

THE WHY OF OBSERVATION: LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT WE SEE
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WHAT WE THINK WE SEE

“Can’t I just tell you which students would be good for your dance program?” Mr. S. had been teaching 4th graders for a long time. He knew his students’ strengths and weaknesses and was not opposed to having a handful of them selected for a dance program ArtsConnection was bringing to his school. But when we sat down to discuss the criteria for selecting students—with his input—during a 7-session dance workshop series for his whole class, he looked at the ArtsConnection team skeptically. The program director, a site coordinator, and I—the dance artist who would co-teach with a colleague—met with Mr. S. in the teachers’ lounge and offered the small packet of materials that explained terms like coordination and agility, improvisation, and focus in the context of a dance class. Mr. S. was having none of it.

“I could give you a list,” he suggested. The program director nodded and said, “That’s a good idea. We could look back at the list after the assessment and see how it compares with the observations we make in the process.” I agreed, suggesting Mr. S. not share his list with us until after the final session. We explained, though, that watching his children and working with us to study their learning in dance, were central to the success of the project. For the next half hour we reviewed the Talent Assessment Process (TAP) forms and procedures. We described the kinds of things students might explore in the dance class, encouraging Mr. S. to notice what his students were doing and when something caught his eye to make a note where it seemed to belong on the instrument. If a child stayed with something for a long time, Mr. S. might make a mark next to “focus.” If that child’s focus faded just after Mr. S. made note of it, he wouldn’t erase the mark; for the time that child’s focus grabbed an observer’s attention, it counted. We had to trust that such moments would occur. We went through each element in the areas of physical skill, motivation, and creativity, addressing such varied behaviors as spatial and rhythmic awareness, spontaneity and expressiveness in improvisational explorations, and physical control. At the end of the period, Mr. S. took the TAP instrument with him, assured us he would be ready for our first session later that day, and moved toward the door. “I still think,” he said over his shoulder as he left, “it would be easier if I just gave you a list.”

Like most teachers beginning this process, Mr. S. participated uncertainly during the first two sessions, usually waiting to hear what others said before tentatively offering an observation (which was sometimes followed by a shrug and a qualifying, “But I don’t know.”) It’s a challenging task: watching students take a dance class, scribbling notes beside 25-30 students’ names next to a list of barely familiar criteria, then having a conversation about every child based on what each of the four or five observers noticed in the course of the class. By the third session, though, something had shifted. Sometimes Mr. S. was the first to say, “Did you see how she adjusted her space in the circle? That was great.” He was becoming confident about his ability to watch his students learn in an art form and to talk about it clearly and insightfully. His growing enthusiasm for the task also told us he saw value in what his students were experiencing. Collectively, our comments began to paint a picture of each child, regardless of whether he or she would be selected for the long-range program. Each child had something to offer and something to work on.

In the fourth session with Mr. S.’s class, we were struck anew by what the observation process could reveal. D., a quiet, small, beautiful child, had been absent during the first three classes. I welcomed him into the class, told him to do his best and to feel free to ask questions at any time. During the warm-up I saw that D. had no trouble picking up and was, in fact, leading most of his classmates. When D. immediately grasped a complex, traveling spatial pattern that his classmates had been building toward for three sessions, I grabbed my tally sheet and looked for Mr. S. Standing at the side of the gym, he clutched his chin with his hand, as if to prevent it from hitting the floor.

During our scheduled end-of-class conversation about all of the children, we could have spent the entire session talking about D. Mr. S. struggled to express himself. “You don’t understand,” he said. “That child has no skills.” He saw our stunned faces. “No,” he corrected himself. “I *see* . . .” he gestured to the open space of the gym where D. had just been dancing. “He *has* skills. He obviously *has* skills. But he has no—*skills*. He can’t read and he can’t write. Last year he practically lived in the back of the coat closet with his shirt pulled over his head. He spends more time in detention in the principal’s office for fighting than in my classroom.” We all stood silently, absorbing Mr.

S.'s words. He seemed shaken, discombobulated. Finally he took a deep breath. "How," he said softly, almost to himself, "How did he do that?"

FROM TALENT ASSESSMENT TO OBSERVATION

More than ten years after this experience, I was in a grant proposal meeting at ArtsConnection in May of 2005. The hoped-for project was called Developing English Language Literacy through the Arts (DELLTA). My notes from that day looked like this:

"Our questions:

- (1) What and how do students learn in the arts?
- (2) What is essential to students learning in the arts?
- (3) How does this learning process influence language development?

Our goals for artists, teachers, and students involved in the project:

- (1) *Artists*—Develop the skills to use inquiry in arts teaching practice to help students become aware of what & how they are learning in arts.
- (2) *Teachers*—(a) Develop familiarity with art form in order to better describe student understanding in the arts. (b) Be able to articulate how the experience in the arts helps students' language acquisition. (c) Develop skills for engaging in action research.
- (3) *Students*—Develop skills of elaboration, stamina, and fluency."

Mr. S. wasn't the only teacher to come to mind as I scanned the goals, nor was D. the only student in my thoughts. After years of conversations with teachers in countless schools focused on detailed observation of students involved in art-making, what stood out was a depth of discussion and understanding that went far beyond the intention of selecting students for advanced arts instruction. Classroom teachers had developed sophisticated language around the arts; teachers and artists had recognized capabilities in students they'd previously overlooked; and artists who initially struggled with the demands of the TAP instrument came to embrace it and even deepen their teaching through it. On more than one occasion, artists told me they could not go back to teaching without the observational framework that TAP had established for them; they now *knew* their students in a more complete way.

The assessment process had also led to some of the most meaningful exchanges and most long-lasting partnerships I'd experienced with teachers. Looking at the goals of this new project—for artists, for teachers, and for students—I remarked that every one of

them seemed to have been met by what we had done in our talent identification processes. The connection for me was obvious.

It wasn't obvious to everyone. Very few members of the current artist faculty and program staff at ArtsConnection were familiar with TAP. Of the three programs—Young Talent, Talent Beyond Words, and New Horizons—through which the process had been developed, only Young Talent remained and it existed in just 3 schools; each year at my Young Talent school, new program managers and site coordinators needed several hours to learn the intricacies of the process.

Those who knew about, but had not experienced, the process also voiced concern about two words in the name: talent and assessment. Though ArtsConnection's research going back to 1991 supported the use, validity, and reliability of TAP in identifying potential talent in dance, music, and theater (even amongst students with no previous training), that goal seemed unrelated to our current work and, for some, distastefully elitist; didn't we want all students to make art? Some saw the second word, assessment, as code for "testing." Though I knew that this assessment—like other assessments conceived as careful, multi-layered, observational processes—had nothing to do with tests and everything to do with noticing and deepening our understanding of learning, others were wary.

ACTS OF PERSUASION AND ADAPTATION

To help convince ArtsConnection that an adaptation of the Talent Assessment Process was worth pursuing, I asked Laura Livingston, an ArtsConnection theater artist who had used TAP for many years, to help me make my case to Carol Morgan; I hoped that our combined dance and theater perspectives would be persuasive.

Laura and I described how using the TAP instrument had changed the ways teachers observed, described, and came to understand the nature of their students' arts learning. We reflected on how teachers' language—articulating both arts processes as well as students' ability to communicate within those processes—grew from one week to the next. Laura and I had also noticed that using the instruments fostered more active participation among teachers and spurred greater curiosity about what their students were experiencing. Carol was intrigued and asked me to devise a plan. How would the process

need to change for its new purpose? And how would artists, teachers, and program managers be trained in the use of this observational tool?

Early on we renamed the forms “Observation Sheets” to put our focus on observation rather than assessment. We also decided to focus on just five students and to limit the number of sessions in which the process would be used. Our reasons for these changes were twofold: (1) our focus was on the ELL students and not all participating students had been specifically identified as ELL; (2) the task of making observations and commentary on all students in a class seemed cumbersome to the observers. Since this was no longer an instrument for selection, the previous imperative—seeing and discussing every student in every class—did not carry as much weight.

The shift of focus specifically to “observation” and “language acquisition” led us to pose several related questions:

- (1) What is observable?
- (2) How can we use what is observable to build the language skills of students who are involved in these arts processes?
- (3) Is language “released” if we focus first on physical and emotional ease?
- (4) How do we make meaning in non-language-specific ways (and what are those processes)?
- (5) How do we take what we learn in (4), above, and re-integrate language?

We saw two stages of translation in our questions: (a) translating what is visible and physically evident in dance and theater into language the teachers could learn and use in discussing and describing the work, and, (b) working with teachers to support ELL students’ artistic understandings and using those as a bridge to greater English language fluency. Before we could even approach teachers and students, however, we needed to be sure ArtsConnection staff and artists understood the purpose of the Observation Sheets and the value of the criteria. Laura Livingston and I were two of only a handful of artists on the ArtsConnection roster who had helped to develop the criteria and were practiced at using the process. Though the tools had been created and tested with rigor by a broad range of dance and theater artists (Oreck, B. et al, 2003), we thought the artists involved in this project must examine the criteria through their own expertise and have an opportunity to question and develop it further. We wanted all participants to understand why we had chosen to use the observation tools, how they would be used in DELLTA schools, and how they might affect their work, both theoretically and practically.

TRAINING: EXPERIENCE FOR UNDERSTANDING

ArtsConnection's commitment to experiential learning as the most effective route to understanding, meant that the training sessions for each group (staff, artists, and teachers) involved physically active dance and/or theater experiences. To explore the criteria being used to examine the nature of arts learning, the sessions also featured a process of recollection: each participant would reflect on a meaningful experience in the arts, followed by a group discussion and charting of essentials from those recollections. This reflective practice established a foundation for looking at—and raising questions and suggestions about—the nature of arts learning and the existing criteria. To apply the criteria, we either watched video of students in dance or theater classes or took turns making observations of each other in small group “sample classes.”

The first sessions were for ArtsConnection staff. As active participants in the observations, staff members were expected to document the process and to participate in ongoing adaptations. The logistics were complex and time-consuming and it was critical that staff members understand not only the written forms but also grasp the rationale and protocol for the conversational element of the process and be adept at facilitating that conversation.

We then conducted training for artists over the course of four separate meetings. After their reflections on arts process and observations of video or live subjects, they had opportunities to question and offer ideas for revision of criteria. They were also asked to look at their own curriculum and examine the relationship between their on-going work and the process of using Observation Sheets. The use of the process would affect both curriculum and pedagogy; by working together collaboratively, artists were able to help each other address the challenges of designing, teaching, and participating in the observation process while maintaining the integrity of their art and their teaching practice.

During the final artists training meeting, teaching artists worked with ArtsConnection staff to design the training for the participating classroom teachers. The artists helped to conduct the training for classroom teachers on a Saturday before the program began. During the training, teachers learned about the background of the

observation process, and practiced using the sheets by watching video clips or taking turns engaging in and observing dance and theater experiences. In debriefing the experience, teachers and artists discussed strategies for using the protocols effectively as well as ideas for teachers' selection of the five students they would like to observe closely during the dance and theater workshops. Teachers and artists also planned what the students would do while the program manager, teacher, and teaching artist discussed their observations. These conversations occurred during the final 10 minutes of the three classes when the observation sheets were being used. ArtsConnection provided each participating student with a journal and with journal prompts to which they could respond during these ten minutes.

IN THE SCHOOLS

Principals, assistant principals, and other school staff had a critical role to play in supporting the faculty and students involved in this project. Because it was crucial that participating schools understand the structure of the program and the essential ingredients of the observation process, ArtsConnection staff introduced the observation sheets at each DELTA school, meeting with the administration before the workshops began.

After the Saturday training for participating classroom teachers, the ArtsConnection program manager at each DELTA school scheduled a planning meeting in the school with the teaching artist and classroom teachers. The on-site visit helped the artist become more familiar with each classroom culture and the ESL teaching strategies in use. At this meeting, each teacher discussed his or her process for choosing the five students to be observed, and the group scheduled three dates, over the course of the longer residency, during which they would conduct the detailed observations.

On each observation day participating teachers, the teaching artist, and the program manager used the observation sheets to record their observations of five students in each class. Classroom teachers observed only their own five students, while the teaching artist and program manager observed five students in each participating class. The criteria sheets reminded observers what to look for and offered language to describe student behavior in theater and dance. Observers recorded their observations on separate sheets that listed students' names along with criteria and skill areas. Observers were

encouraged to make notes during the class and to attend to the relationship between their observations and the skill areas listed. During the last ten minutes of class the teacher, teaching artist, and program manager discussed their observations of each of the five students. After each observation day the program manager typed the individual notes each person had made on the observation sheets as well as the program manager's own notes on the final conversation.

IN RETROSPECT

An example of the kinds of notes program managers collected comes from PS 230 in Brooklyn. Ms. H. jotted down the following observations about a boy in her class:

“Understands? Rushes, follows behind. Mr. B. has to show how to bend his leg. He sees it as fun, skips around 2X. Does not know the break. Sloppy.”

The program manager then notes an additional comment Ms. H. made during the summary conversation: “He sings the Funga song outside of class. He gets so excited it exudes from his skin.”

In 2007 Carol Morgan asked what we had learned in the initial DELTA project. In my focus on Observation Sheets, I made these comments:

We have learned—

- . . . that most teachers working with students in these schools are unfamiliar with the nature of teaching and learning in the arts;
- . . . that ArtsConnection's years of observing students in arts programs have provided tools and procedures that can be adapted to a new situation;
- . . . that inviting teachers into a guided process of observing and discussing their students' work in dance and theater stimulates teachers' curiosity about and understanding of their students as learners;
- . . . that encouraging both teachers and artists to see and understand who students really are, what they care about, how they express themselves and make meaning, helps students take ownership of their learning (“autonomous learning”);
- . . . that autonomous learning is an essential ingredient for language acquisition.

DELTA's focus on English language and literacy development forced us to re-examine our work in a new context. We found support for our ideas in current research that takes a socio-cultural perspective on language use and acquisition and posits “a view of language, learning, and teaching that sees meanings and understandings constructed not in individual heads, but as between humans engaged in specific situated social

interactions.” (Hawkins, M.R., 2004). Clearly if we are looking at learning in this context—self in relation to others, personal motivation, self-concept, affective engagement, etc.—we begin to see connections to the experience of learning in the arts. ArtsConnection’s exploration of these connections through DELLTA helped us not only recognize that issues of language acquisition are central to all our learning in the 21st century, but that artists must make an effort to engage in the conversation, both to expand the definitions of “literacy” and “language” and to deepen the educational community’s understanding of learning processes.

By keeping artistic investigation at the heart, ArtsConnection invited a range of artists and teachers to bring their own experiences, creative impulses, and spirit of learning to the table. We observed carefully, and worked to describe our growing understandings about our own art and the way in which students learn through that art. We uncovered more questions about understanding (both non-verbal and language-based); expanded the potential for partnering with classroom teachers; found opportunities to re-structure curriculum design based on reflections on student learning; and discovered new potentials for the observation process beyond its application in this project alone.