

THE SERGIO BLANCO STUDY: EVALUATING CREATIVE WORK THROUGH AI

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ABSTRACT

The methodology outlined in this paper proposes a structured and replicable framework for incorporating AI-assisted evaluation tools into educational contexts characterized by creative expression and artistic inquiry. Over a four-month case-study at the Rome Fine Arts Academy, twenty-five students engaged with Sergio Blanco's theatrical monologue, *Memento Mori*, using it as inspiration to develop individual artistic performances as the objective of an academic course. In the days following their performances, each student individually documented their creative process and outcomes by creating a final multimedia *exposition*—a structured presentation integrating text, images, audio, and video. The textual components of each student's document were analyzed through the AI platform ^ooKobi, which provided insights into thematic coherence with Blanco's original work and assessed originality among the students' artistic research presented in their final document. Preliminary findings indicate participant engagement suggesting the collection of insightful data to gauge the potential for AI to support instructors in effectively evaluating creative assignments in higher education settings. The paper concludes by addressing methodological limitations, outlining immediate next steps for data analysis, and identifying future directions for continued research in AI-assisted evaluation.

KEYWORDS

AI-Assisted Evaluation, Higher Arts Education, Artistic Research

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a structured academic course at the Rome Fine Arts Academy that explored how artificial-intelligence (AI) tools can assist instructors in evaluating students' creative work. Sergio Blanco's *Memento Mori*—an autofictional monologue on mortality, memory and narrative—served as the common stimulus. Twenty-five students drew on the text to devise individual artistic performances and, afterwards, to assemble “expositions”: multimedia documents combining text, images, audio and video and archived on the online repository Research Catalogue (<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/>).

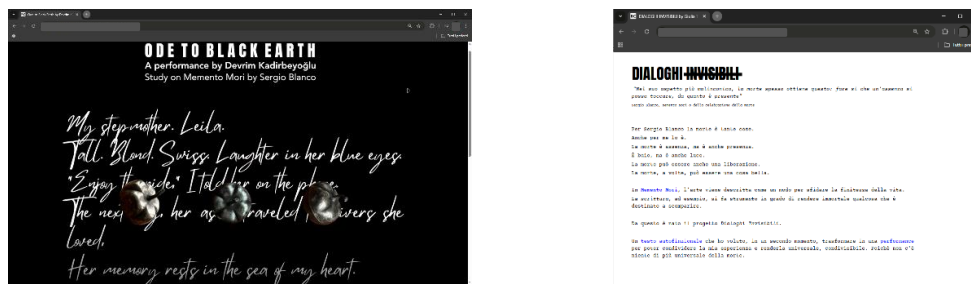


Figure 1. Two examples of creative outputs in the form of Expositions created for the course.
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The final documents were produced in the form of expositions, a structured multimedia presentation combining text, images, audio, and video, designed to document and reflect on the artistic research and creative processes underlying an artistic performance (Borgdorff, 2012; Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2014).

The methodological approach comprised two primary factors. The first factor involved a systematic comparative analysis between Sergio Blanco's *Memento Mori* and the student-generated expositions. Semantic similarity was gauged with two complementary methods: **(1)** cosine distance, a standard metric in information-retrieval research (Manning et al., 2008; Turney & Pantel, 2010), and **(2)** a large language model concept extractor embedded in the °°Kobi platform (Giretti et al., 2023, 2024; Ripa di Meana et al., 2024) that quantified the concepts shared across texts. Results from these automated measures were cross-validated against the course instructor's thematic analysis of the texts, enabling us to determine how closely each student's expositions aligned with—or diverged from—the original stimulus in both thematic and conceptual terms. This step emphasized the educational context, particularly highlighting courses such as Theatre Directing¹, where it is crucial to assess students' ability to construct personal projects while clearly preserving a discernible connection to the assigned reference material. Within this type of educational framework, students' final outputs must not merely be "inspired by" the original text but explicitly maintain recognizable dramaturgical relationships to it. The second factor shifted the focus to examining thematic and semantic relationships among the students' own expositions. This internal comparative analysis aimed to identify patterns of originality and innovation within the student cohort, reveal thematic convergence or divergence across student responses, and enhance understanding of how distinct or similar individual creative processes are within a shared educational context.

It is important to note that the proposed methodology did not evaluate or quantify the students' artistic performances enacted at the end of the course. Instead, the analytical focus rests on the artistic research embedded in each student's exposition. In this context, *artistic research* refers to the reflective and systematic process through which artists investigate, expand, and articulate the conceptual and aesthetic foundations of their work (Borgdorff, 2012; Hannula, Suoranta, & Vadén, 2014). By examining how students documented their personal explorations, conceptual frameworks, and creative decision-making, this research aimed to capture the intellectual and theoretical dimensions underlying the performed pieces.

Using °°Kobi, we also generated an interactive semantic graph (Figure 2) that positions each student exposition relative to Sergio Blanco's *Memento Mori* and exposes thematic connections across the cohort. In the display, Blanco's monologue appears as a green node, student texts as red, higher-level concepts as blue, and individual lemmas as grey. Hovering over a node (Figure 3) highlights its links, while clicking a red node opens the full exposition. While the graph did not inform the data analysis presented in this paper, it was presented to students in a final feedback session, using it to spark group discussion and gather qualitative reflections on how the AI-generated visualization portrayed the students' work.

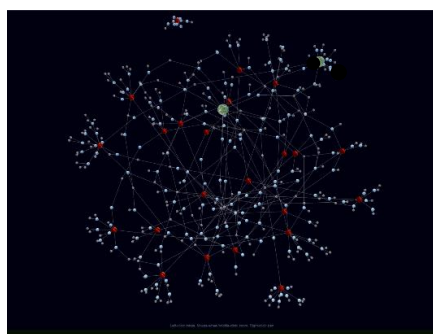


Figure 2. The overall view of the graph. The Green node represents Blanco's text while the red nodes each represent a student exposition. Blue nodes are concepts and gray nodes are lemmas

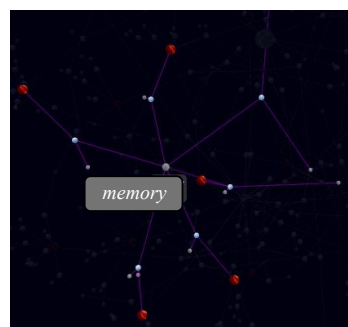


Figure 3. Detail from the semantic graph illustrating the lemma *memory* (gray node at the centre of the image) and its relationships to several student expositions (red nodes)

¹ Theatre directing is generally known as the artistic practice of interpreting, organizing, and coordinating all creative elements involved in a theatrical production—including acting, staging, design, and narrative—to shape a cohesive, meaningful, and expressive performance.

2. ENHANCING LEARNING IN ARTISTIC EDUCATION

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into educational contexts has attracted growing attention, particularly regarding evaluation methods. This literature review examines how AI is currently utilized to support assessment processes within educational settings, with special attention given to creative and artistic disciplines.

2.1 AI-Assisted Evaluation in Higher Arts Education

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly explored in higher education, particularly regarding its potential in enhancing assessment processes, promising benefits such as increased objectivity, consistency, and efficiency (Gardner, O'Leary, & Yuan, 2021). However, implementing AI in artistic disciplines introduces distinct challenges due to the inherently subjective, expressive, and context-dependent nature of creative work (Kong, 2020).

Despite these inherent complexities, current research highlights several possibilities for AI's supportive role in evaluating artistic disciplines. For instance, semantic analysis tools can measure originality and thematic depth in creative writing or visual art, providing supplementary insights that might escape traditional human evaluators (Forster & Dunbar, 2009; Beaty & Johnson, 2021). AI-generated evaluations offer structured feedback which educators can use to initiate deeper critical reflections and foster richer pedagogical dialogue (Liang, 2024), provided instructors and students possess a foundational level of AI literacy (Liang, 2024; Ko et al., 2021). Recent work underscores that automated semantic metrics and expert-driven ratings, such as the Consensual Assessment Technique (CAT) (Amabile, 1996; Baer & McKool, 2009), are increasingly convergent rather than competing approaches to creativity assessment. Large-corpus studies show that distributional measures of semantic distance—whether computed with classic word embeddings or with transformer-based models—explain 60–70 % of the variance in CAT originality scores on divergent-thinking and narrative tasks (Beaty & Johnson, 2021; Dumas et al., 2021). Follow-up research introduced Divergent Semantic Integration (DSI), which replicated these correlations across 3,500 short stories and nine prompts, confirming that higher-level semantic dispersion reliably predicts expert creativity ratings (Johnson et al., 2023). Parallel studies testing large-language models as surrogate judges find moderate—but steadily improving—agreement with CAT panels, hinting that machine raters can augment, though not yet replace, human expertise (Acar, 2023). Taken together, these findings support a hybrid strategy in which CAT anchors validity while semantic-distance analytics add speed, scalability, and fine-grained diagnostics—an approach our Sergio Blanco study adopts by pairing expert CAT ratings with cosine-distance and concept-overlap measures.

Nevertheless, critical voices warn against relying solely on AI-driven assessments. There are concerns that algorithmic evaluations may inadequately capture intangible creative qualities such as emotional impact, cultural relevance, and unique stylistic nuances, potentially leading to reductive assessments of complex creative outputs (Lim, Gottipati, & Cheong, 2023). Consequently, an integrated assessment approach, combining AI-supported analytics with peer feedback and expert instructor judgment, is strongly advocated to preserve the nuanced appraisal of artistic merit (Myint, Lo, & Zhang, 2024), ensuring sustainable and replicable pedagogical practices (Myint, Lo, & Zhang, 2024; McWilliam & Dawson, 2008).

Ethical dimensions further complicate AI's application in arts education, particularly regarding biases embedded within AI systems. These biases could unintentionally favor specific cultural norms or historical aesthetics, necessitating careful algorithmic transparency and inclusive dataset curation to maintain fairness and diversity in assessment practices (Lim, Gottipati, & Cheong, 2023). To address these issues, collaboration among AI developers, educators, and cultural experts is recommended, ensuring AI technologies evolve respectfully toward the pluralistic nature of artistic expression (Mayo, 2024).

2.2 Experiential Learning

The course was structured to leverage experiential learning principles. Eisner (2002) illustrates how uniting Experiential Learning with Project-Based Learning encourages students to immerse themselves in real-world tasks, prioritizing active learning and collaboration—an especially effective strategy in art and design education. In Kolb's (1984) framework, learning is viewed as a cycle encompassing concrete experience,

reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Echoing these ideas, Greene (1995) underlines how hands-on engagement and reflective practice bolster meaningful inquiry in the arts, spurring creativity, critical thinking, and cultural appreciation.

Collaborative activities were incorporated into the course to encourage students' mutual exploration, critique, and deeper understanding of artistic and cultural concepts). Collaboration can heighten engagement, stimulate motivation, and strengthen both interpersonal and cognitive competencies. By embedding collaborative tasks into an experiential framework, learners engage in dialogue, diverse perspective sharing, possibly enriching their overall learning experience.

3. °°KOBİ

The study used the AI-driven platform °°Kobi, a knowledge ecosystem developed to encourage in-depth exploration and innovative interactions with artistic content (Giretti et al., 2022). The platform draws upon an extensive, curated collection of artistic research publications sourced from the Research Catalogue, forming its core knowledge base. °°Kobi employs large language models to transform this content into structured, interconnected semantic relationships, enabling nuanced and contextually relevant query responses (Giretti et al., 2023). The system typically leverages the LLM's capabilities to facilitate interactive exchanges, enabling end-users—primarily students—to type messages into a chat interface and receive responses in the form of text or media (see Figure 4). In this study, however, the LLM's analytical capacity to process documents, extract relevant information, and generate meaningful associations and contextual insights was specifically employed to assist instructors in evaluating student-produced outputs. °°Kobi called the LLM model Gemma-2 7B-it for concepts extraction. For semantic distance calculation, the system embedded texts at paragraph level using Google text-embedding-004 (768-dimensions). See Giretti et al. (2023, 2024) for architecture details.

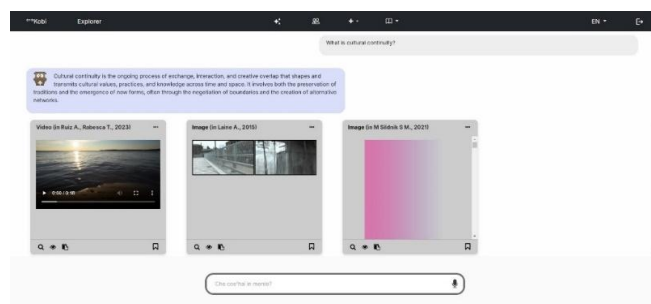


Figure 4. The °°Kobi chat interface. Users can type their queries in the bottom-center chat box. Responses are displayed on the left side of the chat. They can include related media such as images

4. THE STUDY

The course took place at the Rome Fine Arts Academy as part of the Regia academic curriculum, spanning a duration of 15 weeks and for a total of 75 hours. The educational approach of the course emphasized artistic research methodologies and included a dedicated seminar conducted by a researcher, during which students were introduced to the Research Catalogue as a significant tool for artistic inquiry and dissemination.

The pedagogical framework of the course was structured into three main phases: collective acquaintance, group performance, and dissemination. Prior to the first phase, all students received a consent form explaining the research objectives connected to the course and the use of their data for analysis. They were informed that participation in the course was independent of their decision to grant or deny consent: those who chose not to have their data used for the study could still complete all course activities. A short questionnaire gathered basic demographic information from consenting participants. Consequently, all students engaged in a collaborative brainstorming session facilitated via an online tool, MIRO, although other

collaborative platforms could also have been utilized. At this stage, Sergio Blanco's *autofictional* theatrical monologue, *Memento Mori*, served as the central stimulus. Blanco's text explores themes of mortality, personal narrative, and memory, presented through an autofictional format that merges factual autobiography with fictional elements. Students anonymously uploaded their individual responses and interpretative materials to a shared digital workspace, enabling collective feedback and in-depth group discussions aimed at discovering and critically engaging with Blanco's nuanced exploration of life and death.

In the second phase, students dedicated four weeks to creating their artistic performances. Each student was required to adopt Sergio Blanco's creative framework and scenic apparatus which involved using narrative-based theatrical techniques to intertwine personal material with fictional elements, reflecting the autofictional nature of Blanco's original work. On December 18, all students presented their performances resulting in 25 autofictional micro-performances. No photography, video recording, or external audience attendance was permitted, ensuring a focused environment.

The final phase focused on individual dissemination and reflection. Following their performances, students individually created multimedia expositions that documented and expanded upon their creative processes and outcomes. Central to this stage was students' reflection on the connections between the original performance materials and their finalized expositions. At the end of the course, students completed an anonymous questionnaire evaluating their experiences, engagement, and the effectiveness of educational methods and tools.

The overall activity involved twenty-five participants, mostly from Italy (thirteen individuals), with the rest of the participants originally from China (9 individuals), and three from various countries. The average age among the participants was 25 years old, with an even gender distribution of approximately half female and half male. Students participating in the study earned educational credits akin to those of a standard academic course. The data and insights generated in this study did not contribute to the students' actual evaluation, and it is currently the subject of analysis for the research presented in this paper.

5. METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

The real-life educational context provided by this course is crucial in validating the methodology and analysis. By engaging students in authentic creative tasks inspired by Blanco's *Memento Mori*, the research aims to measure tangible creative and educational outcomes, ensuring practical relevance and applicability of AI-driven analytical methods.

5.1 Comparison between Blanco's text and students' final assignments

The analysis began by comparing students' texts with Sergio Blanco's *Memento Mori*. This first analysis focuses on two main metrics: **(a)** the number of *shared concepts* and **(b)** the cosine distance between Blanco's text and the students' final assignments. Shared concepts are meant to quantify matching concepts between *Memento Mori* and individual student expositions. Concepts were extracted by prompting Google's large language model *Gemma 2*² within the "Kobi platform and validated by comparing them with a thematic analysis conducted by the course instructor. This data is collected to assess how frequently students employed similar core ideas, themes, or terminology. Cosine distance measures how closely each student's text aligns semantically with Sergio Blanco's original work, *Memento Mori*. A lower cosine distance indicates high thematic similarity or fidelity, while a higher distance suggests originality or thematic divergence. This measure is computed by converting texts into numeric embeddings that capture their core semantic features. To calculate embeddings, we used Google's *text-embedding-004*. It produces 768-dimensional multilingual embeddings and are suitable for working at sentence or paragraph level. We then computed the cosine distance between the embeddings of *Memento Mori* and each student exposition. Cosine distance values range from 0 (identical meaning), through 1 (unrelated), to 2 (opposite meaning), offering a robust semantic measure independent of text length.

² Google. (2025, May 23). Models. <https://deepmind.google/models/gemma/shieldgemma-2/>

In addition, these AI-derived metrics are compared with teacher-generated thematic evaluations, conducted through thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017), assessing coherence between the original text and student expositions. This integration provides a balanced assessment by combining insights from LLMs with expert human evaluation (Nowell et al., 2017), enhancing methodological rigor and interpretative trustworthiness.

In practical terms, these combined metrics provide educators and researchers with the means to evaluate: *thematic coherence* (to what extent student expositions build upon themes in *Memento Mori*), and *originality and deviation* (the degree to which students adapt or transform the original themes).

5.2 Comparison between Final Assignments

Consequently, semantic distance metrics were applied to students' assignments to highlight thematic relationships, originality, and creative diversity within the group. To increase the robustness of these metrics, the CAT analysis was employed. Four expert evaluators independently rated each exposition on criteria including creativity, originality, narrative ability, and exposition likeableness. Specifically, the dimensions of narrative ability and exposition likeableness were included to enable evaluators to provide nuanced assessments, reflecting either positive appreciation or negative critique on formal aspects of the work. The methodology was selected due to its efficacy in capturing subjective nuances of creative outputs through consensus among multiple expert assessments.

Integration of CAT results with cosine distance measurements aims to provide a robust, multidimensional view of student work. Whereas cosine distance quantifies the semantic originality and thematic proximity between expositions and the source text or among peers, CAT evaluations contextualize these findings within human interpretive frameworks. For instance, a high cosine distance might indicate semantic difference, while corresponding high CAT ratings could affirm that this difference represents independence or strong originality. Conversely, a low cosine distance suggesting strong thematic alignment could be positively or negatively contextualized by CAT scores—indicating either insightful fidelity or limited innovative departure. By aligning CAT's qualitative insights with cosine distance's quantitative precision, the research seeks to leverage both objective data-driven metrics and subjective expert judgment, ensuring a balanced and comprehensive evaluation framework. The ongoing synergy between these methodologies aims to clarify the complex interplay between originality, thematic coherence, and creative effectiveness, ultimately enriching the educational insights that will emerge from this study.

6. INITIAL INSIGHTS AND LIMITATIONS

Initial insights indicate a positive reception of the course structure and the use of digital tools (°°Kobi, Research Catalogue). Approximately 88% of students expressed overall satisfaction, and 79% agreed that the digital materials provided enhanced their involvement in the course activities. The CAT evaluation of the student expositions (creativity, originality, narrative quality, and likeableness) achieved statistically valid interjudge reliability, demonstrating that the four evaluators reached a consensus regarding the relative merits of different expositions. These observations pose the basis for the ongoing steps being taken into the analysis of the data.

In this research thematic coherence and creativity are treated as complementary—not competing—constructs. The primary instructional goal is to ensure that each exposition maintains a recognisable dramaturgical link to Sergio Blanco's *Memento Mori*; such alignment is consistent with constructive-alignment principles that stress coherence between learning objectives, tasks, and assessment in higher education (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Once that anchor is established, the framework probes *how inventively* students extend, reinterpret, or subvert those themes, using CAT ratings and pair-wise semantic-distance metrics to gauge originality within the cohort. Accordingly, the paper's focus is dual: (1) thematic coherence (external alignment with Blanco's stimulus) is necessary for meeting the course brief and verifying learning objectives in Theatre-Directing contexts, (2) creative divergence (internal differentiation among student works) is then assessed to illuminate individual innovation and inform formative feedback. The study therefore does not claim that coherence "matters more" than creativity; rather, it posits a sequential

hierarchy in the evaluation workflow—*first* confirm fidelity to the assigned reference, *then* examine the imaginative departures that constitute artistic value.

Concerning the constraints on the proposed methodology, one limitation lies in the composition and size of the participant pool: the study involved only twenty-five students at a single institution, restricting generalisability. Broader studies with larger and more diverse cohorts—ideally spanning multiple universities and cultural contexts—are needed to verify whether the observed patterns persist elsewhere. Moreover, although the expositions contain images, audio, and video, the current AI pipeline ignores those modalities. Future work should extend the framework to multimodal embeddings so that visual, sonic, and performative features—often central to artistic meaning—are also evaluated. Finally, because creative work is inherently subjective, AI-assisted evaluation must actively accommodate and encourage diverse yet meaningful interpretations that align with the social norms and cultural contexts of the creators.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This paper presented an ongoing exploration of AI-assisted methods for evaluating creative work in higher arts education, using Sergio Blanco's *Memento Mori* as both a thematic catalyst and an analytical benchmark. Preliminary insights suggest that the data collected may hold significant value for further analysis. Specifically, they could help establish whether AI-driven semantic analysis methods can offer tangible metrics—such as lemma overlap and thematic distance—to enrich human assessments of originality and creativity. Concurrently, our qualitative evaluations (expert panel reviews and student questionnaires) underscore the importance of integrating human-interpretive and contextual dimensions when assessing inherently subjective artistic endeavors. As this research is still in progress, additional work remains to determine the extent to which AI can best complement traditional pedagogical practices in the arts. Short-term steps involve achieving more comprehensive statistical results, eventually refining the semantic analysis models, and possibly integrating more diverse media formats (e.g., images and audio) to expand the comparative framework. The research team also plans to investigate how AI-generated insights may influence students' reflective processes, potentially shaping their creative development. In sum, by situating AI metrics within robust pedagogical and experiential learning frameworks, we aim to harness the strengths of computational analyses without diminishing the inherently human dimensions of creative practice or evaluation. These preliminary findings point to a promising direction for AI as a supportive instrument for educators in evaluating creative work. By combining CAT ratings with semantic-distance measures, AI-based systems like Kobi could act as formative evaluation assistants that tracks and displays each student's creative progress. Instructors could build step-by-step rubrics around the system metrics—for example, rewarding close thematic alignment at early stages and encouraging larger conceptual leaps in later drafts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is part of the project Enacting Artistic Research (EAR), funded by the European Union - NextGenerationEU, Mission 4 Component 1, CUP B83C24001590005. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for them.

We thank SAR (Society for Artistic Research) for granting access to the Research Catalogue materials.

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