

The Adventures of Teaching the Theatre Journal

Gretchen Nordleaf-Nelson

Seven years ago, when I began teaching IB Theatre, I required students to make a personal website as a digital journal. I had my students follow the guidelines laid out in the curriculum, which was that “from the beginning of the course, and at regular intervals, students at both SL and HL are required to maintain a theatre journal. This is the students’ own record of their two years of study and should be used to record:

- challenges and achievements
- creative ideas
- critical analysis and experience of live theatre productions as a spectator
- detailed evaluations
- experiences as a creator, designer, director, and performer
- feedback
- reflections
- research
- responses to work seen
- responses to diverse starting points
- skills acquisition and development.”¹

Initially, their digital journals were empty. So I soon realized I needed to assign journal writing and carve out time for my students to write. After five years I thought I had mastered the theatre journal! The truth was that I truly did not understand or appreciate the impact the theatre journal can have on a student’s experience in the drama classroom. My journey in teaching the theatre journal was actually just beginning.

The adventure begins . . .

¹ IB Theatre Guide - first assessment 2017 Legacy Curriculum

Two years ago, while waiting to make copies in our faculty workroom, I picked up an issue of the IB Review and read the article *Improving your reflection* by Dinos Aristidou. The focus of the article was to teach students to think about writing reflections from different perspectives for different areas of the IBDP program including CAS, the EE, and TOK. What I discovered while reading the article is that *reflective writing* was actually the type of journaling I wanted my students to incorporate into their theatre journals.

Preparing for the journey . . .

I felt I had just been handed a new map for teaching the theatre journal but I had no idea how to get from point A - students having ideas, thoughts, and feelings about their work and experiences in theatre to point B - *students writing authentically in a reflective mode on their ideas, thoughts, and feelings about their work and experiences in theatre*. Just like any traveler preparing for a new journey I had to unpack the trunk I'd been using to make room for new ideas and new practices. Through unpacking that trunk I discovered that the *journals* my students were writing were really *diaries of their work*. They were not actually *journaling about their work*. So, what is the difference between a diary and a journal you might ask? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines **a diary** as a record of events, transactions, or observations kept daily or at frequent intervals. It defines **a journal** as a record of experiences, ideas, or reflections kept regularly for private use. This was an "ah-ha moment" in my journey. ***The drama journal is truly a reflection journal written by the student on their experiences, processes, ideas, and contemplations about theatre.***

Let's talk about student writing for a minute . . .

I've been teaching for over 30 years and teaching students to write is an adventure for both teacher and student. Over the course of the adventure, you will have students who truly love to write – these are the students who will write about anything and have fun doing it. Then you have the students who tell you, “Writing isn't really my thing” and it is like pulling teeth to get them to put down two sentences. Then there are the students who write to get the assignment done and check the box. There are other varieties of writers in our classrooms but those three types make up the largest groups in my classroom. Yet, when we ask students to write in a drama/theatre journal we want them to be authentic and be willing to disclose their personal thoughts. Whew, that is a tall order for any teenager in today's post-pandemic world. There are many who do not want to take that journey. Realizing this, it was apparent that I needed to learn new skills to be able to teach my students the craft of *reflective writing* and how it would impact their learning.

Learning new techniques to pack in my trunk . . .

I literally did a deep dive into learning more about the concept of reflection and metacognition and what role they play in one's learning. Through my research, the workshop on *The Art of Reflection* with Dinos Aristidou, and talking with Jane Fisher on *teaching reflection in the classroom* I learned - 1) a deeper understanding of reflection and the different types of reflections a student can use to learn 2) strategies for meaningful reflection on learning and 3) activities on using reflection in an arts practice.² Ultimately, when it was explained that reflection is “...the bridge between external experiences and their internal impact is key to our development as learners and as active global citizens,”³ the objective of the drama journal for my students became clear. So my next step

² Dinos Artistidous - ISTA Workshop *The Art of Reflection Workshop*

³ Dinos Artistidous - ISTA Workshop *The Art of Reflection Workshop*

was to design an environment and communication climate for students to become willing risk-takers to look within themselves, to look at their work, and then write authentically about their experiences in the classroom. The days of the diary entries masquerading as journal entries in my class were over.

So with my new trunk of skills and techniques what does the drama journal look like in my classroom now . . .

- I made the transition at the beginning of the school year to the practice of ***reflective journaling for all***. This means that in ALL my classes (all levels of drama and all Language and Lit classes) students write reflections.
- The digital online version of the original form of my class drama journal is in limited use.
- Journals in my classroom are now called ***Theatre Reflection Journals***.
- Students purchased a physical journal or I provided them with one.
- They were given the assignment to make the journal their own by creating a cover collage or adding original artwork.
- Students handwrite or type or draw their reflections. If they need to submit their journal via google classroom, they write their reflection in their journal, take a photo, and then submit it to google classroom.
- I assure students that the only person reading their journals is me, the teacher. This has created a safe space so students are willing to be authentic and disclose their personal thoughts and revelations.
- Reflections are written at the beginning of a project, midway through the project, and at the conclusion of the project.

- I have students write reflections at the beginning of class to get them focused on the work of the day.
- I have students write reflections at the end of class to remember what worked well and what did not.
- Students are more comfortable and more willing to write when provided with a prompt. This way, when a reflection is assigned, they learn how to direct their writing.
- I use [Jane Fisher's – Journal – Teaching Reflection](#) as a regular teaching resource.
- I use [Making Thinking Visible](#) reflection prompts as a regular practice.

So, now it is Spring . . .

What is the result of repacking my trunk with new skills and teaching practices? The result has been incredible! My students over the past year began their own journey of learning through their reflections. They are beginning to understand that thinking about their work, how they work, how they feel about their work, and why they make the choices they do in their process are important and should be acknowledged by themselves and by the teacher. And, yes, I still have students who write a novella for a five-minute reflection prompt. I have students who write two sentences for a reflection at the end of a major project. I have students who are dealing with post-pandemic anxiety and the fear of not reflecting the right way. Yet, they are all reflecting, in some manner, shape, or form. This *new theatre journal* is making a difference in my students' experience as learners and with their experience in making theatre.

Who is Gretchen Nordleaf-Nelson. . .

I have enjoyed working and learning with students for over 30 years while teaching in suburban, urban and independent school settings in four different states. Over the course of my teaching tenure, I have taught English (9-12), Theatre (9-12), IB Theatre, IB Language and Literature, Media Design as an IB Visual Art, Journalism, ELL Literature and History, and Art History. Drawing on my background in theatre and Dorothy Heathcote's work I have also developed and taught professional development courses for teachers: Drama Methods for the Classroom Teacher and The Teacher as Actor. My training includes a Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education with a student/faculty designed major in Theatre, English, and Education - from Western Washington University and a Master of Arts in Theatre from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.