

Arts Assessment For Learning

THEATER — 3RD GRADE

HOW TO: SCENE STUDY- *THE ODYSSEY*

This unit is developed around a performance of a scene from *The Odyssey* (Robert Fagles translation).

[This class met for two periods per week and completed this project in approximately 24 sessions. Each step of the following lesson sequence was about 3 lessons. This is an approximation and will vary depending on the students' abilities and their familiarity with creative drama.]

Step 1: Pre-Assessment

- We began with a pre-assessment: The students had to perform one brief phrase from a text of *The Odyssey*. The phrases were selected from different titles given to Odysseus throughout the text.
- Students were then grouped in pairs.
- Partners were asked to help each other in crafting their own performance of the phrase.
- The performances were videotaped.

Step 2: Rubric Development

- The students watched selected videotapes of student performances to begin the process of rubric development.
- When viewing the tapes the children were charged with describing various levels of quality work.
- A rubric was developed based on the student observation. The rubric was shared with the class.

Step 3: Scene Work from *The Odyssey: Odysseus Encounters the Cyclops*

- Next students prepared longer passages from the text.
- We worked on the scene (*Odysseus Encounters the Cyclops*) in sections, beginning with simple passages of descriptive narrative and then, over the course of a few weeks, progressed to passages containing both narrative and dialogue.
- Again, the students worked with partners. This time one partner was the “director” and was charged with helping the actors meet the criteria for good performance.
- *The stronger actors were used as directors since they had the best understanding of how to meet the criteria.*
- Again the performances were videotaped.
- The students observed the tape and set goals for themselves for future work.

Step 4: Introducing the Role of Director

- We began a discussion of the role of the director and asked: *What did the director say or do that was useful to the actor?*

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- We began charting what “good” directors said and reviewed it at the beginning of each rehearsal – this chart of “Things Good Directors Say” became our Director’s Feedback Guide.
- Through this process, we brainstormed what the directors needed to know in order to help the actors.
- From this list, we created the *I Like/I Wish Protocol*, which was developed to give the directors a tool for helping the actors improve their performance.

Step 5: Rehearsals with Feedback

We continued to discuss the role of the director:

- We continued to work through the Odyssey and worked on slightly more complex scenes, building up the number of actors required for the scene and the number of tasks required of the actors. Earlier scenes had used only narrative passages (no dialogue), such as a description of the Cyclops eating the men.
- Later scenes required a mix of dialogue and narrative. These were more difficult and required different skills of the actors. Actors began to identify their character’s objective and started to explore different tactics to achieve those objectives.
- We began working in groups of three - one director working with two actors - as the work became more complex.
- After each rehearsal, the directors would give feedback to the actors using the protocol: *I like / I wish*.
- If the scene was performed for the class, once the director had given feedback, the discussion would open to the whole class to comment.
- This was especially helpful for directors who weren’t sure what was needed for improvement.

Step 6: Introducing a Checklist in Rehearsals

- We began using a checklist to help directors and actors review each other’s focus and commitment in the rehearsal process.
- We modelled how to use the assessment checklist for the whole group and then I had the students use them individually as a self-assessment tool.
- Soon, it became clear that the tool was better suited for peer assessment (rather than self-assessment)

Step 7: Full Group Rehearsals

- We moved to full group rehearsals.
- The student directors took on the role of assistant directors to me, who was responsible to giving the overall direction and staging the scenes.
- We divided the scene into parts and assigned each part to a group of 4-5 students.
- These roles now were locked-in for the performance at the final share.
- The scene was staged by the teacher and rehearsed in sequence.

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- The student directors took notes based on their observations of the rehearsals and also took notes given by me.

Step 8: Final Rehearsal Period

- We videotaped one of the later full group rehearsals
- The students viewed this with their student director, and working with their director and me, decided on a goal for the next rehearsal.
- The students rehearsed, keeping their goal in mind, and received feedback mostly from me.

Step 9: Performance and Reflection on the Process

- We performed our scenes for second grade classes
- The second grade students were told an abridged version of the story of *The Odyssey*. I showed them pictures of the section of the story they would see the 3rd grades perform. I also acquainted them with the language of the text through my telling of the story.

Suggestion:

- After the performance the audience may tell the actors what they thought the story was about and may identify what they thought were the most interesting scenes.
- After the audience exits the performers discuss how the experience of performing was different from rehearsing.

TIPS: SCENE STUDY- *THE ODYSSEY*

Follow the Steps in the Action Plan and ...

- **Use an authentic text of *The Odyssey*.** I recommend the translation by Robert Fagles, Penguin Classics, 1996. Edit the text for length, but keep as close to the original language as possible. The poetry is powerful, and despite the difficult vocabulary, this makes for easier reading, acting, and memorization. Teach vocabulary one scene at a time, before the students are required to act it.
- **Tell the story before the students are required to act it.** A good simplified source for telling the story is *The Adventures of Odysseus*, written by Hugh Lupton and Daniel Morden, illustrated by Christina Balit. Barefoot Books 2006. Lupton and Morden are noted British storytellers. The book comes with 2 cd's of Lupton and Morden reading the text. Their performances are compelling.
- **Keep the initial segments that the children will act short**, even just a sentence or a phrase in length. A narrative passage of a paragraph in length can easily be broken down into short segments, allowing for easier memorization, and offering parts to more students. More capable students can handle longer sections. The verse actually is easier to memorize than prose.
- **Keep independent groups small at the beginning**, only two students. Our students are used to a Turn and Talk framework in their regular classwork. We built on this for early rehearsals. The maximum group size my children were able to manage was 4, three actors and one director. Beyond that it became too difficult for the students to focus, and too difficult for the directors to keep track of what each student needed. Optimal size seemed to be 3, two actors and one director.
- At first it's fine to have each child in a group working as an actor, and coaching the other child. But **once we divided the roles into actor and director, the focus on the work improved.**
- Use the term "director". Not only is it authentic language for theater, but it seems to carry some status in the minds of the students. **Once we labeled the roles of actor and director, the students seemed to take their work more seriously.**
- At this level of work **good actors tend to make the best directors.** They understand what is required to make the text come alive. This will not always be true however. You will often find children who have no desire to act, but who have a good eye for what the actors need to do to improve their work.

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- **Students with good social skills also tend to make good directors, as do students who are able to stay focused on their work.** Students who enjoy leadership roles can make good directors, but be warned, students who are perceived as “bossy” do not tend to make good directors.
- **Construct your teams carefully!** Take into account which students will be able to work together productively.
- **Keep the scenes short.** Brief passages are challenging enough for the students to tackle as actors.
- **Keep rehearsals short,** a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes. This helps the students to stay focused.
- **Develop a protocol for the giving of feedback.** We used a protocol called “I LIKE I WISH”. The directors began by giving positive feedback, stating as many things that were positive about the work as possible. This is the I LIKE part. Then the director would mention something that needed improvement. This is the I WISH part. Focus on only one or two WISHES for each actor. These become the actor’s goals. If there are too many, the idea of improvement seems overwhelming. Explain this reasoning to the students. It will make sense to them.
- **Keep a list of useful things directors have said.** This is a learning process for both actors and directors. Such a list will give the young directors ideas about the kinds of things they can say that will help the actors.
- Often, when the work of the actors is good, the directors will not know what to say to help them improve their work. In these cases **let the directors know it’s OK just to give positive feedback,** without suggestions for improvement. Often students will make up suggestions for improvement just because they think they have to. These suggestions then, of course, lack validity.
- **Using video is a great way for the students to reflect on their work and set goals for themselves.** When reviewing the video it is best to review it in small groups, perhaps just the actors involved. While everyone will want to see the all the videos at first, it soon becomes boring and the students lose focus. Smaller groups also reduce the amount of giggling that goes on. Review the videos yourself first. If something will be too embarrassing for the students to see, or something too silly that will cause the class to lose focus, don’t show it.
- Throughout much of the process the students will have been dependent on peer feedback. **There will come a time towards the end of the rehearsal process when they will need the more experienced, comprehensive direction that only the teacher can give. Give it!**