

From Jan Esparza, an actor and theater teacher I met in Mexico at an Int'l School's Conference...

On backward design...

As a professional actor, I have worked with many kinds of directors:

There are those who keep their ideas as a secret in which only they (or perhaps not so much) have the conception of what the final performance would be like. One can get much by working with these god-like omnipotent directors who only give its performers a glimpse of what should be achieved. It is thrilling to try to solve the enigmas of the work in progress when one allows his imagination to fly and inquire about the life of the director and the nature of the play. However, when working with them, one feels a constant fear that most of the time hinders the performer's creativity as he constantly questions himself: am I doing things right? In these cases (when the director is good), the performer is usually surprised by the successful end result, and looks back as he sighs out all the struggle and suffering that at times filled his mind through the process.

There are those directors who from the beginning express a vague conception of how the play would turn out by the end, and they tend to be stronger at explaining the rehearsal process, resulting in empowered performers. Working with these directors is a joy for the actors, but the performances tend to be disjointed, as there is no cohesion in the different tones and energy of the actors. In these processes, there is always a feeling of "if": if we would have done this and that differently... if we would have had more time to rehearse... if the audience was more open to our views as a company..., etc.. In most of these cases, the empowered actor feels lost when faced with the results.

Finally, there are those directors who have gone through an extensive planning process in which they know what they want the performance to be like as they are able to explain the goals regarding the opening night and throughout the rehearsing process to the whole company. I doubt that the first and second kind of directors have not gone through an extensive planning process, and I also doubt that they do not know what they want to achieve. However, I do regard the latter directors as the ones who are able to produce work that transcends. It is in these processes when actors (students) become empowered from the rehearsing process (learning engagements) and throughout the performances (summative assessment). It is in these processes when actors and members of the company develop a working environment capable of integrating ideas as creativity flows amongst them by developing their own vernacular as they work for a common goal. The beauty of it all is that by working under these circumstances, the end result and the engagements designed for the rehearsing process is always subject to change, but do to the way in which every member is involved, including director, actors and producing company, the modifications in the working process, if any, seem to fall into the same goal as everyone is working collaboratively in a healthy learning process.

The latter environment can easily be compared to that of a healthy education programme at all age levels ranging from preschool to post graduate. If the director is the teacher, the actors are the students, the producing company are all members of the collaborative planning process, the engagements are the rehearsing process and the performances is the summative assessment, it is then clear to analyse the importance of the role of backward design regarding any learning process.