

# Arts Assessment For Learning

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THEATER-3RD GRADE

## REFLECTION: IMPROVISATIONAL THEATER

### What went well?

This proved a high interest project for the children. The theater games were popular, and did serve the purpose of ensemble building, and helped the students be more willing to take risks in improvising in front of their peers.

The constant review and application of the three rules of improve after each game helped the children learn the rules and apply them to their work.

The Ladder of Feedback Protocol was especially useful.

First, it changed my perceptions of the children's work.

- Once, during tableaux work, I assumed a child had not understood the nature of the scene and had made a choice that took her out of the action. When clarifying questions were asked by a peer who did not understand her choice, she justified it well. With a small adjustment we were able to work her choice into the scene.
- Another time the children froze in a big, dramatic pose that showed full commitment to the scene, but also seemed totally unrelated to the scene. When clarifying questions were asked, it was discovered that the children had not known what a word in the text meant, and had acted out their misunderstanding.

The use of questioning in the protocol led to richer work.

- When we were working on story development, the protocol offered the children a chance to ask questions about each other's stories. In our small special education class, this provided a golden opportunity for the children to share ideas and embellish the stories. The students started asking questions that really were suggestions, "Could the monster spit lava?" "Sure!" replied the person who created the story. It may have been a formal misuse of the protocol, but it led the children into richer, more detailed, more collaborative work.

It was an effective tool for formative assessment in rehearsal.

- The children would rehearse their scenes in small groups, then share the scenes and receive feedback from the whole class. The protocol was easy for the children to use when discussing the work, and allowed a safe system for offering

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constructive suggestions. It took us away from strict judgement according to limited criteria and opened the way to more creativity as an ensemble.

## **What was so-so?**

I wish we had been able to stick to purely improvisational theater. As it was we used improv techniques to build a sense of ensemble among the children, to build their willingness to take risks and possibly look silly in front of their peers, to encourage their willingness and ability to create stories and then stage the stories with inventive action. This was good.

When we began to prepare for performance, I felt the need to freeze the stories and the staging for refinement. The children's knowledge of stage craft wasn't sufficiently developed to allow for purely improvised performance. For example, the children who were narrators had a tendency to speak softly, or narrate transitions quickly without giving the actors time to respond. Actors frequently upstaged themselves or other actors.

## **What was the most challenging part of trying this?**

Though I had faith in the value of the theater games, it was sometimes hard to justify their use in precise academic language to either administrators or even the children. Both groups needed to know that there was a higher purpose to the silliness. It can be difficult for the children to understand that theater is *fun with control*.

## **What was the impact of this strategy on student learning? (specific examples)**

The children became more skilled at collaboration.

Two examples, both from the second/third grade special education class: (One of these has already been touched on.)

When the children were reviewing the stories they had written using the Ladder of Feedback Protocol every story became richer. The students asked clarifying questions that were really suggestions, "Can the monster spit lava?" and each time the creators of the stories responded with an enthusiastic "Yes!" Or the clarifying questions opened the door for creativity, "Can the monster do anything with his feet?" Another "Yes!" and a new detail was added. This may also have been their assimilation of the rule "Always say yes."

The children became used to working as an ensemble, watching each other, and working through mistakes. The rule to always make your partner look good had a corollary: if someone makes a mistake, keep going. In the middle of a performance, one child froze and could not do his part. Another child stepped right in to cover for him. The audience never knew.

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The use of the Ladder of Feedback Protocol also showed a positive impact. It gave the children a polite way to address issues, and it also gave them permission to become more creative. One audience member, after watching a scene in rehearsal, asking clarifying questions and giving positive feedback, actually stepped right in and redirected the scene in the concerns/suggestions section. This became a group effort, other audience members joining in offering ideas. The players and their director said, "Yes" to every idea.

## **What questions were raised for you as you implemented the assessment practice?**

How to involve more kids in the process as directors? The feedback the children were able to give each other was valuable, but fewer than half the class consistently came up with feedback. I'm reluctant to do something like feedback checklists the kids just fill in and I collate.....too much paperwork and too much work for me, and somehow not authentic to theater practice. I may have to resort to it, but would like to find a better alternative.

## **What new insights or understandings are forming as a result of this experience?**

This was an initial improv project with the children. Subsequent work with the children on a different project showed that with just a bit more experience many children were able to do "pure" improv work, work that had not become scripted and rehearsed. In planning future projects I want to see how improvisational their performance work can become.

The use of clarifying questions as part of a Ladder of Feedback became important. I learned to ask clarifying questions before giving critique. Sometimes the kids were on target with their work, but I did not understand what they were doing, or they made good effort to be on target, but did not understand a word or phrase of a story, or a direction. Clarifying questions helped *clarify* each situation in a positive, productive way.

## **How do the results of your action plan inform your inquiry question?**

The constant iteration of the *Three Rules of Improv* as part of the assessment used in the game playing process helped the children assimilate the rules into their work. The use of the *Ladder of Feedback* with its stress on clarifying questions and positive feedback before concerns and suggestions was critical to the success of the project.