

# Developing a Progression of Student Learning for the Visual Arts

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Teachers are expected to show that their teaching does make a difference to student learning and schools are required to provide evidence that their programmes support raised achievement for all students. Within the emphasis on evidence-based learning outcomes the current project focused on the development of a learning progression as a means for measuring the achievement and learning of students in the visual arts. The learning progression developed is primarily a pedagogical tool that helps teachers identify the next learning steps for students. The learning progression was based on the Communicating and Interpreting Strand (CI) but is inclusive of learning across all four strands of Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum (AiNZC). Multiple approaches are described to enable teachers to identify where students are located on the learning progression.

## Background

Professional development in the arts is focused on improving the content and pedagogical knowledge of teachers in order to increase student achievement in dance, drama, music and the visual arts. The emphasis is on building knowledge and understanding to support teachers and schools to be better able to gather, analyse and use data, including student achievement data, as the basis for professional decision making.

The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2000) describes four strands each with eight levels of achievement objectives. The four strands include: Developing Practical Knowledge in The Visual Arts (PK), Developing Ideas in The Visual Arts (DI), Communicating and Interpreting in The Visual Arts (CI) and Understanding The Visual Arts in Context (UC). A range of resources support teachers in interpreting the achievement objectives and implementing the curriculum. These resources include the Arts Curriculum Exemplars (Ministry of Education, 2003b) and a matrix that identifies progress indicators at each level. The matrix describes broad levels of progress that cover up to two to three years of learning, with wording of some indicators remaining constant across two to three levels, in accordance with the achievement objectives. Teachers require further support and guidance to identify indicators of shift in student learning within these levels.

Current educational research supports a focus on evidence-based practice to raise student achievement (Alton-Lee, 2003; Hattie, 2005; Holmes & Tozer, 2005; Timperley, 2004). Schools need to gather, analyse and use data to make informed decisions that ensure improved student learning. It is a professional responsibility of schools and teachers to critically examine assessment practice to ensure it reflects and supports the broad aims of visual arts education and improves the quality of teaching and learning. Assessment practice must provide valid, meaningful data to help schools decide how best to cater for the needs of diverse students.

Teachers need opportunities to engage in professional dialogue to define what significant learning in the visual arts looks like, identifying indicators or benchmarks of achievement. The four strands need to be considered as interrelated parts of a larger whole, as separating the strands for assessment purposes may serve to strip the arts of their purpose, meaning and significance. For example, considering students' practical knowledge with no reference to how they select, combine, arrange and use the various components to express and develop their ideas may undermine the complexity and richness of the visual arts. Existing International examples of learning progressions tend not to present the visual arts as a set of interrelated strands in the manner described in the New Zealand Curriculum. In contrast, they are often lengthy and complex to use (Clement, Piotrowski, & Roberts, 1998; Withey, Grosz, & Fulton, 1996; Taggart, Whitby, & Sharp, 2004; New Jersey State Department of Education, 2004).

Schools need to develop effective tools and methods to gather meaningful data on student learning in the visual arts. Working collaboratively to analyse and use the information to identify a student's stage of development and next steps learning will support a collective understanding of student achievement and learning progression in the visual arts. Developing learning progression for the visual arts that can be used across levels 1-4 and applied to any art making or responding context should enable schools and teachers to define and communicate their understanding of student learning in the arts.

Evidence suggests a lack of consistency in the approach to visual arts assessment in primary schools (Education Review Office, 2004). Some schools have used national assessment examples as models to create discrete assessment tasks. Assessment practice appears focused on judging finished work, sorting it into levels, sometimes without clear criteria for doing so. Assessment tasks are often separate and unrelated to normal classroom teaching and learning and it is unclear how or if teachers are using the information gathered to improve student achievement.

There is a need to recognise the importance of student learning in, through and about the arts and across the inter-related strands, valuing the visual arts as a significant form of communication and a tool for thinking. There is a need to develop a framework for teachers where student learning in visual arts is broken down into smaller and more easily identifiable stages. This is based on the assumption that if teachers can identify a student's understanding more finely they will be able to communicate more effectively.

## The Visual Arts Learning Progression Project

### *Project Scope*

This small scale project was commissioned by the Ministry of Education to explore ways of measuring learning in the arts and provide assessment tools and strategies for teachers that enhance teacher and student learning. The project set out to develop and trial a learning progression, related to a topic or context of the visual arts, across the four strands for Levels 1 to 4 of the Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2000). A key component of the project was designing and trialing methods for the collection of student achievement data in relation to the learning progression.

The CI strand was selected as a significant and logical area to use as a focus for collecting student data. In the CI strand “students interpret, and respond to meanings and intentions communicated through ... the visual arts. They investigate how meaning in the visual arts is mediated through art works and the ways in which art works are presented and viewed. ... They learn how art works are structured and ideas conveyed” (The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum, 2000, p73).

The CI strand is naturally inclusive of the other three strands. When students share and respond to art works they describe how choices made in the practical knowledge strand support the development and communication of ideas. They may describe the social or cultural context that influenced the making of the work, the purpose of the work and/or the interpretation and valuing of the work. It is difficult to share and respond to art works without engaging with all four strands. A focus on the CI strand challenges the practice of assessing visual arts learning by looking at students’ final work in isolation and without predetermined criteria; a practice that has led some teachers to think that arts assessment is subjective and of limited value.

The focus on the CI strand allows teachers to hear student voice as they reflect on their growing knowledge of the visual arts in its broadest sense. Students articulate their understanding across the strands as they discuss their work at various stages of the process. Effective teacher questioning elicits richer information... (Clarke, S., Timperley, H., & Hattie, J. 2003)

The visual arts learning progression, while focused on the CI strand, provides indicators that reflect the inter-related nature of the strands and should help teachers to unpack and interpret the achievement objectives for each level. The indicators are generic and can be applied to selected contexts. They help teachers to identify what students can do and what the next learning step might be. Four methods for collecting and analysing data in the visual arts have been described to help teachers identify where students “best fit” on the learning progression. An initial trial analysed the effectiveness of these methods to assess student achievement.

### *Developing the learning progression*

A small team of teachers and facilitators were invited to be part of the development and trialling of the visual arts learning progression and assessment methods. The teachers, who were enthusiastic and interested in visual arts teaching and learning, had previously participated in The Arts Professional Development Contract, with a visual arts focus.

The group met on several occasions to develop and refine a draft theoretical learning progression for the CI strand, which was inclusive of all four strands and linked to the levels of the curriculum. A wide range of materials, including recently published exemplars and handbooks that support the arts curriculum, informed the development of the progress indicators in the learning progression. (Ministry of Education 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d, 2002, 2004b, 2005b.) In addition to this, key words provided by the National Facilitator, Primary Visual Arts were used to guide choice of language.

The group decided that the learning progression would identify two to three stages of development within each curriculum level. Three or four statements define learning at each stage. They are generic, designed to be used across any art making context, yet specific

enough to provide direction for teachers observing student learning. The language was intended to be clear, concise and accessible to all teachers.

The assessment methods grew out of the focus on the CI strand. The four assessment methods described reflect and encourage effective classroom practice. They are: student-teacher conversations; observations; written responses (learning journals) and work samples. The assessment methods are not new, but rather describe best existing theory and practice (Ministry of Education 2003a). While not new, very few generalist teachers appear to use them for assessment in the visual arts.

### *Refining the learning progression*

There was a five-pronged approach to trialling the visual arts learning progression that included an initial trial with a teacher development/adviser team, feedback from visual arts pre-service lecturers at Dunedin College of Education, feedback from primary arts advisers and the National facilitator, a further trial by schools currently involved in visual arts professional learning and feedback from a wider group of schools who did not have visual arts as a current focus.

Teachers from the development team worked with students in their classrooms to trial the assessment methods, using them to identify where students “best fit” on the learning progression. They each focused on three to four students, observing them as they worked individually and with peers. The teachers introduced reflective writing and student-teacher conversations into the arts programme. Teacher feedback was gained from a series of conversations, interviews, observations and written responses. Individual student learning journals provided a focus for the adviser and teachers to reflect on information gathered.

The initial trial involved two teachers trialling the methods and progression within a unit of work lasting several weeks. For the purposes of the trial, all four assessment methods and the progression were used discretely and intensively. Normally, assessment methods would be used flexibly and in combination as part of regular classroom practice.

Initial feedback from trialling was positive for both the learning progression and assessment methods. The teachers were excited about their work with students and the data they had gathered. They reported the positive impacts of these assessment methods on their classroom teaching and student learning. They were proud of their class learning journals and enthusiastic about the possibilities they could see for future development. Children’s responses were very positive, and the class focus on students reflecting on and articulating their understanding seems to have raised the profile and status of visual arts learning, with parents being brought into class to see work and children making new work and revisiting learning at home. One teacher commented: “It is exciting to notice how much the children have learnt”. The teachers readily adopted the assessment methods into their programmes as effective teaching strategies and refined their approach to learning journals with their next visual arts unit. Following the initial trial, teacher feedback was analysed and used to refine the progression and the data collection tools.

The revised progression and data collection tools were shared with the team of primary visual arts advisers at the National Hui held in Auckland in September 2005. All primary visual arts advisers were given copies of the draft assessment resource and invited to give feedback. Some general positive responses were received informally, with advisers commenting briefly on the learning journals, quality of work and evidence of student learning.

Self-addressed envelopes were issued to encourage advisers to send their feedback and two responses were later received. The National facilitator for primary visual arts provided full, detailed feedback followed up with regular discussion throughout the trialling process.

The project was also briefly introduced to the wider advisory team, including primary and secondary advisers across all arts disciplines with some interest being expressed from other disciplines. Feedback from consultation with the national team of art advisers and the National Primary Arts Facilitator was used to further refine the progression and the assessment methods and a second version of the visual arts learning progression was produced.

The trial was extended to include three Southland primary schools currently participating in an Arts professional learning contract and fifteen schools from Otago-Southland that had no prior involvement with the learning progression and assessment methods. Schools responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to reflect on effective assessment in visual arts with those that did not participate due to existing commitments asking to be included in any future trialling. The new schools included a cross-section of teachers from Years 0-8, some who had recently participated in an arts professional learning contract and others who had not been involved. The group included teachers identified as experienced or passionate about visual arts and others with less experience or interest.

Consultation with Dunedin College of Education visual arts pre-service teaching staff involved e-mail communications and meetings to discuss the assessment resource at various stages of its development. Verbal feedback was generally positive, stating that progression was clearly identified. The assessment methods and general introduction were felt to be relevant and useful, providing sound, clear guidelines for schools. Some feedback suggested the levels are “a little arbitrary and too broken up”. Effort to represent the inter-related nature of the strands has made it difficult to keep progress indicators in a consistent order, but does serve to reaffirm the non-hierarchical nature of the strands. A suggestion that there could be fewer stages or progress indicators may make it more difficult for teachers to identify shift within the levels. A suggestion for future development was the integrated assessment of visual arts and other curriculum areas that recognizes the more holistic experience of learning.

The overall response to the assessment resource by the trialling teachers was strongly positive. Teachers expressed confidence in being able to identify a student’s stage using the learning progression. They felt using the range of assessment methods would allow decisions to be made easily and that “anyone picking up the document and reading the progression steps could adopt them into their classroom programme, helping teachers to identify next steps learning and any gaps needing to be covered”. Teachers described the assessment resource as useful and manageable with the language clear and accessible.

Teacher comments included:

*the stages of the progression are easy to identify and realistic in expectation*

*the progression will be useful for planning for and reporting student achievement*

*it is easy to develop specific learning outcomes from the progress indicators*

*the assessment methods reflect best practice and provide rich information about student learning*

Teachers identified many benefits for using the learning progression to identify a student’s prior learning, and for grouping students to meet needs or provide extension. They

felt that use of the progression and assessment methods would highlight strengths and weaknesses of the classroom programme and ensure coverage of the strands.

Other significant benefits reported included:

*continuity and consistency of planning, assessment and reporting across the school*

*helping teachers to develop learning intentions and success criteria*

Some teachers expressed concern that the learning progression was language based, and that less articulate children may be disadvantaged. Teachers will need to use the range of assessment methods, including observation and work samples, to gather evidence of student arts learning to provide a comprehensive view of student achievement. Some felt the most valuable, but time consuming and difficult to manage method of assessment was student-teacher conversations.

Two teachers identified issues related to the time required to undertake and record the assessment:

*time and management when similar assessment is expected in all curriculum areas*

*the need to find efficient ways of recording information*

Many teachers expressed concern that their current assessment practice was largely unsatisfactory. While some schools felt that no additional support was required to implement the assessment resource, others felt they would need professional development to successfully spread the message to all staff and change beliefs and approaches to arts assessment.

Requests for further support included:

*a video resource exemplifying good assessment practice*

*in-class modelling of teaching/assessment strategies*

*examples of student-teacher conversations at each level*

Teachers were enthusiastic for a resource that provides direction for assessment in the visual arts, with many asking to be included in any future trialling. While some schools were unable to use the assessment resource with students due to existing commitments, most stated a clear intention and enthusiasm to use the resource in 2006, with one principal commenting that it is “a really good resource which we will use!” and others commenting, “We are very interested in working through possible assessment procedures in the future.” Teachers found it a “very thorough, thought-provoking document that linked well to current methodologies” and others expressed their appreciation for “tackling the difficult area of visual arts assessment and providing a great resource”. The learning progression has been further refined in light of feedback and is published in its final form in this paper.

## The Visual Arts Learning Progression

The visual arts learning progression identifies progress indicators that reflect achievement across Levels 1 to 4 of the Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum. Each level is broken into two stages with the exception of Level 1 where three stages are described. Statements define aspects of learning at each stage and progression within each level. The statements are generic, designed to be used across any art making context, yet specific enough to provide direction for teachers observing student learning. A key consideration was to ensure that language used was clear, concise and accessible to all teachers. Statements had to reflect the achievement objectives, but use language that all teachers could understand. Each stage of the learning progression is seen to build on and be inclusive of earlier stages.

<b>Visual Arts Learning Progression – Focus on CI</b>		
This progression is inclusive of learning across all four strands, through a CI focus. Use when students are talking or writing about their own and others artworks Each stage builds upon and is inclusive of earlier stages.		
Level 1	i	Labels objects Gives brief (1-2 word) responses when prompted Begins to show awareness of media
	ii	Talks about what an artwork is about Responds to questions about artwork Comments on discoveries made during exploration Recognises that artworks have a place and purpose in peoples lives
	iii	Talks about aspects of an artwork and how and why it was made Begins to link ideas in artwork to choices made Begins to use some arts vocabulary Expresses ideas about effects and qualities of materials and processes
Level 2	i	Describes an artwork, how it was developed and the ideas it conveys Explains the effect of 1-2 choices made Talks about the purpose of specific art works and their significance within a community
	ii	Begins to link choices (of techniques, materials, processes etc.), to ways of communicating ideas Shows some evidence of planning and exploring ideas towards final work Begins to identify problems faced in making artworks and suggest possible solutions.
Level 3	i	Describes ideas in work, and the relationship with techniques/processes. Explains how ideas were developed Identifies use of elements and explains use of principles of composition. Investigates the purpose of artworks and talks about their context Uses introduced vocabulary when making and responding to artworks

	ii	Comments on a particular approach, (convention, procedure, or process) used in making objects and images. Begins to use, develop and recognise personal approaches and explain their meaning or effect Describes problems faced in producing work and how they were resolved Describes different kinds of ideas found in different art works
Level 4	i	Identifies ways artwork is influenced by artist model's approaches Explains choice of materials, techniques, symbols and motifs to convey intention Investigates the purposes of artworks and identifies their contexts
	ii	Uses introduced vocabulary consistently in making and responding to artworks Explains how ideas were initiated and developed in artwork Describes evidence of conventions, used in the work Shares findings about how why and how an artwork conveys meaning/ideas

### *Locating students on the visual arts learning progression*

The assessment methods described in the section were designed to help teachers identify where students “best fit” on the visual arts learning progression. The range of methods described allows students multiple opportunities to demonstrate or articulate their knowledge and understanding. These methods are recognised as useful across other areas of the curriculum (Ministry of Education 2003a, 2005a). Teacher judgements of a student’s level of knowledge and understanding should be informed by all four assessment methods used over time to give a comprehensive picture of student achievement.

#### *Student teacher conversations*

Conversations between students and teachers are integral to effective teaching and a useful assessment strategy. Guidelines were developed to enhance the quality of these visual arts learning conversations. Effective questioning is vital in obtaining useful assessment information and “attending to the answers that students give is as important as planning and asking the questions” (Ministry of Education 2003a, p82). Sample questions were provided to show the types of questions teachers might ask. They were intended to be used as a guide, with teachers advised to develop questions specific to the context of the art work and responsive to student comment. Student response to appropriate questions helps teachers to locate them on the scale of learning progression.

#### *Observations*

Students’ comments and actions provide information about what they can do and what they know and understand. Observations may be either informal or planned and structured. “Systematic, structured and recorded observations help to ensure that the teacher gives equitable attention to the needs of all learners in the class” (Ministry of Education 2003a, p56) and should occur at all stages of the art making process and include all aspects of visual arts learning. Teachers need to predetermine a focus for observations to allow them to record relevant information efficiently.



### *Work samples*

Work samples are best considered in conjunction with other assessment methods, especially student comments. Student art works provide a focus for discussion and reflection. Student comments may provide information about their learning and reveal whether or not choices made in work have been conscious and deliberate. Work samples collected at various stages of the art-making process from drawings and plans, exploration of techniques, materials and processes through to completed works can provide evidence of student learning. It is a valuable exercise to “develop school based exemplars by assessing work samples collegially” (Ministry of Education 2003a, p66).

### *Written comments*

Written comments provide a permanent record that can be referred back to. All students can engage in written reflection at the same time, freeing the teacher to have conversations with or record observations of students. Considered with work samples they can form the basis of teacher-student or peer discussion. An effective way to collect written comments is in a learning journal or visual diary that documents the process of student thinking and engagement. Students draw and write to record and reflect on their learning, throughout the art-making process, and across the four strands of the visual arts. Well directed, student writing provides evidence of self or peer evaluation against clearly identified learning intentions and success criteria.

While it was necessary to define the assessment methods as discrete tasks, it was reinforced that they should not be used separately and in isolation, but together to give a broad view of student learning. The methods described are not new, but are a relatively new approach for many teachers in the visual arts.

## **Reflections and Recommendations**

Teachers have been enthusiastic about developing and using learning progressions to improve their practice and student learning. There is a need for discussion and debate amongst art educators across all levels of education to define, in simple, accessible terms for teachers, what constitutes significant learning in the arts.

Recommendations for future development include:

- Further refinement of the learning progression and assessment methods
- The development of similar progressions for other strands
- Using a similar format and approach to develop assessment resources for each of the arts disciplines
- Sharing case studies online as examples of how the assessment methods and learning progression have been used to identify and improve student learning

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