

Ann Frkovich and Annie Thoms

The Monologue Project for Creating Vital Drama in Secondary Schools

High school students create and perform interview-based monologues that help them “talk about the critical issues that underlie our daily lives.” Ann Frkovich and Annie Thoms share student samples and advice for teachers who want to give students a powerful speaking and writing tool.

On a darkened stage in a high school in lower Manhattan, a spotlight goes on. One by one, ten students step forward to speak of September 11 and the days and weeks that followed in their community, four blocks from the site of the World Trade Center. They speak in the words of others: their peers, teachers, custodians, and security guards. Each monologue has been created from interviews with the people whose stories are told. As the night progresses, these stories begin to weave together, creating a tapestry of experience. In 2002, the play is published by HarperCollins as *with their eyes: September 11th: the view from a high school at ground zero*.

In a Milwaukee classroom, three sections of a Women’s Voices class discuss how the voices and perspectives of women have been silenced, and they talk about the stories they want to hear and reclaim. They make lists of all the women they know, or would like to know, whose stories they want to hear. They make lists of questions to ask their expert interviewees and set up the interviews, readying themselves to listen and watch closely. They will record the interviews on audiotape, transcribe them, and edit them into monologues that preserve natural language. In a month, these students will *become* the women they have interviewed, hearing and reclaiming the voices of the silenced.

Over the last four years, in the high school classrooms and theaters where we teach—Annie at Stuyvesant High School in New York City, Ann at Pius XI High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin—we

have experimented with the interview-based monologue. The results have astounded us.

As educators, we know that millions of students in thousands of school communities could use the chance to talk about the critical issues that underlie our daily lives. Some of these are national and global issues; some are the issues of daily teenage life. The monologue project is one way to provide that chance. It is a method for collecting stories: journalism, oral history, poetry, and performance rolled into one.

Our work on the monologue project was inspired in part by Anna Deavere Smith’s one-woman shows *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. In each, Smith interviewed and performed in the character of a number of people in neighborhoods that had experienced periods of great unrest: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in 1991 and Los Angeles in 1992. In the introduction to *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith writes: “Speaking teaches us what our natural ‘literature’ is. In fact, everyone, in a given amount of time, will say something that is like poetry. The process of getting to that poetic moment is where ‘character’ lives” (xxxix). In the late 1990s, Erick Gordon and Juliette LaMontagne used Smith’s structure to create the Mockingbird Monologues, a project in which eighth graders wrote and performed *Fires in the Mirror*-style monologues in the voices of characters from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Vinz). Smith’s monologue form, whether fiction-on-fiction or based in oral history, allows for a greater understanding of the complexities of language and char-

acter in our everyday lives as well as in the literature we study.

The Monologue Project in Your Classroom: A Brief Guide

The following guide is not exhaustive; this is a project that benefits from being tailored to each community in which it is used.

Provide students with examples of related work. Students read aloud previous student monologues and examine the natural speaking patterns of everyday people that inform character and identity, such as accents, vernacular, slang, and dialect. We discuss the effect of line breaks, which imply how the monologues should be spoken. Other helpful examples of documentary monologue plays and layered storytelling include Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem*.

Watch Anna Deavere Smith and/or previous students in taped performances. Watching Smith's work is extremely effective in highlighting the importance of voice and gesture and showing the ways in which she turns herself into several different people, one after another. Previous student performances provide current students with attainable models.

Turn the class into a theater company. Students work together toward a class performance three to four weeks away. The classroom becomes a production space, within which critical issues will be examined, interviews will be designed, and monologues will be rehearsed.

Discuss and determine critical issues. Discussion may initially be focused by the topic of the course, as it has been in our Women's Voices classes, or by immediate circumstances in the community, as it was at Stuyvesant after September 11. Students brainstorm a variety of subtopics related to the larger issue: What kinds of women's stories have been silenced? What issues do you think most affect people locally, nationally, or globally? What recent events or current issues are critical to the school community? We offer a forum for students to focus on the ideas and issues that are important to them, constructing curriculum together in dialogue (Stock). Once we have introduced the questions, students

freewrite for five minutes on possible issues, circle their top three, and choose one to share with the class. We put these up on the board. Students note common themes and choose a single or related issue on which to focus: racism or racism and violence.

Choose experts to interview. Students brainstorm: Who might be an expert on this topic? Members of the community and even family members may come to the fore here. We discuss methods of politely approaching possible interviewees, explaining the monologue project, and asking for permission to conduct the interview.

Develop strong interview questions. As a company, students work together to brainstorm questions that will elicit open-ended response and encourage interviewees to tell their stories. These questions go up on the board, and the class determines which are the strongest and why. In a class focusing on a single issue (racism and violence, community reaction to a school dress code, the role of technology in modern society), all students will ask their interviewees the same basic set of questions, adding their own when appropriate. In a class focusing on multiple issues (women's stories of discrimination in the workplace, abortion, sexual assault), each student will create a list of questions.

Practice note-taking skills. Though students will audiotape their interviews, they must write down observations and follow-up questions as their interviewees speak. For later writing of stage directions and character description, students will note their interviewees' gestures, appearance, and mannerisms.

Record the interview on audiocassette. While some schools and school districts are able to provide small tape recorders to students, most students have little trouble finding or borrowing audio-recording equipment. (Some students have used video cameras, but they find interviewees speak less naturally when the camera is rolling. Furthermore, students are then mimicking performance, rather than carefully studying the nuances of language.)

Transcribe and edit the interview. After recording their interviews, students listen closely, choosing the portions of the interview they will transcribe: moments that tell a story, moments when their interviewee's

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character comes alive in language. Identifying the crux of the interview is difficult for many students: Where is the moment of greatest drama, comedy, or tragedy? We go back to our models and discuss why Smith and previous students chose to give us the moments that they did. In small groups, students help each other find their crux and transcribe these moments word for word, replicating pauses and inflections using line breaks. They capture vernacular dialect and slang, often creating new spellings in the process. In transcription and editing, students become attuned to alliteration and assonance and experiment with white space and enjambment. They become intimately familiar with the unrhymed line. Class time is devoted to group work as students help each other edit the interviews into monologues and share their experiences of the project. Group work allows the teacher time and freedom to give individualized instruction to students of all ability levels.

Rehearse. On their own and in class, students practice their interviewees' gestures and speaking style. Together, they discuss costumes, props, and tips for memorization, diction, and projection. Students with acting experience assist with direction and performance techniques. Boys portraying women can receive excellent pointers on how to cross their legs like women; girls can also learn how to posture themselves like men.

Write the title, character name, and stage description. Using Smith's monologues, *with their eyes*, and previous student work as models, students write brief descriptions of their interviewees, including relevant information about costumes, props, energy, and gesture. They choose titles for each monologue and identify their interviewees by name (or, in the case of those who wish to remain anonymous, by other attributes: "Anonymous Male Custodian," "Anonymous Sixteen-Year-Old Girl").

Performance and Beyond

There are various ways to stage the final performance. We recommend performance of all the monologues on a single day to highlight the ways in which individual stories overlap and weave a collective story.

In-class performance. Students sign up for or are assigned a time slot on the day of performance, which is held in the classroom or on an in-school field trip to the theater. In either setting, we recommend creating a performance space: in the theater, students might sit in a circle on the stage, getting

up one by one to perform; in the classroom, the front of the room can be cleared and desks rearranged to form rows with a central aisle. Students and teachers from other classes may be invited to join the class as audience members, though it is useful to set aside a period without a larger audience for those students who are uncomfortable with public performance. Before the performance, students change into their costumes and gather their props. We encourage them to memorize the monologues but do not require it.

Performance as a play. The monologue project may begin as a play, as it did at Stuyvesant with *with their eyes*, or move from in-class performance to performance for a larger school audience. In the latter case, we work with students to choose the strongest monologues from the class performance. In both cases, students work together to create an order for the monologues, highlighting themes and contradictions through their arrangement. A public performance date is set, and students memorize their monologues. Sets and lighting may be added.

Processing and assessment. After the performance, in whole-class discussion and/or written self-assessment, we pose the following questions: What was the experience of performance like? What connections, themes, and contradictions did you notice? What do we as a class know about this critical issue that we did not know when we began?

Postperformance options. Monologues may be collected and bound together as a publication, perhaps with copies housed in the school library for future use. In mounting a production, making a class book, or both, teachers may want to explore the creation of multimedia pieces: adding film and artwork, timelines, maps, introductions, forewords, dedications, or fictional pieces based on the project.

The English classroom and beyond. Many English teachers, following the examples of Ken Macrorie and Tom Romano, are currently implementing I-Search and multigenre approaches to writing research papers. The monologue project, with its focus on student inquiry and careful listening, can be used with both research formats. Social studies or humanities teachers might use the monologue project for any unit that covers twentieth- or twenty-first-century history, asking their students to record, document, and perform anyone who has lived through significant historical events important to that unit. In collecting oral history, students gain an authentic firsthand account of the cultural and social history

often left out of textbooks. The work of Studs Terkel to preserve and document the collective oral history of the American experience is a valuable resource when teaching this method. The importance of historical preservation and documentation becomes clear as students create a living time capsule, a work they can bequeath to the students who come after them.

Helping Students Value and Capture Voices: Two Case Studies

While it is often necessary to focus the monologue project around a specific theme, idea, or occasion, we find that this focus works best when students themselves, explicitly or implicitly, bring it to the table. We strongly urge teachers to allow their students the time and opportunity to find the specific themes, ideas, and occasions that critically impact them. Two case studies discuss the approaches we have taken with the monologue project.

Ann's Case Study: Finding Critical Issues in Daily Life

In the fall of 2001, I used the monologue project as a final, performance-based evaluation of the many themes and issues discussed in my Women's Voices class at Pius XI High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Students interviewed and portrayed classmates who struggled with young love, friendship, body image, and eating disorders. They portrayed mothers with colorful stories—timeless, coming-of-age realities. They performed women who cooked and cleaned and could not sit down as they chatted about their fulfilled and unfulfilled dreams. Some performed women who were too tired to keep working. Some students performed monologues in Spanish, Italian, or Vietnamese and supplied translations. Many teachers were performed; one even lent a student her blazer for an authentic costume. Students wore their interviewees' robes, aprons, slippers, dresses, jewelry, and glasses. As I watched the student actors and nonactors read and perform their monologues, it became clear to me that the day of performance is not necessarily an exercise in creating perfectly delivered drama. It is, more vitally, an exercise in bearing witness (see fig. 1).

I now use the monologue project to introduce a unit on playwriting in my creative writing classes for juniors and seniors at Pius. Each section chooses a topic critical to them locally, nationally, or globally.

Past topics testify to the variety of responses: For experts on the Green Bay Packers and the popular Milwaukee festival Summerfest (a local issue), students sought out Summerfest employees, diehard Packers fans, police officers, bar owners, local grocers, musicians, poets, activists, neighbors, and neighborhood personalities. For experts on media and technology (a national issue), students interviewed surgeons and computer gamers, little girls who are fans of the Olsen twins, and old men who find that they can no longer live without the convenience of the remote control. For experts on racism and violence (a global issue), students interviewed victims of racial profiling and bosses who were cavalier and frightening with their uncensored, racist remarks. Projects demonstrated diversity, perspective, complexity, and ambiguity.

I invited students from each section of my creative writing classes to perform on Pius's Fine Arts Day. Each student performed three or four monologues, with costume changes, over the course of an hour. Student directors and stage managers conducted rehearsals for these performances. Throughout the rehearsals, I was an observer. I got the sense that students saw a real purpose for bringing their work to a larger audience. I videotaped these performances and use them as student examples of the monologue project (see fig. 2).

Annie's Case Study: Critical Issues Thrust upon Us

In the fall of 2001, I began my second year at Stuyvesant High School, full of plans for revitalizing the theater community as well as teaching my English classes. On September 11, those plans were put on hold. Stuyvesant's 3,200 students, faculty, and staff evacuated our building, four blocks from Ground Zero, and walked uptown to safety as the towers fell behind us. For ten days we had no school. Stuyvesant is a magnet school, with students from all five boroughs of New York; we were physically separated from each other by the breadth

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FIGURE 1. Women's Voices

From "At Eighteen"

Crystal, by Cari Bickle

At 18, living as such a young parent and wife
I kinda miss that I didn't go to college and have a career
but
maybe some day
after
my kids grow up
cause I'll still be young
I mean I'll still be pretty young
when
when they leave the house
maybe I can start a career then
when I'm about 35 or so and then I won't have to miss out on that
And my daughter Maria is now 14 months old
and
it's such a joy watching her grow and do new things
but
at the same time it's also difficult for me to think about those kind of
things
because
the child I'm carrying right now
isn't gonna make it according to the doctors
because they say that they can't see any kidneys, bladder, and amniotic fluid
and when I first found out
that—
the baby wasn't going to be able to
live
it—
was really hard
all we did was cry for the next couple of days
and
just couldn't believe that it was happening to us
and
I just kept trying to find answers and reasons why it happened to
me
and
what did I do wrong
and
and
just searching for answers and reading the Bible
trying to find similar things that happened to people
and just trying to find a sign—
from God, that everything was going to be OK—

From “At the Very Border”

Magi S. Jalea, by Shanleigh Jalea
(in Ilonggo, the Philippine dialect, and English)

Manga NPA to nga nag pa pundo to sa amon.
NPA, New People’s Army,
manga “communist” bala sa aton lugar haw.
Dasun,
gin kadto ya gid kami sa sulod salakyan kag
nag siling nga, “Day,
panaog lang kamo da.
Pareho malang ang aton causa.
Indi ka mo namon pag anhong. Panaog kamo lang.”

So . . .
wala kami ka intiende so nag pati lang kami.

Na naog kami sa daw
canal canal. Kadto kami to.
Nga, “Hapa lang kamo to.”
. . . Baw!
Damo damo na gali to ga hinapa
Nga manga tawo!

Soon,
May nag lupok—
PAK-PAK-PAK . . . BOOM!
Ato gali
sign na to sa manga NPA nga mag retreat na sila!
They were thinking
siguro kuno nga ang military ma subol sa ila
via the land
WALA!
Nag agi via the sea ang manga military!
Ato to sa buli namon nga gina hinapa kami ya,
ang military ato to gali ga kamang pakadto

Na batian nalang namon nga nag may singit na,
“Yo depota! Damo gali tawo di ho!”
Military na to.
Amo to,
because of that incident,
nag decide gid ako nga
I have to leave Philippines.
Sa work ko,
na kay ka danger—
may hazard pay kami to.
Ndi ka bayad ang hazard pay mo to sang nerbios mo.

*It was the NPA who stopped us.
NPA, New People’s Army
who we would call “communist.”
Well,
they actually went up to our car and
said, “Miss,
please get out of the car.
We’re all fighting for the same cause.
We’re not going to do anything to you. Just get out.”*

*So . . .
we didn’t know what was going on so we just did what
we were told.
They took us down to this
canal place. That’s where we went.
They said, “Lie on the ground over there.”
. . . Oh man!
There were already all these people there
lying on the ground!

*Soon,
there was an explosion—
PAK-PAK-PAK . . . BOOM!
That was actually
a signal for the NPA to retreat!
They were thinking
that the military was going to attack
via the land
THEY DIDN’T!
The military went via the sea!
There, behind where we were on the ground,
was where the military actually was, crawling
in the rice fields toward us.
But finally, all we heard was someone yell out,
“Son of a b*tch! There are people here!”
It was the military.
So,
because of that incident,
I decided then that
I have to leave the Philippines.
My job,
because of its danger—
they gave us hazard pay.
But hazard pay can’t pay for how scared you were.*

of the shocked city. I went online to find that students were writing to each other, posting hundreds of individual stories: where they had walked, who they had stayed with, how they had gotten home, who they had lost. Reading these stories, I was struck by students' need to record and share each detail of their experience. The tragedy had been communal, yes, but each of us had a story to tell.

When we returned to Stuyvesant in early October, the climate had changed. Many students felt overwhelmed by the 9/11 news coverage and wanted

simply to return to their work. The effects of the attack, and our evacuation, were hidden under a surface of normalcy. When the time came to choose a play for our Winter Drama, I remembered the stories that had been so necessary for students to tell in September and decided to start digging.

Working with a student director and two student producers, I cast ten actors from all four grades. Together, we brainstormed interviewees, and each actor went out to record two or three interviews, asking about people's experiences on September 11 and

FIGURE 2. Critical Issues

From "Five Dollars and Sixty-Five Cents"

Juan Carlos, by Marcos Montero

Every night when I went home, my back
My poor back
It was killing me from . . . from leaning over and
washing those . . . those dishes
They never stop coming . . . one right after the next
OK, it was a Saturday night around 10:50
Like always, I was helping close
The cooks were still there
The two cooks were white . . . and I remember they used
to pushed me around
I still remember what they called me . . . Ah ah wetback
See what you have to know is that back then I didn't
know English
I didn't know what wetback meant . . . they just laugh
and I felt stupid so I
. . . I also laugh with them
They just laughed and called me a "Stupid Mexican"
Knowing a few swear words I told him the best I could
I said, . . . Beech
Exactly like that
They were very angry
After I was doing everything . . . aum around 11:15
I left walking to my house
On 8th and Mitchell they just . . . they just
Jumped me and beat me up
I saw them laughing and saying
"Stupid Mexican" "Stupid Mexican"
I was hurting pretty bad when they dropped me and
Started kicking me
I remember screaming . . . After that they left
I got myself up and walked in agony to my house
I was so angry and . . .
And . . . I felt hopeless
This all happen why . . . because . . . I'm Mexican

From "Scraping Their Pockets"

Darrel, McDonald's

Store Manager,
by Brandon Pokrzewinski

I witness racism almost every day here
at McDonald's
I take that back—
it's not really racism as much as it
is classism.
Truck drivers come in here scraping their
pockets for change—
so they can buy a ninety-nine cent
cheeseburger.
And then there's the business people—
they're usually moody as hell—
they're in such a rush complaining that
they only have thirty
minutes for lunch.
Those are the people we could
do without.

Now don't take offense to this—
but I would rather serve a white customer
than a minority.
There is one thing that upsets me
though—
I was born in Wisconsin
and I have worked all my life
to have what I have.
What really pisses me off is when I see
some foreigner—
they come through the drive-thru and can
barely speak English
Yet they're driving a brand-new BMW.
That bothers me—
But I avoid confrontation. (Chuckles)

FIGURE 3. Views from Ground Zero

Overture**Kevin Zhang, sophomore**

I saw this
huge plane it was . . .
 it looked much bigger than the first one,
 it just,
 it looked like one of those jets, you know,
 in the movies,
 you know, Air Force One or something, one
 of those big jets.
 It was one of those and it just hits—
 it hit the building right there.

Katherine Fletcher, English teacher

I noticed it enough to say to my class
 what was that
 sort of casually
 I wasn't scared or alarmed I just sort of said what
 what was that
 and someone said
 thunder
 and I was like no
 it's not thunder
 it must have been a truck
 it was like a sound of a truck like hitting
 something on a street or
 you know how sometimes you'll hear something
 like that.

Hudson Williams-Eynon, freshman

We all went to Art.
 My art class is on the tenth floor
 turned
 facing north so
 we couldn't see anything but
 everyone was looking out
 the windows
 so
 the teacher was like
 "You know,
 this might sound stupid and everything
 but I still want you guys to draw.
 You can tell your kids that when
 the World Trade Center was
 y'know
 attacked
 you guys were drawing
 contour drawings."

Juan Carlos Lopez, School Safety Agent

I got this weird transmission
 the strangest transmission in my life
 that a plane hit the World Trade Center
 and I ran into the computer room to see.
 I haven't gotten back into that office.
 The recollection of what I saw is framed in that window,
 like if I had to draw you a picture I would
 have to draw the window frame as well.
 I'm a little apprehensive,
 just looking at these banners I get a little choked up.
 So I—I fear going into that office
 I might lose my composure.
 But it's been long enough that maybe I could go into that office
 and take it in
 but I, I—
 you know in a way I don't feel ready, I don't.

Katie Berringer, freshman

We didn't know what was going on
 so when we see this like
 psychopathic lady running down the hallway
 like "I need to call my mother, I need to call my mother!"
 and we're like
What is wrong with HER?
 and we didn't know what was going on so we were like
 laughing at her.
 But then we heard that thing on the speakers
 but we still thought it was like
 tiny and they were telling us out of respect
 like when that guy died and everyone had a moment of silence.
 We thought it was something like that—
 but I saw my friend and he was telling me
 like about all these things he was seeing out the windows
 and I was like *holy shit*
 this is big.

Jennifer Suri, Assistant Principal, Social Studies

There were students who came into my office to use the phone
 to touch base with their parents
 to see if they were okay . . .
 and there were actually many of them crowded into my room
 and the electricity went out
 momentarily and the lights started flickering and
 everyone screamed
 and dropped to the floor, frightened.
 And I just tried to comfort them.

From *with their eyes: September 11th: the view from a high school at ground zero*, ed. Annie Thoms (New York: Harper, 2002), 21–26. Text copyright 2002 Tareh Batra, Anna Belc, Marcel Briones, Catherine Choy, Tim Drinan, Ilena George, Shaleigh Jalea, Lindsay Long-Waldor, Liz O'Callahan, Chantelle Smith, Michael Vogel, Carlos Williams, Christopher Yee & the NYC Board of Education. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

in the two months afterward. We worried that people might be reluctant to talk; we found the opposite. Our interviewees spoke eloquently, thoughtfully, as if they had been waiting to be listened to. Their words were vital, and their voices varied: students of different ages, teachers, a custodian, a security guard, a dining-hall worker, two students from the special education satellite program within our building. The monologues took on personal reactions and political rhetoric; they delved into great pain but were sprinkled with hope and humor. When performed together, they formed an extraordinary tapestry.

Late in 2001, an editor at HarperCollins contacted me, looking for student writing that might help other students deal with the enormity of September 11, and in the fall of 2002, *with their eyes* was published (see fig. 3). Since the book's publication, several high schools around the country have contacted me about dramatizing it. The play has been performed in Kansas, Colorado, Florida, and West Virginia, and students from schools in these states have contacted my students, eager to connect.

I continue to use the monologue project in my Women's Voices class, asking, as Ann does, for the voices of the silenced. I show the students *with their eyes*, and it opens a door for them to talk, if they choose, about their own experiences three years ago. In one more year, none of my students will have been present on September 11, 2001. I hope the play will serve as an institutional history for those who come after them.

Using the Monologue Project to Meet English Standards

The monologue project gives students an authentic purpose for the mastery of English standards. Students are asked to be comfortable with diversity and multiple perspectives. They obtain, organize, and assess information from a source and credit that source. They incorporate technology, using tape recorders and word processing. They examine literary terms, such as imagery, symbolism, and theme, while crafting their in-

formation into a monologue. They use presentational standards and appropriate grammatical conventions to create sentences and poetic lines, which reveal an authentic voice. They organize and develop ideas and prepare multiple drafts of creative spoken and written pieces. Students create and negotiate in large and small groups. They employ critical-thinking skills in performing, critiquing, and interpreting finished drafts. They begin to see the complexity and ambiguity of their lives and experiences as something also inherent in literature and fiction.

A Critical Need for Understanding

The monologues are often uncensored and honest. Sometimes they are deeply disturbing. Teachers and students must be ready to hear the stories their interviewees need to tell. Students have been initially uncomfortable with conveying tragic or disconcerting stories, but they are comforted by the multilayering approach of the monologue project. When these monologues are performed together, they are not individual voices but the collective voice of a community. Teachers and students must be pioneers in the creation of our new literature: stories that are vital, poetic, and honest.

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