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ASSESSMENT TRENDS IN THEATRE EDUCATION

BY DANIEL RENNER

Many of you have been involved in state panels and committees that are trying to tackle the thorny issue of how to assess arts education in the classroom. Research centers, universities and education directors across the country are experimenting with different models in a search for an answer. There is no easy solution, no silver bullet. How could there be when we are asking for an objective analysis of a subjective process involving complex data? We are also looking for new ways to assess our teaching artists and programs in order to improve our offerings. There is an elusive quest for effective documentation methods that funders now require, but are left to our discretion. Add into the mix our desire to instill in students their own capacity for self-assessment, and the task seems all but impossible. But there are new models that are beginning to bear fruit.

Scott C. Shuler has been a key player in analyzing and developing new protocols for assessing theatre education in our public schools. He is a national leader in the field and has provided us with an overview of where field assessment has been as well as suggestions for where assessment trends are currently headed. While his article is geared more directly to teachers in schools, it provides all of us with a better understanding of future directions and resources for crafting our own tools of assessment. I hope this article will generate discussion in your theatres. It would be very helpful if you would share those discussions and any successes or enlightening failures with TCG. We would like to gather them to present in the spring Education *Centerpiece*. Until then, all the best as you embark on another season of classes, student matinees, residencies and the myriad of other educational programs that make up our field.

Education *Centerpiece* Curator: Daniel Renner, Director of Education, Denver Center Theatre Company. Copyright © 2001 by Theatre Communications Group, Inc. All articles reproduced by permission of the authors. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form, or by any means, including photocopying, without written permission from the publisher or author. Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 355 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017, telephone (212) 697-5230, fax (212) 983-4847, website: www.tcg.org. Ben Cameron, Executive Director; Joan Channick, Deputy Director; Christopher Shuff, Director of Management Programs; Laurie Baskin, Director of Government and Education Programs; Rachel Ford, Management Programs Associate.

ASSESSMENT IN THEATRE: NAEP AND BEYOND

BY SCOTT C. SHULER

Assessment plays an essential role in developing effective theatre programs. Teachers must develop curriculum that establishes clear expectations for student learning (objectives or outcomes) based on what their students need to know and be able to do, possibly building on the new National Standards in theatre education.¹ Assessment enables teachers to determine how successful they are in helping students learn, and thereby to improve the way they teach. Assessment also enables schools to diagnose a teacher's professional development, to determine additional resources that may be needed, and to improve local curriculum (see Figure 1, page 3). Perhaps most important, developing students' capacity for self-assessment provides them with the tools that empower them to continue their independent growth after they leave the classroom.

Good teachers have always assessed their students, determining how well individual students are progressing and adapting instruction to meet their needs. Such assessment has, however, often been sporadic rather than systematic, focusing on only a few areas of learning rather than addressing the full scope of the curriculum. This has been particularly true in theatre and the other performing arts, where assessment has traditionally focused almost exclusively on performance.

BACKGROUND ON ASSESSMENT IN THEATRE

Historically, teachers of theatre and the other arts have been rather insecure about assessment. For years, arts educators were sometimes viewed as behind the rest of the educational world because they lacked "Scantron" tests — those all-too-familiar exams for which students use #2 pencils to fill in lots of little bubbles. Throughout the second half of the 20th century, traditional standardized tests increasingly seemed to be the key to establishing credibility in the field of education.

Most theatre educators said, "If that's assessment, then forget it," and turned their backs on assessment in general. They said, "If assessment is something kids do with a #2 pencil, then we're not going to do assessment, because that's not what theatre education is all about." They concluded that standardized tests were trivial and inappropriate for the arts.

Ironically, at the same time, many theatre educators were busy conducting the kind of performance assessment that educators have now come to recognize as essential. They were doing assessment every time they adjudicated a theatre festival or auditioned students for a particular part or for admission to a theatre school. True, they tended to rely on very general criteria, such as vocal projection and coherence of gestures; they focused almost exclusively on theatre performance; and they were often inconsistent in their use of evaluation criteria — but they were assessing. The theatre education profession's challenge today is to build on the assessments that teachers have always been doing well and try to address some of the important content areas that they have been neglecting.

NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS (NAEP) IN THE ARTS (1997)

During the Clinton administration, the arts were finally recognized as one of the core subjects in the federal Goals 2000 education initiative. That recognition led to the development of the National Standards in Arts Education, which included theatre standards. The administration also supported the development of the 1997 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the Arts.

The purpose of NAEP testing is to get a snapshot of what students across the country know in a particular subject. Prior to 1997, no national assessment in the arts had been conducted since the 1970s, and earlier arts assessments were designed to measure achievement only in art and music. The 1997 assessment was designed to test students on their mastery of all four of the visual and performing arts, including dance and theatre.

¹ *National Standards for Arts Education: What Every Young American Should Know and Be Able to Do in the Arts* (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994)

Figure 1

Designing Appropriate Curriculum: Model Driven by Student Needs

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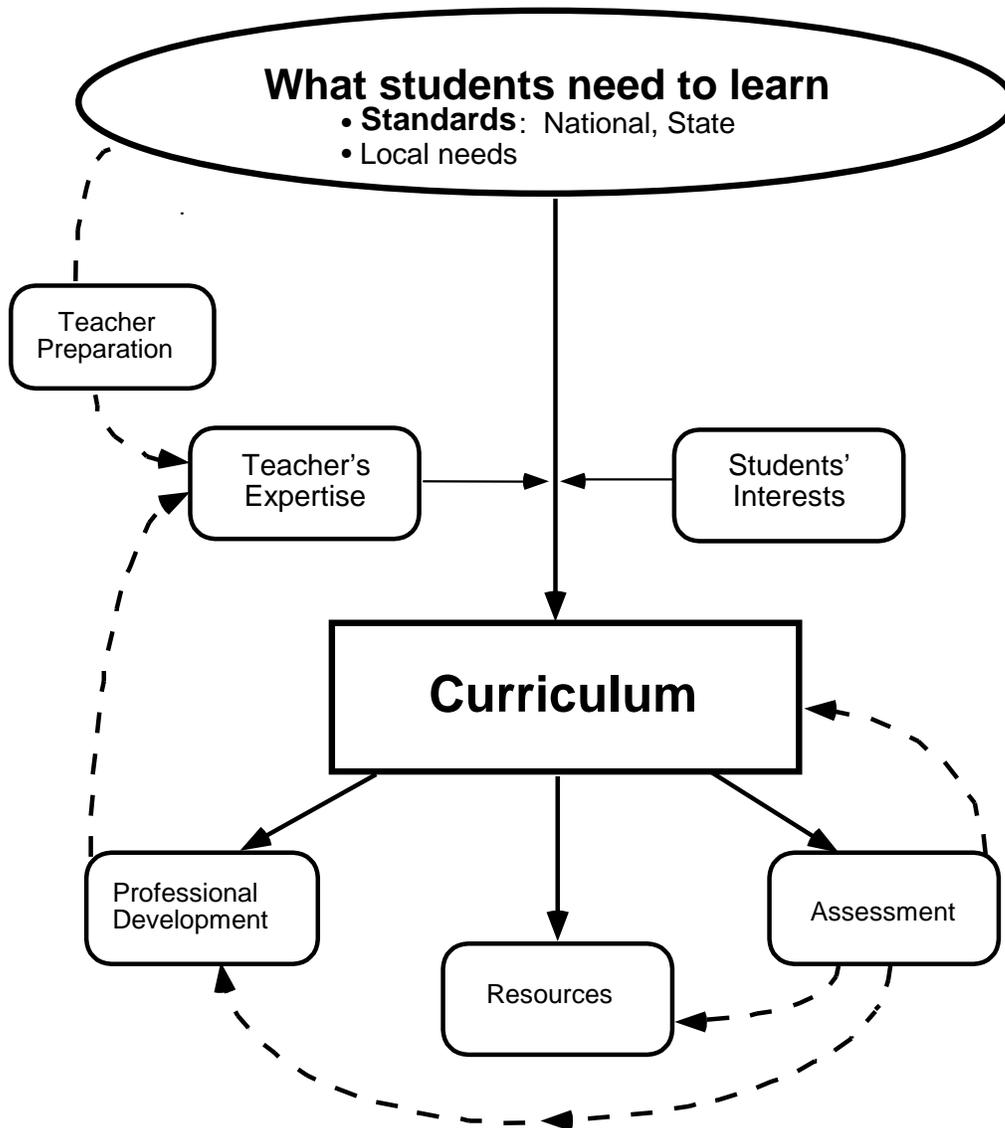


Figure 2

3 Artistic Processes

Creating	Performing	Responding
<p>Imagining</p> <p>developing idea(s) (concepts, ideas, feelings)</p>	<p>Selecting</p> <p>choosing an artistic work (repertoire) to perform</p>	<p>Selecting</p> <p>choosing an artistic work and/or performance to experience</p>
<p>Planning</p> <p>exploring, researching and designing ways of presenting the idea(s) through artistic materials</p>	<p>Analyzing</p> <p>analyzing structure and researching background of work</p>	<p>Analyzing</p> <p>seeing/hearing visual/aural features of the work and performance</p> <p>mentally assembling what is seen/heard into a coherent whole</p>
	<p>Interpreting</p> <p>developing a personal interpretation of work (an idea of its expressive intent or potential)</p>	<p>Interpreting</p> <p>developing a personal response to the ideas of both the creator and performer</p>
<p>Making, Evaluating, Refining</p> <p>applying knowledge and skills/technique to bring idea(s) to life through artistic work</p> <p>evaluating quality and refining successive versions ("drafts") of the work</p>	<p>Rehearsing, Evaluating, Refining</p> <p>applying knowledge and skills/technique to bring personal interpretation to life through performance</p> <p>evaluating quality and refining successive versions of the performance</p>	<p>Evaluating</p> <p>evaluating quality of artistic work and its performance</p>
<p>Presenting</p> <p>Presenting in performance or exhibiting completed work for others</p>	<p>Presenting</p> <p>Performing work for others</p>	

Inclusion in the 1997 NAEP was a major breakthrough for theatre education, both because of the recognition that was afforded to theatre content and because the NAEP process generated innovative models for large-scale theatre assessment.

The 1997 arts NAEP project had three phases. The first phase, which was completed in March of 1994, was the design of the Framework and the Specifications documents.² The Framework outlined the content of the field, which means that it was rooted in the National Standards, and it also made general suggestions about the nature of the assessment. The Specifications document was more technical and specific than the Framework. For example, it provided detailed directions about the types of items that were to be developed for each type of theatre content.

Although the nature of a national assessment prohibits using some strategies that teachers use on a local level, such as collecting portfolios of students' work over time, both the Framework and Specifications documents are of considerable interest to the arts education field. In particular, they present innovative approaches to organizing the content and assessment of all four arts, including theatre. These documents may be found at: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/arts/>.

The second phase of the NAEP project was to develop and refine the test itself. Assessment tasks ("items") for grades 4 and 8 were piloted in schools across the country during the 1994–95 school year, and the tasks were revised based on the information collected. Tasks for a grade 12 assessment were also developed. Theatre educators may want to obtain copies of the CD-ROM based on the 1997 NAEP, because it includes multimedia examples of theatre assessment tasks used in NAEP as well as student work. The CD-ROM may be ordered at the same website: <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/arts/>; results of the 1997 NAEP can also be found at this site.

The format for NAEP is very compelling and useful, even at the local level. The designers of the assessment chose to measure how well students had mastered the National Standards by asking students to carry out the three basic artistic processes, which are the fundamental ways in which people interact with the arts: creating new art, performing existing art, and responding to art as a member of the audience. In recognition of the often overlapping relationship between creating and performing in theatre, the developers of the theatre portion of the NAEP framework used a dotted line to separate the creating and performing processes. In general, however, creating new theatre includes improvising or writing scripts; performing existing theatre includes acting; and responding to theatre includes viewing performances as an educated listener or consumer.

An illustration of the three artistic processes outlined in the NAEP Framework, refined and elaborated by this author, may be found in Figure 2 (see page 4).

An important part of the job of theatre teachers is to empower their students to carry out the three artistic processes independently. The processes therefore provide a powerful conceptual model to drive instruction.

Each of these three processes also requires exactly the kind of independent thinking that is sought by the advocates of authentic assessment. For example, a student who can independently create theatre through playwriting begins by generating alternative ideas, making initial drafts, evaluating and refining each revision, and finally presenting the work to others in performance. That experience often leads, in turn, to another cycle of revision and refinement. Determining whether students can carry out the necessary steps of the creating process should be a priority for assessment in any theatre class. Assessment at all levels — national, state and local — should measure whether students can carry out the three processes.

THE FUTURE OF THEATRE ASSESSMENT

Significant changes in theatre assessment are occurring in a number of schools, and others are on the horizon. Teachers are, for example, collecting student portfolios by digitizing students' work and storing it on CD-ROMs or other media. The material in the portfolios is being evaluated using scoring scales (rating scales or "rubrics") that are based on the National Standards. Student portfolios include not only student performances, but also demonstrations of their work in the other artistic processes, including scripts, improvisations and written work such as critiques of theatre and performances.

² The College Board, *1996 NAEP Arts Education Assessment Framework* (Washington, DC: National Assessment Governing Board, 1994, prepublication edition).
The College Board, *1996 NAEP Arts Education Assessment and Exercise Specifications* (Washington, DC: National Assessment Governing Board, 1994, prepublication edition).

Teachers will use more visual components in instruction, such as those increasingly available on CD-ROM or the Internet. These resources enable educators to teach more effectively by presenting, for example, visual information about the cultural context of the works that their students view. Publishers will include prepackaged visual aids to accompany their scripts and text series, including video examples of students working with those materials. These will prove useful both in providing a model for students and for setting standards when evaluating students.

The report cards of the future will consist of files that teachers put “online” for parents to review. Theatre teachers will select samples of their students’ work to attach to their video explanation of the students’ progress, which parents will be able to call up on their home computer screen. Parents will be able to compare their student’s work to exemplary models, review the curriculum on screen, and see what their student will be studying next. Parents will also have the option of requesting a video telephone conference with the teacher about their student’s work.

Until this not-so-futuristic day arrives, each local theatre faculty should, as part of their curriculum development process, design district-wide assessment based on projects that every teacher has their students complete at certain grade levels. (See Connecticut’s www.ctcurriculum.org site for an example of standards-based instructional units, with assessment criteria and benchmark student work.) Teachers should collect the results of these projects in a portfolio for each student. The portfolio projects should be designed to demonstrate students’ mastery of the outcomes outlined in the local theatre curriculum, which should hopefully be aligned with the National Standards. Each student’s portfolio should include a videotape recording of the student’s performances, improvisations and compositions, as well as written work, such as analyses and critiques of theatre works and performances studied in class. Local districts should use these portfolios to conduct district-wide evaluations of students’ theatre achievement. Districts must acquire the technology to permit development of student portfolios, and provide theatre teachers with the time to manage the portfolios. If time is limited, then so must be the number of projects completed and collected.

States must continue to develop assessments that will hold all schools accountable for teaching students theatre and other arts. Portfolios should probably play a role in the state assessment process. In fact, some states have begun to outline basic expectations for what might be included in local portfolios; eventually such portfolios might be reviewed periodically to ensure that districts are providing students with a quality theatre education. State departments of education should also help teachers design local assessments linked to their local curricula.

Theatre learning can and must be assessed. Think deeply about what types of learning are most important in your curriculum. Discuss with your colleagues authentic ways to assess learning, and make sure that you ask students to carry out the three artistic processes. Choose one assessment idea to try first, perhaps while a colleague tries a different idea. Compare notes. Compare students’ work. Repeat the process to design assessments that address other areas of your curriculum. As you develop effective assessment strategies, begin to build them into your curriculum guide. Report the results to your community. Use the results to improve your program. In short, use assessment to make your teaching, and therefore your students’ learning, more successful.

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