I have had the privilege of working with a team of art educators charged with writing the new Visual Arts Standards. After a strenuous review, the standards are public and we’ve begun the process of examination to determine how and under what conditions they might be implemented. In what follows I discuss the new standards in light of what they suggest for curriculum and instruction.

The Visual Arts Standards and Teaching for Understanding

There are 195 new standards. While that number may be off-putting, it begins to make sense when one considers how the standards are philosophically tied to a commitment to teach for understanding. The focus on understanding is drawn in part from the work of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in their seminal work, Understanding by Design (2005), and recognizes that identification of what students should know and be able to do, evidenced in the 1994 standards, is not the same as identification of things we wish students to understand deeply. The authors suggest that we ascertain the significant ideas central to our subject and then teach for deep understanding of these ideas. In developing the new National Visual Arts Standards, the Writing Team identified 15 such significant “Big Ideas.” In the standards, they are known as Enduring Understandings.

Enduring Understandings represent ideas and processes we want students to integrate, refine, and keep as they move through the art program and eventually into adulthood. These are the ideas that need to endure when details and certain minimal skills fade away. This kind of understanding implies a degree of sophistication relative to a concept, with insights that can be demonstrated through a variety of performances (Stewart & Walker, 2005, p. 12). Accordingly, certain behaviors can indicate deepened understanding. Perkins and Blythe (1994) explain that when students understand, they “do a variety of thought-demanding things with a topic—like explaining, finding evidence and examples, generalizing, applying, analogizing and representing the topic in a new way” (pp. 5-6). A row
of 13 performance standards organized horizontally from preK to advanced high school indicates behaviors that are designed to gradually deepen understanding of the enduring idea. All 195 standards serve to help students develop, deepen, and demonstrate those 15 Enduring Understandings.

As art educators scrutinize the performance standards they will find descriptions of many behaviors they currently hope for, if not expect from, their students even if they have not explicitly identified them as such. In the context of the new standards, these behaviors benefit from careful articulation and ordering. Viewed horizontally, as they build from one grade level to the next, scaffolding makes sense. Viewed vertically, as all standards for one grade level, they also make sense in developmental and conceptual terms.

**Artistic Processes**

The 15 Enduring Understandings are separated further into four groups having to do with the processes signaling full engagement in the visual arts—Creating, Presenting, Responding, and Connecting. Standards associated with these four Artistic Processes delineate anticipated student behaviors and reveal assumptions about what is important to each process. In my view, the best way to initially approach the new Visual Arts Standards is to grasp the overall rationale for and the Enduring Understandings associated with each of the Artistic Processes. This broader perspective then becomes the framework for understanding and appreciation of the specificity contained in each of the 195 performance standards.

**Creating**

“Picasso did not simply deposit in Guernica what he had thought about the world; rather did he further his understanding of the world through the making of Guernica” (Arnheim, 1962, p. 10). Psychologist Rudolph Arnheim reveals a perspective on the artistic process of creating that is echoed and reinforced throughout the new standards. This view that links the creative process with the emergence of ideas and the construction of meaning is especially apparent in the progression of performance standards in Creating.
The six Enduring Understandings of Creating draw upon multiple ways in which artists and designers engage in artistic investigation—breaking with or following traditions; experimenting with ideas, materials, forms, and approaches; interacting with objects, places, and design; balancing experimentation and safety; critiquing, reflecting upon, revising, and refining work—while highlighting the importance of developing the life skills of innovative thinking and creativity. Students increasingly grasp artmaking as an important way to explore and gain insights about the world, themselves, and others.

The standards recognize the richness of creative investigation and reveal increasingly sophisticated processes for students to generate ideas and envision artistic work. From imaginative play and exploration of materials and tools, to brainstorming alone or in collaboration, the standards acknowledge the cognitive work involved in initial and later phases of artmaking. In the early grade levels and throughout the grade-by-grade progression, they emphasize experimentation and the possibility of employing multiple approaches to art or design problems. Eventually, in later grades, students become responsible for formulating their own problems, shaping their own investigations as they explore personally meaningful themes, ideas, or concepts.

With a strong emphasis on experimentation, invention, and discovery, the standards recognize the importance of developing and practicing skills and habits. While not media specific, the standards recognize the need for students to develop skills in working with various media, methods, and approaches. Students are to develop studio habits regarding use and care of art materials, tools, and equipment; and demonstrate openness to new ideas and willingness to experiment, innovate, and take risks. Attention to these skills and habits is important to the conception of the student as a serious and reflective artmaker.

From the earliest years, students are expected to share and talk about their own artwork, learning to describe their choices and reflect upon their process. Over time, the standards expect students to create artist statements; determine and apply relevant criteria to reflect upon, revise, and refine their artworks; and engage in constructive critique.

Central to these standards is the significance of the student’s contemporary life and world. Students are encouraged to draw upon and create relevant content as they tap personal interests and experiences in and through their artmaking practice. Through the progression of standards, students attend to the practice of artists and designers working in their own time and adopt contemporary modes such as collaboration. As makers, students develop increasing recognition of the communicative power of images, objects, and places in their contemporary world.

Presenting
The inclusion of Presenting highlights a practice long associated with the making of objects. When people make things, they tend to share them with or “present” them to others. We have conventions for such sharing, and these vary depending on the nature of the object and the context in which it is shared. We humans also have a long tradition of collecting objects, artifacts, and artworks. Again, the ways in which our collections are presented to others vary depending on what it is that we wish to make public and the context in which it will be presented.

The Presenting standards make explicit something that always has had a place in art education—the practice of presenting or displaying student work. Here, though, we involve students in the process and help them recognize factors and issues that enter into the decisions about the presentation of their own works. They investigate the possibilities and limitations of spaces and technologies, for example, and consider different requirements in displaying two- and three-dimensional work. Throughout the grades, the Presenting standards require an increasing sophistication in curatorial practice, all the while allowing for a shift of focus from the display of one’s own work to the presentation and preservation of artworks, objects, and artifacts made by others.

Students increasingly understand that decisions made regarding what, how, and where to present objects, artifacts, and artworks carry meaning. A preK student simply identifies “places where art may be displayed or saved,” but by Grade 6, students “assess, explain, and provide evidence of how museums or other venues reflect history and values of a community.” An advanced high school student should be
able to curate “a collection of objects, artifacts or artworks to impact the viewer’s understanding of social, cultural and/or political experiences.” The Presenting standards are important because they extend and refine the process of Creating, in recognition of the tendency we have to share what we make. These presenting standards take this tendency seriously and, over time, provide opportunities for students to recognize and examine multiple methods, venues, and criteria for displaying their own work. The standards also increasingly fund students’ understanding of the societal role of and values embedded in preservation and display of objects, artifacts, and objects made by others; hence, extending into and having implications for yet another artistic process—Responding. Ultimately, students develop the deep understanding of the ideas advanced with Presenting—ideas having to do with the way in which objects, artworks, and artifacts are presented; the factors considered when preparing them for preservation or presentation; and the societal impact of and cultural roles played by collections and presentations.

Responding

The Responding standards reflect understanding of our tendency to pay attention to and “read” what we see, to make sense of our visual world. These standards take seriously our inclination to look for, find, and construct meaning. They also suggest an even weightier implication, put forward in an Enduring Understanding that states, “Individual aesthetic and empathetic awareness developed through engagement with art can lead to understanding and appreciation of self, others, the natural world, and constructed environments.” As we think about what it is that we want our students to carry with them into adulthood, we often talk about empathy. We do believe that engagement with art can provide ways of thinking about others and ourselves, and we generally aim for a deepened appreciation of the world in which we live.

In moving toward this appreciation, the Responding standards have young children simply “recognize art in their environments” or distinguish “between images and objects.” Eventually, students are asked to attend to expressive properties of imagery, explain the ways in which they respond to objects in a variety of contexts, and analyze the impact of or cultural associations prompted by specific images. With increasing sophistication, students recognize and explain how their responses to the natural world, constructed environments, and visual imagery shift and change depending on context.

When we seriously reflect on meaning constructed through our experiences with objects, artifacts, and artworks, especially those in a variety of contexts, we have the opportunity to try on other perspectives, stretching our own views and coming to a deeper understanding of the roles that art, design, and visual culture play in all of our lives. The grade-by-grade standards have students attend to contexts in which they encounter and the factors that influence their responses to works of art and design. Other

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Responding standards more directly address visual culture and gradually have students become aware of the power of images to reveal and influence values and behaviors. In creating the Responding standards, we recognized that even a preK child will offer an interpretation of an artwork, often referring to subject matter as “scary” or “happy.” We ordered the standards in such a way that student interpretations increasingly reference various characteristics of artworks. We introduced the importance of attending to contextual information—the circumstances under which the artwork was created, information about the artist and/or time period, the conditions surrounding the way in which an artwork or group of artworks is presented—when constructing interpretations. Beyond this, the standards stress the importance of determining the relevance of certain kinds of contextual information. This progression of learning aims for students being able to construct compelling and plausible interpretations.

The standards associated with valuing and evaluating artistic work move students from a recognition that they like some artworks better than others, to an understanding that such a preference is different from an evaluation based on criteria; that one might dislike a particular artwork and yet, given certain criteria, judge that same artwork as meritorious. These important understandings increasingly deepen as students also come to recognize the importance of employing or constructing criteria relevant for evaluating specific works of art or design; that some criteria can be more relevant than others and that much depends on specific contexts and purposes.

Connecting

Many of the performance standards in Creating, Presenting, and Responding reference how art, design, and visual culture are connected with personal experience, community values, and cultural history. The two Connecting Enduring Understandings and their associated performance standards focus more directly on these ideas, and they do so by highlighting two different catalysts for making such connections—our responses to art and our experiences in artmaking.
Early on, at preK, students simply recognize that people make art. In Kindergarten, they identify one purpose for which art might be made. Increasingly, students come to understand that purposes of art vary from place to place and time to time; that changes in art are often connected with changes in beliefs, values, and traditions; that art can not only reflect but also reinforce cultural identity; and that our personal connections to art may be influenced by our knowledge of the various contexts in which art is encountered, understood, and appreciated. These standards essentially ask students to step back and consider art and its connections to their world—to think about art, culture, and history, in general.

With artmaking experiences as a catalyst, the second strand of Connecting standards situates artmaker and artmaking processes firmly in the world, reinforcing the notion that in artmaking, alone or with others, we draw upon personal experience—our stories, our perceptions, events, and traditions in our communities—and try on alternate ways to see and understand the world. Students increasingly understand artmaking as an investigative process, recognizing and using inquiry methods of observation, research, and experimentation as means for exploring their own evolving interests and concerns as well as for constructing new knowledge and insights.

Curriculum Planning

With these new standards, as in the past, educators will exercise innovation in planning lessons and units of instruction that ignite the imaginations of their students, address student and community interests and needs, and tap into substantive art content. Since the standards are voluntary, states, districts, or individuals may choose to adopt, adapt, or ignore them. The standards also are silent on specific themes, materials, works of art and design, names of artists and designers, instructional strategies, and so on—considerations that routinely enter into curriculum planning. In articulating performances related to the Artistic Processes of Creating, Presenting, Responding, and Connecting, however, they do suggest ways that students might engage with ideas, objects, and materials, and how these behaviors might progress in order to develop deep understandings. To promote such progression, curriculum planners may design lessons and instructional units that incorporate the standards and engage students in any number of these performances.

Curriculum planning involves an assessment of student needs, interests, and questions; local considerations; institutional mandates; and a host of other factors, including the passions and expertise of the teacher. I believe that teachers will continue to draw upon their passions and areas of expertise as they plan for their students’ engagement in relevant and mind-stretching art and design practice. The 15 ideas, presented in the form of Enduring Understandings and grouped according to processes central to full engagement with the visual arts, will offer guidance in these efforts. The grade-by-grade descriptions of desired behaviors will assist planners in articulating expectations aimed toward students developing lasting understanding of these ideas. While reinforcing many of our past assumptions about artistic practice, these new standards also provide a vision for moving forward and deeply enriching the lives of our students now and in the many generations that follow.

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References


Endnotes

1 An earlier article on the new Visual Arts Standards, “Assessment and Next Generation Standards: An Interview With Olivia Gude” (by Robert Sweeny, in Art Education 67(1), pp. 6-12), provides an overview of the process of writing and organizing the new Visual Arts Standards with an additional focus on how they relate to issues of assessment.

2 Even before the Visual Arts Writing Team convened, the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards (NCCAS) had created “A Conceptual Framework for Arts Learning,” a document that provides the philosophical assumptions, goals, and other important information that ground the creation of new standards in dance, media arts, music, theater, and visual arts. For those seeking such foundational information, I recommend this framework and other related documents available on the NCCAS website, http://nccas.wikispaces.com/Conceptual+Framework.

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