

Assessing Drama: Beyond Performance

Empathy, intuition, and the three-way evaluation in drama education

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ABSTRACT

In India, speech and drama exams form the basis of assessment for drama, often devoid of empathy. While these methods are familiar to children and parents from other content areas, the focus on measurement comes at the cost of creativity and human growth. This author advocates for an intuitive approach to assessment that considers student, teacher, and parent voice.

Indian teachers love assessments. Indian parents may love them even more. I am an Indian teacher too. The only difference is that I teach drama and I teach drama outside of a school setting. So I thought I could get away with it.

Wait! Can I? Should I?

How will I know how my students are progressing? And how will I know how I myself am progressing?

15 years ago when I began my journey as a private drama teacher, these were some of the questions that kept returning to me, especially once I started teaching more than two students at a time. The reason I chose not to teach at a school was precisely because schools either have assessments or make drama teachers put up skits and plays with little or no contribution by the students.

In my second year of teaching, I found myself at a crossroads. I knew that both my students and I had grown, but I couldn't quite put my finger on *how*. That's when I began exploring the drama assessments that were readily available in India at the time: Speech & Drama exams. The syllabus was easy to navigate and quite interesting to teach, mainly because it didn't dictate how you should teach. And here was an international qualification readily available in my country. My students and I leapt at the opportunity.

Once the first set of exams were over, I came to three conclusions:

- One can only mark the technical aspects of performance (memory, comprehension, staging, voice, speech, etc.)
- The student is able to share barely twenty percent of the process work and almost nothing about how drama has contributed to their life
- It's a certificate parents and competitive children love

A child who could not look a stranger in the eye managed to complete

a solo exam. But she was marked down with the comment: "Some engagement with the audience." Another child who had just come out of the closet created a devised piece about his experience. But he was marked down with the comment: "A bit over the allotted time." The examiner had no choice but to do so because that's what the marking scheme suggested. Empathy had left the examination room. Empathy doesn't like examination rooms.

WHAT SCHOOL AND INDEPENDENT DRAMA EXAMS ACTUALLY MEASURE

It is difficult for drama examiners to retain empathy during an exam. I know this because, over the years, I have become good friends with many Speech & Drama examiners. Whenever the topic of exam comes up, they speak about how hard it is not to look at the child in front of them and simply mark the technicalities.

Earlier, some brave examiners would talk to the child a little longer to better understand them before marking. But now the exchange is usually reduced to:

Hello.

Whenever you are ready...

I'll ask you some questions now.

Thank you.

And that's it. Yet the system works for the majority of children and parents in India because it is familiar. It mirrors what they are used to in schools. In a cut-throat education and job market where children grow up constantly being measured and compared, this system is quick and works best for the schools.

Sir Ken Robinson often spoke about how education systems focus heavily on measurable results, sometimes at the cost of creativity and human growth (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). In such a system, subjects like drama easily become another place where marks and certificates matter more than experience. So drama becomes another commodity; another subject to pass. And if one doesn't do well, then perhaps one

simply doesn't do drama at all.

WHAT THESE EXAMS CANNOT SEE

In drama, Dorothy Heathcote says, "we are trying out life" (1993). And perhaps that is where the discomfort with assessments in drama lies.

If we are trying out life, how do we measure drama with a marking scheme?

How do we grade courage? Or vulnerability? Or the moment when a child finally finds the confidence to speak?

The child who finally makes eye contact with the audience may not have mastered voice projection yet, but she has crossed a mountain of fear. The student who goes slightly over time while sharing a deeply personal story may not have followed the rubric, but he has trusted the space enough to be honest.

Drama classrooms are messy places. Growth there is rarely neat and almost never fits into tidy boxes. It appears in unexpected moments—when a quiet student volunteers to lead a scene; when a group works through disagreement while devising a piece; when a child suddenly realises that another person's story could also be their own. No examiner sees those moments, yet those are the moments where the real learning happens.

Drama educator Cecily O'Neill reminds us that in process drama, the real value lies in the experience of exploring a situation together rather than simply presenting a final performance (O'Neill, 1995, p. xiii). In this kind of work, students are not just performers being judged. They are people trying to understand ideas, relationships, and different points of view. Heathcote's approach shifts the teacher's attention away from polished performance and towards the learning generated through the dramatic experience. She was dissatisfied when students were merely "doing theatrics" or "acting" artificially; instead, she sought the dramatic pressure that would enable learners to approach a problem in a new way (Wagner, 1976, p. 13).

These thoughts changed how I began to look at assessment. Perhaps assessment in drama should not only ask, "Did the student perform well?" but also:

- Did the student take risks?
- Did the student collaborate and listen?
- Did the student show curiosity about the character or situation?
- Did drama help them understand themselves or others a little better?

These are slower questions. They need observation over time, reflection, and conversation rather than a five-minute performance and a checklist.

Here comes what drama teachers bank on the most: *intuition*.

THE INTUITIVE ASSESSMENT

Many of us arrive at teaching drama almost by instinct. Perhaps the urge to share what we know and to grow through that sharing lives close to the surface in every drama teacher. Reflective observation, self-assessment, and formative assessment are already familiar practices to many drama educators. Jones mentions Diagnostic Assessment, where based on one's student population, a teacher needs to pay particular attention to one's evaluation of what the students need at the outset of a learning experience (2024, p. 82). Yet there remains another dimension of assessment that is harder to describe. It emerges from long-term relationships with students, from careful observation, and from accumulated experience. Often, we experience it first as intuition.

We can read faces. We can hold a child's hand and sense what happened in the morning. We can feel what a child experiences during a session. Sometimes we are almost like alchemists, adjusting the lesson plan in the moment to include a child who might be feeling lost. Because we listen. And listening strengthens our intuition.

As teachers we use our intuition to assess, and then confirm our observations by noticing changes that are sometimes visible only to the teacher. This can make the teacher feel helpless when it comes to writing an assessment report. Thankfully authors Cecily O'Neill and Alan Lambert offer an interesting perspective on evaluation in their book *Drama Structures*. They write, "In evaluating drama, it is the quality of the experience which is important" (1982, p. 145). They also suggest that teachers might begin assessment by reflecting on their own contribution to the work.

For teachers who are actively engaged in the process, this is quite natural. The teacher knows whether she took a bigger creative risk than the previous class. She knows if she showed greater patience or created more space for students' ideas. She knows if the material explored in the session was deeper or more complex. If the teacher's objectives for the class were met, the students' learning has likely progressed as well. Perhaps an examiner should work with students across several sessions before assessing them. Otherwise the one-time, 20–30 minute performance task will do what many exams do: pass a judgement.

ASSESSMENT BEYOND THE EXAM

When discussing assessment in drama, it is important to acknowledge that examinations are only one part of a much larger conversation. Drama educators have long recognised that many of the most significant outcomes of drama learning are difficult to capture through a final performance alone. While examinations and performance assessments can provide evidence of technical achievement, they often reveal only a small part of what students experience and learn over time.

Assessment in drama has therefore evolved in many different directions. Diagnostic assessment seeks to understand where students begin: their prior experiences, interests, strengths, confidence levels, social dynamics, and readiness for learning. Formative assessment follows students throughout the process, documenting their growth through observation, discussion, reflection, feedback, and self-assessment. In both cases, the purpose is not merely to judge achievement but to understand learning. In *Assessment in the Drama Classroom*, Jones argues that assessment begins by identifying students' entry points and understanding what they bring into the learning experience. Questions such as: How willing are students to take risks? How well do they collaborate? What are the social dynamics of the group? are all forms of assessment. These questions move beyond performance outcomes and focus instead on the conditions that make meaningful drama learning possible.

This distinction is important because assessment is not the same thing as grading. Examinations, marks, certificates, and rankings are all forms of grading. Assessment, however, can also mean identifying

where students begin, observing how they develop, documenting their progress, and helping them understand their own learning. Much of the most meaningful assessment in drama may happen long before a final performance is presented.

Self-assessment and goal setting have also become important parts of drama education. Students are often invited to reflect on their own learning, identify areas for growth, and gather evidence of their development over time. Rather than being passive recipients of evaluation, they become active participants in understanding their own progress. The approach described in this article grows from this broader tradition. What interests me is not whether formative, diagnostic, and reflective assessment practices are valuable—they clearly are—but what role intuition might play within them?

Drama teachers often recognise growth before they can easily explain it. We notice a student who takes a creative risk they would once have avoided. We sense a growing confidence in a child who speaks more freely than before. We observe a group listening to one another with greater patience and generosity. These observations may later be documented through reports, reflections, or conversations, but they are often first encountered intuitively. It is from this perspective that I began to think about assessment not simply as measurement, but as an ongoing practice of attention.

THE PARENT'S VIEW

Parents often evaluate drama very differently. The quintessential Indian parent checks whether drama is helping their child succeed in two important social spaces: school and family gatherings. If after a year of drama their child is invited to present something at the school assembly, then drama is working. If not, they may withdraw the child. Some parents continue sending their children for exams simply to collect certificates for future college applications. But most parents judge drama through everyday interactions:

Does my child speak more confidently?

Does she greet relatives comfortably?

Does he participate in school activities?

This can be a difficult space for drama teachers. Yet there are also

parents who continue sending their children simply because their child comes home happy and looks forward to the next class. These parents trust that if the child is enjoying the process, learning is happening—and we are fortunate to have many such parents at Joy of Drama, where I teach.

What Parents Notice

Over the years, some parents have shared observations that stayed with me. One parent once said, “My son can now sit and chat with anybody on anything!” Another parent told me, “My child is growing here. She is gaining some power that I don’t understand but now she talks more deeply about the same topics which she discussed very little about earlier.” A quieter student’s mother once shared something simple but powerful: “She has started to ask questions at school.” These changes rarely appear in exam reports, but they often reveal the deeper impact of drama education.

THE THREE-WAY EVALUATION

Student – Teacher – Parent

Perhaps the most meaningful way to understand progress in drama is when three voices come together: parent, student, and teacher. The student voice is especially important. Drama educators have used self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting to help students recognise their own learning. “Self-assessment must be a consistent approach to teaching and learning in the drama classroom in order to foster meaningful engagement” (Jones, 2024, p. 20). So considering self-assessment is crucial in this case.

The teacher observes the process.

The parent notices changes outside the classroom.

And the student slowly begins to recognise their own growth in and outside the classroom.

The teacher sees small shifts—a student speaking a little louder, listening more carefully, or sharing the stage with others. Jones

explores this when describing *Noticing* as a habit of mind for good teachers (2024, p. 113). The parent notices different things—a child greeting relatives confidently, volunteering in school, or telling stories at home.

And then there is the student. Students are often the last to realise how much they have changed. But sometimes, if we ask the right questions, they begin to see it. *Were you nervous when you first came to class? What was the hardest thing you tried this month? What did you do this week that you couldn't do last year?* Slowly the answers appear.

"I spoke louder."

"I worked with someone new."

"I wasn't scared on stage."

These may seem like small answers, but in drama education they represent very big journeys.

At Joy of Drama, we try to follow this three-way evaluation system—parent, student, and teacher. To provide students with a formal framework as well, we connect this process with a LAMDA Group Devising qualification. Group devising allows students to collaborate over time to create their own performance rather than presenting a single prepared piece. The qualification offers a recognised certificate, which many parents appreciate, while still allowing the process of exploration, collaboration, and growth to remain central.

When these perspectives come together, assessment becomes less about judgement and more about understanding. It becomes a conversation rather than a verdict. A student who had been with us since 2016, is now an engineering student and says that his power of imagination catapulted post drama and he fell in love with Physics!

Of course there will still be exams. There will still be certificates. And perhaps they will continue to serve their purpose. But maybe the real assessment of drama lies somewhere else.

- It lies in the quiet confidence of a child who once refused to speak.

- It lies in a group of students learning how to listen to each other.
- It lies in the moment when a student realises that another person's story might not be so different from their own.

Rabindranath Tagore once wrote, "The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence" (1969, pp. 109). Perhaps drama education is simply trying to do that.

One classroom.

One rehearsal.

One brave child at a time.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Vaishali Chakravarty is an actor, drama-in-education expert & entrepreneur. She has performed in several theatre productions with Actor Factor Theatre Company. She founded Joy Of Drama in 2015, a fast growing drama and life skills training organization with centres across India and a number of successful online programs. Vaishali is one of the few theatre practitioners who have trained extensively in both the traditional and the contemporary forms. In addition to training under the Manipuri physical theatre masters Sabitri Devi and Late Heisnam Kanhailal, she has formally trained in Drama & Speech and has subsequently been awarded the 'Associate of Trinity College London—(ATCL) Diploma with Distinction' and 'Licentiate of Trinity College London—(LTCL) Diploma with Merit' in Speech & Drama and Performance Arts respectively. She has attended the Shakespeare Summer School at the Royal Academy Of Dramatic Art (RADA), London and completed the Professional Development Program in Drama-In-Education at the University Of Dublin, Ireland.