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CENTERPIECE

FOCUS ON: EDUCATION

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EXPERIENCES WITH ASSESSMENT

BY DANIEL RENNER

Assessment has become the buzzword in regional theatres as we strive to develop strong education programs and obtain new sources of funding. Assessment can be the bane of an education director, or it can be an opportunity for growth and a focused, congruent program.

Theatres have always worked with ongoing assessment of the rehearsal process and classroom training of actors. We have not, however, recorded the data, and have traditionally preferred a final product to process. Assessment that “coaches” is the basis for much of our teaching. We now need to record and collect data and act on our research-based data for program improvement and development.

While there has been a determined effort in our field to adopt educational assessment models employed in the public schools, there is a growing movement to forge our own instrument to better reflect our unique goals and diverse programming. The first question is (hopefully) what are you assessing and why? The general consensus in education is that assessment needs to be focused on the student. Curriculum, instruction and method are ultimately reflected in the measured progress of the student. Some approaches are formative in nature and assess the learning process in order to foster new questions and further development. These approaches are rooted in changing how one behaves or thinks. Others are summative in order to evaluate the learning that has occurred; rather like a report card, or snapshot. Specific skills and facts are demonstrated. Many approaches are hybrids — due to the variety of activities, ranging from a single workshop to yearlong residencies. Or as the current wisdom advocates: “when you are assessing, look for a reasonable amount of growth in a reasonable amount of time.” None of these approaches is better than the other. Each demands that the practitioners are clear about the desired results and the uses of the assessment.

One of the greatest challenges lies in the nature of our work, our background in an interpretive art form. Everyone involved in the assessment brings his or her own lens of perception to the process. We need to find commonalities that enable the process to work without skewing the results. We need to develop a common language and an understanding that these experiences will benefit us all. When

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directing a play, the responsibility for assessment lies with the director. For the education director, there are more players involved in the process. It demands a concerted effort by all of the players involved to develop an assessment system collaboratively that meets the needs of all stakeholders. It also demands that most precious commodity in the theatre...time.

Andrea Allen of the Seattle Repertory Theatre, Dawn McAndrews of the Shakespeare Theatre and Dan Welch of the Walden Theatre have graciously donated that resource to this *Centerpiece* by sharing their current forays into the world of assessment. Space precludes us from printing the reams of data, analysis and results they have gathered in the last year. Contained in these pages is an overview rather than a comprehensive study. Each of these education directors invites you to contact him or her for more detailed information.

EVALUATION: WHY ARE WE DOING THIS? SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM A NORTHWEST LEARNING COMMUNITY

BY ANDREA ALLEN

Why Qualitative Research?

About a year ago, my staff and I began talking in earnest about the whole “evaluation thing.” We planned to create a comprehensive system of evaluation that would revolutionize our work in the schools and make us the darling of funders. Yeah, right. A group of mainly math phobes, we immediately felt inadequate as we assumed we must gather quantitative data, run some kind of statistical-analysis-hocus-pocus and end up with Legitimate Scientific Findings. Such a system is antithetical to who we are as teaching artists, and we continued to act like children about to be tested for the millionth time on material that seemed irrelevant to our experiences. And then one of my staff members asked, “Isn’t there a way to just discuss what we do and get better at doing it?” Fortunately, we’ve been working with an enlightened educational consultant for the past two years who has helped us to see the light of *qualitative* research, specifically formal observations and interviews. Far from being an “illegitimate” form of research, qualitative studies (e.g., case studies) are well suited to evaluating complex scenarios in which a direct cause-effect relationship cannot be presumed. That pretty much describes the classroom, doesn’t it?

Granting Time for Reflection

Beginning in September of last year, we assembled a group consisting of four Seattle Rep education staff members, an intern, a freelance teaching artist (we paid for her time) and our education consultant, Mary Lloyd, Ed.D. For the first four months, we were trained in formal observation — how to stay present in the room, how to take “thin” and “thick” notes and — especially hard for people like me — how to keep from over-analyzing or jumping to conclusions while observing. Importantly, we did not try to “overcome” our biases. Instead, we tried to become aware of them and acknowledge when they are being triggered. In between monthly sessions with our consultant, each of us would observe educational events, beginning with things that we were complete outsiders to and then moving on to our own programs. In January, we framed a question: “What can a group of non-traditional arts educators learn about themselves and their programs?” At this point, each

member of the group was asked to perform two observations per month. These were most difficult for the freelance teaching artist and our resident teaching artist, who have crazy schedules. We also tried to coordinate what each one of us was observing in order to get multiple perspectives; e.g., we would have two people observe the same event or watch different days of the same residency.

In order to collect comparable data and not force ourselves to read one another’s copious handwritten notes, we created a cover sheet for the observations based upon a format that we had been using in our matrix of education programs. The *dramatic pentad*¹ as it is called, sounds much more difficult than it is, and its terminology is actually quite appropriate for use in the theatrical realm. (Editor’s note: For more information on Seattle Repertory Theatre’s use of the *dramatic pentad* and its influence on the Rep’s marketing plan, see the January 2002 issue of the *Centerpiece*.) The pentad is comprised of five elements:

1. **Act:** What is done?
2. **Scene:** When or where is the **act** done?
3. **Agent:** Who performed the **act**?
4. **Agency:** How did s/he perform the **act**?
5. **Purpose:** Why was the **act** performed?

When we began using the form initially it had three final questions at the bottom — “What went well?” and “What did not go so well?” and “What might be done differently?” At our meeting in February, my staff staged a mini-coup, saying that they didn’t feel like the final questions were especially helpful for the evaluation process. Since each class and situation is so

¹ Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1945. Referenced in Lloyd, M.M. (2000). *Kenneth Burke’s dramatic pentad and models of educational outreach for youth in arts and cultural institutions*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Seattle University, Seattle, WA.

unique, it felt reductive to make recommendations about what “might” have been better. Instead, they wanted to discuss what questions for further inquiry were raised by the observation. As a staff, we’ve also been working on posing strategic questions to provoke new thinking, so this change to the form made sense.

At our session in March, I asked the group what value they saw in collecting observations and reflecting on them. Our freelance teaching artist responded: “Thank goodness this time exists, because I never would have done it on my own. I don’t have time to do it without being given — granted — the time to reflect... These are things you are ‘supposed’ to do anyway [in order] to be a good teaching artist. But, the Rep is acknowledging that it is as important as contact time.”

An Example

This season we created a new two-week format for middle school students around our production of Ping Chong’s *Obon: Tales of Rain and Moonlight*. Since this was a new short-term program, we decided to focus our final observation sessions around it. As a group, we logged in more than 16 hours of observation in the classroom. Three members of the group were also teaching, so they did self-reflections based on the observation form each week. Since I was not teaching in any of these residencies, I attended all five schools at least once. Prior to conducting observations, we identified the following guidelines and questions:

- ❖ What is the purpose of a two-week residency versus a three-day residency?
- ❖ How does one week flow into the next?
- ❖ Does our curriculum planning (especially as a group) prepare us for the residency? What assumptions do we have when planning that may impact the outcome of the residency?
- ❖ Does the culminating day flow from the work up to that point?
- ❖ What difference do the performing artist visits make in the engagement of the students?
- ❖ Have the days before the visit by the puppeteers prepped the students well — are they asking good questions?

After completing the residencies, our group met to discuss what we had observed. We identified a number of issues around the purpose of the two-week format, including:

- ❖ What happens when students don’t see a show? (In one class, nearly half of the students were unable to go to the production.) How could you create a discussion to deal with this?

- ❖ The sense of a product at the end seems important. However, we need to stretch our concept of what is a product. It doesn’t have to be a scene or short skit; it just needs to have a sense of a culminating event.
- ❖ We need to develop stronger techniques for discussing artistic work with students. This includes opinion versus assessment, and how do we get more students to participate (with individual and group responses?)
- ❖ We need to identify and articulate clearly to the students the artistic purpose for activities.

Other issues were around the relationship with the teachers and our need for them to be engaged and active partners in the classroom, especially with the small group work. Most of the teachers had worked with us on a variety of projects, and they seemed to see their lack of involvement in the class as a compliment to the teaching artist (e.g., “You’re so good; you can take care of it.”). Finally, because of the schedule for the production, the residencies took place in mid-May — much later in the year than we would normally be in the classroom. After a couple weeks of state testing and the inevitable countdown to the last day of the school, the students were a bit restless, and the teachers seemed exhausted.

Observing Ourselves

At our last meeting, I again asked the group why reflecting on our practices was important: “It’s less about standardizing the curriculum and people’s styles, and it’s more about standardizing the way that we nurture our teaching artists to get at the curriculum.” By focusing on what we are *learning* about evaluation and assessment — instead of what we think we should be doing about evaluation and assessment — we have made the process useful and exciting for ourselves and our programs. The benefits have been immediate. We use specific examples to describe our work, and our ability to give and receive feedback has grown immensely. We acknowledge the limitations of our own individual perspectives, and look to one another (and our students and teacher-partners) to fill in some of the gaps. Over the next year, we will add self-reflections, student comments and work samples and teacher responses to our developing qualitative research base. With observations over time by a variety of observers (we will be using this technique with three other theatres in consortium programs), a picture will begin to emerge that will include quantifiable data, but we will preserve what we feel is at the very heart of all of our work: the ability of an individual to watch, articulate and respond. And that is why we’re doing it.

— Andrea Allen is Director of Education at Seattle Repertory Theatre. She is also (coincidentally?) in the process of completing her Masters in education by documenting the observation work that she has conducted with her staff. For more information about this process (including a detailed account at the end of summer), please contact her at andrea@seattlerep.org.

ASSESSMENT BY DESIGN

BY DAWN MCANDREWS

The road to “assessment” has definitely been paved with good intentions and a bit of frustration. Like many others in the field, I was initially resentful of assessment’s questioning nature — what do you mean “How does this program affect the participants?” Isn’t it obvious how important it is to bring art to students of all ages throughout our community? Can’t we just *see* how the arts transform lives? I didn’t want to assess anything just to comply with granting requirements; I needed measures that would address the outcomes and answer the questions that we set for ourselves. What I wanted was a way to assess outcomes that wasn’t tied to measuring attendance or enhancing academic achievement. And then in a journal put out by the National Arts Stabilization in the fall of 2000, I found a very simple assessment developed by Clayworks in Baltimore, Maryland. Their funders asked them to measure how their programs had affected the quality of life of the participants, and so they designed an assessment to measure joy. They developed a quantifiable system to test the outcomes on their own terms. If they could do it, why couldn’t we?

So, we’ve spent the past year taking a good, hard look at our programs not just for sound design, and not just for the anticipated or sometimes accidental effects we have had on the participants, but to uncover a way to design, document and measure programs that meet our own intended outcomes. We have begun incorporating phrases like “enduring understanding,” “essential questions,” “performance benchmarks,” “outcomes” (implicit and explicit) and “assessment” into daily conversations about all our programs.

Here’s the old way we would do it: We would develop an outline of the structure of the program and the goals. We would deliver a series of interactive, standards-based workshops that are connected to the curriculum and teach students about the art of making theatre. We would distribute a form to teachers and students asking them to evaluate the program. Our funders would want to know how the students benefit from the program, so we invite them to come see the final presentation and put together a packet of letters from the students and pull the best responses to the evaluation questions. Complete, right? Except that we didn’t address two very important questions — what did we intend to affect and how did we know when we’d done it? We may have actually been assessing the effects of these programs all along but because we didn’t have a specific question articulated and an intended outcome, we couldn’t adequately describe the result either anecdotally or quantifiably.

Now we start with an essential question, set three or four very specific outcomes, design the steps it will take to implement the program, and then develop the measurement tools that we will use to assess — first, we measure the participants’ understanding at the beginning, and then again, we measure the effects of the program at the end.

The better part of the past year was spent focusing on just the Southeast (SE) Project (our after-school youth theatre program) and developing the instruments to assess the effects on the participants. Should we assess daily, weekly, monthly or quarterly? How many behaviors, skills and attitudes should we say we could affect? Is it realistic to quantify always, sometimes, rarely or never? What’s the difference between measures that go from 1 to 5 or from 10 to 50? Are we measuring students against their peers in the program or just themselves? How do we create an accurate baseline? How do we cope with outside mitigating factors? Should we just have paid for an outside evaluator? For those who want to see the whole picture for our SE Project here it is:

ESSENTIAL QUESTION FOR THE SE PROJECT

How can creating and performing my own stories help me see myself as a valuable, contributing part of the community?

GOALS

The SE Project's programmatic goals enable members to:

- ❖ explore their creative voices,
- ❖ identify themselves as artists,
- ❖ become a resource to the community.

These three objectives constitute the programmatic goals for all three tiers of the SE Project and are gauged by the power of art making to transform the individual and the community, rather than by the attainment of preset levels of artistic achievement or test scores.

DESCRIPTION

The SE Project invites students in grades 4 through 12 from southeast D.C. to explore their world through individually and collaboratively created theatre experiences. Through playwriting, performance and mentorship, the SE Project offers students the resources to develop new skills and build self-esteem and confidence through the performance of their own works. The three programs of the SE Project — Young Company Residencies (students, ages 8–12), Core Company (students, ages 13–17), and In-school Residencies (students, ages 13–17) — aim to foster increased self-expression by collaboration, exploration and facilitated problem solving.

The SE Project fulfills a vital need in the community by providing a nurturing place during nonschool hours for young people in southeast Washington, D.C., to explore their creative voices. The measure of success for the SE Project is simply when the participants consider themselves artists, poised to give back something to their community.

OUTCOMES

- ❖ Participation in the theatrical process fosters creative expression in the context of participant stories and issues. (assessment — skill development)
- ❖ This ensemble of teen artists will see themselves as a resource for community, cultural and educational activities. (assessment — attitudes)
- ❖ Students exposed to arts and culture in the Washington, D.C. area and the region will be able to recognize and connect to the broader community and to value their place in it. (assessment — behaviors)

Without question, we have made mistakes along the way, and I'm sure that our first year's "data" would make a statistician's head spin. Yet, we have the beginnings of some pretty sound assessment tools designed to measure our programs on our terms. And somewhere during the past year we have begun to work better as a department and to understand the connections among every one of our programs. Next year, we'll refine the assessment tools for the SE Project and see how they can be used or modified for our other programs. We have, at least, cleared a path of where to go from here and have the tools to assess the journey.

— Dawn McAndrews is Director of Education at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C.

ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION

❖ Performance Assessment(s)

- ◆ *Page to Stage Workshop* — a conceptualization workshop in which students explore a particular play (this season *Hamlet* and *R&J*) and the theatrical process by distilling what happens in the play (plot) into one sentence, what happens in the play (themes) and how this is used by a director for a given audience. Then, they make decisions as a group about what time period and in which city they would place the production to make it more accessible for a modern audience. This assesses the knowledge acquired, and their ability to explain, interpret, apply to another process, have both perspective and empathy and reveal things about themselves and the needs of their community.
- ◆ *Mid-Program Showcase* — rehearsal and performance.
- ◆ *End-of-Year Community Night* — rehearsal and performance.

❖ Analytic Assessment(s)

- ◆ *Weekly Assessment* — measuring skills, behaviors and attitudes based on a beginning of year baseline. Conducted by project assistant (to have continuity through the season).
- ◆ *Quarterly Assessment* — measuring skills, behaviors and attitudes based on a beginning of year baseline that demonstrates long-term growth. Conducted by project assistant, SE Project director and Community Programs manager to have input from all those mentors who work with students from one quarter to the next.

EVALUATIONS USED TO ASSESS OUTCOMES

- ❖ Participant Evaluation
- ❖ Parent Evaluation
- ❖ School Residency Coordinator Evaluation
- ❖ Guest Artist Evaluation

EVALUATION OF PROGRAM STRUCTURE

- ❖ Eternal Evaluator (same person for the past two years)

ASSESSMENT — A JOURNEY TO OUTCOMES

BY DAN WELCH

The outreach education program at Walden Theatre is in its sixth year. We are engaged in assessment and evaluation for a number of reasons. We evaluate in-school programs internally through teacher evaluations and testimonials; we evaluate which students are learning for program effectiveness through pre- and post-tests; and we are developing an assessment model to measure program outcomes in order to apply for grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and private foundations.

Walden Theatre has an eight-week program entitled *Resolving Conflict through Drama*, which is a workshop that, through role-playing, teaches students to make healthy choices about violence. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, we need to know the teachers' observations of the students' behavior after a program is complete. To go about this, we send out a teacher evaluation form with specific questions to obtain their observations. What follows are some of the questions we ask teachers:

- ❖ *Do you feel students learned new ways to deal with conflict situations?*
- ❖ *Have you noticed any differences in the way students are treating each other?*

Depending on their answers, adjustments would be made before the program was implemented at a new school.

In the early 1990s, the state of Kentucky introduced the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), which made schools accountable for measured results from their students. Testing began to be administered through the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) for grades 4, 5, 7, 8 and 11. Outreach programs had to adjust and create a curriculum based on state standards (KERA Core Content) and to develop a way to measure the skills that students were learning through arts education programs.

One approach to justify Walden Theatre outreach programs in schools is to administer a pre- and post-test to show what students are learning. Students are given a short test at the beginning and end of the workshop. If the workshop is effective, the students' would have a better understanding of the program's mission, and this would be reflected in their test scores. Below is a pre/post-test for our *Introducing the Elements of Drama* workshop. The questions are taken from the KERA Core Contents:

1. What is the difference between a play and a movie?
2. What three things do you need to have in order to have a play?
3. What is the difference between a monologue and dialogue?
4. What is the difference between a prop and set piece?

The results of the tests can then be presented to the principal of the school to evaluate for future workshops at the school.

EXAMPLE ONE

Recently at an elementary school, 4th and 5th grade students taking the workshop averaged 29 out of 100 points on the pre-test. Following the program the students averaged 73 out of 100 points on the post-test. These scores were sent to the principal. Along with the curriculum coordinator, we are waiting to hear from them when school is back in session about future workshops.

The other approach to assess what students are learning is through their writing. In the program *Exploring History through Drama*, students work in small groups to write a play from a story in their social

studies text. The groups rehearse and then perform the plays in front of their peers. The students' work is graded on sentence structure, the required elements needed in a play and the drama knowledge shown during their performance. The following is a checklist of drama assessment during the rehearsal and performance portion of the program: *vocal expression, portraying a character, listening, movement, actor identifies relationship to other characters and uses props properly*. The performance assessment is to show what the students learned through the rehearsal portion of the program and is graded on a numerical scale with one indicating an introductory level, and five representing a proficient level. The goal is to see if the students improved from the first rehearsal to the performance.

EXAMPLE TWO

Rehearsal One

Student A:

Vocal expression (can the student be heard)	1	2	3	4	5
Portraying a character	1	2	3	4	5
Listening (does the student listen to the other characters and react to what is said)	1	2	3	4	5
Movement	1	2	3	4	5
Identifies relationship to other characters	1	2	3	4	5
Uses props properly (are they using the prop in the context of the play)	1	2	3	4	5

The students have three rehearsals before they perform their plays, and the students' progress is tracked from rehearsal through the performance of the piece. The performance assessment is somewhat subjective, but the emphasis is placed on process rather than product. The writing portion is assessed more critically.

This program is popular because it allows the students to be assessed in different disciplines (i.e., English, social studies, drama). A follow-up letter is also sent at the end of the year to see if students' interest in social studies improved after the workshop.

Walden Theatre is currently developing a model to measure program outcomes in order to apply for grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and private foundations. We are attempting to track the inputs, activities, outputs and student outcomes to see if the workshop meets the program objective. We will then be able to assess the program and provide evidence that a particular workshop will benefit students. Below is the program model we are currently developing:

- ❖ **OBJECTIVE:** State Education Standards (how the program meets the goal set by the State Education Standards).
- ❖ **INPUTS:** Resources dedicated to or consumed by the program (money, staff, supplies).
- ❖ **ACTIVITIES:** What the program does to fulfill program objective (classes, theatre games, role-playing).
- ❖ **OUTPUTS:** Products of the activities (# of classes, # of students, pre- and post-test, teacher observations).
- ❖ **OUTCOMES:** Benefit for students (new knowledge, modified behavior).

Two very good resources in developing a model for measuring program outcomes have been helpful to us in this process. The first is a workshop taught by the local United Way entitled *Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach, Parts 1–3* and the second is the Harvard University Project Zero project REAP. To access the Project Zero project REAP (Reviewing Education and the Arts Project) log on to <http://pzweb.harvard.edu/Research/REAP.htm>.

— Dan Welch is the Education Coordinator at the Walden Theatre in Louisville, KY.