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Embracing Subjective Assessment Practices:

Recommendations for Art Educators

Leslie Gates

I am concerned that assessment of art is by nature subjective and because of that, not really accountable. When you force it into some sort of truly objective form it then (however accountable) becomes this very soulless, uninspired counting system, which is so counter to my approach to teaching.

(Dan, blog post, June 23, 2014)

I recently taught a graduate course titled Assessment in Art Education, in which 12 art educators from local public and private K-12 schools and I grappled with questions that many art educators share.[1] We discussed our questions and engaged in many complicated conversations related to assessment in the arts, informed by other art educators' ideas (e.g., Beattie, 1997; Dorn, Madeja, & Sabol, 2004; Douglas & Jaquith, 2009; Eisner, 1966; Gruber, 2008; Gruber & Hobbs, 2002; Jones, 1995; Hafeli, 2001; McCollister, 2002; Wright, 1994). However, one issue in particular had the power to thwart all other discussions: the desirability of objectivity and/or subjectivity in assessment.

The teachers in the course understood objective assessment as the ability to assess student work without being influenced by personal factors, such as emotions, biases, or prejudices. Subjective assessment, informed by professional expertise, is open to variation due to the biases, experiences, or prejudices of the specific assessor. The teachers felt variation among assessors (i.e., poor inter-rater reliability) was a professional liability given their need to defend their subject matter as valid, essential, and academic in accountability-obsessed, data-driven schools.

Throughout this article, I will weave my voice with those of practicing art educators in order to illustrate the tension between

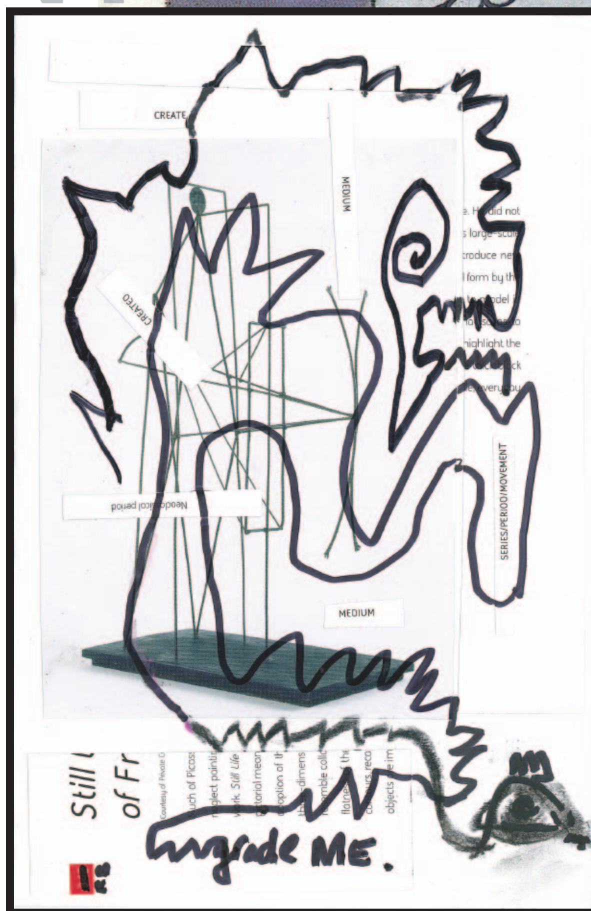

Figure 1. *Grade Me*, Ryan Billy, 2016. Collage. 8.5 in. × 5.5 in.

objective and subjective assessment methods. The collages that appear throughout this article were created by students to illustrate their assessment dilemmas and are used with permission to visually represent the dilemmas addressed in this article. In response to the dilemmas, I argue that art educators must (1) engage in the difficult task of creating assessment instruments that assess some of the less tidy aspects of student artmaking that are nevertheless central to learning in our discipline and (2) consider the ways in which our experience and knowledge both inform and complicate the making of subjective judgments, which are necessary and valuable in assessing art. I conclude by presenting strategies for generating quantitative data desired by administrators from rubrics that include qualitative, subjective language.

Objectivity and Subjectivity in Assessment

Assessing the quality of artwork or studio habits is subjective (Figure 1). Reducing our assessments to only what can be quantified is problematic because it assumes numbers are inherently objective and likely narrows what we assess to the presence or absence of various formal criteria. Criticizing the role rubrics play when they specify only the presence of formal

elements, Gude (2013) contends, "Art projects shouldn't be turned into tests" (p. 10). To embrace subjectivity as an inherent aspect of our work, we need to understand what our knowledge and experience affords us while considering the ways our knowledge and expertise also shapes our subjectivities.

Art educators are educated professionals. They have studied the teaching of art and have continued to learn with every year of experience. An experienced elementary art educator's subjective judgment about a 3rd-grader's composition skills would likely be informed by the thousands of students she has worked with as well as her knowledge of that particular child. Yet, I observed how even experienced art educators in the assessment course were fearful of making subjective judgments. Laurie wondered, "Wiggins (2012) talked about assessing creativity and I had a little light bulb moment. Why do I hold back?... Do I question my ability as a professional to make these kind of judgments?" (Laurie, blog post, June 25, 2014). Perhaps many art educators have internalized the assault on teachers in educational policy (Kahlenberg, 2011-2012) and increased teacher shaming in the news media[2] and now question the value of their professional judgments.

Knowing students is an essential aspect of assessing their work. Educators know whether the students challenged themselves, took risks, and learned important (even unplanned) concepts. Yet practicing teachers in our course who attempted to create rubrics using objective criteria and descriptors often downplayed the importance of their relationships with the student. They did so in hopes that anyone who used the rubric would be able to assess the student's work in the same way that they did, supposing this added credibility to the instrument and might keep any potential criticism or disagreement at bay. Julie said, "After looking at Wiggins' (2012) creativity rubric, there is some subjectivity in his ways of describing creativity. It will take time for me to get comfortable with assessing things that are disputable" (Julie, blog post, June 24, 2014). Julie wanted to create rubrics with objective language to assuage an occasional vocal parent and satisfy her administration. However, by constructing rubrics that could be used by anyone regardless of their knowledge of art or of the student, Julie risks silencing her professional expertise.

Some of the students in my course also described the ways they attempted to negotiate their professional knowledge within the constraints of a rubric (Figure 2). On the first day of our graduate class, I felt the students breathe a collective sigh of relief when someone said, "Even though I have a rubric, I often find myself fudging the rubric to give the student the grade she deserves." Collectively, we know that our knowledge of students matters, and that some important learning simply does not show up on even the best rubrics (Hafeli, 2001; McCollister, 2002).

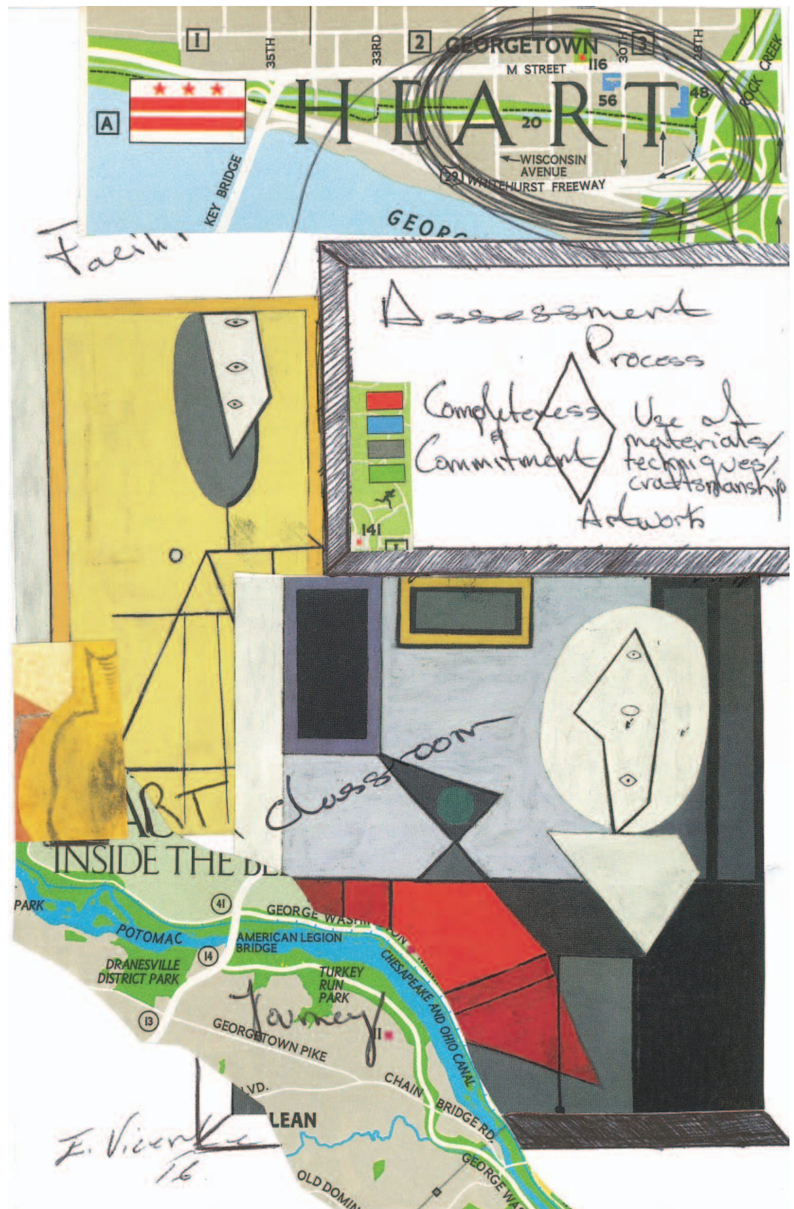

Figure 2. *He(art)*, Erik Vicente, 2016. Collage. 8.5 in. × 5.5 in.

While I advocate in this article for teachers to embrace their professional expertise, critical reflection is necessary to examine the ways that our subjectivities are reflections of our own talents, tastes, and efforts (Atkinson, 2001), our social and cultural positions (Gilligan, 1982; Rolling, 2004), and our position of authority as educators (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2001, Shor, 1996). Recognizing things that influence our subjectivities allows us to reflect critically on our role as assessors and the limitations of our own points of view. However, recognizing the limitations of subjectivity should not dissuade us from engaging in subjective judgments based on the belief that "objective" quantities are somehow impartial. Furthermore, we should recognize that rubrics containing nothing but quantitative descriptions also involve

subjectivity: a judgment initially determined how many colors on a poster would be considered "outstanding" versus "satisfactory."

Assessing the Subjective

> Assessing art projects is viewed as subjective by many colleagues. Not that my co-workers question how I assess student work, but given the current educational/political climate, teachers are "under the microscope" for accountability. (Lauri, blog post, June 22, 2014)

Lauri, an intermediate school art teacher, felt an increased pressure to lessen the subjective language in her assessments, especially in order to demonstrate student learning quantitatively as required for her teaching evaluation.

Instead of embracing the struggle to assess the aspects of our discipline that are less tidy, I observed teachers in the class attempting to arbitrarily define "correct" and "incorrect" for the sake of constructing a more objective assessment. I saw the desire of teachers to construct rubrics with objective language that included descriptors that counted the presence of certain things, such as, "Poster has three colors."

Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis (2004) suggested that attempting to increase the objectivity of scoring guides using quantities often backfires. They asked, "Why does a poster have to have three colors? Can a black-and-white poster be highly effective in communicating information?... The criterion might be better phrased, 'The design of the poster draws people in and supports the message'" (p. 207). While there are certainly correct and incorrect, right and wrong aspects of learning in the arts, not all learning in the arts can be captured within such a structure. For instance, there are correct and incorrect ways of using vocabulary to describe various pieces of equipment and tools used in the artmaking process, but we would struggle to apply such finite categories about the degree to which a student's choice of material helps to support the intended concept of the work.

Assessing Dispositions

Assessing the quality of a student's work is not our only struggle; assessing dispositions (e.g., creativity, persistence) that are intimately tied to the quality of student's artmaking can be difficult. As an early career teacher, I once insisted to a professional mentor that creativity could not be assessed. He said, "There's got to be a way to assess creativity, because as art teachers, we know it when we see it. We are already assessing it in our observations of students. What's difficult is describing it for others." I now agree that creativity can and should be assessed (e.g., Wiggins, 2012) if this is one of the things we claim to teach. As I see it, one of the main tasks of art educators in our generation is to embrace the struggle of describing the messy and untidy learning in art education classrooms in order to formalize it for those outside of our classrooms/field.

> I typically use very systematic and objective ways of grading so that there isn't any mystery to how I grade. The feedback and facilitating I do during the lesson is how I try to push kids to think creatively and problem-solve, but I don't grade them on that. I agree with the group that these skills are extremely valuable and can be applied to all areas in life. I just have never found an objective enough way to assess these things before. (Julie, blog post, June 24, 2014)

In this quote, Julie suggests that subjective assessments are mysterious (Figure 3). She identifies her inability to assess valuable skills in an objective way, which results in her choosing not to grade such skills. A consideration of whether objectivity is possible or desirable when assessing such skills is absent from her process of deciding what she can or should grade in her classroom.

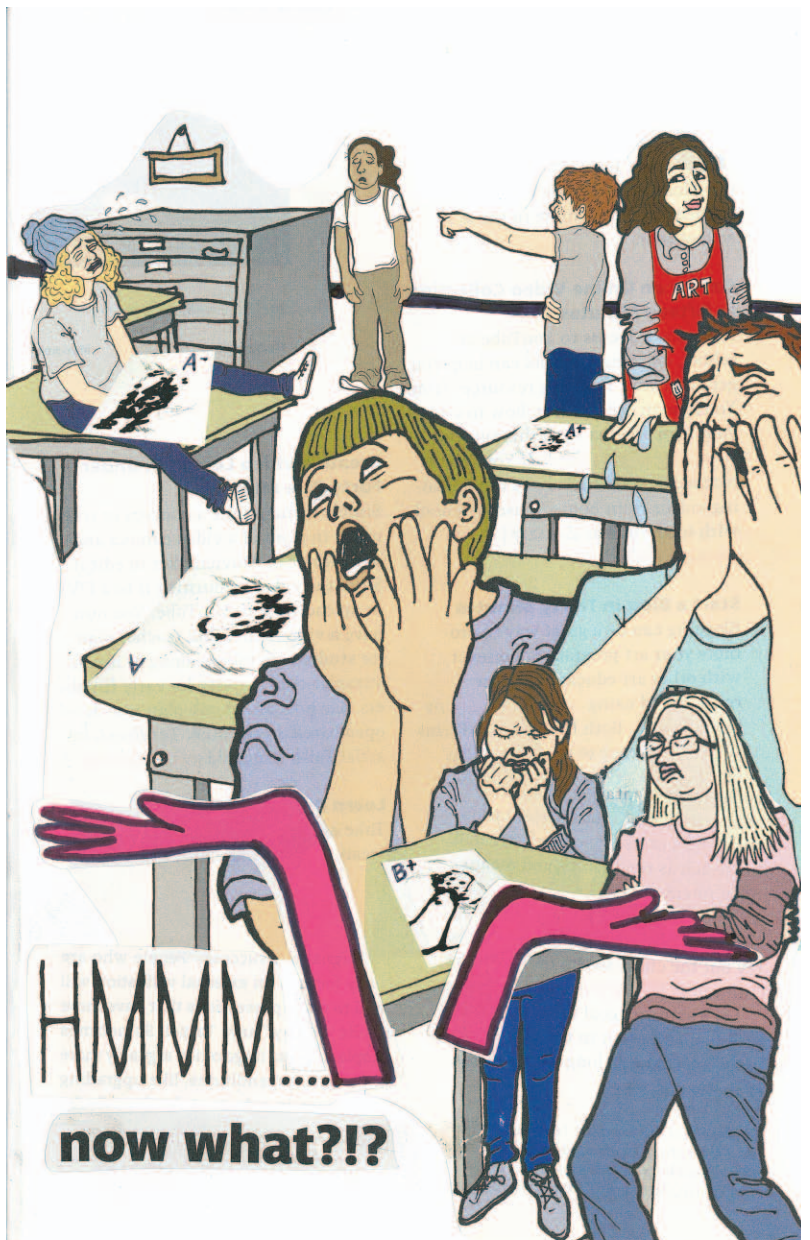

Figure 3. *Hmmm....now what?!?* Dominique Guza, 2016. Collage. 8.5 in. × 5.5 in.

I believe that we can design tools that assess quality of work, skills, and dispositions that can then be translated to quantifiable measures when necessary.

Other members of the class have also experienced pressure to assess what can be quantified (and thus miraculously considered objective). Dan, while participating in our course, was simultaneously working with the art department in his district to create common assessments based on their elementary art curriculum objectives. He reported back to the class,

> What we are expected to produce and create for these charts is total bean counting! No two ways about it. Our Supervisor of Curriculum is not interested in anything that cannot be assessed by quantifiable objectives. I brought up the idea of assessing "behaviors" and although my coworkers and supervisor were very interested and very supportive, we realized that it is completely counter to what is being asked of us by the administration. (Dan, blog post, June 26, 2014)

Dan's reference to *bean counting* describes a concern over assessing things that were easy to quantify but were of little value in terms of representing deep learning in the discipline. Many members of the class described a similar experience: assessing basic knowledge that was easy to quantify for their administration rather than assessing knowledge and dispositions that were demonstrative of deep learning in the arts.

Why and how art educators might resist such standardization of learning in general are beyond the scope of this article. However, I do not see assessing learning that is central to our discipline and generating quantitative data as either/or. I believe that we can design tools that assess quality of work, skills, and dispositions that can then be translated to quantifiable measures when necessary. The following section will provide some suggestions for doing so using rubrics that include descriptive, quality-based language.

Descriptive, Qualitative Rubrics

While rubrics should be one of several assessment methods in order to provide a comprehensive assessment of a student's work, our current education climate is over-reliant on rubrics as a means to align (i.e., standardize) assessments across courses, within departments, or even as a means of demonstrating the teachers' effectiveness (e.g., Danielson, 2013; Marzano, 2013). Rubrics are traditionally used in performance assessments, which are, "assessments based on observation and judgment. Students engage in an activity that requires them to apply a performance skill or create a project and we judge its quality" (Stiggins et al., 2004, p. 191). Rubrics are broadly applicable in that they can be used to assess performances, written pieces, artwork, studio habits, and so on. They also provide an opportunity for an educator to be transparent about her expectations, and encourage student self-reflection. However, rubrics have their limitations, including, "sameness or less variation and less risk taking in the students' solutions to the problems that lessons pose… [and the hampering of] personal responsibility, creativity, and independence" (McCollister, 2002, p. 51). Art educators must acknowledge both the benefits and limitations of rubrics in order to use them as

Writing Performance Descriptors

The performance descriptors describe the relative differences between performances at each level. These are some of the ways that difference can be presented:

- by referring to *specific aspects* of the performance that will be different at different levels.

  For example, [*analyzes*] the effect of… /*describes* the effects of… /*lists* the effects of…

- by using *adjectives, adjectival phrases*, *adverbs*, and *adverbial phrases*. These extra words are used where the aspects of a performance stay the same across the levels, but there is a qualitative difference to the performance.

  For example,

  - *accurately explains/explains with some accuracy/ explains with limited accuracy*
  - *provides a complex explanation/provides a detailed explanation/provides a limited explanation*
  - *shows a comprehensive knowledge/shows a sound knowledge/shows a basic knowledge**

    *These descriptions need to be supported by work samples or exemplars in order to make the differences clear to students.

- by using numeric references. Numbers identify quantitative differences between levels.

  For example,

  - *provides three examples/provides two examples/ provides an example*
  - *uses several strategies/uses some strategies/uses few or no strategies**

  A word of warning: numeric references on their own can be misleading. They are best teamed with a qualitative reference (e.g., three appropriate and relevant examples) to avoid ignoring quality at the expense of quantity.

    *This kind of description needs to be supported by work samples or exemplars in order to demonstrate exactly what is meant by "several" and so on.

- by referring to the degree of assistance needed by the student to complete the task. This kind of performance descriptor is explicit about the degree of independence shown by the student while undertaking the task.

  For example,

  - *correctly and independently uses/ with occasional peer or teacher assistance, uses/ with teacher guidance, attempts to use*

Figure 4. Writing performance descriptors. From Assessment for Learning (n.d.).

Table 1. Quantifying data amidst subjective language.

	Outstanding (5 points)	Satisfactory (4 points)	Unsatisfactory (2 points)
Criterion: Composition	"Photographs demonstrate students' strong composition skills and the ability to compose using clear focal points that direct the viewer into the photograph."	"Photographs demonstrate sound composition skills and the ability to compose using a focal point."	"Photographs demonstrate weak composition skills with a seemingly haphazard composition and/or unclear focal point that leaves viewer unsure of what is important."
	8 students	12 students	4 students

effectively as possible and determine when they are and are not the appropriate assessment tool.

Rubrics describe the criteria that will be assessed and qualities of performance at various levels of achievement. I find that teachers do not struggle with identifying criteria as much as they struggle with writing performance descriptors that present a "clear and accurate picture of what constitutes quality" (Stiggins et al., 2004, p. 195). Performance descriptors were the primary site of debate in our course about whether subjective language is appropriate. During one class session, a group of middle school teachers actually split themselves into two smaller groups based on their inability to agree on whether subjective language was appropriate for use in a rubric they were developing.

Figure 4, Writing Performance Descriptors, provides four possibilities for writing descriptions of quality in a rubric. Many of these performance descriptors leave room for subjective judgments to be made. For instance, performance descriptors that describe the quality of students' journalistic photographs might include the following language:

- "Photographs demonstrate students' strong composition skills and the ability to compose using clear focal points that direct the viewer into the photograph."
- "Photographs demonstrate sound composition skills and the ability to compose using a focal point."
- "Photographs demonstrate weak composition skills with a seemingly haphazard composition and/or unclear focal point that leaves viewer unsure of what is important."

In these descriptors, words such as "strong," "sound," "weak," and the ability to determine the relative clarity of a focal point are all subjective judgments. We could avoid this subjectivity by simply *bean counting* the number of photographs a student submitted, or the number of hours they spent developing the photos, or whether the photos included required components in checklist fashion. However, the students' grades then represent more about whether they followed directions than on the quality of their composition.

Creating rubrics, even with qualitative, subjective language, can still produce quantitative data that school districts require for things such as benchmark assessments. There are two relatively simple ways to do this. One is to simply add up the number of students whose work met qualities described at each level (Table 1). These numbers would represent the quality of composition in student photographs, and each criterion in the rubric could be counted similarly.

This type of quantitative analysis would give you a snapshot look at one class' proficiency levels across the assignment's various criteria.

A second strategy is to apply this principle over time to show student growth, which would be beneficial for making effective use of portfolio assessments and helping students consider their own progress over time. If the composition criterion was included in a number of photographic assignments across the course of the semester (even if it its definition changed slightly based on the project), you could also quantify a student or entire class' improving composition skills over the course of time.[3] Table 2 provides one example of how longitudinal student-level data might be generated through a variety of rubrics, if consistent criteria were applied to various projects.

Table 2. Student-level longitudinal data.

Course: Introduction to Photography Student Name: ____________				
Criteria	Project 1: Point of View	Project 2: Lighting	Project 3: Non-traditional	Project 4: Series
Composition	4 Satisfactory	4 Satisfactory	5 Outstanding	5 Outstanding
Concept	2 Unsatisfactory	4 Satisfactory	4 Satisfactory	4 Satisfactory
Technique	4 Satisfactory	4 Satisfactory	4 Satisfactory	5 Outstanding
Score	10	12	13	14

By the end of the assessment course, Julie, who spent most of the course attempting to increase the objectivity of her assessments, wrote,

> I'm beginning to realize my goal of trying to create a completely objective assessment isn't a task I can do with some of the things I want to assess. Some things in art are just going to have to be judged by my understanding and assessed in the way I see fit. (Julie, blog post, June 27, 2014)

Julie's realization that some learning cannot be assessed in quantitative/objective terms should cause art educators to reflect on how embracing subjective and qualitative aspects of assessment might enable a more holistic representation of learning in the arts.

Art educators can and should engage in the difficult task of creating assessment instruments to assess some of the subjective aspects of art that are central to learning in our discipline. By failing to do this work, we risk surrendering key aspects of our discipline to the regimes of standardization and accountability. By using strategies such as those outlined in this article, art educators can confidently use qualitative assessment language and generate descriptive, quantitative data that is increasingly expected in this era of accountability. ■

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Endnotes

[1] The practicing art educators quoted throughout this article were enrolled in a graduate class and provided their consent for me to use their experiences in this article. Some names were changed to pseudonyms at the request of individual students.

[2] The National Education Association has documented some of the teacher shaming in their online publication *neaToday* using the tag "Attack on Teachers" (http://neatoday.org/category/attacks-on-teachers).

[3] Showing student growth over time is one way for teachers to demonstrate their effectiveness in my state's student learning objective template.

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