

# WHAT DO THEY KNOW?

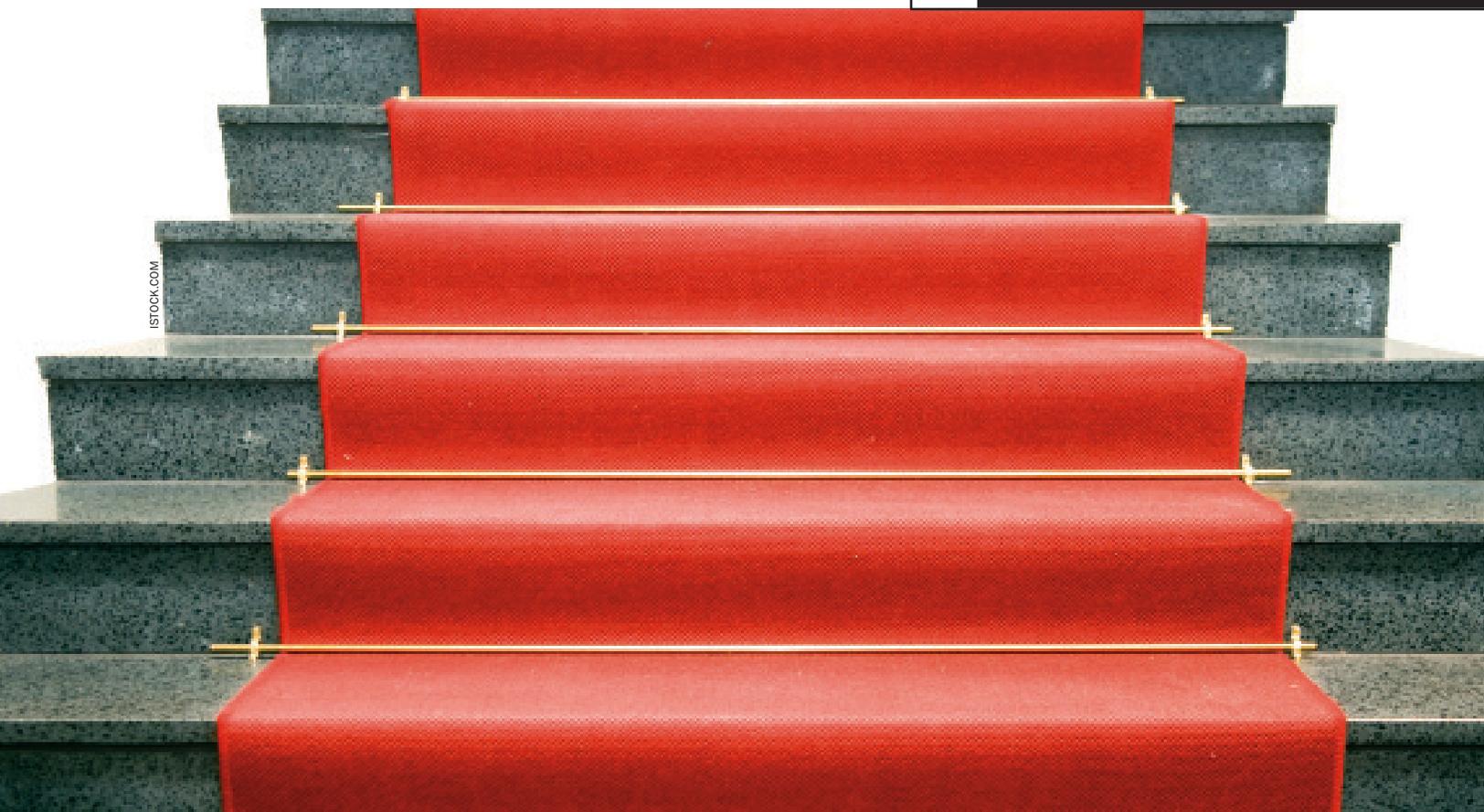
*The six steps of successful  
theatre class assessment*

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WE ALL KNOW that evaluating students' performance and measuring growth are ongoing activities in the educational process. However, in our experience many theatre teachers consider assessment a pesky afterthought. This attitude might be particularly common in theatre because, as a performance-based discipline, traditional assessment instruments are often assumed not to be applicable.

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Another problem is the assumption by students parents, and even administrators that assessment in theatre will be subjective and therefore biased. In truth, solid assessment *can* be successfully applied to theatre classes. Designing thoughtful assessments focused on key learning goals can not only provide accountability and tell you what students have learned, it can help you become a more effective teacher.

This article evolved from conversations we had about essential information teachers need for creating assessments in theatre, based on our experience in classrooms and our work with future theatre educators. An article by Shawnda Moss in the Fall 2009 issue of *Teaching Theatre* also highlighted the importance of assessment in the theatre classroom, and we wanted to continue the dialogue. We're going to go a step further and offer a framework for theatre teachers who want to incorporate authentic assessment into their theatre classes. To that end, we have created six sequential steps that provide priorities and guidance for developing effective theatre assessment, with examples to help explain and demonstrate our approach.

About our examples: they are not comprehensive or necessarily the last word in how you should conduct an exercise or plan a lesson. In some cases you're likely already doing some of the same sort of work (or some variation) in your theatre classrooms. Our point is to help you connect lessons or exercises to authentic assessment practices with your students.

### 1. Begin with the end in mind

We borrow our first step from Stephen Covey, who wrote the popular self-help book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Covey's second habit is to "Begin with the end in mind." His idea is as fundamental for good theatre assessment as it is for living a meaningful life. Sound assessment starts by defining clear goals based on one or more of your state's theatre standards; in most cases those standards have been derived from the *National*

*Standards for Arts Education* published in 1994.

For example, National Standard One emphasizes playmaking and scriptwriting. If you were doing a unit based on that standard and wanted to "begin with the end in mind," you might ask your students to create a scene with a beginning, middle, and end that shows distinct characters in conflict. This goal is observable, measurable, and attainable. Creating a specific goal like this will enable you to construct your lesson plans and assessments in alignment and help you plan future units that will deepen student learning and understanding of playmaking.

With clear goals and assessments, you also can capitalize on the teaching potential of a wide range of theatre activities. Although theatre games are appealing exercises, by themselves they are not a panacea for generating student interest and boosting achievement. Every classroom activity should *always* be viewed in the context of targeted learning outcomes.

We've found that new teachers often select classroom activities based on what engages their own interest or what they think students will enjoy. However, even a simple game can be linked to a learning goal and a theatre standard. A common warm-up like the mirroring game, in which two facing students attempt to match one another's movements, might seem to be a just an ice-breaker. A more effective strategy would be to plan this exercise as an introduction to a lesson on pantomime, use of space, and movement to create feeling or story that builds toward these key learning outcomes.

Beginning with the end in mind prevents curriculum from becoming a collection of random lessons, and it helps create the assessment foundation from which the skills and knowledge of students can be measured. Any theatre exercise has dozens of potential applications to standards, ranging from playwriting and acting to directing and technical theatre. Each one usually leads to subsequent, more complex activities. The mirroring exercise, for instance, could lead into

the Viola Spolin game "involvement in twos" (acting), sculpt a statue (for directing/creating a frozen tableau), or pantomime (acting, creating a story). No matter what exercises you choose for your students, to develop coherent curriculum within an instructional unit, you must decide what your goals are. You also need to bear in mind that, while you can't cover each standard in every class period, it is possible to address several standards in one carefully organized lesson.

As you plan your curriculum for an individual unit, you should also work on the assessment strategy you will use to confirm that students have achieved mastery. This will ensure that instruction and assessment are consistent and reinforce each other.

Here's an example: In a unit on directing, the end goal could be to understand the impact of blocking and movement on stage and how to use these principles to direct scenes. You can demonstrate this in a straightforward fashion by asking for four volunteers to come up on stage or to the front of the classroom. Position the four from stage left to stage right, spaced evenly across the stage, one lying on the ground, one sitting on the floor, one sitting in a chair, and one standing up. Then ask the student audience several questions: "To which person do you eyes automatically go and why?" "Who is in the strongest position on stage and why?" "Who seems to be the most important in this stage picture and why?" "Who is in the weakest position on stage and why?" "Who is the least important and why?" With students discussing and demonstrating their understanding of these body positions on stage, you are able to introduce the concepts of strong and weak stage positions, while simultaneously assessing their understanding of the concepts as they contribute to the discussion. Depending on the clarity of their answers, you can either review and re-teach, or move on.

These physical demonstrations can be wonderful teaching and learning tools that provoke discussion, connect the activities to evaluation, and put these directing concepts into classroom

practice in an engaging, performance-based way.

## 2. Create pre-assessments

At the beginning of a new year or a new unit, you always want to determine the theatre skills your students already possess. Doing a pre-assessment that gives you an accurate understanding of what your students know is crucial in designing instruction that challenges but does not overwhelm them.

Here's a pre-assessment exercise that would gauge your new students' general understanding of acting; you can probably use it with either middle or secondary students. Have each student partner with someone they don't know well. Ask them to find out their partner's name, age, and two unusual facts about that person. Then have them ask their partners to explain three things he or she knows about acting. Finally, have each student, in turn, stand and state the seven pieces of information about their partner from memory. This activity serves as an ice-breaker, while showing you your students' ability to memorize information, their vocal skills (articulation, vocal variety, volume, breath support), and their performance comfort level.

With any pre-assessment, you also need to be mindful of the sequence of skills you are building in your students. For example, students need to understand characterization before they can skillfully perform a scene. Through periodic assessment, you can detect exactly where your students are in a sequence of skills. This helps you target your instruction to what they need next.

Theatre pre-assessments are also a good opportunity to measure students' ensemble skills. Your observations will give you an idea about how much effort you must invest in teaching cooperative skills such as showing respect for others, creative collaboration, and handling disagreements. For instance, asking students to create a group poetry piece with movement not only will evaluate their ability to create a story

with movement, but also their group collaboration skills.

Pre-assessments used before teaching, as well as other assessments applied during and after teaching, do not need to interrupt instruction. Instruction and assessment in theatre can overlap because, as a kinesthetic art, they are naturally connected (as in our blocking example). Pre-assessment, especially when informally included early in instruction, provides crucial information to guide later authentic assessments that address skills embedded in performances and other learning activities.

## 3. Create scoring guides to assess mastery

Scoring guides, or rubrics, are not just useful for paper/pencil tests. Using well-designed rubrics can enhance your instruction as well as provide a more objective structure to your assessment. Creating specific grading criteria that align with your learning goals can easily be applied to the performance tasks of theatre. These are useful tools for both you and your students. For example, to address the goal of understanding elements of design, a rubric might evaluate a student's ability to create a ground plan for a specific setting in a play. Evaluating progress toward your goals will help both you and your students remember what is important and keep everyone working toward mastery.

Make sure your performance criteria are clearly written in terms your students can understand. One way to decide upon a rubric is by first posing it in question format. Some possible questions/criteria for a ground plan might include: Is the setting appropriate for the time period and/or the circumstances? Does the ground plan allow for actors to move through the stage space easily, can they be seen, and is the set-up easy to use? Are the necessary elements (furniture, tree stump, etc.) included and/or are there extraneous elements that are not needed or not used? Do the choices for the ground plan's design effectively convey the proper mood and vision for the play or scene? These four questions

easily translate into a picture of the optimal performance or product that the rubric will be based on. Providing superior examples for students to know how each criterion translates to actual work—in this case, a finished ground plan—is also quite helpful.

After providing concrete examples and discussing what constitutes a good ground plan or other performances or products, rubrics can be finalized. If students understand what characteristics are necessary for a good ground plan, you may opt to have them participate in creating levels of proficiency. Discussing the levels of proficiency in partnership with students will help them realize that your rubrics are valuable tools for documenting their progress and providing feedback for improvement. They will also perceive them as less subjective.

There are many resources for creating rubrics available on the Internet. The rubrics you find online can provide helpful templates to create subject-specific rubrics. It's possible you might find an existing rubric that is applicable to your needs, but in most cases you're probably going to have to recast it to align with your learning goals and your students' needs.

For instance, you might find a rubric related to acting quality, with performance elements such as "expression," "memorization," and "effort" that are weighted equally. If your learning goals stress expression and bringing the character to life through voice quality and gesture, you would weight this criterion more heavily than the others and add more detail to the way you characterize each level of proficiency. In addition, you might not like the vocabulary used in the rubric (for example, many teachers prefer not to grade "effort" because such judgments are quite subjective), and change those as well.

Always review the rubric with students prior to beginning an assignment, so you know whether or not they understand what's expected of them. For example, when we discussed a character collage rubric with high school freshmen, we found more clarification

was needed in class to define the terms “symbol” and “metaphor” as they relate to characterization.

#### 4. Assess during instruction

Some teachers believe that assessment should only be used at the end of a unit—so-called summative assessment—but we believe that “checking as you go” provides valuable information as well. Formative assessment can be characterized as evaluation *for* learning that occurs during instruction, while summative assessment is evaluation *of* learning that takes place after you have completed your instruction. Formative assessment can be powerful. Recent research has demonstrated that ongoing evaluation can be as effective as intense instructional interventions such as one-on-one tutoring in fostering student growth.

Formative assessment is, of course, a routine part of the rehearsal process of any play—actors rehearse a scene and the director gives notes suggesting different line delivery, movement, and a host of other playable elements. You can apply the same sort of tool in your theatre classroom, though the stakes and process might be a bit different.

For formative assessment to work well in a classroom, several things must occur. First, you must share the targeted learning goal with students. In theatre, goals are often related to performance. Even young children can understand and master goals such as accurately reciting lines, entering and exiting the stage at the appropriate time, and standing in the correct position. As students learn what is being evaluated in a rehearsal, they also become more aware of what makes a good performance.

We know theatre teachers who find it useful to ask students, “Why should we learn this?” or “How will this skill help us learn something else?” This sort of inquiry can make a difference. A student who doesn’t know the purpose of a particular assignment is obviously less likely to master the learning goal the teacher has in mind.

Once students understand the goal, you can provide them feedback with concrete suggestions on how to close

the gap between where they are now and that goal they are trying to reach. For instance, a student having difficulty being seen and heard on stage because she is turned away from the audience (upstaging herself), may need help not only in realizing why this is ineffective but also how to remedy the problem. Showing the student a more effective position and explaining why the new position allows her to be seen and heard will make a difference. Sometimes other strategies, such as having the student stand in the audience while another student demonstrates what the first was doing, can be helpful.

Finally, the last important step in formative assessment is to give your students an opportunity to *apply* the feedback to reach a goal. For example, if your students are having a hard time with a blocking sequence, they’ll need a reasonable amount of time to rehearse the same sequence repeatedly, so that only the correct choice becomes automatic in their performance. The process of giving feedback, providing strategies, and allowing for practice should continue until *all* students have mastered the goal. Remember, this is not about talent—all students can and should work towards the same level of skill and knowledge mastery, whether in theatre or any other subject area.

#### 5. Teach students to do peer- and self-assessment

As instructors, we want students to function independently when they leave school and no longer have our guidance. In our experience, fostering the ability to assess oneself is one of the ultimate goals of instruction. It teaches students to look beyond their own point of view and see themselves in relation to a standard. It also teaches empowerment. When students eventually understand and internalize the standard, they will not be as dependent on teachers to suggest corrections or make judgments about their work. They will be able to use standards and goals themselves to continue improving. Teaching students to evaluate each

other—peer assessment—can have the same impact.

To help students understand and embrace peer and self-assessment, researchers Linda and Jeff Fernsten recommend three guidelines (*Reflective Practice 6, 2005*):

1. You must create a supportive environment in which you encourage candid reflection. Only honest dialogue about strategies can lead to new learning insights. Also, if you can teach students how to provide constructive suggestions, they feel supported and not attacked. This can be achieved largely through modeling and practice during class.

2. You need to design effective prompts for student reflection. These should be based on your learning goals. If students are reflecting on their own or a peer’s performance, you can ask them specific questions about how the performance was effective and why, using theatre vocabulary rather than asking a vague question about the performance in general. Similarly, if a performance requires revision after formative feedback, ask students to specify the changes made and how they helped the student move toward mastery of the goals.

3. For effective student reflection, you and your students need to develop a common language. Modeling the language to use when analyzing work is crucial in the early stages of student learning. In addition, using theatre vocabulary reinforces their understanding of the terms (diction, vocal variety, connecting gestures to emotions, etc.). You can also offer lessons about evaluation and reflection skills. This could include class discussions involving analysis of performances based on specific criteria.

When students examine samples of performances, scripts, design renderings, or written work and then generate their own questions, the process becomes more concrete for them. For example, a teacher can encourage elementary theatre students to think about their performance by asking them questions during class such as, “Could you hear and see everyone during the scene we just rehearsed?”

or “Could you tell what kind of character each person was or the mood they were in by how they changed their body and their voice?” Similarly, high school theatre directors can work on vocal variety by asking students questions such as “Is your character’s voice specific and consistent with his/her personality, mood and circumstances of the play?”

Theatre students can also see concrete evidence of their progress over time if their individual and/or group performances are recorded at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Using a rubric as they review these performances will help them self-assess and consider ways to improve their work.

With peer assessment, it’s important that you take the time to teach your students how to make their feedback to their classmates constructive. One of our teachers recently described his efforts this way: He began by asking his students to describe “something they liked” about a particular actor’s performance and “one thing the actor could do to make the performance even better.” At first, his students had difficulty articulating positive aspects of performance, making general statements such as “They were really into it.” After the teacher added specific prompts, such as “Describe what you saw” or “What did she do with her body and voice to show you that?,” they began to use theatre vocabulary based on his learning goals. Soon all of the students were working harder to achieve success because this peer assessment activity had made them acutely aware of different strategies to improve. Assessment generated by students creates a positive self-awareness, which in turn makes them more efficient learners.

## 6. Assess yourself

In his book, *The Drama Classroom: Action, Reflection, Transformation*, Philip Taylor makes a strong case for reflective theatre practice. A willingness to revise teaching pedagogy, open-mindedness, and flexibility are all characteristics that he suggests can improve teacher practice.

Teacher self-assessment is something every educator needs to do. If your self-assessment tells you that all or some of your students seem to be floundering, you need, of course, to consider adjusting your teaching. It might mean simply slowing down or speeding up your instruction, or a more thorough reconsideration of your methodology. Trying to figure out *why* you’re succeeding or failing is the real challenge.

One way for you to review your effectiveness is to videotape your own instruction. If you’re concerned about your directorial skills, videotape your rehearsals, applying the same sort of assessment tool we suggested for student self-assessment. A videotape allows aesthetic distance so you can examine what was successful and what modifications need to be made in your future direction or classes. If students’ dialogue seems unintelligible in a videotaped scene exercise, for example, you know you probably need to address diction and projection in later instruction.

Simple observation is also a good way for you to assess your effectiveness. As supervisors, we sometimes observe beginning theatre teachers focusing on teaching content and not teaching *children*. When this happens, we tell them to notice visual cues that help determine aspects such as pacing: “Are students still focused enough to delve deeper, or should this be revisited on another day?” A visual assessment of facial expressions can often indicate if everyone is “getting it.” If something seems amiss, we advise our interns to analyze the situation, identify the problem, and try to find a successful way to address it. For example, in the directing exercise described earlier, if students are hesitant to move actors around the stage to create specific stage pictures, you might try asking a more guided question: “How would you take the person who is standing and change his body position to put him in a weaker position on stage?”

State, regional, or national theatre festivals, such as the ones sponsored by the Educational Theatre Association,

can be another good self-assessment yardstick. Feedback about your school company production by a skilled adjudicator can provide invaluable insight into your effectiveness. A thoughtful adjudicator can offer suggestions for both you as a director/educator and your students as performers. Working on these aspects *after* the judged performance also helps the students internalize the desire to keep on improving for the sake of creating artistic and effective theatrical performances, rather than abandoning the play after the festival performance rush has passed.

The bottom line on all assessment is that it should improve student learning. The six steps we’ve suggested here are not necessarily going to solve every evaluation challenge you face in your theatre classes. However, we do think they can be a foundation from which you can create and embed ongoing assessment in your classroom and on your stages. If you begin with the end in mind, find out what students know, use good scoring guides, check as you go, teach students to check their own work, and assess yourself, you have a framework for effective and efficient assessment that will serve you and your students.

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