Assignment Critique

The assignment I selected for analysis is the writing assignment for the final project in the 9th grade English class I student taught at Cleveland School of the Arts. This assignment came at the end of our tedious “Romeo and Juliet” theater unit, paired with a project that centered on the student’s art majors. The student produced a piece of music or dance, wrote a scene, or did some photo/drawing/painting project, and then wrote a short paper explaining the project. Drawing its theoretical support mainly from the Growth and Process movements, this assignment focuses on describing and explaining the student’s artistic project in terms of what interpretive choices were made. The assignment was praised by both my cooperating teacher and my University observer and produced a wide variety of student responses, but I was never quite pleased with the assignment. I felt the form of the writing prompt was too prescriptive and at the same time the assignment was not well-defined. The students in my classes nearly all fell into a very basic writing category, but this assignment does little to address the form standardization that will be expected of them in the future.

James Britton wrote, “the area in which language operates in English lessons is personal experience” (Harris 14), working along with John Dixon and others at the Dartmouth Conference to define the English subject. One emergent perspective came to be called the Growth movement, and included ideas about the important relevance of English activities to student’s personal lives and about developing the student’s understanding of and ability to use language. Also drawing from a strand called the Process movement, James Moffett lent a theoretical and practical support to the Growth theorists. Joseph Harris describes, “If Britton and his colleagues had provided a powerful argument for teaching expressive language, then Moffett sketched a compelling way of doing so.” (Harris 12). Moffett worked with cognitive development ideas from Piaget and Vygotsky to characterize writing along a scale of abstraction and distance from the perspective of the writer, defining the more personal and concrete as more basic. The Process movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s dealt with “the need to provide “at-risk” students populations with successful writing experiences led to an emphasis on simple writing assignments concerned with topics with which students were presumably familiar – that is, assignments concerned with their own lives” (Clark 79).

This assignment establishes itself solidly in the Growth and Process movements as it focuses on the student’s experience and works to develop a self-conscious understanding of interpretive processes. By working with the student’s chosen art major as well as with the text of “Romeo and Juliet” The assignment validates their personal experiences and attempts to develop their ability to describe and understand those experiences. While using the personal experience as subject matter, the assignment’s strength is in turning it to a discussion of interpretive processes, rather than just a description or evaluation of the experience. The student is urged to explain why interpretive choices were made and to support those explanations with details of their project and details of the text. This content based perspective develops the techniques of analytical writing that will be expected in the future. Using the personal experience as subject acknowledges the basic nature of the 9th grade student’s abilities, though perhaps not in terms of cognitive development. Basic writing students may be ignorant of the expectations of an academic audience or of the complexities of a Shakespearian text, and writing a paper that focuses on what they did and why allows students to work within their experience.
One of the strengths of this assignment in application was its reflexive relationship with the artistic part of the project. The need to explain what interpretive choices were being made in the artistic interpretation of the play made the students more aware of their interpretive options, and helped to develop more meaningful projects. Unfortunately, the quality of writing was relatively poor and would be unacceptable in most circumstances. The students had produced writing earlier in the year with my cooperating teacher that bore a much stronger resemblance to academic prose, but was achieved through an approach dictating the type, form, and function of each sentence in each paragraph. While I found that level of teacher control abhorrent, perhaps some middle ground could be found.

While this assignment takes the personal and experiential values of the Growth and Process movements, it ignores other important features of those movements that could have helped students improve their writing. While the desired content product is clearly defined in the Assignment Sheet, In-Class Discussion, Model, and Grading Rubric, the audience is never addressed and the process of how to achieve that product is ignored. While these may have been addressed in class, they are certainly important enough features to be included in an assignment sheet. My feeling that the assignment was too prescriptive of a certain product, (suggesting what content should be in each paragraph, numbering four paragraphs), could have been dealt with by instead suggesting various processes that could be used to achieve acceptable papers. These processes of analysis, explanation, and writing would be more universal and less likely to be restrictive than a description of each paragraph. A critique of Process not limited to this paper would argue an oversimplification of writing problems, which extends to this paper as well. While showing awareness in subject choice for the basic writing students, this assignment offers little help in overcoming the grammar and usage errors endemic in basic writing. Mina Shaughnessy’s work on basic writing could be usefully applied to this assignment, but not to change the focus from content to trivialities of error.


Written Explanation of Romeo and Juliet Art Project

4 paragraphs
- Introduction – what you are doing and why
- Description of your Art Project in detail
- Description of the scene your project is about
- Explanation of how you chose the details of your project and what those details mean.

Description of art project in detail
  “Describe your art project in detail.”

Description of textual basis for art project
  “Describe the scene that your project is about.”

Reasoned defense of choices made in art production
  Describe how you chose your art project.
  Explain what the details mean.

Producing a scene
  Reasons for choosing this scene
  Explanation of choices.
  Details? Props, costumes, setting, language changes?
  Explain the original and how you changed / interpreted it?

Writing a Scene
  What characters are in this scenes, existing characters, new characters?
  Why should this scene be included in the play?
  What does this scene add to the play?
  Explain the original and how you changed / interpreted it?

Dancing a Scene
  Why was this scene chosen?
  What style of dance is this, and how is that appropriate for this scene?
  What do movements of the dance show us about the characters?
  Explain the original and how you changed / interpreted it?

Musical scene
  What scene or part of a scene have you chosen to represent with music?
  What style of music have you chosen?
  How does the music reflect the ideas of the text?
  Explain the original and how you changed / interpreted it?

Photo/Drawing/Painting
  What scene or part of a scene have you chosen?
  What details of your picture have you decided upon? (setting, clothing, positions of people)
  What do these details show us about the characters?
  Explain the original and how you changed / interpreted it?
Project Assignment Sheet

**Producing a Scene – Performance Guidelines**

1. Introduce yourselves and tell what you will be doing.
2. Set-up your scene using whatever props or costumes you need. These could be as simple as a sword, or a hat, or dressing everyone from one family in a single color.
3. Perform your scene, reading from notes, *(NOT THE BOOK)*. Be sure not to turn your back on the audience.
4. Explain to the audience why you chose to perform the scene this way.

**Writing Guidelines** - include
- Reasons for choosing this scene
- Explanation of choices – Why do the characters look the way they do? What emotions are they showing and why?
- Details? Describe props, setting, any changes you make
- Explain how you interpreted the original scene.

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**Writing a Scene – Performance Guidelines**

1. Introduce yourself and tell what you will be doing.
2. Either alone, or with others, read or perform your scene for the class. If your scene is very long (over 5 minutes to read), then read only part of your scene.
3. While reading or performing, make sure you are reading in loud clear voices and that you have planned out ahead of time what you are doing. Everyone reading should have a copy of the lines. Do not turn your back on the audience.
4. Explain to the class what you were trying to accomplish or convey in your scene. Why did you choose to perform or write it in this way?

**Writing Guidelines** - include
- What characters are in this scenes, existing characters, new characters?
- Why should this scene be included in the play?
- What does this scene add to the play?
- Explain the original and how you changed / interpreted it?

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**Musical Interpretation – Performance Guidelines**

1. Introduce yourselves and tell what you will be doing.
2. **BEFORE** you perform your scene, make sure that you explain what scene you will be representing, what song you chose for that scene
3. Perform your song for the class.
4. Explain why you chose that song for this scene and what the song reveals about the scene.

**Writing Guidelines** – include
- What scene or part of scene have you chosen to represent with music?
- What style of music have you chosen?
How does the music reflect the ideas of the text?
Explain the original and how you changed / interpreted it?

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**Dance Interpretation – Performance Guidelines**
1. Introduce yourselves and tell what you will be doing.
2. Explain what scene you have chosen **BEFORE** you perform, tell the audience what it will be watching.
3. Perform your scene, paying attention to how characters and actions are represented.
4. Explain how you decided to perform your scene like you did.

**Writing Guidelines** - include
Why was this scene chosen?
What style of dance is this, and how is that appropriate for this scene?
What do movements of the dance show us about the characters?
Explain the original and how you changed / interpreted it?

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**Visual Art (Drawing / Photograph) – Performance Guidelines**
1. Introduce yourselves and tell what you will be doing.
2. Show your picture, drawing, or photograph to the class. If it is not large enough to be seen by everyone, you can carry it around to show.
3. Explain what scene or what moment your picture represents, noting all the characters that are present. Explain why you chose that scene, and what choices you made while making the picture, (who is in the scene, how people are arranged, what people are doing).

**Writing Guidelines** – include
What scene or part of a scene have you chosen?
What details of your picture have you decided upon? (setting, clothing, positions of people)
What do these details show us about the characters?
Explain the original and how you changed / interpreted it?
Written Explanation Grading Rubric

Name:  
Total Score:  
Period:  
Date:  
Project Description:  

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Comments:

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Written Explanation Example Intro

My art project for Romeo & Juliet is a new scene for the play that describes what would happen if Romeo talked to Capulet at the party in Act I, Scene 5. This is an important change because Capulet never learns about Romeo’s love for Juliet, and then insists that she marry Paris. If Romeo was able to let Capulet know about his love for Juliet before this started, the problem with Paris might have been avoided. However, Capulet doesn’t accept Romeo and still insists that Juliet marry Paris.