 1) holistic rubric evaluates several criteria together;
- 2) analytical rubric evaluates the criteria, which are subdivided into sub-criteria, providing detailed information and guidance to the student and teacher on how to develop the necessary knowledge and skills.

Analytical type assessment rubric is considered in current research because this type of rubric was introduced as an assessment tool in Latvia as part of the school curriculum reform in 2020.

## Methodology

In order to investigate the problematic issues outlined in introduction part about the art assessment within the framework of school education, two following research methods were used:

- 1) an online questionnaire surveys of Latvian secondary school teachers, which was conducted in two stages;
- 2) participants' observation during the teacher professional development program "Evaluation of Creative Works in the Art in School Education".

Each online questionnaire survey was designed with its own purpose and included a different set of questions. In the first stage, the purpose of the survey was to determine the situation at the initial stage of the implementation of the reform ideas, when teachers were introduced to the evaluation rubric as a new tool for evaluating student achievements. The survey was conducted in 2021, where 60 teachers took part in, who participated in education courses organized by the Latvian State Education Centre in 2021 received an individual e-mail with an invitation to participate in a survey about the experience of teaching visual arts and the evaluation process in elementary school. The purpose of this questionnaire was to understand the opinion of Latvian school teachers towards the evaluation of works of art. The questionnaire consisted of 18 questions, which were divided into three groups: the first part was about the structure of the learning process (number of assessments and topics); the second part of the questionnaire contained questions about the principles of evaluation and student involvement in the formulation of criteria, and in the third part, teachers had the opportunity to freely express ideas and suggestions for the evaluation of creative works.

Further, during the second stage of the survey in 2022, an in-depth analysis of the problematic issues of assessment was conducted, where 77 teachers participated. Teachers were approached in two ways:

- 1) individually via e-mail with a request to participate in the study and fill out the survey;

2) in the social network *Facebook*, addressing Latvian school teachers to participate in the study.

As a result, 54 completed questionnaires were received from the individually addressed teachers, while 23 questionnaires were received from the *Facebook* community of teachers. The purpose of this questionnaire was to examine the experience of teachers in using the assessment rubric and to identify the challenges teachers faced in implementing the new assessment tool in art classes. Therefore, the survey questions were focused directly on the rubric, the criteria of the rubric and the objectivity of the assessment. The questionnaire consisted of 17 closed-ended questions, which were divided into two groups:

- 1) the first part consisted of general questions about teachers' work experience as visual art teachers, and assessment practices in everyday classroom work;
- 2) the second part of the questionnaire contained questions about the use of rubric as an assessment tool while evaluating students' works.

After the second survey in 2022, the participant observation was conducted during the Teacher professional development program "Evaluation of Creative Works in the Art in School Education" in August 2022. The purpose of the program was to improve teachers' skills to plan an effective creative process and to evaluate students' works of art according to the specifics of the subject. The total duration of the program was 36 hours with participation of 25 teachers of visual arts from general and professional schools. In this stage of the research, the experience of teachers in applying the rubric as an assessment tool, as well as a teaching and learning method, was described by collecting teachers' statements and insights from three phases of training: firstly, during the open discussion in the introductory part, secondly, in the rubric creation workshop and finally in the reflection part at the end of the courses. Thus, the purpose of the participant observation was to get acquainted with the skills of teachers in creating a rubric and to identify the main problems that teachers face in this process.

## Results

The results of each stage of the study are described in a separate subsection, to facilitate a better overview of the progress of the study and highlight the most important key considerations.

### The first-round questionnaire

A brief survey was conducted in 2021, to acknowledge the attitude of Latvian school teachers towards the evaluation of study works of art. It was completed by 60 visual arts teachers. The selection of teachers for this survey can be considered

an expert survey because structurally they were teachers with more than 10 years of experience as visual arts teachers (70%), who received professional education at the Faculty of Pedagogy, Psychology and Art of the Republic of Latvia. University of Latvia (65%) and Latvian Academy of Arts (20%). The survey was anonymous.

In the first part of the questionnaire, 65% of respondents stated that they give 2 to 4 summative assessments per semester, 30% give 5 to 6 assessments and 5% noted that they give 7 assessments per semester, performing both finished work and half-finished work and also sketch evaluation, depending on the situation.

In the second part of the survey, it can be concluded that out of 60 teachers, only 22 participate in the evaluation process together with the students, which indicates a procedural problem, such as lack of time. 8 teachers indicate that they give the assessment individually in a conversation with each student, and 6 that they give the assessment only in written form. When commenting on the importance of evaluations, answers about the assessment of skills dominate (mentioned 48 times), and the level of creativity is almost equally important (mentioned 44 times). This means that the findings of the theory fixed at the beginning of the article will be confirmed. It is also possible to evaluate personal effort (mentioned 34 times), process quality (mentioned 43 times) and knowledge (mentioned 32 times). When answering why assessment is needed in the visual arts, only a few teachers admit that “so that the student can better see his own growth” and “understand the basic principles of art”. However, the favorite topic is “ornament in national culture”, which shows that it is easier to create a rubric for such a topic related to precision and structure.

In general, 80% of respondents indicated that assessment in art subjects is necessary. However, 20% of respondents stated that they do not consider the necessity to evaluate student artworks. Their responses consisted of statements such as “Creative work should not be evaluated”, “Art should be like a therapy session”, “Art is difficult to evaluate”, “Art evaluation is a matter of taste” etc. Despite the fact that such responses were in the minority, they were sufficient to initiate a deeper investigation and questioning teachers about the assessment practices in the visual arts in school education.

### **The second-round questionnaire**

At the second stage of the survey, an in-depth analysis of the problematic issues of art assessment was carried out with an emphasis on the experience of teachers using the rubric as an assessment tool. A three-point Likert scale was used (*never, sometimes, often*) to find out teachers' opinions about the objectivity of their assessment of students' works in art classes. The answer *never* was counted as a negative answer, while the answers *often* and *sometimes* were counted as positive. An overview of the results of this survey is provided below.

Table 1. Respondents' answers to the questionnaire (second stage, 2022)

| Questions   | Answers  |          |
|---|----------|----------|
|   | Positive | Negative |
| 1. Do you think your personal (subjective) opinion is present in the assessments of student work?   | 40%      | 60%      |
| 2. Do you use a comparison of student work ("best and worst") when giving a summative assessment?   | 65%      | 35%      |
| 3. Have you had a situation where, in your opinion, the summative assessment (on a 10-point scale) did not reflect the student's real achievements. | 87%      | 13%      |

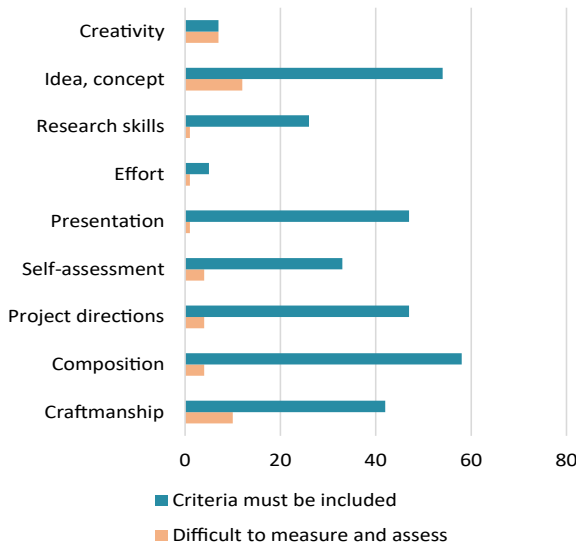
As can be seen from Table 1, more than half of the teachers rated their assessment practice as objective. On the other hand, answers to additional questions lead to a reconsideration of the objectivity of teachers' assessment practice, as they note that they use comparison of students' work, and do not always agree with criteria-based assessment.

The reasons for contradictions in the answers of individual teachers regarding the objectivity of assessment could be that either teachers find it difficult to determine appropriate criteria and points, or they still tend to evaluate students' work based on subjective judgments.

In the second part of the questionnaire teachers were asked to answer the questions related directly to the rubrics. Respondents expressed their opinion about the need for rubrics and noted whether they had any experience in using them. The results show that 61% of respondents consider rubric as a necessary tool in art assessment, 22% stated that rubric is inadequate tool for art assessment, and 17% admitted that they are not familiar with this kind of assessment. Therefore 64% of the same respondents noted that they do use rubric, while 36% prefer other methods of assessment.

Most of the respondents noted that they use rubrics in the assessment process, and yet the majority of these teachers (90%) have noted in the first part of the questionnaire that in their experience there are often situations when the summative assessment (on a 10-point scale) does not reflect the student's real achievements. Furthermore, in the response to the question of whether teachers have difficulty determining appropriate criteria and scoring, 88% of respondents admitted that they have some difficulties with creating an appropriate assessment tool on their own.

At the end of the survey, in a multiple-choice question, teachers were asked to select one or more criteria that, in their opinion, should be taken into account in art classes when evaluating works. And for the last question, they were asked to indicate one criterion that is most problematic to measure and evaluate. The results are shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* The selection of criteria for evaluating works of art and the difficulty of evaluating (measuring) criteria in teachers' experience

The most frequently respondents noted such criteria as composition (mentioned 58 times), the idea of the artwork (mentioned 54 times), planning and direction of the artistic project (mentioned 47 times), demonstration and presentation of the artwork (mentioned 47 times) and skill (mentioned 42 times) that are considered important when evaluating student's works. Whereas the most challenging for teachers is to evaluate students' work according to such criteria as the idea of a work of art (mentioned 12 times), creativity (mentioned 7 times) and craftsmanship (mentioned 10 times).

### Participant observation

In order to get a better understanding of the teachers' experience, using rubrics as an assessment tool, the participant observation was conducted during the Teacher professional development program «Evaluation of creative works in the art in school education». The total duration of the program was 36 hours with participation of 25 teachers of visual arts from general and professional schools.

Within the framework of the program, teachers were invited to listen to theoretical lectures on creativity and its development in students, as well as to participate in practical workshops, creating assessment tools for evaluating students' works in art classes. During the workshop, participant observation was carried out in order to get acquainted with the skills of teachers in compiling the rubric, as well as to identify the main problems that teachers face in this process.



At the beginning of the workshop, teachers looked at examples of ready-made rubrics and were invited to express their opinion about the possibilities of this tool, implementing an objective and meaningful evaluation of students' works. Teachers mainly highlighted the rubric's impediments when thinking about students' creativity. On the other hand, the lecturers motivated teachers and emphasized the possibilities and benefits of rubrics for improving the learning process. During the discussion, the participants' statements were recorded, in which they expressed their opinion on the use of the evaluation rubric in the art lessons. For analysis, quotations were selected expressing an opinion on the benefits or impediments of the rubric as an assessment tool. Key takeaways from the discussion are summarised below (Table 2).

*Table 2.* Participants' quotes from the discussion about the introduction of the rubric in the practice of evaluating creative works

| Impediments (participants' arguments)   | Benefits (lecturers' arguments)  |
|---|--|
| "I really don't understand why everything must be described in such a detail. It is not realistic to do this in classes every day." | "How will the teacher know whether and in what quality the student will have achieved the learning goal? How will the teacher justify the grade to the student?" |
| "I will allow students to create works freely, I will not limit them in any parameters."  | "How else can students understand what quality work is?"   |
| "Another massive job that a teacher has to do in his spare time!"   | "It is good if the students are also involved in creating the rubric. Maybe it could be introduced as part of the lesson?"                                       |
| "Criteria can interfere with creativity and interfere with expressing oneself."   | "We should evaluate in such a way that evaluation becomes a learning tool and promotes self-regulation, metacognition and motivation."                           |
| "Criticism of work can harm the personality of a young student and the further development of creativity."                          | "Rubric criteria and description can serve as structural advice."  |
| "Extraordinary activity cannot be foreseen in the criteria!"  |  |
| "Creativity means that the student is always reaching for something new, so it is difficult to set static criteria."                |  |

At the beginning of the rubric creation workshop, the instructor brought four samples of student work, which were projected onto the screen. The teachers were invited to an open discussion to exchange the views on the evaluation of each work. At the end of discussion, it was concluded, that the teachers could not come to a common decision on how to evaluate these works. The cause of the situation was that the teachers evaluated the work from their own point of view. Some judged by the technique, others were interested in the idea or the student's efforts in creating this work, etc. And the most common decision of

their assessment was based not on specific criteria, but on the comparison of students' work, when one work is better or worse than another.

The outcome of both discussions clearly reflected the importance of finding and agreeing on an objective assessment tool that would be clear, unambiguous, and understandable to all involved in the learning process, that corresponds to the guideline that creating rubric requires clear language about learning objectives associated with the lesson or learning task (Krause, 2010).

During the observation of participants in the workshop, when the teachers had to create the evaluation rubric, the difficulties were observed not only in the selection of criteria and division into levels of achievement, but also the lack of skills in choosing appropriate concepts was detected along with difficulties finding the right words while creating a textual description. Therefore, participants joined together and found it very useful to collect the most frequently used keywords and phrases to use when creating a rubric in a table, so that in the future they could only copy the desired criteria with a ready-made division into levels. The result of the collaborative work is reflected in the Table 3.

Table 3. Criteria, sub-criteria and useful keywords for assessment rubric in visual arts

| Artistic Process       | Criteria                             | Sub-criteria  | Useful keywords   |
|------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Foundation (framework) | Project directions (requirements)    | Goal and objectives<br>Guidelines<br>Project expectations                             | Independence, responsibility, accuracy, relevance, preciseness        |
| Creation               | Research (investigations)            | Samples (images, texts, hyperlink etc.)<br>Sources<br>Descriptions<br>Self-reflection | Selection, quantity<br>quality, relevance, variety                    |
| Creation               | Creativity                           | Innovations<br>Taking creative risks<br>Experiments<br>Sketches                       | Originality, uniqueness, quantity                                     |
|                        | Technique and skills (craftsmanship) | Art medium<br>Materials<br>Tools<br>Equipment   | Selection, use, neatness, cleanliness, accuracy, attention to details |
|                        | Composition                          | Elements of art   | Placement, use, arrangement, originality                              |
| Presentation           | Demonstration (exhibit, share)       | Use of media<br>Content<br>Organisation and timing<br>Engaging the audience           | Relevance, communication, preparation, explanation, confidence        |

Table 3. Continued

| Artistic Process | Criteria          | Sub-criteria   | Useful keywords  |
|------------------|-------------------|--|--|
| Soft skills      | Effort            | Personal engagement<br>Attitude<br>Self-direction and focus<br>Time management<br>Improvements | Participation, activity<br>Independence,<br>responsibility |
|                  | Critical thinking | Interpretation<br>Problem solving<br>Pre-planning<br>Envisioning<br>Decision making            | Independence, activity                                     |

The set of criteria (Table 3) was compiled in collaboration with participants and was based on the recommendations of the European Network for Visual Literacy (ENViL) (<http://www.envil.eu>). The above mentioned set of criteria met the requirements of the Latvian educational standard and the content of the curriculum.

## Discussion

The results of the survey confirmed the relevance of the question of how to assess the arts in formal education, and whether teachers receive sufficient support to understand and acquire the necessary skills to master the use of new assessment tools. It can be concluded that difficulties in the assessment of students' works of art are present not because of the teachers' attitude towards the assessment of the creative process, but because of the lack of skills to determine the criteria and the appropriate number of points to measure them. This confirms the relevance of the question of how to assess the arts in formal education, and whether teachers receive sufficient support in acquiring the necessary skills and mastering the use of a new assessment tools.

After reviewing the documented quotes of teachers and lecturers from the participant observation in Table 2, references can be made to the decades-old research observations and scientific paper conclusions (Soep, 2005; Douglas, 2012; Burnard, 2011; McArdle & Wright, 2014) that were mentioned in the introductory part of this article. This shows that the issue of objective assessment and its importance in the modern educational process in general, as well as the nature and process of summative assessment in art education, is still relevant.

For example, pros and cons quotes (Table 2) like "I really don't understand why everything must be described in such detail" and "How else can students

understand what quality work is?” corresponds to necessity to rethink the purpose of assessment in general, focusing on that the educational goal of assessment is to motivate students and support their learning improvements (Pedder & James, 2012). Or the quotes “Another massive job that a teacher has to do in his spare time!” and “Criteria can interfere with creativity and interfere with expressing yourself.” corresponds to the observation that creating rubric for teacher is very time-consuming task (Krause, 2010). During the workshop it was observed, that it is sufficient to provide teachers with clear assessment criteria and guidelines, and consistent moderation and consultations are necessary, while implementing a new assessment tool (Johnson, 2014). And in the final reflection part the teachers found it very useful to communicate with other teachers to share experiences, to reflect on each other’s decisions (Gardner et al., 2014).

As the results of the survey showed, almost all the teachers who already use a rubric still face difficulties in conducting an objective and convincing assessment of students’ work. Therefore, it is recommended to develop a practical guide for creating rubric that also includes templates with keywords for different types of assignments. It would also be useful to conduct a study of alternative assessment tools in school education that are relevant to the specifics of the arts.

## Conclusion

Both the survey and participant observation have showed following problematics of art assessment within the school framework:

Creating sets of criteria in art is problematic due to its diversity, it is difficult to combine and balance objectively determined learning outcomes and subjectively determined creative expression in the same assessment rubric.

Expression in art largely reflects the student’s own personality, feelings and thoughts. For this reason, the selection of criteria should be well thought out and balanced, and the students themselves should be involved in the selection of criteria and goal setting, so that the demands or assessment imposed by the teacher do not negatively affect the students’ self-expression and at the same time help them understand what quality work means.

Although the specifics of the arts include elements that cannot always be measured, arts education also requires data that demonstrates student growth. This data is important both for the teacher and for the student. The teacher is evaluating the effectiveness of teaching methods and for a student this data serves as a tool for personal and professional development.

Teachers expressed insecurity about their skills in setting criteria and objective assessment, as evidenced by frequent concerns about their decision, fair and accurate assessment. Therefore, the teachers expressed the need for help in implementing this evaluation tool, for example, rubrics approved by senior officials or

a comprehensive manual and templates with criteria and their descriptions for different types of tasks.

Considering that the rubric as an evaluation tool was introduced in 2020 and within two years, teachers are still not confident in their competence to evaluate the achievements of students, it can be concluded that teachers have not received sufficient support for acquiring the new skill.

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