

How to...

Perform when the lights dim

Paul Kleiman

Times Higher Education, 2 February 2001

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/how-to-perform-when-the-lights-dim/156886.article>

WHAT

Paul Kleiman looks at 'cavalier', 'roundhead' and 'innocent' approaches to assessing performing arts students.

WHY

It is no longer enough for tutors to say 'you were wonderful darling'.

HOW

There I am, sitting in my favourite balcony seat in the institute's auditorium, pen in hand, notebook discreetly balanced on my knee, preparing to watch and assess a performance by final-year performing arts students.

Not only am I audience and critic, but examiner too: I have to assess and assign individual grades to each of those students.

As the show is late going up (do I have to assess that as well?), I have time to consider just some of the variables and imponderables around the assessment of performance. The students may be acting and/or singing and/or dancing and/or playing instruments. The text may be extant or devised. The success of the performance will depend on a team effort - both onstage and offstage - yet, I am required to assess and grade each individual. The visual and acoustic environment may enhance or hinder the perception and reception of the show. The director may have been able to encourage each individual to work to their maximum potential - or they may have destroyed any creativity and enthusiasm.

As the prospect of a list stretching to infinity and beyond looms, I am grateful that the house lights dim and I am eager but nervous about handing out assessment justice to each of the individuals who contributed to the production.

I am comforted by the thought that there is another member of staff (or two) sitting somewhere else in the auditorium also with a notebook and with probably the same thoughts, and there are colleagues in dance, drama and music departments around the country grappling with the same issues.

How do we do it? On what basis? And is it valid or fair or reliable anyway?

Some of us shared our thoughts and experiences of assessment in Lancaster last November in a workshop organised by Palatine, the subject centre for performing arts, and we are meeting again today.

We seem to divide into three main sub-groups. There are the assessment **roundheads**: those fully committed to the new assessment world order of modularisation (dividing a programme of study into easily digestible chunks); explicitly stated learning outcomes (making sure the student and the teacher both know what they are aiming towards and what the student is expected to achieve); and criterion-referencing (a set of clearly defined standards against which the student's work is assessed).

Assessment for the roundheads, is generally a matter of ensuring that the protocols and criteria are properly set up in the first place, and then following them using one's professional skills as an educator and practitioner.

Then there are the **cavaliers**: those who believe that creativity and artistic endeavour cannot simply (or complicatedly) be reduced to sets of protocols, learning outcomes and assessment criteria. They prefer approaches such as holistic assessment, allowing provision for unexpected outcomes and non-conformist processes, and, in some cases, involving the students in their own assessment and that of their peers.

Lastly, there are the **innocents**: often highly experienced and skilled professional practitioners who have recently entered what appears to them to be the overly bureaucratic, esoteric, parallel universe of assessment in higher education.

No longer can their critique of a performance or performer be contained in the clichéd and stereotypical "You were wonderful, darling" type of comment. They now have to assess and grade individuals, use assessment protocols, provide detailed formative and summative feedback, and justify their marks to external examiners and assessment boards.

As I sit in the balcony watching the show and attempting to scribble down some notes in the darkness that will be at least partly legible in daylight and, after 15 years of teaching, assessing and chairing various assessment boards, I am certainly not among the innocents. But am I an assessment cavalier or a roundhead?

My natural instincts are those of the cavalier. I know that there is something about good and particularly great work that resists categorisation. It goes by various names such as "the tingle factor" or "the wow moment". It is that individual or collective feeling that one is experiencing something out of the ordinary (which is surely one of the qualities art aspires to) and that, at the same time, resists description or explanation. Yet, I also know that that way subjective madness lies and, *in extremis*, assessment can consist solely of the preferences and prejudices of individual tutors.

So I put aside the plumed hat and put on the solid helmet of the assessment roundhead. I immediately feel on safer ground. I have the module handbook, which lays out in precise detail what is expected of the student, what the expected learning outcomes are, what the assessment criteria are, the weighting percentages and the grading criteria. Using the assessment pro forma that has been provided, I can go down the list of criteria statements and, using my knowledge, skills and

experience, I can answer questions such as "To what extent does the student demonstrate x, or, y, or z?" with a range of answers from "not at all" to "excellently".

Turning to the grading criteria, I can then convert my various responses into a number. I can add up all the numbers, apply the weightings (if any) and arrive at a total. I finish by writing some constructively critical comments in the box provided.

This approach satisfies everybody. The students each get a piece of paper with marks and comments that they can share and compare with their peers.

There is also a sense that the tutors are working off the same assessment "script".

The tutor, under the time pressure of at least dozens if not hundreds of assessments, has got a clear system to work within and to.

The institution can demonstrate that assessment is open and transparent and that there is an assessment paper trail that can be audited by any external body. It also has comprehensive documentary evidence in the case of any appeal.

And the parent - who increasingly has a financial as well as a familial interest - can see that their investment is being taken seriously and is reaping dividends.

So where is the problem?

"Surely," the roundheads state with some justification, "this is a far better, fairer, more reliable, more valid and more transparent approach than the old 'I-feel-a-first-coming-on' days."

It is hard, admittedly, to argue against a view that fits so well in an educational world view that always has one eye firmly fixed on Quality Assurance Agency visits, funding council audits, reviews and such like, and that is constantly playing to a gallery in which government perceptions of and policies towards higher education are prominent.

The nagging doubt about all of this centres on those treacherous terms "creativity" and "innovation". If the teaching of performing arts is about working within rather than extending or working beyond existing forms and boundaries; if it is based around the development and application of craft skills; if it works within and to accepted notions of good practice, then the roundhead approach is undoubtedly the correct one.

But, if the deserved reputation for creativity and innovation in the arts that this country enjoys is to be maintained, then it might just be that we need some of that creativity and innovation applied to the way we teach and assess those who will become the artistic creators and innovators of the future.

One thing is certain: the collective experience of hundreds of tutors assessing students in performances of different types of dance, drama and music over many years, in many different venues and circumstances, amounts to a vast reservoir of knowledge, experience and skill.

Despite the differences in philosophies, methodologies and practices of assessment, I am always impressed by the immense care, concern and thought of my colleagues around the country, and their willingness to engage in free and open debate.

So, as the applause dies, the house lights come on and I head for the bar before I attempt to decipher my hieroglyphs, I consider that, actually, when it comes to assessment we are certainly worth a 2:1 at least.

Times Higher Education, 2001.