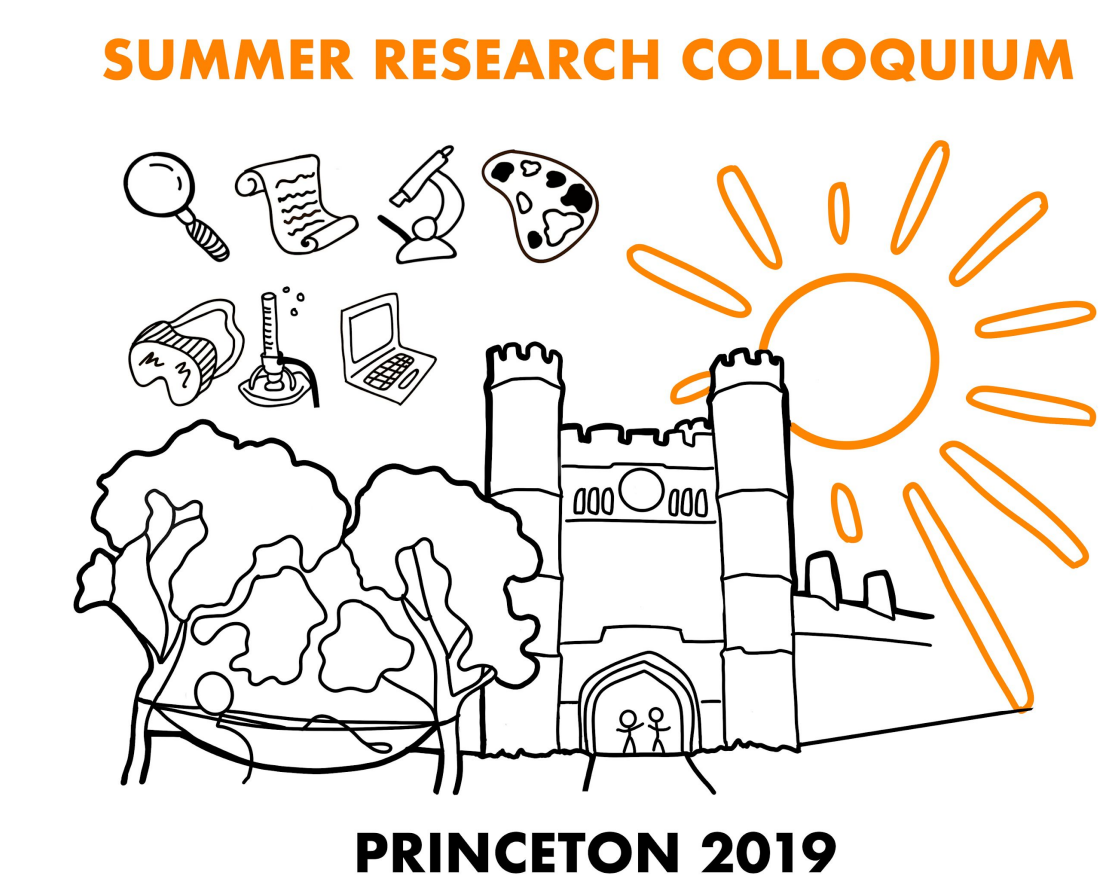# Reassessing Assessment in Theater Education

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Background

For years, the McCarter Theatre has offered programs for students in pre-K through high school. The goal of these programs is twofold. McCarter's programs strive to teach theater techniques, enabling students to explore and embody characters on stage. At the same time, McCarter's programs seek to inspire personal growth, encouraging students to develop skills such as imagination, collaboration, creativity, persistence, and empathy.

At the end of each program, McCarter staff requests that students complete self-assessment surveys. The data collected from these surveys is used to evaluate the programs. Scholars and educators alike have long contested how to assess theater education. The field of theater—and arts—assessment as a whole is underdeveloped. Theater requires imagination, creativity, and empathy—skills that are seemingly immeasurable. Assessments, some argue, seek to quantify these unquantifiable aspects of theatre.

Research Question

How should educators assess a program's ability to instill the "immeasurable qualities" of imagination, creativity, personal agency, and persistence in its participants?

Methods and Materials

My research began in the McCarter Theatre's "Assessment Tools" folder. From this file, I compiled rubrics, the McCarter education learning goals, and data (collected from previous summer camps and after and in school residencies) dating from 2016 on. The resources found in this file, however, only served as my starting point.

I consulted a variety of sources throughout my research, including scholarly studies conducted by Harvard's Project Zero, essays by scholars and educators alike, and sample assessments and surveys, both those distributed by McCarter, and those suggested from other sites and schools.

I began drafting new survey questions, layouts, and models. I analyzed and adjusted the survey's layout and content. I considered the order and wording of the questions, the phrasing and placement of the directions, the survey's length and alignment with McCarter's educational goals and rubric.
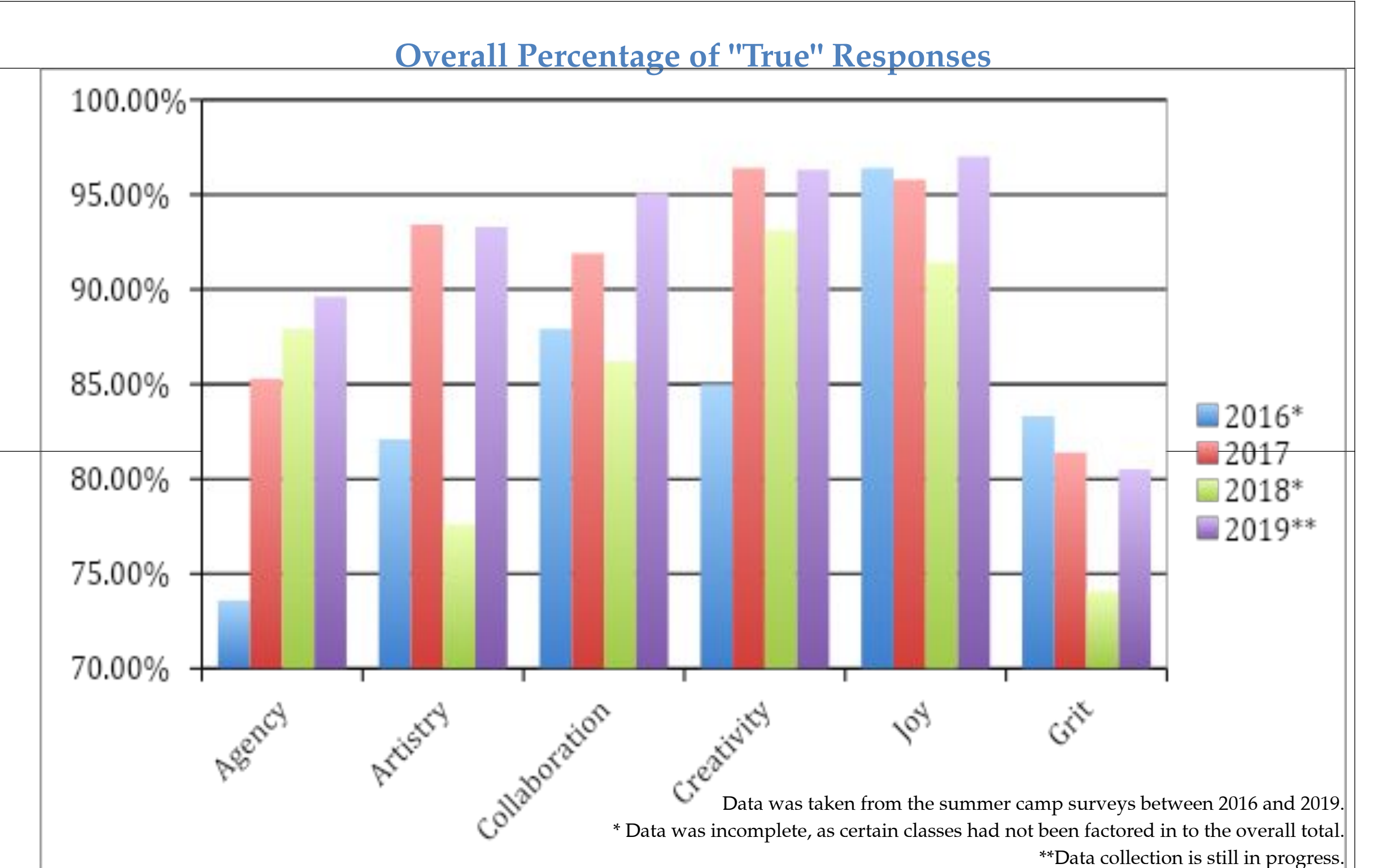
I was working with a few restrictions. The assessments had to be brief student reflections that could be completed within an allotted time. These restrictions effectively ruled out the drafting of longer exam-type assessments. Furthermore, research indicates that self-assessments, in tandem with classroom observation, are the most effective way in which the acquisition of immeasurable qualities such as creativity, imagination, collaboration, and persistence can be measured. Due to time and job restrictions, I was unable to conduct my own classroom observations, and had to rely on third-party accounts.

Results

The McCarter student survey consists of two sections. The first asks students to respond to a set of prompts using "true" and "false," while justifying their answers in the comments. The second is comprised of a series of questions asking students to elaborate on their experience, their favorite parts, what they would change, and how the class impacted them.

Data collected from previous classes and summer camps is available from 2016 on. I pulled and analyzed the data specifically taken from the summer camp programs.

Skill	Prompt	Observations

Agency	I shared my ideas and talents with the class.	• Students express a hesitancy to definitively respond to this prompt.
		   • Ex. In a class of 16 students:
		     • 3 indicated that prompt was "false"
		     • 3 wrote in that prompt was "sometimes" true
		     • 1 student insisted she shared her ideas, but not talents
		   • Several others indicated that they attempted to share their thoughts, but could have participated more fully.

Artistry	I feel more comfortable telling a story on stage using my body, voice, and imagination.*	• Artistry tends to score lower than creativity and joy, but higher than grit and agency. • The prompt for artistry changes to accommodate the specific goals and curriculum of each class. Other iterations of the prompt include: "I grew more confident in my ability to listen and respond," and "I got better at developing my artistic vision through the solo performance form." • Scores seem to vary from year to year and class to class. • This is likely a reflection of how well the prompt reflects the goals and curriculum of the class.

Collaboration	We worked well together as a team or ensemble during this class.	• Students tended to assess their peers' collaboration within the class as opposed to their own.
		   • Ex. In a class of 31 students:
		     • 3 indicated that prompt was "false"
		     • 2 were unsure
		     • 6 expressed doubt that class was collaborative as a whole (pointing out specific students who refused to collaborate)

Creativity	I used creative thinking and imagination during this project.	• Creativity tends to score high across the board. • It dipped in 2016 (3 courses which tend to score high in creativity were not counted that year).
Joy	I enjoyed the camp and feel proud of what I worked on.	• Joy tends to be one of the highest, scoring categories.

Grit	I did something that was hard for me and stuck with it.	• Students seem to misinterpret the prompt.
		   • Ex. Several students justified their response that the prompt was "false" by claiming that "nothing was too hard."
		 • Students seem to have trouble contextualizing the question within their class experience.
		   • Ex. One student who answered "false," later wrote about how she was most proud of how she was able to eventually understand an activity she first found difficult.
		 • The prompt also seems to carry a negative connotation.
		   • In order to answer with "true," students must first admit that they found something to be difficult.

Overall Percentage of "True" Responses

Legend: 2016*, 2017, 2018*, 2019**

Categories: Agency, Artistry, Collaboration, Creativity, Joy, Grit

Data was taken from the summer camp surveys between 2016 and 2019.
* Data was incomplete, as certain classes had not been factored in to the overall total.
**Data collection is still in progress.

Conclusion

My research yielded a series of observations that can be used to inform new models of surveys and assessments.

In the survey's first section, the prompts for agency, collaboration, and grit ought to be reassessed. Student responses for agency indicate that the dichotomy of "true" and "false" isn't yielding accurate results, as it crowds out more nuanced responses. To remedy this, a sliding scale could be adopted. It would similarly allow for the data to be quantified without limiting the students' responses. Student responses for collaboration indicate that the prompt's wording is misleading. The usage of "we" in the prompt, as opposed to "I," is leading students to assess their peers' collaboration within the class, as opposed to their own. Students should reflect on their own efforts to collaborate with their class. Student responses for grit indicate that the prompt is simply misinterpreted. The prompt should be more explicit in its definition of grit and persistence. It could also be framed in a more positive light, focusing on a student's willingness to remain positive in the face of adversity and try unfamiliar and challenging tasks again.

The second section of the survey should also be reassessed. In order to avoid both the contrast effect (where the order of the questions leads to a greater difference in responses) and the assimilation effect (where the order leads to a greater degree of similarity in responses), questions should be grouped logically. The survey should ideally unravel like a conversation would, encouraging students to reflect on their class experience as a whole before honing in on minutia. Questions geared towards identifying demographics, age, and prior experience with McCarter should be placed towards the end and preceded by more engaging topics.

Acknowledgement

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