

Assessment as a Teaching Tool

by Susan Weber

When I work with students at any level, I assess their understanding and mastery of important concepts in four steps:

1. Know what I want students to understand and master.
2. Pre-assess for teamwork skills and emotional/cognitive baseline.
3. Provide clear directions and opportunities to demonstrate understanding or mastery.
4. Post-access for understanding and mastery.

Here's how these steps play out in *Ladybugs*, a PreK program.

Clear Objectives

My objectives for Theater Arts are aligned with Ohio Fine Arts Academic Content Standards. My objectives for curricular content are aligned with Ohio Department of Education Pre-Kindergarten Content Standards in Science and Common Core State Standards.

Here are 3 of my objectives for *Ladybugs*:

- Students will demonstrate teamwork by listening and following directions.
- Students will improvise gestures and sound effects to dramatize a story.
- Students will name and locate human body parts and know ladybug attributes including wing colors and the location of legs, antennae and eyes.

Pre-assessment

I use a familiar song as a quick emotional/cognitive assessment of students' teamwork skills. *If You're Happy And You Know It* is a good choice.

These are my directions:

- Sing with me.
- Show me your movements in the song.
- Sit criss-cross applesauce for the whole song (you don't need to stand up).

As we sing, I begin my mental assessment check-list:

- Are they singing with me? If not, do more students sing when I remind them?
- As they clap, stomp and shout, are they enthusiastic, quiet, loud, calm?
- Do they stand up when we sing, 'stomp your feet,' or do they remember my directions? For younger groups, I don't expect them all to remember.
- Are some choosing not to respond to word clues, not paying attention or perhaps having a hard time in a large group?

By the end of the song, I know quite a bit about this group's teamwork baseline. This is very important information as I adjust my teaching to this baseline.

Opportunities to demonstrate understanding or mastery

It's impossible to assess students' understanding and mastery if they don't know how to express themselves in a group. When I provide an opportunity to make an artistic choice, I reinforce taking turns before offering the option of a unison class response.

For example, as we begin to identify physical attributes of the ladybug, I ask a volunteer to tell me ladybug wings are red, another to talk about the black spots. I ask the whole group to 'show me your antennae' and 'show me your big bug eyes,' etc. This is a good time to introduce the concept that gestures help us communicate. I assess for participation and imitate some of their movements to encourage them to continue to experiment with gestures.

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My intention now is to practice gestures and sound effects in unison. We do this while exploring human body parts. I point to and name my shoulder, elbow, knees, etc. The next time I point to these parts, I ask the group to speak the names in unison. The third time, they point to their own shoulder, elbow, etc. and say the names in unison.

Gesture and sound effects are two important elements of storytelling. Responding to a cue with gesture and sound is a skill we will need when I begin to tell the ladybug story

Now it's time to create sounds/gestures to dramatize a particular story. Rather than show them how to swing, snore, swoosh, etc., I ask them to show me. This series of gestures/sounds provides opportunities for artistic experimentation. If more and more students are participating as we go along, we are ready to tell the story together. And even as we tell the story, my assessment continues.

An experienced storyteller earns her listeners' participation and holds their attention by constantly assessing their understanding and enjoyment of the story. She sets them up for success by preparing them for important jobs in the story. She gets continuous feedback about her listeners' understanding of the story, improvisation and mastery of their role in it by assessing them at work, doing their jobs.

Post-assessment

To conclude our time together, we typically create two dances.

In the first dance I assess for

- student understanding of names
- locations of human body parts
- following directions as they respond to the song's lyrics.

The song has them find a ladybug on the ground, put it on their shoulder (elbow, knees, etc.) and spin around.

Before we do the second dance (with imagination dust flying), students transform into ladybugs, showing me their wings, spots, legs, antennae and bug eyes for *Ladybug Hokey Pokey*. Because my hands are playing guitar, their choice of movement is entirely their own. I'm looking for understanding of ladybug parts and mastery of gestures in response to cues. Because enthusiasm for both art and curricular concepts is always my goal, I'm also looking for smiles, giggles and peppy energy which, needless to say, is in good supply with my early childhood storytellers.

Conclusion

I've given examples from a PreK program, but the process is the same working with older students and more complex arts and curricular content.

1. Know what I want students to understand and master.
2. Pre-assess for teamwork skills and emotional/cognitive baseline.
3. Provide clear directions and opportunities to demonstrate understanding and mastery.
4. Post-access for understanding and mastery.

Assessment is an indispensable teaching tool I use from beginning to end of every lesson. We've seen how assessment is essential to the efficacy of this PreK storytelling session.

And we thought we were just having fun with ladybugs!