

**ABSTRACT**

Introducing a field-tested approach to identify artistic ability and accurately assess student learning.

## A Powerful Conversation: Teachers and Artists Collaborate in Performance-Based Assessment

*Setting: A school gymnasium. A 40-minute dance class with a visiting Teaching Artist has just ended. At one end of the gym, the artist and two other teachers hold clipboards and talk quietly. At the other end, 28 fourth grade students sit on the floor drawing and writing about their dance class experience.*



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**Classroom Teacher:** Andrea really surprised me. She is so quiet in the classroom—it's hard to get her to say anything. In here she was so expressive, so focused.

**Teaching Artist:** She really impressed me too. When we were going across the floor in that complicated combination, she stayed with her partner and was right on the rhythm. That is really hard—I marked her for great spatial awareness and rhythm. And I just loved her improvisation at the end. She was really communicating her own idea about transitions and journeys.

**Physical Education Teacher:** She's not really into sports at all, but I thought she was very agile, very coordinated. I liked her perseverance, too. I noticed that she kept dancing all the way across the room even when you weren't watching, when you had turned to the next group

**Teaching Artist:** Okay, let's move on to Carla ...

The discussion lasts about 10 minutes, until every student has been mentioned. It is repeated after each of the first four classes of the dance TA's residency.

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This kind of conversation about students is a powerful, but all too rare, occurrence in school. For inschool teachers, a class led by a colleague provides a chance to observe their students engaged in the arts, see familiar individuals in a new light, and discuss them with other educators. For TAs, the follow-up conversation offers an opportunity to focus on each individual, to learn about students from classroom teachers, and to share their artistic perspectives, insights, and knowledge. For the students, the entire process allows their creative and artistic strengths, talents, and interests to be recognized and appreciated.

TAs often hear classroom teachers remark after a class, “I was so surprised by \_\_\_\_\_. He/she never performs like that in the classroom.” Artists see, and bring out, sides of students that other teachers often don’t see. Even in schools with strong arts programs, classroom and other academic teachers may have little opportunity to watch their students work in the arts. Artists also bring a different perspective and pedagogy and hold a special affinity for many students whose energy and creativity go under-appreciated in the classroom.

After many years of hearing teachers express surprise at their students’ performance in arts classes, ArtsConnection set out to create a process that would help define and focus attention on artistic abilities and characteristics and bring further value and legitimacy to artists’ views of children. The result is the Talent Assessment Process in Dance, Music, and Theater (D/M/T TAP) (Oreck, Owen, & Baum, 2004), a five-session process conducted by TAs in collaboration with classroom teachers. D/M/T TAP was originally developed and tested in ten New York City public elementary schools and has since been adapted and applied in schools in Ohio and other parts of the country. The post-class conversation is an essential part of this process.

D/M/T TAP was designed as a method for selecting students for advanced instruction, but the methodology of D/M/T TAP has since been applied to other types of assessment of progress and achievement as

well. Research has shown the results of the process to be valid and reliable and to have lasting impact on the attitudes and practices of participating TAs, teachers, and students (Oreck, 2004; Oreck, Baum, & McCartney, 2001; Oreck & Piirto, 2004). It provides an introduction to the art form while offering opportunities for careful observation and systematic assessment of all students with clear, observable criteria. It uses a process that allows all students to be seen and heard in every class and has an easy-to-use scoring system. Whether used to select students for advanced instruction, to increase teachers’ appreciation for and understanding of the arts and artistic abilities, or as part of an assessment of learning and progress, this authentic and performance-based method can be an effective way to involve teachers in the arts residency and set the stage for rich collaboration between TAs and classroom teachers. But, of course, it is not easy.

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## The Challenges

As a TA, you may be thinking, “That sounds great—I’d love to have that kind of interchange with teachers after my class, but there’s no way it can happen. The next group is standing at the door waiting to come in. I have so little time with them as it is, and the kids are supposed to have something to show and share after eight sessions. And how can I possibly learn all those names so that we can have the conversation in the first place?”

For artists to begin thinking about how to look at students individually and make this kind of systematic assessment part of their teaching practice, there must be unusually effective collaboration with school administrators and teachers. Class schedules must be adjusted

to include discussion time. Students must come prepared with name tags, printed boldly and clearly, with their names listed on easy-to-read assessment forms. Someone must collect the assessment forms and analyze the results. Above all, the school must understand the value and potential impact of looking at students in this way. Otherwise, it will seem like just a lot of extra work for everyone involved.

For the TA, conducting assessment takes significant extra planning and preparation. The facilitation skills are basic to good teaching but require much more careful attention and structure in a performance-based assessment setting. Clearly defined and articulated assessment criteria and simple, brief instructions to students are essential. Activities, groupings of students, and time must be consciously designed so that every student can be assessed during every class period. Most importantly, activities should be engaging and authentic to the art form.

As in any residency plan, the series of classes should balance activities that offer a sense of success and confidence with those that provide challenges to even the most advanced students. Without such challenges, teachers cannot distinguish among students or identify who is ready for more challenge. If, on the other hand, all of the activities are too difficult, students will become frustrated.

These are the basic principles. Over the past 15 years, we have developed a framework and training process to help artists adapt their own curriculum and material for use in assessment. We have also created methods through which schools and arts organizations can analyze and share assessment data. I will briefly summarize the main features of the assessment process itself and then discuss the professional development for artists.

## Overview of the Process

The keys to the success of D/M/T TAP are: (a) assessment criteria that are clearly stated and observable; (b) activities that are appropriately challenging and authentic to the art form; (c) class structure and facilitation that allows all students to be seen and heard in each class period; and (d) a scoring system that is easy and minimizes distractions to students and observers.

A team of two TAs with intact classrooms conduct the assessment over four class periods. A callback session involving the top students from all of the classrooms is held to select students for advanced instruction. The two TAs share the roles of facilitating and scoring throughout the class. TAs can also be teamed with school arts specialists, when available. While having two TAs present requires some creativity (and additional funding), it is the ideal way to conduct assessment and provides an exceptional professional development opportunity for TAs.

Two TAs and the classroom teacher assess students on both a list of specific traits and on an overall, holistic scale. The traits were defined by a group of arts educators in each art form, representing a wide spectrum of styles and techniques. The goal was to identify observable behaviors that were common to many different styles and techniques (though, perhaps, with different emphases) and to describe them in nontechnical language that teachers and parents could easily understand. The categories are listed in Figure 1. The behavioral descriptors, along with the background and methodology of D/M/T TAP, is described in more detail elsewhere (Oreck, Owen, & Baum, 2004). The artists arrived at criteria supported by Renzulli's *Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness* (Renzulli, 1978), which defines giftedness as the confluence of Above Average (not necessarily prodigious) Ability, Creativity, and Task Commitment. Renzulli sees giftedness as a set of behaviors, rather than a permanent state of being, and the artists strongly endorsed the relevance of this conception for the arts.

<b>Figure 1</b> Talent Assessment Categories in Dance, Music and Theater			
	<b>Dance</b>	<b>Music</b>	<b>Theater</b>
Skills	Physical Control Coordination & Agility Spatial Awareness Observation & Recall Rhythm	Rhythm Perception of Sound Coordination	Physical Awareness Collaboration
Motivation/Task Commitment	Ability to Focus Collaboration Perseverance	Enthusiasm Ability to Focus Perseverance	Focus/Commitment
Creativity	Movement Qualities Improvisation Expressiveness	Expressiveness Composition & Improvisation	Imagination

When a listed behavior is noticed, the assessor notes the observation with a single plus mark next to the category in the student's box. Each observer also gives an overall score (1 to 5) for each student in the class that accounts for intuitive impressions and allows for the recognition of students who were exceptional in one or more categories but had few total notices across all categories. The trait and overall scores from all observers are combined into a single score for each session. At the end of the process, scores for all sessions are combined, and students are rank ordered by both class and grade.

A supportive, risk-taking environment is established so that students feel comfortable and can do their best. Students are made aware of the criteria and are reminded that they will have multiple opportunities to participate, regardless of how they are assessed. These are all essential features of authentic assessment as described by Wiggins (1998) and others (Linn & Baker, 2001). Authentic assessment reflects actual practices in the art form and in the learning situation, unlike the decontextualized and artificial conditions often found in testing situations.

### To summarize, following are the primary elements of the process:

1. *Students are assessed throughout the class, while fully engaged in arts activities.* For students to do their best, they must be fully engaged in interesting and satisfying artistic experiences. This is the primary challenge to the validity of any arts assessment. If the artistic experience is not engaging and authentic, then the students' responses are unlikely to be artistic. Most activities are done in groups to minimize stress and to see how students work together, watch, listen, and respond to each other. Students must have time to warm up physically and mentally in a comfortable atmosphere, one in which they feel comfortable to take risks, communicate their feelings and ideas, and commit themselves fully to the activities.



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Fourth grade students in Queens, NY taking part in the Dance Talent Assessment Process.

2. *Multiple sessions.* One-time assessments are inherently unreliable, particularly in an area with which students may be unfamiliar. The four sessions provide all students with an introduction to the art form, help overcome initial shyness, and allow students to demonstrate a range of skills and talents in a variety of activities.
3. *Multiple observers.* Collaboration between arts specialists and classroom teachers provides different points of view and more thorough observations, resulting in a more complete and equitable assessment.
4. *Easy to understand criteria.* Criteria developed by professional artists and arts educators, which represents a variety of artistic approaches, is easily understood by both experts and nonexperts.
5. *Curriculum developed by the TA.* To effectively facilitate activities for assessment, the TA must be comfortable and confident with them. Activities designed by others or developed for assessment but not in the artist's repertoire are less likely to be as engaging and successful with students.
6. *Easy to use assessment and scoring instruments.* A simple marking and scoring system allows observers to pay full attention to the class. Scoring is based on cumulative notices of all observers rather than the judgment of a single individual. Both specific criteria and overall observations are used.
7. *Classroom teachers are trained in the assessment process.* Direct involvement of the classroom teacher increases appreciation and knowledge of students' creative and artistic abilities, which can be used to support learning throughout the curriculum.
8. *All students participate.* Every student is noticed, discussed, and assessed during each session. More than a screening or identification system for outstanding talent, the process provides valuable information on the abilities, intelligences, interests and learning styles of all students.

## **Professional Development for TAs: Developing Skills and Curriculum for Assessment**

More than 50 TAs have been trained to conduct D/M/T TAP over the past 15 years in New York City and Ohio. The artists represent a wide range of styles and techniques in dance, music, and theater. The training consists of four full-day sessions followed by a complete administration of the five-session assessment. During the training, artists adapt and try out various activities from their own repertoire. These are then structured into a five-session curriculum based around a common framework. The framework is somewhat different for each art form, but in all cases it provides structures for whole group, small group, and individual activities and a balance between improvisation and set material. While some styles emphasize improvisation more than others, the student's ability to create and express himself/herself, as well as the ability to learn specific material, is considered essential to the assessment.

The artists who have been most successful with D/M/T TAP are highly experienced with a wide range of students and schools. It is very challenging to simultaneously teach and assess, no matter how good a teacher you are. No specific style or technique has been found to be most conducive to the process. Above all, an openness to examine and adapt one's own teaching practice and the ability to see and remember individual students are the most useful characteristics for an excellent D/M/T TAP facilitator.

The biggest challenge for most TAs is the need to be more structured in an assessment than in a normal class. Every student must have a chance to try every exercise, and they must

be grouped to allow each student to be seen and heard. The size and make-up of the groups must be arranged and changed frequently and intentionally so students are comfortable and are not overly hindered by difficult partners or groups.

Verbal instructions need not be scripted, which would lessen the spontaneity and naturalness of the situation, but artists need to practice their instructions to students so that they are as clear and brief as possible. The facilitator must also know how and when to give appropriate feedback to students without biasing the assessment. Observing students' response to suggestions and criticism is an important feature of authentic performance-based assessment (Wiggins, 1998) but must be carefully monitored.

The training is not complete until the TA has the opportunity to conduct and evaluate a full assessment process. Most people make significant adjustments during the course of the five sessions and feel much more confident and successful the second time around.

## Outcomes of the Process

The results of D/M/T TAP over the past 15 years have been shown to be valid and reliable through statistical analysis. The process itself has had a significant positive impact on students, teachers, and TAs. Statistical analysis provided information about reliability—whether or not assessors agreed with each other (inter-rater reliability) and whether or not the results were reproducible (stability). In the case of D/M/T TAP, where one of our primary goals was to increase teachers' appreciation for and understanding of artistic abilities, we were particularly interested in the extent to which classroom teachers' ratings agreed with the TAs. The results in the initial trials and the expansion study in Ohio showed a high level of inter-rater agreement among all three assessors, including the teacher (alpha reliability = .86 dance, .73 theater, .88 music). The results improved consistently the second time a teacher participated in the process. Stability was adequate although the variety of arts experiences introduced over the course of the process resulted in some class-to-class fluctuation.

The validity of an assessment process is based on if it measures what it says it does—in this case artistic ability. A large percentage of identified students (more than 75%) made good to excellent progress in advanced classes as evaluated by their arts

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instructors over the course of two years. A follow-up assessment conducted by outside arts instructors two years later confirmed the original results. While not a pure measure of predictive validity, these indicators strongly suggest that we can, in fact, make a good prediction of success even in students with no prior arts instruction.

The assessment should not be overly influenced by factors that are assumed to be extraneous, such as language ability, gender, ethnicity, classroom teacher, or test scores. So validity is also a measure of fairness and equity. In all of the schools studied, the students who were identified as ready for advanced instruction represented all classrooms, including special education, and generally reflected the ethnic and cultural background, test score performance, and gender balance of the schools.

For students and teachers, the identification of artistic abilities can have a wide range of effects. Teachers can recognize strengths and interests in all of their students, not just those selected for advanced instruction. The awareness of students' artistic abilities, particularly among those not succeeding in the classroom, was found to be the single most powerful

motivation for teachers to use artistic approaches in their teaching practice (Oreck, 2001). Teachers' success as assessors and the knowledge they gained about the arts through the assessment process and their collaboration with TAs gave them confidence to engage in the arts and support their students' artistic explorations. The overall impact on those students who are identified as potentially talented and participate in weekly arts classes can be seen through changes in academic performance, through increases in self-regulatory behaviors in the classroom, and in the development of resilience, identity, and the ability to pursue higher education in the arts (Oreck, Baum, & McCartney, 2001).

For the artists themselves, the process has been equally powerful. Many TAs have said that the experience of conducting systematic assessment has carried over to all of their other teaching; they are better able to focus on individual students while teaching, communicate with teachers, and think about their planning process in new and valuable ways (Oreck & Piirto, 2004).

## **Applications and Alternatives for Assessment**

As must be abundantly clear by now, D/M/T TAP, for all its potential benefits, is both complex and demanding on schools and arts organizations. There are situations in which such careful, detailed assessment will be required; in many others some of the ideas and approaches can be applied without administering the entire process. D/M/T TAP was applied in Ohio to identify students for official state designation as gifted and talented, and a high level of empirical rigor had to be employed. In the selection process for the Mississippi School of the Arts, a multi-session process was not practical, so aspects of the D/M/T TAP framework were applied to the selection criteria, design of the classes, and scoring system. In an application not related to identification of talent, "The Shakespeare Theatre's Text Alive Program" assesses student learning and progress over the course of a residency. They use the multi-observer, observational format and the D/M/T TAP scoring method, conducting pre-post assessments of student skills, behaviors, and knowledge.

The talent criteria has also been used in more informal ways to help teachers recognize artistic behaviors of their students during residency programs and to inform teacher-Teaching Artist conferences. Specific characteristics that will be focused on during the course of the residency can be assessed at the beginning of the residency as a form of pre-test and again at the end to document student growth and learning over time. In this case, the number of observations necessary will vary depending on the complexity of the activities, number of observers, and prior experience of the students.

## **Conclusion**

At the heart of the D/M/T TAP assessment is a conversation between artists and teachers about students engaged in an arts experience. To take full advantage of the potential power of that conversation, we need to focus the observers' attention on specific characteristics, capture and keep track of the information and insights, and officially schedule time for the conversation to happen. Without this kind of serious attention, insights and observations often remain general and are easily forgotten and lost. Attending to our observations with this level of detail helps all of us—teachers, TAs, students—clarify our intentions and deepen our work.

For TAs and the organizations that employ them, the adoption of individual student assessment constitutes a significant step and a major challenge. Even excellent TAs who assess

as they go, continually responding and adapting, require an additional level of training, planning, and support to make the process systematic and produce a written record. This investment can have a major payoff, providing powerful evidence for the value of the arts and for the artists' ways of seeing.

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