

# **Assessment in the Service of Learning: An Example from AP<sup>®</sup> Art and Design**

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With its focus on providing support materials for teachers and students that allow opportunities for real time feedback, the 2019 redesign of Advanced Placement (AP<sup>®</sup>) courses solidified the AP Program's commitment to the Assessment in the Service of Learning (AISL) ideals. AP Art and Design offers a model for the ways in which assessments can support the process of learning. The Art and Design course and assessment both drive student motivation, engage students in some way, and promote metacognitive skills. This chapter examines the structure of the AP Art and Design portfolio assessment along with the support offered to teachers and students, demonstrating how this program models the process-focused elements of AISL. Because the portfolio requires students to conduct an inquiry emphasizing process over product, AP Art and Design provides inherent motivation for students, keeps them engaged, and encourages metacognition. These factors make this assessment a prime example of AISL.

Prior to 2012, the Advanced Placement Program (AP<sup>®</sup>) provided, in essence, three components to participating educators and students. The original component, administered by the College Board on behalf of colleges and universities nationwide since 1955, was the summative AP Exam, written and scored not by the students' own teachers but by committees of college professors and expert high school instructors. Second, there was a "Course Description" booklet, which contained a short outline of topics typically taught in the corresponding introductory college courses. Finally, the AP Program partnered with professional development centers to provide professional learning workshops, primarily focused on familiarizing teachers with exam details, scoring standards and rubrics, and techniques for teaching advanced topics.

In 2002, the National Research Council and the National Science Foundation issued *Learning and Understanding*, a report that indicated that the primary goal of AP and other advanced educational programs should be to help students develop a deep understanding of the organizing concepts and principles in all disciplines, and accordingly, curricula should focus on a reasonable number of concepts.<sup>1</sup>

In the decade that followed, College Board convened cognitive scientists and experts in each discipline, and from 2012, began implementing sweeping changes across the suite of 35 AP courses and exams, such that by Fall 2019, each AP course was redesigned, and anchored in a short list of transferable disciplinary skills that would now be the focus of each exam question. These skills became the spine of each AP course, recursively embedded within a finite body of content that would serve as a transparent compact with AP teachers about the full scope of content that could appear on an AP Exam.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Learning and Understanding: Improving Advanced Study of Mathematics and Science in U.S. High Schools*, Gollub, Jerry P., Bertenthal, Meryl W., Labov, Jay B., and Curtis, Philip C., Eds. National Academy Press, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Drew, Christopher, "Rethinking Advanced Placement," *New York Times*, January 11, 2011.

In short, this redesign of the 35 AP courses required a willingness for the sponsoring organization, College Board, to step away from an all-inclusive approach to course and exam topics—an approach that reflected the wide variation in content selected by the thousands of faculty and adjuncts who teach the college courses from which AP scores exempt students. Instead, the AP Program developed a transparent scope and sequence for each AP course, one informed as much by cognitive science researchers as by subject-matter experts in each field. This change required delineating content formerly eligible for inclusion, as off-limits, and outside the scope of the AP Exam. Because there is no perfect consistency in the topics valued by the approximately 4,000 colleges and universities that utilized AP scores to place students out of introductory courses on their campuses, the AP Program incurred some degree of risk that these changes would alienate a subset of faculty whose favored topics were not included on the AP Exam. To minimize that risk, the AP Program conducted extensive analyses of syllabi from a range of institutions receiving AP scores, generated a comprehensive list of all topics appearing in college syllabi, and asked faculty to rate each topic's essentiality as a prerequisite for successful further study of the discipline on campus. Topics were then removed if they did not have high average ratings as essential foundational content. In parallel, the AP Program partnered with faculty and AP teachers to conduct exam timing analyses with the goal being to determine an appropriate amount of exam content ensuring adequate instructional focus on the recursive, transferable discipline skills.

Another significant improvement made possible because of the redesign of AP's focused course topic delineation is the design and delivery of free formative course assessments for all AP students. In the past, students and teachers had no way to check progress and calibrate learning and performance to an external benchmark, until they received their summative AP Exam scores each July—too late to make use of such information for that year's population of learners. The AP Program released AP Classroom at the start of the 2019 school year in conjunction with the 35 redesigned AP subjects. For each topic in every AP course, the AP Classroom platform provides daily instructional videos from a racially diverse group of expert AP teachers, daily formative practice questions teachers can assign before class, and an associated student data dashboard for instructors. The instructor dashboard provides teachers the opportunity to focus their instruction on correcting student learning misunderstandings, rather than dedicating precious instructional time to content or skills that students are already demonstrating well.

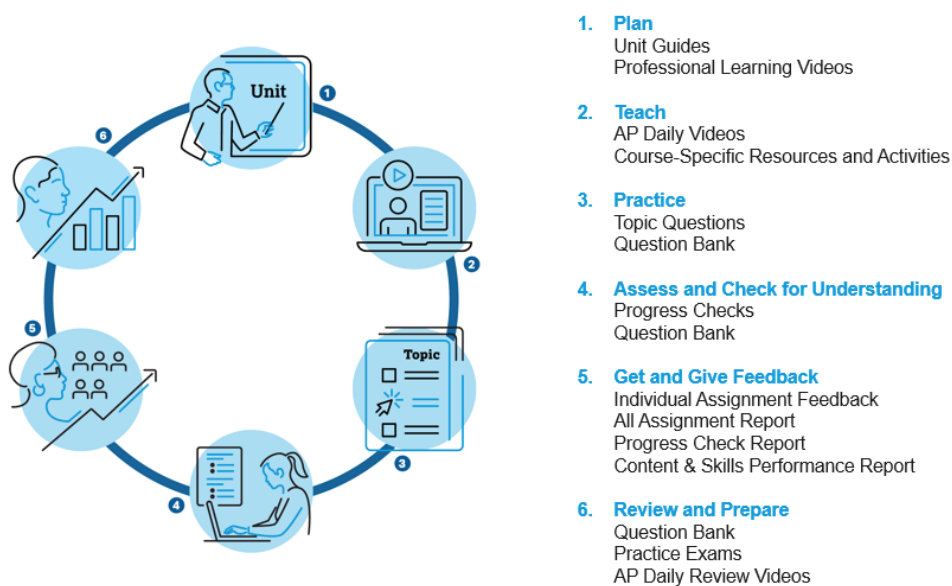
Accordingly, AP Classroom builds on the redesign of AP Exams to provide learners and their teachers with real-time feedback on topics they've mastered, skills they're developing, and how to focus further practice where the need is greatest. As a result, the usage levels are high, as is teacher satisfaction. In the 2022–23 academic year, the students taking AP classes watched a total of 66 million instructional videos and took 45 million formative assessments, generating an unprecedented amount of direct and relevant instructional feedback for themselves and their AP teachers. Over 80% of AP teachers use AP Classroom resources, and nine out of ten teachers report it helps prepare for the exam and learn course content<sup>3</sup>.

The free AP Classroom resources, anchored in the redesigned exams and course frameworks, now enable a cycle of teaching and learning supports that connect formative assessment data to instruction and learning, let alone preparation for the summative AP Exam, as Figure 1 depicts:

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<sup>3</sup> Aggregate of AP teacher surveys from Sep 2023–April 2024, n=2300

Figure 1.



## Incorporating Projects and Portfolios into AP Assessments

AP Exams have traditionally been defined by a single, three-hour examination at the end of a course, determining whether a student earns a qualifying score for college credit or placement. However, this approach has begun to shift with the introduction of performance tasks and portfolios as integral components of the AP assessment. As of 2024, these assessment models are employed in seven courses, covering approximately 400,000 exams. While AP Art and Design has utilized portfolio development for decades, this concept has more recently been adopted in courses like AP Seminar and AP Computer Science Principles (CSP), among others. This shift reflects an organizational belief that performance tasks allow for deeper instruction and learning, provide more authentic assessments of skills, and make learning more engaging and relevant for students. AP's existing project-based assessment shows evidence of improved student performance and strong demand from both teachers and students for incorporating such projects into AP courses and exams. However, while projects have demonstrated their value and addressed community needs, challenges and open questions remain about how best to implement them in the AP Program.

## Benefits of Performance Tasks

The introduction of performance tasks in AP assessments has yielded several promising outcomes. For one, students in these courses tend to have more success on the assessment, with students of similar levels of academic preparation being more likely to earn qualifying scores than in other AP courses and with high success rates among Black, Hispanic, and first-generation students. Additionally, courses with performance tasks like AP Seminar and AP CSP contribute to strong student performance not only on the AP Exams themselves but also in subsequent coursework and college. For example, students who take AP Seminar tend to earn higher first-year GPAs and have better retention rates in college than students who do not take APs<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, AP CSP often serves as the first AP STEM experience for many underrepresented students, and those who take it are more likely to pursue further studies in computer science and related fields<sup>5</sup>.

4 Sanja Jagesic, Maureen Ewing, Jing Feng and Jeff Wyatt, "AP Capstone™ Participation, High School Learning, and College Outcomes: Early Evidence," College Board (2020).

5 Jeff Wyatt, Jing Feng, and Maureen Ewing, "AP Computer Science Principles and the STEM and Computer Science Pipelines," College Board (2020).

## Challenges and Open Questions

Despite these successes, challenges and open questions remain as AP continues to incorporate performance tasks into AP assessments. One of the main challenges is ensuring the security, validity, and consistency of these assessments—AP’s core value proposition. Performance tasks, by their very nature, are more difficult to standardize than traditional exams. This challenge is compounded by the introduction of generative AI tools like ChatGPT, which raises new questions about ensuring authenticity.

In the 2022–2023 school year, when tools like ChatGPT and DALL-E became widely available, AP initially attempted to enforce a ban on AI use in performance tasks. However, it became clear that this approach was neither practical nor beneficial. Instead, College Board is in the process of shifting over time to a policy of responsible integration, starting with AP Seminar and AP Computer Science Principles, allowing students to use AI tools in ways that support their learning while still ensuring that they demonstrate mastery of the material. Even with new policies in place, there are likely to be further issues to resolve as students and teachers learn more about both the benefits and shortcomings of generative AI tools.

Another challenge is the relatively low submission rates among Black and Hispanic students in courses that include performance tasks. Understanding the reasons behind these disparities is critical, as is finding ways to support all students in completing these tasks. This might involve rethinking guidance on how the tasks are administered, changing the performance task format or providing additional resources to help students succeed.

Building and scoring effective performance tasks and instructional resources requires significant resources and expertise. We are still in the process of developing archetypes for these tasks, balancing the need for valid assessment with the goal of providing space for student choice and creativity.

## AP and Assessment in the Service of Learning

The literature on assessment in the service of learning highlights a number of different ways in which assessments can move beyond measurement and serve to enhance or improve learning. Whether it is by modeling expectations for test-takers, providing key insights to teachers, or establishing markers of progress, assessments can be used to improve learning outcomes. Of particular interest to assessment design is the way in which assessments can support the process of learning. This can be done by creating assessments that drive student motivation, engage students in some way, and promote metacognitive skills. In the areas of motivation and engagement, assessments can do things like providing “meaningful referents...that complement the previously existing cognitive frameworks of the student” (Qualls, 1998, p. 298). When students recognize themselves in the material presented on the assessment, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated to perform well. Encouraging metacognition, or a reflection on one’s own thinking, means creating an assessment that encourages test-takers’ “monitoring their own understanding, predicting their performance, deciding what else they need to know, organizing and reorganizing ideas...[to] help them advance their understanding” (Earl, 2006, p. 4).

With its focus on providing support materials for teachers and students that allow opportunities for real time feedback, the redesign of AP courses that was completed in 2019 solidified the AP Program’s commitment to the ideals of Assessment in the Service of Learning. And the shift toward performance tasks moves the needle even further. Of course, AP has had a model for this approach to assessment since 1972. AP Art and Design as a program has always modeled these process-related aspects of assessment in the service of learning, and with its own redesign, it now has additional factors that can motivate test-takers, support engagement, and encourage metacognition. Before we examine how these ideas play out in the redesigned course and portfolio assessment, however, we should provide some basic details about AP Art and Design, its history and its current program structure.

## Art and Design: Pioneering Project Based Assessment in AP

In 1972, College Board pioneered standardized student portfolio submissions and assessment through AP Studio Art. Since then, participating high school students have had the opportunity to gain college credit or advanced placement in drawing, 2-D design, and 3-D design by achieving a passing score of 3 or above (on a scale of 1–5). As part of the AP Program’s intentional course redesign focus, AP Studio Art was reimagined and became AP Art and Design in 2019. The revised course includes an increased focus on student inquiry to guide art-making through the Sustained Investigation portfolio component. In the Sustained Investigation, students answer two writing prompts:

1. Identify the inquiry that guided your sustained investigation.
2. Describe ways your sustained investigation developed through practice, experimentation, and revision.

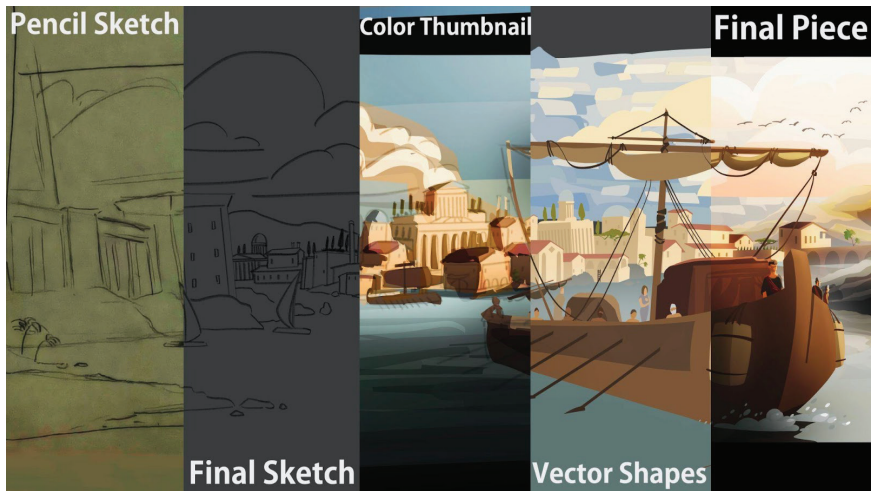
The 2023 AP Art and Design *Course and Exam Description* (CED) defines a sustained investigation as “an inquiry-based and in-depth study of materials, processes, and ideas over time” (p. 43). In this portfolio component, students are encouraged to discover, explore, question, reimagine, practice, experiment, and revise to demonstrate synthesis of materials, processes, and ideas. Students develop their inquiry based on personal experiences to create unique and original artworks. “Experiences can be documented by recording observations and perceptions related to an experience” (p.14 ) using “any materials, processes, and ideas as long as the work is the student’s original creation” (p. 35). Thus, students are free to choose ideas, materials, and processes that are the most meaningful and personal to them (Escoffery et al., 2025). During the annual AP Art and Design exam assessment, readers (raters) often note that the most exciting and engaging portfolios to score are those derived from student passions, personal lives, and their art-making discoveries.

When assessing the sustained investigation portfolio component, readers use an analytic rubric to measure four art-making practices (See Appendix A):

1. guiding inquiry,
2. practice, experimentation, and revision in art-making,
3. synthesis of materials, processes, and ideas in art-making, and
4. portfolio skills.

Each Sustained Investigation analytic rubric row contains decision rules defining how a rater can apply a score of 1–3 to best award student achievement. In this portfolio component (worth 60% of the overall exam score), students demonstrate their thinking through art-making in writing and digitally submitted images and works (e.g., sketchbook pages, mood boards, mindmaps, experimental or process images, and final artworks). For example, in Figure 2, Daniel Stordahl, whose portfolio was featured in the 2024 AP Art and Design Exhibit (Stordahl, 2025), shares a digital image composite demonstrating the drawing process he used to tell the “story of young Julius Caesar’s capture by pirates in 75 BC and his vow to return and destroy them” (para. 2). The written evidence accompanying his process work elucidates material choices and conceptual and physical process(es). Daniel describes his materials as “Paper, pencil, Adobe Fresco, iPad” while his processes include “Compose sketches, plan color/light, block shapes in vectors, render shadows/gradients, cinema border” (Stordahl, 2025, para. 2). By including part of his finished artwork in this process work, we understand the progression and choices made from inception to completion.

Figure 2.



Note. From *Caesar Departs from Rome*, by D. Stordahl (2025), 2024 AP Art and Design Exhibit (<https://apartanddesign.collegeboard.org/2024-student07>).

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In this image, the process writing informs the viewer's interpretation and when paired with Stordahl's inquiry statement (written evidence), the investigation into the relationship of exploring *The Revenge of Julius Caesar* through cinematic techniques to tell a story and convey emotion in a single shot is evident:

*Throughout every step, I was intentional about contributing to the bigger picture of the story. For example, in "Caesar Departs from Rome," I wanted viewers to feel the power and glory of Rome, represented by the sunlit city in the background. At the same time, I positioned Julius Caesar venturing toward a cloud-covered area, symbolizing the danger and uncertainty of the outside world while foreshadowing the peril he would encounter. This deliberate process ensured that each element added meaning and contributed to the narrative. (Stordahl, 2025, para. 6)*

It is important to note the assessment requires that inquiry guides art-making. Thus, the written inquiry statement is a valuable tool aiding the student's ability to narrow their art-making exploration and discovery to a targeted focus and clarifies the presented visual evidence. However, at the heart of the sustained investigation portfolio component is an art-making focus on practice, experimentation, and revision of materials, processes, and ideas. The written inquiry statement guides art-making exploration and substantiates the visual images submitted for evaluation.

The sustained investigation process aligns closely with PBLWorks's Gold Standard PBL: Essential Project Design Elements, which emphasizes sustained inquiry, student voice and choice, opportunities for critique and revision, and reflection (Buck Institute for Education: PBL Works [PBL Works], n.d.). In AP Art and Design, students are given the time and space to work like artists, gradually developing a portfolio that reflects both their skills and their creative process. The rubric for the sustained investigation portfolios emphasizes inquiry and student reflection, promoting a cycle of learning, reflection, and revision. Students are encouraged to describe how their sustained investigation was guided by inquiry and demonstrates practice, experimentation and revision of materials, processes, and ideas.

In contrast to the Sustained Investigation analytic rubric, readers use a holistic rubric to assess the second portfolio component, Selected Works (Appendix B). This component measures student accomplishment in portfolio skills and their ability to synthesize materials, processes, and ideas in finished artworks. Although the Selected Works component does not include formal writing prompts, student writing accompanies each final

work, providing information on the students' idea(s), materials, and process(es). In Figure 3, 2023 AP 3-D Art and Design student Audrey Nordfelt created a composite image showcasing scale and detail in her sculptural work. Nordfelt provides information on her idea of perception and developing individual meanings. The idea explanation aids interpretation and understanding of the visual image, and when combined with a materials description "cone 10 clay, high fire glazes layered for custom effect, K9 & Las Vegas Red" and process(es) "sculpted hollow form, added hollow tentacles, factoring in balance, fired in reduction, added base" (Nordfelt, 2023, para 1), the viewer gains insight into how the artwork was developed and executed to fulfill the student's vision.

**Figure 3.**



Note. From *Currents*, by A. Nordfelt (2023), 2023 AP Art and Design Exhibit (<https://apartanddesign.collegeboard.org/2023-student05>).

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When scoring the Selected Works portfolio component, readers review the digitally submitted student works, the accompanying text clarifying idea(s), materials, and process(es) and use a scale of 1–5 to assign a score (See the Selected Works Scoring Guidelines in Appendix B). The Selected Works are worth 40% of the student's total AP Art and Design score.

## Section II: Training and Course supports

### AP Art and Design Course Rubrics and Scoring Guidelines

The rubrics and scoring rules (Appendixes A and B) are consistent from year to year and available for teacher and student use on College Board's website, AP Central. AP Central also hosts a web page for each portfolio (2-D Art and Design, 3-D Art and Design, and Drawing) and includes sample student portfolios, providing written and visual evidence for each rubric score point in the sustained investigation and selected works portfolio components. The samples include written commentary from experienced AP Art and Design readers (comprised of high school art educators and higher education faculty) who relate student work to the rubric and describe how each sample achieved a score point. Many high school teachers use the sample student portfolios in conjunction with the course rubrics in low-stakes formative assessments as a way for students to discuss, critique, and practice applying the course rubrics to visual and written evidence. For example, students may use the rubrics to guide conversation during an in-class critique of student artwork and writing. Students might also work in small groups to discuss art-making progress using specific course rubric content (including definitions) as a focus. In gallery walks (where all student artwork is on display for review), students can use Post-It notes and write feedback aligning with rubric language. The AP Art and Design course rubrics are often printed and added to student sketchbooks for ongoing personal review and reference.

Most importantly, the rubrics direct students toward essential art-making practices inherent to learning and growing through practice, experimentation, and revision of materials, processes, and ideas through an inquiry-based approach. For example, to achieve the highest score in Row B of the Sustained Investigation rubric, students must provide "visual evidence of practice, experimentation, and revision demonstrat[ing] development of the sustained investigation." This statement ensures students provide evidence that they have practiced, experimented, and revised their materials, processes, and ideas in pursuit of an in-depth investigation over time. To achieve the highest score in Row C of the Sustained Investigation, students must provide evidence of the "visual relationships among materials, processes, and ideas and demonstrate synthesis." Students who achieve synthesis have practiced, experimented, and revised throughout their portfolio as they worked towards the coalescence of materials, processes, and ideas. The rubric structure outlines ways students can successfully produce art while providing language that guides discussion and feedback through various formative assessment practices.

### Teaching and Learning Supports

The AP Art and Design *Course and Exam Description* (CED) is a conceptual framework outlining course skills and content applicable to lesson planning through Big Ideas, Learning Objectives, and Essential Knowledge Statements. It is available for download from each AP Art and Design portfolio (2-D, 3-D, or Drawing) hosted on College Board's webpage, and instructors are encouraged to print and share the CED with students. As noted above, the redesign of AP Programs allowed College Board to create new resources for teachers and students. For AP Art and Design, these resources serve to clarify CED expectations. Experienced high school AP Art and Design teachers and college or university faculty host a series of on-demand short videos, called AP Daily Videos, in College Board's learning management system, AP Classroom. The AP Daily Videos clarify ideas in the CED by offering targeted lessons that teach curricular concepts in 7–15 minute segments. AP Art and Design teachers can assign videos to their students through AP Classroom to watch as part of daily work, and students can review as a class, as a small group, or individually. To ensure students understand how the AP Art and Design rubrics are applied when scoring student portfolios, AP Classroom additionally hosts rubric training videos that compare student examples to course rubrics and explain how students achieve rubric points. The same rubric training videos are used to norm readers to the exam requirements and rubric application during the annual AP Art and Design portfolio assessment (Reading). This transparency ensures all students and teachers can access the current visual and written rubric explanations as student work develops and before the final portfolio assessment occurs. Using the CED and companion AP Daily Videos, students are guided on developing their visual art images and works to align with the summative course rubrics and scoring guidelines.

Finally, College Board's website page for AP Arts Webinars also hosts free, on-demand webinars such as *Best Practices on Using the AP Art and Design Rubrics*. These resources are designed to be flexible, allowing teachers and their students to watch AP Classroom and webinar videos together, individually, or in small groups. This adaptability enhances any school's AP Art and Design curriculum, catering to different learning styles and situations.

## AP Art and Design Exhibits

College Board's AP Art and Design Exhibit (College Board, 2024) is an annual exhibition showcasing exemplary student artwork. During the yearly AP Art and Design Reading, leaders review student portfolios and choose student artworks representing diverse artistic approaches and ideas, student demographics, and school locations. In total, each year's exhibit includes an average of 50 students. After the initial curation process, students are invited to submit high-resolution images of their selected artworks and create a student statement for publication. In the statements, students respond to prompts that guide them in explaining how they came up with their inquiry idea and how it developed during the school year. Their explanations also clarify the portfolio rubric (e.g., their intentionality in choosing materials and developing processes to support ideas and achieve synthesis). The guided student explanations showcase their work and teach other students (and teachers). Additionally, the student's art teachers and school leaders share best practices for ways in which they support teaching and learning in AP Art and Design. Teachers often write about how they support inquiry-based learning, and school leaders explain how they support and promote the visual art program in their schools. The power of the AP Art and Design Exhibit's design is to intentionally showcase student artwork and serve as a teaching and learning tool through exemplars and detailed student, teacher, and school leader best practice explanations. The exhibit is available on the internet and linked to AP Classroom so that teachers can refer to it as a resource that supports the AP Art and Design rubric and scoring guidelines. The exhibit has over 230,000 visits annually, making this teaching tool a valuable resource for instruction and assessment.

## Section III: Theories of Assessment in the Service of Learning

All of these elements of the AP Art and Design portfolio program combine to make it an excellent example of Assessment in the Service of Learning. Edmund Gordon (2020) defines this idea as "an approach to Pedagogy in which assessment, teaching, and learning are organically interrelated such that these three processes are dialectically and reciprocally employed each in the service of the other" (p. 73). In many ways, AP Art and Design serves as a perfect illustration of how assessment can be "organically interrelated" with teaching and learning. While it is ultimately a summative assessment leading to the awarding of a final AP score that can be used by colleges and universities to grant students placement or credit for work done in high school, the AP Art and Design portfolio is intentionally process-focused in a way that allows it to work in the service of learning. As Gordon (2020) puts it, "Assessments should be designed so that the processes of student thought and creation are visible...Portfolios can make visible the scaffolding, both from the teacher and the students' own processes that resulted in the product" (p. 74). The AP Art and Design portfolio works in just that way; in fact, the portfolio submission requires that students detail the processes of thinking that led to the works they have created.

As we have seen, the design of the portfolio requirements and of the rubrics used to evaluate those portfolios specifically creates opportunities for students to demonstrate the processes they used and to explore the steps of learning that took place over the course of the development of their portfolios. In the Sustained Investigation section of the portfolio, students can submit images that document their art-making process, and the rubrics specifically ask for evidence of practice, experimentation, and revision (See Appendix A). The written evidence that students supply also provides opportunities for them to reflect on and discuss their process, the decisions they made, and any development or revisions that came from their investigation of the inquiry topic. Thus, in Row B of the Sustained Investigation rubric, raters are asked to look at both the visual and written evidence. To

achieve the highest score on that Row, the work must demonstrate the following: “*Visual* evidence of practice, experimentation, and revision **demonstrates development** of the sustained investigation. **AND** *Written* evidence describes ways the sustained investigation **developed** through practice, experimentation, and revision” (See Appendix A). In the literature on Assessment in the Service of Learning, a focus on *process* is discussed as a multifaceted aspect of assessment that pushes one beyond the realm of mere measurement and into the service of learning.

One aspect of *process* that the AP Art and Design portfolio highlights is student motivation. In asking students to follow a line of inquiry through practice, experimentation, and revision, the portfolio demands and hopefully encourages students to exhibit a certain amount of motivation as they solve problems and develop artworks of their choosing. An inquiry driven curriculum places students in the driver's seat of their learning, providing autonomy (a basic tenet of motivation). In her discussion (2006) of assessment as a “powerful lever for learning,” Lorna Earl notes, “In the medium and long term, assessment [holds] the possibility of...influencing students' motivation as learners and their perceptions of their capabilities” (p. 4). Learning is not a static state that can be simply identified by an assessment, something a student has or has not acquired; rather, it is a “dynamic process” (Earl, 2006, p. 6) that requires active engagement on the part of the learner.

To keep students actively engaged in the learning process throughout the entire portfolio development process, the AP Art and Design program includes a number of features designed to increase student motivation. The heart of the portfolio is the Sustained Investigation section, and a quick look at the Scoring Criteria (See Appendix A) for this section demonstrates factors that are linked to motivation. First, the Sustained Investigation section is meant to be guided by an inquiry that the test-taker chooses based on their own specific interests, and the first row of the scoring rubric assesses whether or not there is an inquiry and to what extent that inquiry has guided the investigation. That is, test-takers are not simply asked to create individual works of art. They are asked to use their artwork as a vehicle to investigate and explore ideas that are of interest to them.

Additionally, students are asked to solve problems that arise as they conduct their investigation, and problem-solving is a key feature of motivation. As Earl puts it, “Not only are humans able to search for problems to solve; they appear to enjoy it” (2006, p. 5). In the case of AP Art and Design, students can encounter any number of interesting problems, from difficulties composing works to challenges using specific media. The course and portfolio are designed to encourage students to engage with those problems and learn from them. We can see this emphasis on problem-solving in the part of the rubric related expressly to whether or not the test-takers have engaged in “practice, experimentation, and revision [that] demonstrates development of the sustained investigation” (College Board, 2023, p. 41). Test takers can show evidence of this practice, experimentation, and revision by including process documentation in their portfolio. That could be a preliminary sketch or model that led to a more finished work, an image of a piece that was unsuccessful but provided a key idea, or documentation of an artistic idea as shown in Figure 3. Because the focus of the portfolio is on inquiry, investigation, and exploration, test-takers are not required or expected to include only polished, ‘perfect’ works of art. Because perfectionism can have a negative impact on student motivation (Fletcher & Neumeister, 2012), it can increase motivation to allow test-takers to include works that show growth or learning, such as process pieces and works that were revised. The explicit focus in the portfolio requirements on “practice, experimentation, and revision” (See Appendix A) allows students the freedom to try new things and fail. In fact, a student's failures can increase motivation in a situation like this because “perfection” is not an expectation or a requirement.

Motivation, in fact, is a key factor enabling someone to continue when a task or process is difficult, and creating works of art can present difficult challenges. Such challenges for AP Art and Design students might be related to the use of a particular medium (paint, ceramics, digital photography, etc.), the attempt to find the proper style to use to communicate a given idea, or solving a problem related to composition, which was a struggle encountered in 2023 by Aanje Greymountain (Greymountain, 2023). In one artwork (See Figure 4), Greymountain

was attempting to depict the ending of the Navajo story of the Hero Twins, the moment when the Twins bring the head of the evil giant back to their mother and grandparents. However, she struggled to find the right composition for the piece, something that would depict both the Twins and the head of the giant. As she notes, "I had a tough time creating this piece. For the life of me, I could not find out how to fit in the head of the giant despite it being the central element of the storytelling" and took "much trial and error" (Greymountain, 2023, para. 3) to get to the composition she ended up using, which we see in Figure 4. As we will discuss later, this kind of self-reflection or metacognition is further demonstration of the way that AP Art and Design operates as assessment in the service of learning, literally helping shape the artist's practice and process.

Figure 4.



Note. From *Hero Twins*, by A. Greymountain (2023), 2023 AP Art and Design Exhibit (<https://apartanddesign.collegeboard.org/2023-student01>).  
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Course instructors for AP Art and Design can help students understand the importance of maintaining motivation in the face of interesting challenges. Greymountain's teacher, Greg Stevens, notes how the structure of the AP course and assessment served as effective motivation, saying,

*Through practice, experimentation, and revision, Aanje successfully fulfilled her vision. Sketchbooks were filled with different compositions, details, and subject matter. What started as a verbal story was written down and divided into visual pieces. Those pieces were then vetted through critiques, self-analyzation, and cohesion. Nothing was considered sacred, and everything was up for discussion, debate, and revision... The College Board has provided a structure that allows students to make their art more authentic, conceptual, and personally fulfilling. It's not so much teaching the technical aspects but the behavioral traits of an artist (Stevens, 2023, para. 2).*

The AP Art and Design portfolio, then, is structured in such a way as to provide motivation for test-takers, helping them learn the “behavioral traits of an artist” (Stevens, 2023, para. 3) and giving them the tools to solve problems in ways that enhance learning. In addition, many of the tools discussed earlier in the article (e.g., AP Classroom videos and the Exhibition) give teachers the resources they need to help students maintain motivation while solving problems.

In the literature related to assessment in the service of learning, researchers note the importance of engagement as a major factor encouraging student learning, and engagement is another aspect of *process* that the Art and Design portfolio encourages. Dylan Wiliam, speaking of the forces that drive successful learning, notes, “[T]here is now a strong body of theoretical and empirical work that suggests that integrating assessment with instruction may well have unprecedented power to increase student engagement and to improve learning outcomes” (2011, p. 22). For AP Art and Design, the focus on inquiry, experimentation, and exploration in the portfolio requirements and in the evaluation criteria is designed to enhance student engagement in ways that the former AP Studio Art course and portfolio allowed but did not explicitly encourage. Although AP Studio Art originally had a Concentration section that allowed test-takers to focus on an idea of interest, certain aspects of the evaluation criteria rewarded mastery of technical skill over inquiry. For example, in the previous course, one of the bullets in the scoring guidelines describing the highest score point for the Concentration section read, “In general, the work is technically excellent” (College Board, 2019, p.7). And for many years, the Selected Works section of the portfolio was known as the Quality section, a name that emphasized the focus on mastery of technique and the creation of highly polished, finished works of art. AP Art and Design shifted its focus to inquiry-driven investigation. As part of the redesign process described at the beginning of the chapter, College Board held extensive discussions with college professors and those who run foundation art programs at the college level. The predominant feedback was that college foundations courses prioritize inquiry and investigation over the creation of finished artworks. A quick look at the terminology defined in the scoring criteria reveals the redesigned AP Art and Design course does value exactly these inquiry-related concepts—development, discovery, experimentation, exploration, practice, process, and revision (College Board, 2023b). The glossary defines the key concept, inquiry, as “the intentional process of questioning to guide exploration and discovery over time” (p. 43). And this vision of inquiry, the call for students to ask questions and explore topics of interest to them, helps keep them engaged as they develop the works that are included in their portfolios.

Because students in AP Art and Design are exploring topics of interest to them, they are more likely to be engaged with their work, which leads to greater satisfaction. According to Naomi Holmes (2017), “Student engagement is intrinsically linked to two important metrics in learning: student satisfaction and the quality of the student experience” (p. 23). This sense of satisfaction can lead to enhanced effort and ultimately to stronger performance. There are many examples of engagement in successful portfolios submitted for AP Art and Design. For instance, Audrey Nordfelt, who took the AP 3D Art and Design course in 2023, started out feeling like ceramics were, as her teacher put it, “outside her comfort zone” (Frampton, 2023). As she worked on pieces for her portfolio, Nordfelt (See Figure 5) became increasingly engaged by the idea of perception because people kept telling her what they thought her artworks represented. As she says, “So many people would ask what I was making, and then they would tell me what they thought it was. For the most part, people saw it as different things. This made me curious about perception again. I decided to look into it and research human brains and how we process things we see. I learned that there are different steps to perception” (Nordfelt, 2023). Because she was engaged with this particular idea, Nordfelt was able to overcome her discomfort with the medium she was exploring and create work that was both meaningful to her and successful according to the portfolio scoring guidelines. For her work, *Currents*, featured in the 2023 AP Art and Design Exhibit (College Board, 2023a), she noted that different people saw different shapes or creatures (e.g., anemone or octopus) in it.

Figure 5.



Note. From *Currents*, by A. Nordfelt (2023), 2023 AP Art and Design Exhibit (<https://apartanddesign.collegeboard.org/2023-student05>).  
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Nordfelt's research on perception, or the notion that "because we all have learned different things and lived different lives, we all have different knowledge and use that knowledge to perceive things we see differently" (Nordfelt, 2023), promoted the kind of engagement required to create a successful portfolio. As her teacher notes, "Sometimes, students must be encouraged to keep going even when they do not know how it will happen. She went on to win the best of show in our district art competition and created an amazing AP Art and Design portfolio" (Frampton, 2023, para 6). In this case, engagement played a large part in helping this student "keep going."

#### **Section IV: Formative Feedback cycles Supporting Metacognition**

In the case of AP Art and Design, the final, summative assessment (the portfolio) is designed to encourage student attention to process, causing the portfolio to function in many ways like a formative assessment. Students put together their portfolios over the course of a year or longer, with regular opportunities for teacher feedback to guide student revisions leading to changes in subsequent works that make the final portfolio more successful. Building on Arkalgud Ramaprasad's classic definition of feedback (1983), D. Royce Sadler notes that "information about the gap between actual and reference levels is considered as feedback only when it is used to alter the gap" (1989, p. 121). That is, the feedback that teachers provide on AP Art and Design portfolio work can be used to improve performance. Thus, it meets William's (2011) requirement of being "information generated within a particular system, for a particular purpose" (p.3), rather than information "separated...

from its instructional consequences" (William, 2011, p. 3). Within the AP Art and Design classroom, teachers are consistently working with students to revise and refine works, explore new ideas that could further the inquiry, and learn from both mistakes and successes. The scoring guidelines, which give points for successful experimentation and revision, are explicitly constructed to reward exactly this kind of formative feedback.

Furthermore, the emphasis within the portfolio requirements and the scoring criteria on inquiry keep the students actively engaged in the learning process. The example works discussed above show how the program is designed to encourage motivation and engagement by having students pursue a line of inquiry that is interesting to them (a traditional story important to the student's culture or an intellectual idea that the student finds fascinating). As Earl (2006) notes, "Learning was long thought to be an accumulation of atomized bits of knowledge that are sequenced, hierarchical, and need to be explicitly taught and reinforced. Learning is now viewed as a process of constructing understanding by attempting to connect new information to what is already known so that ideas have some personal coherence" (p. 4). Following a line of inquiry through experimentation and revision in the AP Art and Design portfolio requires students to do exactly that—construct understanding by connecting new information to what is already known.

The formative feedback cycles that the AP Art and Design portfolio allows for, and that the scoring criteria encourage, support students in a specific form of feedback, namely metacognition, which "occurs when students personally monitor what they are learning and use the feedback from this monitoring to make adjustments, adaptations and even major changes in what they understand" (Earl, 2006, p. 7). Take, for instance, the focus in the Sustained Investigation section on revision as one of the key skills test-takers need to demonstrate. Throughout the process of developing a portfolio, a student is asked to look at the work they have already created and make adjustments based on what they have learned, what has worked, and what has not come across as they expected. That is, the student must engage in metacognition in relation to the works that have already been created, thinking about the thinking that went into each piece and making adjustments as they progress. Using this type of metacognition can help learners to "understand and control their own cognitive processes" (Hands & Limniou, 2023, p. 125). Student development of metacognitive strategies has been tied to better learning outcomes, such as moving from surface to deep learning approaches (Hands and Limniou, 2023), and it is theorized to "play a fundamental role in guiding students' learning across domains" (Taouki, Lallier, & Soto, 2022, p. 921). Supporting these metacognitive activities was an active goal of the Art and Design redesign process, and we see clear evidence that the new portfolio requirements do, indeed, encourage this kind of thinking.

As the AP Art and Design *Course and Exam Description* points out, the process of investigation that is at the core of the work done to develop a portfolio "can confirm and challenge thinking, revealing connections and opportunities" (College Board, 2023, p. 14). Students are encouraged to focus on this metacognitive process both by the portfolio design with its emphasis on inquiry and by the fact that Row B on the Sustained Investigation scoring guide explicitly assesses whether the works demonstrate Practice, Experimentation, and Revision (See Appendix A). That is, students are directly rewarded for metacognitive practices like making revisions based on examining and thinking about the results of an earlier attempt.

For an excellent example of the way metacognition can influence the development of the artworks going into a specific AP Art and Design portfolio, we can look at the work of Elizabeth Tian (See Figure 6), who submitted a Drawing portfolio in 2023 and had work that appeared in the 2023 Exhibition (College Board, 2023). According to Tian, "The state of mind can be a place of disruptions, brawls, celebrations, or serenity" (2023, para. 2). Because she was aware of and able to reflect on those different, conflicting states of her mind, she was determined to create works that "depict a visual strain that reflects one's emotional strain" (Tian, 2023, para. 2) related to the pressures that society places on each individual due to unrealistic expectations. In the piece *Gasping*, we see this metacognitive exploration developed visually. Tian claims this piece explores the "accumulation of immense

pressure that is overwhelmed by its constantly changing surroundings" (Tian, 2023, para. 9). In the work, Tian includes "cheeky laughing and screaming mouths, frantic eyeballs, and crooked, yellowed teeth" to visually demonstrate the idea that "society tries to draw people into what they see, say, and feel" (Tian, 2023, para. 3). Thus, her thinking about the way society impacts a person, creating tension and distortions, led to Tian's experimentation with both content (exaggerated and distorted features) and form. *Grasping* is a self-portrait, in which the artist is surrounded in a swirl of grotesque figures, representing directly the kind of social pressure Tian is investigating, depicting her "struggle to cry out, gasping for relief" (Tian, 2023, para. 3). And yet, the work contains balance and symmetry. There is order and beauty that indicates the relief and peace that lie beyond the tension Tian is exploring. As she notes, the tension we all experience "will soon be released because we evolve as we experience it" (Tian, 2023, para. 2). It is this level of metacognition and recognition that the AP Art and Design program both allows and encourages students to reach.

**Figure 6.**



Note. From *Flooding*, by E. Tian (2023), 2023 AP Art and Design Exhibit (<https://apartanddesign.collegeboard.org/2023-student14>).  
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## Section V: Engaging Community through AP Art and Design: Learners, Teachers, Administrators, and Families

### Presentation

When students embark on their journey to produce a portfolio of work for AP Art and Design, the production and exhibition of their work is often a community affair. From informal class critiques to formal end-of-year art shows, the visual art students present their work throughout the art-making process. College Board's CED (2023b) speaks to presentation and audience engagement like Nordfelt (2023) sought to engage others through perception. Both focus on interpretation as part of presentation. Essential Knowledge Statement 3.F.1 informs teachers and students that

*Presenting works of art and design to viewers for interpretation involves making decisions about what to show, when to show it, how to show it, and to whom it is shown. Different ways of presenting work can lead to different interpretations—even for the artist or designer who made the work. The artist or designer has the power to affect how materials, processes, and ideas within a work are perceived, based on decisions they make about how they present or display the work (p. 27).*

Students are thus directed to intentionally engage their audience through presentation choices to affect interpretation. Artworks, by nature, are meant to be viewed and interpreted, leading to conversation and dialogue about artistic intention and purpose. The CED further directs student artists that presentation “can include communication[s] between the artist or designer and the viewer” to “inform thinking and making” (College Board, 2023b, p. 27). Communication may occur through discussion, writing, and even visual responses. The CED advises students to consider how “documentation can include viewer interpretations of the work presented. Documentation of presentation becomes a resource for the artist/designer and it can be shared with viewers” (College Board, 2023b, p. 27). A student artist has the capacity to engage others by developing a dialogue through presentation processes. In part, this kind of dialogue begins in the classroom through critiques focused on presenting, interpreting, and providing feedback on artwork.

### Formative assessment

Visual art critiques are an integral form of formative assessment in an art and design curriculum. By their nature, art class critiques develop a sense of peer community through shared purpose and meaningful engagement around art-making. Students struggle together to communicate ideas, improve art-making practices, discuss processes, and create a finished project. Art critiques can be short teacher and student feedback sessions lasting minutes to several days of classroom conversation focused on an entire class's artwork development. An art critique typically involves a presentation of the final artwork or work in progress followed by a discussion of the ideas, material choices, and processes used. Some critiques are teacher-directed, while others are collaborative activities with whole class engagement. Dan Kuffel, a teacher whose student College Board curated into the 2023 AP Art and Design exhibit, wrote in his teacher statement that he supports student learning by

*encourage[ing] students to work in small groups to promote the cross-pollination of ideas. Having a sounding board, opposing perspective, friendly ear, or complete collaborator as you create your best work. These also act as informal critiques while the works are developing. Work is shared and refined, and usually, your friends will tell you the truth (Kuffel, 2023, para. 7).*

In this capacity, learners are engaged and motivated to participate, to help and encourage each other, to develop friendships, and to understand ways to improve. Honest communication and relationship-building through art production are foundational to building trust. Making and presenting art is a vulnerable process, and trust is integral to supporting authentic communication and creativity. Maggie Jones, another teacher whose student, Aundrea McCarthy, was curated into the 2023 AP Art and Design Exhibit, wrote in her teacher statement that

“critique sessions serve as collaborative forums, where students offer each other constructive feedback, fostering a sense of community within our creative space” (College Board, 2023, para. 3). Through critique, learners present and reflect, document their learnings from peer or teacher reviews, and discuss learnings in ways unique to the visual arts. Critiques provide regular feedback cycles that enhance student ideas, skills, and artistic growth. Presentation and critique practices build community engagement in the classroom that can parallel how professional artists engage with others.

## School and Community Engagement

College Board’s CED guides teachers and school administrators to consider that “students need time and resources to engage with art and design in the classroom, school, and in the local community as well as in museums and galleries (in person and virtually)” (College Board, 2023b, p. 5). While visual art critiques are one way to engage and build community, extending the visual arts curriculum into the community is another. It is crucial for students to engage with art and design in various settings, as it broadens their perspective and enhances their learning experience. Virtual or in-person field trips or gallery visits allow students to engage with how adult artists think, create, and present their art. When students perceive how adult artists grapple with art-making to communicate ideas with their processes, they may gain insight into how they, as young artists, may fit into a broader art-making community. This kind of external connection or meaning-making builds purpose and reinforces internal motivation. When AP Art and Design students discover how or why their voice matters in a larger context, their inquiry goals become even more meaningful.

Visual art teachers are generally creative in forming community within their classroom, school, and local community. In a statement about her featured student in the 2023 AP Art and Design Exhibit, educator Emily Lemp writes, “...we often have showcases and gallery walks throughout the school year and partnerships with outside organizations that host some of these events, such as the law firm Cleary Gottlieb” (College Board, 2023, para. 2). By working with an external sponsor, Lemp can build relationships between a law firm and student artists to support and engage the school community in ways appropriate to the school context. Another featured educator in the 2023 exhibit, Suzanne Zimmerman, writes in her teacher statement that the AP Art and Design program advances students because she builds relationships with local designers and creative mentors. She adds,

*We show work annually at our local art center in a professional gallery, a collaboration that has led to internships and employment through networking in the community. Critiques, competitions, school art shows, and creating work to sell for charity cultivate a comprehensive picture of how to be an engaged artist and activist in practice. We try to help our young artists thrive professionally and personally by learning to apply creative problem-solving, community, confidence, and perseverance in the art studio and their other life adventures* (Zimmerman, 2023, para. 3).

Building community partnerships between students, the school community at large, and the surrounding community, including businesses and art studios, creates rich programming to engage and support students.

## Section VI: Conclusion

AP Art and Design, then, offers an excellent model demonstrating the different process-related aspects of Assessment in the Service of Learning. Because it allows opportunities for formative assessment throughout the development of the portfolio, the program engages students (and their broader communities both inside and outside of the classroom), enhances motivation, and fosters the use of metacognitive strategies. The *Course and Exam Description* (College Board, 2023a) explicitly drives students toward these different aspects of learning, as it puts the focus of the course and the exam on investigation, experimentation, and revision. Those ideas are essential to the development of the work, but also to the thinking that goes into all aspects of the course, from the decision to explore a particular Sustained Investigation topic to the discussion of works with classmates and the broader community through to the selection of works to present in the portfolio. Each step in the process allows the students to examine the decisions they have made, look at the impacts of those decisions, and adjust. This metacognitive work fosters deeper learning (Hands & Limniou, 2023), which is evident in the outcomes seen for students who have taken AP Art and Design. More studies should be done to evaluate the impact of AP Art and Design on student learning, but the preliminary results (Escoffery et al., 2025) point to the idea that theories of assessment in the service of learning do result in strong learning gains.

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## About the Study Group

The Study Group exists to advance the best of artificial intelligence, assessment, and data practice, technology, and policy; uncover future design needs and opportunities for educational systems; and generate recommendations to better meet the needs of students, families, and educators.

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