

# Using Student-Generated Artwork as a Form of Social Studies Assessment

Danica Zink

**Abstract:** Making visual artwork like paintings, photographs, and prints can act as a valuable assessment tool in the social studies classroom. Secondary social studies educators can implement art creation to assess students throughout the learning process, in both formative and summative assessments. Art creation has unique benefits, and it can be a supplement or replacement to traditional written assessments. It offers opportunities for differentiated instruction, where students interact with the material in different ways. Art also gives an outlet for students to make new connections without the use of text. Educators can also design and implement art-based assessment as an authentic form of assessment in a visual world. Social studies teachers should implement art as an assessment tool at the secondary level.

## Introduction

Graduates of American public schools remember using glue sticks, construction paper and crayons nearly daily in elementary school. Every class featured a hands-on art or craft. In social studies specifically, students likely completed a diorama, poster, or salt clay sculpture to represent their learning. Then one day, the glue sticks dried up, the crayons were broken and forgotten, and the construction paper was replaced with lined paper. Art became something only touched in the art classroom. No longer were grades given on paper pyramids and decorated sarcophaguses. Instead, the grades came from writing and lots of it.

## Defining Art

Surely, art is a very broad term. However, art as addressed in this paper will be focused on visual art, specifically stable images, and photographs. Examples of visual art include paintings, photographs, pencil drawings, and sculptures. Non-examples include music, theater, film, and literature. Though these works of art are still valid and appreciated, the literature cited throughout this piece largely references visual art. Though all art could be used, this manuscript will focus on these immobile and silent pieces of artwork, where the visual nature speaks to the learners' understanding. This work will also focus on the use of art as an assessment in older grades, particularly in grades 7-12.

What do we, as a professional community of secondary social studies educators, know about using student generated art as an assessment technique? Student generated artwork is a unique resource that serves many purposes. Student artwork can be both a formative and a summative assessment. It also provides opportunities for teachers to differentiate in the classroom and help students form new connections. Art making can also serve as an authentic task, where students learn applicable skills and create art as a meaningful product.

## Art as an Assessment

To begin, students can form artwork at several points in a learning segment. Assessment, as educators know, takes many forms, including formative and summative assessments. Student artwork can be present in both assessment types. In formative, they can create artworks to make connections, and teachers can monitor student learning. In summative assessment, students can display everything they have learned in a visually dynamic way, such as designing a monument, mural, or other culminating project.

### **Formative**

Typically, formative assessments in the upper grades include concept maps, graphic organizers, and other forms of written worksheets. Carnegie Mellon University (2023) defines the goal of formative assessment as “to monitor student learning to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by instructors to improve their teaching and by students to improve their learning.” Teachers check these types of assessments to ensure student learning throughout a learning segment. Student-generated artwork can be a valuable formative assessment in the social studies sphere. It could be worked into a typically written assessment, like when learning new vocabulary. Students could create their own visual depiction of the word. When reading multiple sources of complex historical events, students could draw the story or event from each perspective to visualize.

One example comes from Sophie Rudolph and Susan Wright. They wanted to get information on how students viewed some of the big topics of social studies. Rudolph and Wright (2015) challenged students to draw pictures of the future or pictures of history (p. 486). These very broad topics are sometimes hard to imagine. But pictures gave examples of how students viewed these concepts and gave educators a way to see patterns of understanding. Rudolph and Wright (2015) tasked 7th grade students with answering the question, “What does history look like?” (p. 494). Students were found to show concepts of time and cycles in their drawings. In their work, Rudolph and Wright focused on two separate students who made artwork featuring repeating circular shapes (much like the rings of a tree) in one and similar repeating rectangles in the other. The authors found that “students are capable of complex engagement with challenging concepts. When these images are viewed together, it also enables a stronger and deeper collective understanding of the layers of meaning that come together in seeking to understand the world” (Rudolph & Wright, 2015, p. 495). Though this example is from the beginning of the unit, it still allowed teachers an insight into students’ understanding, and they were able to gauge how to move forward in the class. In all, educators can look at pieces of art like this to check student understanding and the efficacy of their own teaching, just like they would with a written worksheet.

### **Summative**

Similarly, student-generated artwork can also serve a purpose at the end of a unit, in a summative form. Carnegie Mellon University (2023) says that summative assessments are to “evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional unit by

comparing it against some standard or benchmark.” These assessments occur at the end of a learning segment. In a social studies classroom, they often take the form of an exam or a final project such as a paper or presentation.

Once students have completed a learning segment, students could create a work of art that represents what they have learned, as they would with a written or oral assignment. For example, researchers Julie Taylor and Okezie Iroha implemented and evaluated a social studies project that brought together community involvement, social studies concepts, and art creation. This project, called the Detroit Billboard Project, challenged students with a multi-step project. They had to study their community needs and elements of art and advertisement. Then, the culminating product was a tangible billboard in downtown Detroit. The billboard featured the slogan “BE STRONG AND STAY IN SCHOOL” plastered on top of two opposing images: one of a black and white “Detroit Drop-Out” and the other of a brightly colored successful graduate. (Taylor & Iroha, 2014, p. 5). Students showed what they had learned about their community and advertisement techniques in the form of artwork. This could be done in other social studies classrooms as well, with students creating artwork representing big ideas of the American Revolution, concepts like immigration or civil rights. The list goes on. At the end of a unit, students can show what they have learned in a visual way.

## **Benefits of Art for Student Learning**

Art has unique benefits to student learning. It can serve as a way to differentiate, make connections, and develop applicable skills through authentic tasks. Imagine a student tasked with explaining the impact of the Cold War on civilian life. They stare at the assignment. They cannot even pick up their pencil to write an outline. There is so much to think about. All they can picture is dark clouds and people frozen in place. They remember hearing about the stress of the looming nuclear war. But still they sit, unable to put facts and words to the pictures swirling in their brain. Instead of writing in the 30 minutes they were given, they doodled on the page, drawing bombs, black clouds, and scared faces.

Though students could explain themselves in an essay about bomb shelters, stress, and political turmoil, they could also be given the option of creating a painting, collage, or sculpture to explain the looming fear of nuclear war. Some of those big emotions could be better explained through art over words. The student cannot fully put their memories and learning into words, but they are already making judgments about the Cold War - a higher-order thinking skill.

### ***Differentiation***

Some students, like our hypothetical one, might not have the verbal or written literacy skills to complete the task. So, as a way of differentiating, art allows the students to address their thoughts and their learning without using words. Rudolph and Wright (2015) wrote, “The power of the arts is that they are semiotic tools for symbolic and metaphoric communication. Through media, such as drawing, painting and sculpting, students often communicate complex thoughts and feelings better than they can through spoken or written language” (p. 489). Art can act as

an alternative or supplement to written assignments. There is benefit to students of all ages, especially those who are English-language learners, non-verbal students, or other people facing challenges in written literacy skills.

### ***Connections***

Furthermore, artwork helps students make more, deeper, and more complex connections to the material. As classes went online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers had to find new ways to foster engagement with their students despite being in a largely online and asynchronous format. Professors of the Humanities Korda, Leighton, and Warne (2022) implemented the Getty Museum Challenge, where students had to recreate famous 19th century artworks in their own homes using their own phones or digital cameras. Students viewed their inspirational artworks, and then created their own works of art (p. 23). Korda, Leighton, and Warne (2022) wanted the assignment to be more focused on reflection and connections through the process of making artwork:

We framed the assignment as an embodied (and hopefully fun) way of engaging with each course's themes and key questions ... we encouraged students to pay close attention to the original artwork, prompting them with questions about its contexts of production and aspects of aesthetic representation ... We also encouraged students' reflections on the process of making their own versions of these artworks and what making taught them about Victorian art as well as differences between Victorian and contemporary aesthetics and representational practices. (p. 23)

These students were interacting with artwork and creating their own. As they created, they had to be actively thinking about what they had previously learned in their classes. Students had to make connections to their current resources and the state of art today to the vast history that led to the art being created.

This aligns well with the National Council for the Social Studies theme of "Time, Continuity, and Change," which states, "Knowledge and understanding of the past enable us to analyze the causes and consequences of events and developments, and to place these in the context of institutions, values, and beliefs of the periods in which they took place" (2010).

### ***Authentic Assessment***

A final benefit of art-based assessment is the ability for students to practice applicable skills and take part in authentic assessments. Broadly speaking, artwork holds meaning within and across cultures. People have created artwork, and they will continue to do so. Especially in the digital world, artwork surrounds everyone, and students should be prepared to interact with and possibly create artwork outside of the art room.

For this, refer to the Detroit Billboard Project. This project combined community-based service learning and visual art creation. Taylor and Iroha (2015) wrote, "Art-based, service-oriented projects that respect the contextual knowledge and experiences of students are worthy of consideration by social studies educators who seek to advance civic education and 21st-century skills" (p. 18). This project differed

from traditional assessment techniques. Students did not read a text, and then another text, and another text to write something about the texts. Instead, they looked at problems they could see and touch and created a solution that they could similarly see and touch. Taylor and Iroha (2015) found there were benefits to this experiment:

Most of the students had positive views of the billboard project. They valued having had the opportunity to express their concerns and ideas. In addition to having found the process to be informative, they felt that they had made a difference through their involvement. (p. 13)

The students lived through their learning, tying civics principles with art creation. Today, people interact with a lot of text, but they also interact with advertisements and other visual media all around them. Students can create works of art within the social studies context that fit into this highly visual world.

## Conclusion

In sum, the social studies classroom can be home to student artwork, even at the high school level. Artwork acts as a powerful and complex text in and outside of classroom assessment. Teachers should utilize this resource to provide students with unique, hands-on, and often authentic opportunities to display what they have learned. Educators do not fear the art supplies tucked away in the cupboard. History, government, and civics can be represented by meaningful artwork, not just stacks of essays.

## References

- Carnegie Mellon University (2023). *What is the difference between formative and summative Assessment?* - Eberly Center: Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/basics/formative-summative.html>
- Korda, A., Leighton, M. E., & Warne, V. (2022). Teaching with the Getty museum challenge in humanities classrooms. *Currents in Teaching & Learning, 14*(1), 19–38.
- National Council for the Social Studies. (2010). *National curriculum standards for social studies: A framework for teaching, learning, and assessment*. <https://www.socialstudies.org/standards/national-curriculum-standards-social-studies>
- Rudolph, S., & Wright, S. (2015). Drawing out the value of the visual: children and young people theorizing time through art and narrative. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 47*(4), 486–507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2015.1006685>
- Taylor, J. A., & Iroha, O. (2015). Social studies education and public art: the Detroit billboard project. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research, 6*(1), 1-25. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/reader/55a3ce3b3ab8ac285f3a73074122751ff16ee7f1>



## About the Author

Danica Zink received a Bachelor of Arts in History with a minor in Communication from the University of Toledo in 2022. They are back at the University of Toledo working towards their master's in education in 7-12 Social Studies. Danica has also worked as a literacy tutor and camp counselor.