

Arts Assessment For Learning

THEATER — 8TH GRADE

REFLECTION: MONOLOGUES / AUDITION PREP

Without judgment, describe what you did. Just the facts:

The afterschool audition prep class was an 11-week program, open to all 8th graders auditioning for a performing arts high school. I saw students once a week for an hour and forty-five minutes. There was a core group of 4 students who came to nearly every session. There were 4 others who came sporadically, and every so often, a child I never met before who had an audition that weekend would pop in.

Below is a basic outline of how the class went:

Session One – First meeting. We introduced ourselves, did some warm ups, and went over what the High School audition process will be like. Some students already had monologues picked out, others did not know what a monologue was. I gave out packets of monologues, and explained to students that this is just a small selection of monologues. I told them to bring them home, and if they fall in love with a monologue in the packet – fantastic – they should use it, but if they don't find one they loved, I advised them to go to the Drama Book Shop to continue their search. Their HW was to have a comedic and dramatic monologue picked out by next class. Olivia and Trina already had monologues picked out, but not memorized. We listened to them, and discussed why these were good choices.

Session 2 – Students shared their monologue selections. Many were torn between several monologues. We listened to each student read their choices, and the class and I helped them select the one that was the best for them. Homework for all was to memorize at least one of their monologues for next week. They also were advised to find and read the play that the monologue came from.

Session 3 – Students shared their memorized monologues for the first time. The students had very different levels of preparation. Some had strong, clear choices, some were just struggling to get the words out. We discussed the importance of creating a character history – of reading the play and filling in the blanks. The actor must know everything about their character – not just what is going on in this moment (although that is incredibly important as well!).

When each student performed their monologue, I took notes and shared them after their performance. I also asked them questions, such as “What just happened?” , “Why are you sharing this story?” , “What do you want from him?” , etc. depending upon the

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individual performance. After I gave my notes and did a little character work with the actor, I allowed peers to give their feedback. The actor then got to perform their monologue again, applying notes. After the second performance I gave my notes again – noting what they did well, and what they should continue to work on.

Session 4 - Students shared their work on their first monologue, and then we followed the above process with their second monologue.

Session 5 – We focused on student introductions for a good part of the class. During the past two weeks, I taught students to introduce themselves and their pieces before beginning their monologue performance. I had noticed that many had a hard time doing this. We co-created a list of criteria for “A good introduction.” I videotaped them introducing themselves. As a class, we then looked at the list of criteria to see if the student met all of the criteria. We decided what they needed to focus on, and they got to introduce themselves again.

We also co-created a criteria list for a “good monologue performance.” Not every student got to work on their monologues today since we spent a great deal of time working on the introductions.

Sessions 6 ,7, and 8 – We spent these classes working intensively on monologues. Students at this point had their monologues completely memorized, and those coming consistently had put a great deal of work into their monologues. They had done character work, and were rehearsing at home. At the beginning of each class, I asked students to pick one thing they wanted to work on for each of their monologues. When they performed their monologues, I took notes - both pertaining to their goal, and just my general observations to help them. I shared my notes, and also allowed students to share theirs. We discussed whether they achieved their goal, what they did well, and what they needed to continue to work on. They performed again after their notes, and continued to work at home.

After everyone finished their monologues, we began to work on cold readings, and improvisation. Unfortunately, there was not as much time as we would have liked for this, as the monologue work took up most of the class time. For cold readings, we stressed the importance of making quick character choices and connecting with your partner.

Session 9 - Students wanted to spend more time on cold readings, and I agreed that this would be a good use of class time. We hadn't spent nearly as much time on cold readings as we did on their monologue work. We co-created a list of criteria for what makes a good cold reading. Students were paired up and given 10-15 minutes to independently read over their script. They were given time to ask me any questions about the script or characters. They then performed their scene. I took notes, and shared them with the pair.

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As a class we looked over the list of criteria to see which they did well and what they needed to work on, and then they performed their scene again.

Afterwards, most students had time to work on their monologues only once in preparation for our Barnes and Noble performance on Saturday.

Session 10 – Barnes and Noble performance! Olivia, Trina, and Damaris performed their monologues at a fundraiser for the school at Barnes and Noble in Park Slope.

Session 11 – Improv games and party.

What went well?

The students enjoyed co-creating the criteria. The list of criteria made them feel confident and comfortable. They felt good about contributing, and it was good for them to have a visible reference point. They found it useful to select a goal for each of their monologues once they were deeply immersed in them. It also helped other students provide them with meaningful feedback.

Students really wanted to see each other succeed and truly applauded the growth of their classmates. Their peer feedback was usually very meaningful. Students appreciated getting peer feedback from one another. A very respectful, family-like environment existed amongst the core group of students.

I saw growth in each of the students. They all came in at very different ability and experience levels, but each left the course as a better actor.

What was so-so?

I noticed that once they realized they would be getting notes and repeating, some students didn't seem to be giving their first try their full effort.

I am not sure that there was as much peer and self-assessment as there was teacher assessment. I did feel that it was important for students to hear from their peers and to reflect on their work, but I also thought that it was beneficial for them to have my professional opinion and coaching. There were times that I strongly disagreed with some of the peer feedback, and had to find a way to coach the students in the direction that I felt their monologues should go for their attention without disappointing the student that gave the feedback I didn't agree with. Sometimes the growth was so subtle that while I noticed it, the students sometimes did not.

What was the most challenging part of trying this?

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As always, time management was very difficult. Following the formative assessment loop, I can easily get carried away and want to spend 40 minutes on each student's monologues. It was hard to give each student as much time as I would have liked to. It was also hard to find the time to focus deeply on all parts of the audition process – particularly the cold readings and improvisations.

I also had a hard time documenting the process as well as I would have liked to. I had a hard time finding enough time for them to reflect and self-assess in writing. While I do feel that this is an important part of the process, I found that these students, who were preparing for very high stakes auditions, did not want to spend their studio time journaling – they wanted to be up and working as much as possible. I understood that, and did not have them journal as much as I would have liked to. I encouraged them to do so at home, but this usually did not happen.

I also wish I had videotaped students earlier in the process. They did not want to be videotaped at the beginning, and because this was an afterschool preparatory program for their high-stress auditions, I relented at the beginning

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

I saw improvement in introductions. Students did reflect on the criteria chart and had a tangible list of things to concentrate on.

All students learned the proper format, and to make eye contact with the auditioner.

During cold readings, students got better at lifting their eyes from the page and connecting with their partner. They learned that it was OK to ask questions about the scenes.

All students' monologues improved.

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

- How can you make students give their all the first time when they know they will have a second opportunity to perform?
- How do you filter peer feedback that you don't agree with without insulting the child who gave it?
- How can you find enough time for students to meaningfully self-assess without taking away too much work time?

What new insights or understandings are forming as a result of this experience? (share with group)

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Students definitely like and learn from formative assessment. A clear list of criteria gives them a sense of empowerment in a very subjective art form. It is wonderful to give them something tangible to focus on. In reading their reflections, I was surprised at just how much they enjoyed having the criteria, and individual goal setting.

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

I know that formative assessment does indeed improve performance. I see that improvement can occur on the simplest of tasks, and sometimes taking the time to make criteria for something as simple as introducing yourself can make a world of difference.

Documentation to bring (student work, photos, writing, teacher journal, etc):

- Video Samples
- Student reflection