

# Assessment as Theater: Staging an Exposition

In a South Carolina humanities program, students displayed what they had learned in an achievement fair complete with music, drama, interpretive readings, and portfolios.

Outside the auditorium was evidence of death and destruction. In the surrounding resort complex, an uprooted oak had left a gash in the roof of a two-story parking structure. A few miles beyond, roads to the devastated beachfront remained closed to traffic, weeks after the hurricane.

Inside the auditorium, however, were signs of life, of growth in interests and talents, of the reconstruction of intellects, personalities, even communities. I shifted in my seat as the last group of presenters claimed the stage, describing what they had experienced, performing what they had learned in the Rural Educational Alliance for Collaborative Humanities (REACH) Program.

A tall black teenager with a deeply resonant voice and a strong podium presence described the rationale behind the Jasper County High School project. "Reaching Back to Go Forward" was its theme, meaning "understanding one's past in order to go forth proudly into one's future." Students in the school, he said, had undertaken extensive research in order to reconstruct the history of Jasper County. They had taken tours within the county to secure artifacts and field trips to the library in Columbia and to Penn Center—a cultural center that

focuses on black history—on Helena's Island. They had written profiles of historical and contemporary characters and reactions to their trips.

Next, 13 other students stepped forward to perform several short informative skits about the Gullah dialect indigenous to their region of South Carolina and then to recreate a scene from a "praise house." Illustrating the connections between the musical idioms of Jasper County and those of East Africa, they offered a spirited performance of gospel songs.

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This was no dry exposition of heritage—this was a stunning display of musical talent, the powerful voices of the lead performers supported by the soulful chorus. Finally, the excitement and enthusiasm building in the audience found release through a standing ovation.

I felt the excitement, too; but, as an external program evaluator, I had been hired for my skeptical demeanor. Still, as the REACH Humanities Exposition ended, even I was persuaded that intellectual and emotional growth had indeed occurred in the students who participated in the program's activities. Yes, I had experienced good theater. But, more important, I had witnessed a unique approach to student assessment and program evaluation, one with the potential to reshape our notions about how to gather and display evidence concerning educational achievements.

Through this brief essay I want to convince another audience of the possibilities of assessment as theater, in hopes that expositions will be adapted to other contexts. First, however, let me give a brief description of the context in which this one originated.

## The REACH Project

The REACH project hopes to enrich the study of the humanities in rural schools

throughout the State of South Carolina. Designed to avoid separating language skills from humanities content, REACH encourages youngsters to explore the history and culture of their communities and thus to connect rural schools with the life of their communities. The project also emphasizes the use of technologies, especially telecommunications, and extensive collaboration with a network of individuals and agencies—including university faculty, community experts, state and local agencies, and other students and parents across South Carolina.

During the second year of the project (1989–90) 23 schools, more than 100 teachers, and approximately 3000 students were involved. As an example of a school project, the students at York Comprehensive High School, with the help of faculty from nearby Winthrop College, researched the local history and culture of the York area in relation to certain major American historical and literary events. Their findings are now being compiled and edited into

book form, and their research is being shared via computer link-up with students in the town of Fumel, France, in cooperation with the computer center at the University of Toulouse. This computer network exchange also involves sharing descriptions of students' daily activities, lifestyles, and interests. The students at York High are now planning a publication documenting this international interaction.

### American History Institute on Women

A National Endowment for the Humanities institute titled "American History: The New Scholarship on Women" will be held at the Harvard Graduate School of Education from July 8 to August 2, 1991. Directed primarily—but not exclusively—toward secondary social studies teachers, the graduate-level institute will include opportunities to develop new curriculums from the manuscript collections of The Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. Applications are due April 1.

For more information, write to: American History Institute, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 339 Gutman Library, Cambridge, MA 02138, or call 617 495-3572.

In another effort, the 11th graders of Pickens High School came to recognize

the similarities between Pickens and "Grover's Corners," the setting for Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Having read that classic, the 11th graders investigated their own community through interviews with community and other townfolk, field trips, and library research, discovering both its specialness and its universality. Their findings were translated into short stories, poems, essays, histories, tales, plays, and skits; many of these were displayed during the "Our Town Festival," prepared for the entire school.

*Photograph courtesy of Pat Bradley, Beck Middle School*



*In addition to theatrical performances, students showcased their achievements in a series of displays. Here Sean Wilson, Zion Dumm, Rachel Adams, and Kirk McConnell (l. to r.) examine the portfolios, stories, poems, and essays from Beck Middle School to see for themselves what everyone learned during the project.*

### Beyond the Numbers Game

These and other projects in the REACH program certainly sounded educationally beneficial, but how could a program evaluator be certain? From the beginning, the REACH program planners regarded traditional assessments with suspicion—no standardized tests for them. They resolved to explore new pathways, to move "beyond the numbers game" (Hamilton et al. 1977) to authentic demonstrations of student mastery in language and the content of the liberal arts.

Such demonstrations possess three advantages that standardized tests do not. First, they yield something tangible rather than asking students questions produced by others. Second, rather than sticking to institutional time schedules, the time devoted to the production is set by the nature of the task. Third, the process is collaborative rather than accomplished in isolation.

The REACH Exposition honored these three attributes. Indeed, the fair fulfilled part of an overall authentic assessment plan outlined by Archbald and Newmann (1989), the part they call "exhibitions":

Discrete competencies are usually assessed within the confines of schools. In contrast, exhibitions . . . involve production of discourse, things, and performances for the public. Exhibitions also usually require integration of a broad range of competencies and considerable student initiative and responsibility in carrying out a project (p. 20).

Let me now detail some specific features of the REACH Exposition.

### The Exposition

The 1989 REACH Humanities Exposition was the brainchild of four teachers from Beck Middle School in Georgetown, who conceived, planned, coordinated, and hosted this first achievement fair. They invited representatives of the funding agencies, the State Department of Education, and the Office of the Governor, as well as university faculty, teachers, parents—and, of course, students—to attend. The exposition was held in a resort complex on the Hugobattered South Carolina coast in October 1989. It opened with a reception on a Thursday evening, but Friday's activities constituted the heart of the fair. In presentations of approximately 20 minutes each, representatives from 10 project sites showcased the educational fruits of their work in REACH.

The formats of the presentations—most led by students, a few by teachers—included dramatic productions, media presentations, and students reading their own stories and essays. Students from one school whose materials—and building—had been swept away in the storm surge, had had to rewrite their stories about relatives: a grandfather and a 101-year-old great-great-grandmother, to name just two, had spoken of their lives and histories to members of succeeding generations. Some presentations included descriptions of program aims and objectives, others suggested the contours of the curriculum in use. A few detailed the trials and tribulations of program implementation.

In addition to the presentations, portfolio displays of student products were offered at several locations of the complex. The guests were encouraged to browse through the exhibits and peruse the booklets of stories, displays

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of poetry, and collections of essays that demonstrated progress in the development of students' expressive talents. Portfolios that included samples of students' work over an extended period of time were most persuasive. One, for example, illustrated three stages of growth in the writing of "Roger X," from October 1987 to February 1988 to March 1989. Roger's growth in ability was undeniable and impressive.

For those who couldn't attend the exposition, a videotape of the entire program was produced by Jacqueline Gmuca of Coastal Carolina College in Conway, South Carolina. This is yet another innovative strategy for the dissemination of evidence about student learning. The tape serves parents, teachers, and students as a documentary record of the achievement fair.

### Strengths and Weaknesses

Even if the strengths of the program far outnumbered its weaknesses, the record is not a perfect one. In addition to those to which I have already alluded, its strengths included the extent of student ownership in preparing for the fair and in its execution. Talking with several students, I found that the fair was a significant event for them. It was exciting because they were performing and not just performing for each other but for a distinguished audience—and also (since many were of quite modest means) in

being accommodated in the luxury of a seaside resort.

How could the exposition have been improved? Personally I would have liked more data about numbers of students involved in each project site activity, more information about how the fair performers were selected, and candid admissions about the conditions required for successfully carrying out an exposition at a local school. Despite its flaws, however, the REACH exposition was a bold attempt at realizing a vision, actually turning it into a reality.

This exposition speaks directly to all educators who desire to try legitimate and responsible alternatives to prevailing assessment practices. My hope is that other educators may find inspiration in the decision of these South Carolinians to step forward from the wishful backstage rhetoric about more educationally responsible assessment into the spotlight of real performance. The risks are worth taking. □

<sup>1</sup>REACH is supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, the BellSouth Foundation, the Bread Loaf School of English, the South Carolina Humanities Council, and the Office of the Governor of South Carolina. REACH is one of 13 included in Collaboratives for Humanities and Arts Teaching (CHART). The project involved collaboration with Clemson University, Winthrop College, the University of South Carolina, the College of Charleston, Benedict College, Coastal Carolina College, South Carolina State College, Lander College, and Francis Marion College.

### References

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