

Authentic Assessment in the Arts

Empowering Students and Teachers

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Abstract

Due to the highly subjective nature of art and art-making, it is a common perception that effective, unbiased arts assessment is not feasible. However, in our current educational climate teachers are held increasingly accountable for student improvement, and for the reporting of student outcomes. This dilemma confronting teachers is further complicated by the fact there is an equally important body of declarative and procedural knowledge necessary to “understanding” the arts. Traditional means of assessment, such as written testing, do not necessarily reflect this scope of learning in a comprehensive way. So how does one objectively measure student progress in a manner that reflects the totality of students’ grasps of concepts and skills? One mechanism is authentic, via “performance assessment.” This includes direct, systematic observation of student performance and the rating of those skills embedded in the performance, according to pre-established criteria. This article articulates a systematic approach to criterion-based decision-making that forms the basis of

our evaluation of student work, and that guides students in the creation of works of art, more specifically dance.

The overall goal of the analysis of student learning assessment data should be to develop an understanding of students’ learning strengths and limitations, emerging issues and trends, and to discern whether or not additional strategies are required to support student learning.¹ As aptly stated by Grant Wiggins, “The aim of assessment is primarily to *educate and improve* student performance, not merely *audit* it.... Once assessment is designed to be educative, it is no longer separate from instruction; it is a major, essential and integral part of teaching and learning.”²

At the 2002 NDEO conference in Rhode Island, Marcia McCaffrey, Arts Consultant for the New Hampshire Department of Education and I, co-presented a workshop linking authentic assessment to our dance heritage.³ Our specific goal was to provide examples of alternative and authentic assessments linked to performance criteria. Our secondary goal was to stimulate thinking about how state and national arts standards can be employed to advance student learning, and support school improvement. This included discussions about holistic scoring guides and anchor performances demonstrating various levels of mastery, used as means of raising students’ level of metacognition and to promote higher order thinking skills “in and through the arts.” We also modeled the authentic assessment of phrases created in the workshop stemming

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from our dance heritage; in this case the use of vibratory, swing, and percussive actions in choreography and performance derived from the Wigman and Holm tradition and German Expressionism. Finally, we demonstrated how authentic assessment can be objectified to evaluate a broad range of complex skills.

As we continue to develop student-centered, standards-based approaches to teaching and learning, it is imperative that we broaden our definition of “understanding” to beyond that which may be assessed in a traditional manner in writing. To do otherwise perpetuates counterproductive thinking about teaching and learning, creativity and innovation, multiple intelligences, accountability, and knowledge. We all know students who retain information long enough to complete the assignment or take a written test. We also know that students demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways every day. This is particularly true with regard to the arts, where we assess via authentic, alternative, and performance-based methods.

Therefore, to advance the importance of the arts in education utilizing assessment as a teaching tool, we must:

1. Acknowledge that there is a connected body of declarative and procedural knowledge in the arts;
2. Take into account that individuals process information differently (as supported by the latest brain-based research);
3. Embrace the notion that students demonstrate depth of understanding of content through a variety of multiple intelligences;
4. Seek and value students’ points of view.

Appropriate assessments should reflect the student’s grasp of concepts, and knowledge and ownership of skills. Teachers should involve students in self-reflective exercises designed to improve the quality and character of the works they are creating. Students’ views are powerful indicators of their thought processes. Understanding what they find meaningful and how they assimilate skills and knowledge can help teachers engage them in ways that are challenging and empowering.

Further, it is the teacher’s responsibility to design arts assessments that are embedded in instruction, which reflect “best practices” in the arts. They have an obligation to approach assessment holistically with regard to how students create, perform, and interpret works of art using multiple measures of assessment; but the

teacher must be able to model excellent practice. Evaluation of student progress should reflect the act of constructive criticism rather than form the basis of judgment. Assessment has a broader purpose than simply ranking individuals with percentiles.

These issues resonate on a national scale. Not only is linking assessment to instruction educationally sound, there is an increasing demand for authentic feedback and multiple assessment measures for student and programmatic accountability at the state and local levels.

It is important to note that whatever assessment approach individual states use for the arts or other content areas, it is crucial that educators understand the role of assessment as a teaching tool. To be effective, assessment must be linked directly to instruction, and reflect both the declarative and procedural knowledge necessary to a comprehensive understanding of the arts, while keeping in mind that the depth of understanding may differ at various stages of learning.

The paradigm shift toward authentic assessment as measures of programmatic and student success will necessitate extensive professional development for and by our field.

This *need* is based on several observations:

1. One of the dilemmas facing today’s arts educators is to find ways to efficiently and effectively assess complex learning tasks, related to our state and national standards, in the reporting of student progress.
2. Performance-based assessments enable classroom teachers, districts, and states to monitor individual student outcomes. Written exams, in and of themselves, do not necessarily measure the totality and relatedness of students’ grasp of declarative and procedural knowledge necessary to understanding the arts.
3. When debating issues concerning the quality of our schools (and the implications for teacher professional development), two issues consistently emerge: the demand for greater accountability in schools and the imperative for continuous teacher and student improvement.

As an arts organization and as a community, we need to take the lead in changing the nature of assessment in order to demonstrate that it can be a powerful tool for teaching and learning. We must act upon our instincts and develop authentic standards-based assessment methods.

Therefore, I offer the following to stimulate thinking about how we can authentically assess the work of our students in a manner that objectifies the “art” rather than the artist.

The *National Standards for Arts Education: What Every Student Should Know and Be Able to Do in the Arts*⁴ call upon students to be able to demonstrate competency in the arts by the time they have completed secondary school in the following ways:

- They should be able to communicate at a basic level in the four arts disciplines – in dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts. This includes knowledge and skills in the use of basic vocabularies, materials, tools, techniques, and intellectual methods of each arts discipline.
- They should be able to communicate proficiently in at least one art form, including the ability to define and solve artistic problems with insight, reason and technical proficiency. They should be able to develop and present basic analysis of works of art from structural, historical and cultural perspectives, and from combinations of those perspectives. This includes the ability to understand and evaluate work in the various arts disciplines.
- They should have an informed acquaintance with exemplary works of art from a variety of cultures and historical periods, and a basic understanding of historical development in the arts disciplines, across the arts as a whole, and within cultures.
- They should be able to relate various types of knowledge and skills within and across the arts disciplines. This includes mixing and matching competencies and understandings in art-making, history and culture, and analysis in any arts-related project.

As a result of developing these capabilities, students can arrive at their own knowledge, beliefs, and values for making personal and artistic decisions. In other terms, they can arrive at a broad-based, well-grounded understanding of the nature, value, and meaning of the arts as a part of their own humanity.

Within recent years, there has been a great deal of developmental work on arts assessment at the state and national levels to support teachers in attaining these broad educational goals. Much of this research has been conducted by the SCASS Arts initiative (State Collaborative on

Assessment and Student Standards), operating under the auspices of the Chief Council of State School Officers. Since its inception, the SCASS Arts Education Assessment group has field-tested over 30 performance exercises in arts education and refined a selection of them for use in professional development programs at the state and district level. Many of these exercises came from a set the group developed for the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1994.

Currently, the group’s efforts are focused on building an on-line item pool and teacher training process for creating constructed and selected-response items (with and without prompts), that is being piloted at state and local levels.

Practical Application

The rubrics that follow were developed by me to assist teachers in assessing New Jersey Core Curriculum content standards in the arts. The first four provide students and teachers alike with a framework to view and understand aesthetic concerns in dance related to affinities for lyricism (Table 1), bravura quality (Table 2), and technical proficiency (Table 3). It is unlikely that a person has an affinity for only one way of moving. Most express themselves through varying degrees of movement characteristics as reflected in the 0-4 scale provided below. The next rubrics address critiquing skill (Table 4), and dance technique from the perspectives of movement skill (Table 5) and physical attributes (Table 6). The creativity and invention rubric (Table 7) was developed collaboratively with Marcia McCaffrey, for our presentation at the NDEO meeting.³

It is my firm belief that knowing what is assessable, is as important as knowing how to assess student achievement. As a field, we must continue to attempt to “articulate what is before us... [as a means] of discovering what is there...”⁵ through authentic practice.

Movement Affinities

Learning to recognize subtle nuances differentiating stylized dance movement can enhance the aesthetic appreciation of dance for the audience, dancer, choreographer, student, and teacher. For the dancer, identification of movement tendencies may guide career choices and serve as a guide for training regimens necessary to maximize potential. For choreographers and teachers, refining the ability to identify and cultivate the inherent movement preferences of

Table 1 Predominant Movement Affinities / Lyricism

| | |
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| 4 Advanced Proficient <i>Exemplary Response</i> | The dancer is consistently technically, dynamically, and musically proficient. They display a high degree of rhythmic acuity and a movement quality that is fully expressed in the body in relation to the music (extending the movement beyond the accented beat). They demonstrate a highly developed sense of placement and porte bras (carriage of the arms) and consistently excel in the use of line. |
| 3 Proficient <i>Competent Response</i> | The dancer displays an accurate sense of musicality and demonstrates the ability to sequence and process phrases with a consistency of style that is supported by correct anatomical placement and porte bras. The proficient dancer generally demonstrates the ability to execute combinations with a pure sense of line but does not consistently extend the movement beyond the accented beat in the music. |
| 2 Basic <i>Minimal Response</i> | The dancer displays an underdeveloped sense of alignment and placement, accenting the dynamics rather than the quality of the movement with flow. |
| 1 In Progress <i>Superficial Response</i> | The dancer demonstrates inaccuracies in rhythm, shows little or no follow through after the accented beat, and has a limited understanding of dynamic alignment and/or dance technique. |
| 0 Unscoreable <i>Unacceptable Response or No Attempt</i> | The dancer seemingly does not attempt to follow directions and shows little effort to demonstrate competencies. They demonstrate neither rhythmic sensitivity nor understanding of dynamic alignment and technique. |

Table 2 Predominant Qualities of the Bravura Dancer

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| 4 Advanced Proficient <i>Exemplary Response</i> | The dancer is consistently technically and dynamically proficient. They display a high degree of rhythmic acuity and ability to move quickly and accurately within the musical phrase. They demonstrate a highly developed sense of placement and porte bras (carriage of the arms); possess outstanding elevation, strength, and control and consistently move with authority (expressing a highly developed sense of athleticism in tour de force combinations). They also have a strong attack on the accented beat. |
| 3 Proficient <i>Competent Response</i> | The dancer displays an accurate sense of musicality and demonstrates the ability to sequence and process phrases with a consistency of style that is supported by correct anatomical placement and porte bras. They generally execute combinations with strength and control but do not consistently demonstrate a strong attack on the accented beat nor display an acutely developed sense of athleticism or elevation in tour de force combinations. |
| 2 Basic <i>Minimal Response</i> | The dancer displays an underdeveloped sense of alignment and placement, accenting the dynamics rather than the quality of the movement. They can perform some tour de force movements, but with limited strength, control, lightness, smoothness, or ballon. |
| 1 In Progress <i>Superficial Response</i> | The dancer demonstrates inaccuracies in rhythm; shows little or no sense of attack on the accented beat, and has a limited understanding of dynamic alignment and/or technique. The dancer lacks the strength and control to execute tour de force movements. |
| 0 Unscoreable <i>Unacceptable Response or No Attempt</i> | The dancer seemingly does not attempt to follow directions and shows little effort to demonstrate competencies. They demonstrate neither rhythmic sensitivity nor understanding of dynamic alignment and technique. |

dancers enables the director to actualize their artistic vision more quickly and effectively while using the dancer's natural attributes.

Finally, the quality of movement exhibited by the dancer will have an impact on the audience, influencing their aesthetic appreciation of the per-

Table 3 Predominant Qualities of the Technically Proficient Dancer

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| <p>4 Advanced Proficient <i>Exemplary Response</i></p> | <p>The dancer is consistently technically and dynamically proficient. They display a high degree of rhythmic acuity and ability to move accurately within the musical phrase alone or in an ensemble. They demonstrate a highly developed sense of placement and porte bras (carriage of the arms) and have an acute awareness of ensemble movement. They possess good elevation strength, control, consistency of style and the ability to direct focus.</p> |
| <p>3 Proficient <i>Competent Response</i></p> | <p>The dancer displays an accurate sense of musicality and demonstrates the ability to sequence and process phrases with a consistency of style that is supported by correct anatomical placement and porte bras. They generally execute tour de force combinations competently but not with exemplary strength, control, or direction of focus. Their instincts for working in an ensemble are strong, but their skills are not necessarily highly refined.</p> |
| <p>2 Basic <i>Minimal Response</i></p> | <p>The dancer displays an underdeveloped sense of alignment and placement, accenting the dynamics rather than the quality of the movement. They can perform some tour de force movements, but with limited strength, control, lightness, smoothness, or ballon. Their ability to direct focus and execute ensemble movement with precision and predictability is limited.</p> |
| <p>1 In Progress <i>Superficial Response</i></p> | <p>The dancer demonstrates inaccuracies in rhythm; has a limited understanding of dynamic alignment and/or technique, and shows little inclination or ability to execute ensemble, unison phrase-work. The dancer lacks sufficient strength and control to execute tour de force movements.</p> |
| <p>0 Unscoreable <i>Unacceptable Response or No Attempt</i></p> | <p>The dancer seemingly does not attempt to follow directions and shows little effort to demonstrate competencies. They demonstrate neither rhythmic sensitivity nor understanding of dynamic alignment and technique.</p> |

Table 4 Dance Critique

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| <p>4 Advanced Proficient <i>Exemplary Response</i></p> | <p>The student clearly, coherently, and insightfully uses dance vocabulary correctly to analyze choreography with reference to the principles of design; repetition, balance, emphasis, unity, variety, and rhythm and the elements of art (including line, shape, form, space, color and texture). The student demonstrates objectivity and a positive attitude in the critiquing of their own work and that of others using the criteria listed above.</p> |
| <p>3 Proficient <i>Competent Response</i></p> | <p>Student demonstrates sensitivity during the critique process and is careful to offer positive, objective comments directed at the work, not at the artist. They are convincing and mostly accurate in their demonstration of knowledge of the principles of design and elements of art in critiquing their own work and that of others.</p> |
| <p>2 Basic <i>Minimal Response</i></p> | <p>The student displays limited, sometimes inaccurate demonstration of knowledge of the principles of design and elements of art in critiquing their own work and that of others.</p> |
| <p>1 In Progress <i>Superficial Response</i></p> | <p>The students' critique is brief and they are unable to expand on comments; their explanations are incomplete, are unclear or lack detail. Students can neither define nor apply the process of critique. There is little effort shown and no attempt to follow directions with regard to verbal or written critiques.</p> |
| <p>0 Unscoreable <i>Unacceptable Response or No Attempt</i></p> | <p>The student provides an irrelevant or unintelligible critique of their own work or the work of others. There is no demonstration of the knowledge of principles of design and elements of art in critiquing their own work and that of others.</p> |

formance. Choices of movement style can lend insight into the artistic intent of the choreographer,

which when understood by the viewer can enhance their enjoyment of that work of art.

Table 5 Dance Technique – Movement Skills

| | 4 Advanced Proficient <i>Exemplary Response</i> | 3 Proficient <i>Competent Response</i> | 2 Basic <i>Minimal Response</i> | 1 In Progress <i>Superficial Response</i> | 0 Unscoreable <i>No Attempt</i> |
|---|---|--|---|--|--|
| <i>Technical Proficiency</i> | High degree of rhythmic acuity and ability to move accurately within the musical phrase alone or in a group | Frequently demonstrates accuracy in movement | Mistaken perception of movement tasks | No understanding of movement fundamentals | |
| <i>Rhythmic Acuity</i> | Innate ability to accurately and consistently fulfill the musical phrase | Somewhat consistent physicalized musical phrase | Inconsistent execution of movement in relation to music | False perception of musicality and beat | |
| <i>Musicality</i> | Extraordinary ability to sequence phrases with a consistency of style corresponding to music | Fair ability to perform movements correlating to the music | Absence of clear ability to respond accurately to the music | Haphazard physical response to music | |
| <i>Ensemble Skill/Spatial Awareness</i> | Sophisticated sensitivity to group interactions in space | Occasional deviation from choral movement | Mistaken physical awareness of members of core | Erratic movement behavior out of sync with group | |
| <i>Consistency of Style</i> | Persistent appearance of cohesiveness in performance | Generally coherent presentation of choreography | Dubious ability to perform a codified sequence | No apparent grounding in technique | |
| <i>Sequencing Ability</i> | Absolute ability to process movement information | Skillful replication of movement motif's | Meager ability to retain and perform movements | Indeterminate ability to connect movement phrases | |
| <i>Dynamic Range</i> | Extraordinary ability to express emotional context in movement | Sufficient understanding of connection to movement and emotion | Insufficient demonstration of qualitative variety in movement | Oblique understanding of movement possibility | |

Movement Characteristics

The *lyrical dancer* directs the audience to a fuller understanding of the choreographer's intent regarding the relationship of the music to dance. The lyrical dancer uses the expressive quality

of music through the full extension of the body following the accented beat and resounding through the complete musical phrase. The *bravura dancer* generally has a high degree of technical proficiency and tends to accent the musi-

Table 6 Dance Technique – Physical Skills/Attributes

| | 4 Advanced Proficient <i>Exemplary Response</i> | 3 Proficient <i>Competent Response</i> | 2 Basic <i>Minimal Response</i> | 1 In Progress <i>Superficial Response</i> | 0 Unscoreable <i>No Attempt</i> |
|---------------------------|--|---|---|---|--|
| <i>Coordination</i> | Highly developed ability to perform synchronized tasks | Fairly agile. Occasional dysfunction | Limited bodily kinesthetic awareness | Lack of bodily kinesthetic awareness | |
| <i>Direction of Focus</i> | Consistently controls point of attention | Generally able to steer attention of audience | Limited ability to orient audience's point of attention | Totally diffused focus | |
| <i>Use of Weight</i> | Fluency in use of weight distribution as function of character development | Mostly effective display of believable weight distribution | Little accuracy or inconsistent use of weight | No understanding of physical weight centering | |
| <i>Use of Space</i> | Complete understanding of ramifications of near, middle, and far reach | Moderate understanding of spatial awareness | Inaccurate perception of spatial relationships | Vague idea of personal kinesphere and action space zones | |
| <i>Movement Quality</i> | Highly refined capability to use a wide array of physical effort actions | Fundamentally sound ability to move with different energies | Rudimentary knowledge of stylization of movement | Stilted in their ability to express themselves physically | |

cal beat. In addition, they have the capability of executing petit and grande allegro with brilliance and the ability to move quickly and accurately punctuating the musical phrasing. In ballet, the dancer that is *technically proficient* in the use of line and technique is perhaps best suited for corps dancing due to the high level of demand for absolute uniformity. An exceptionally lyrical or bravura dancer would detract from the ensemble. This may be true in other types of dance as well, but is particularly germane to ballet.

Identifying Characteristics Rubrics

Tables 1, 2, and 3 present suggested guidelines for assessing dancers. This approach represents only one of many ways that teachers may engage students in a critical dialogue exploring the topic of aesthetics. Others might include a com-

parative analysis of cultural dance forms, an examination of the personal style of representative figures in dance history, or an inquiry into the elements of art applied to the principles of choreographic design. The commonality among these examples allow for comparison of observable trends and behaviors. In essence, they support the student in their ability to make criterion-based judgments.

The main educational objective of aesthetic criticism in this context is to foster critical thinking and increase communication skills and visual literacy in the arts. Making meaning of the world is a basic human behavior. Grappling with meaning in art, and discovering how and why the arts affect us, can only heighten appreciation for the arts.

According to Eliot Eisner, "Criticism in the arts is not only a way to describe what you have seen;

Table 7 Creativity and Invention

| | 4 Advanced Proficient <i>Exemplary Response</i> | 3 Proficient <i>Competent Response</i> | 2 Basic <i>Minimal Response</i> | 1 In Progress <i>Superficial Response</i> | 0 Unscoreable <i>No Attempt</i> |
|--|---|--|---|--|--|
| <i>Innovation</i> | Intent on discovering new movement and on incorporating it into the dance | Tries new ideas and is able to let go of the old and embrace the new | Tries new ideas and makes movement choices based on both established and innovative movement vocabulary | May try new ideas; relies on established movement vocabulary | |
| <i>Identification Implementation of Creative Opportunities</i> | Views the project holistically; responds creatively | Analyzes and synthesizes new ideas in different contexts | Identifies opportunities for creative play and attempts to find new solutions | Maintains a creative range that is familiar | |
| <i>Involvement in Creative Process</i> | Engrossed in the creative endeavor almost beyond distraction | Consistently displays willingness to exercise choice in problem solving | Visibly engaged in creative problem solving demonstrated by time on task | Occasionally willing to exercise choice in selection of creative options | |
| <i>Self Regulation During Creative Process</i> | Works intently, seeks advice when necessary, analyzes advice appropriately, is not reliant on others | Works thoughtfully and asks questions at appropriate times during the creative process | Makes choices that assist with fulfilling the creative process such as asking questions and seeking assistance | Personal choices or circumstances interfere with seeking assistance and/or fulfilling the creative process | |
| <i>Self Evaluation of Creative Process</i> | Self evaluation promotes creative process | Integrates self evaluation with creative process | Regular introspection of self and work | Occasional introspection of creative work | |
| <i>Self Awareness / Metacognition During Creative Process</i> | Self Awareness and creativity options fully recognized and integrated into all aspects of creative work | Self awareness is recognized and exhibited as an integral part of the creative process | Is occasionally aware creative choices impact outcome but does not consistently consider impact of artistic choices | Seldom engages in self reflection during the creative process | |

it is also a road to insight. The critical act, the task of trying to articulate what is before us, is also a way of discovering what is there.”⁵

The rubric presented in Table 4 demonstrates how the skill of *critique* may be used as a means of evaluating the student’s grasp of the elements of art and design and to prompt further discussion on critical issues in choreography and performance.

Visual Thinking Strategies

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS),^{6,7} a visual arts program designed by cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen and educator Philip Yenawine, is designed to support literacy in the visual arts. In the initial lessons, teacher-facilitators ask students several open-ended questions that encourage students to examine what they see. They include:

Table 8 The National Dance Standards*

Identifying and Demonstrating Movement Elements and Skills in Performing Dance
 Understanding Choreographic Principles, Processes, and Structures
 Understanding Dance as a Way to Create and Communicate Meaning
 Applying and Demonstrating Critical and Creative Thinking Skills in Dance
 Demonstrating and Understanding Dance in Various Cultures and Historical Periods
 Making Connections Between Dance and Healthful Living
 Making Connections Between Dance and Other Disciplines

*Excerpted from: National Standards for Arts Education.⁴

- What's going on in this picture?
- What more can you find?
- What do you see that makes you say that?

These same types of questions could easily apply to the plastic arts; dance and theater. VTS specifically targets narrative imagery and not abstract imagery. However, the type of fundamental questioning cited above could easily assist students in making evaluative statements based on observable occurrences in dance and theater.

Using criterion-based critical analytical skills applied to the rubrics presented in Tables 5 and 6, students may obtain a deeper understanding of how to evaluate dance technique. The rubric presented in Table 7 lays out a mechanism for evaluating creativity and invention applied to the choreographic process. For easy comparison with the rubrics, the eight goals listed in the National Dance Standards appear in Table 8.

Conclusion

The rubrics presented in these pages provide a mechanism for systematically and authentically evaluating student performance skills in an objectified manner. Using these rubrics as stimulus, I invite you to build your own criterion-based assessment instruments that specifically address the needs of your students. In practical application, I believe it is self evident that it is possible to critically evaluate a broad range of complex performance skills in a fair and unbiased manner. The key to success lies in the creation of un-ambivalent benchmarks that reflect essential skills and components of leaning.

Other Resources Provided by SCASS Arts

- Guidelines for Videotaping Performance Assessment
- Arts Assessment Lessons Learned from Developing Performance Tasks (available in hard copy and CD Rom)
- Presentation Materials from the National

Arts Assessment Institute

- Arts Education Year-End Report and Collection of Refined Exercises
- Collection of Unrefined Arts Assessment Exercises Developed for the 1997 NAEP Arts Education Assessment.

For additional information on the SCASS Arts initiative, you may visit their web site at www.ccsso.org/scass/p_arts/index.html. Or for more information on how a state can participate in the SCASS group, contact Frank Phillip at 202-336-7046, frankp@ccsso.org.

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