Background:

While reading John Steinbeck’s novella, *Of Mice and Men*, the 9th grade class analyzed concepts such as personal and social accountability, intention, and power dynamics. To further connect these themes with literature, the class pressed criminal charges against the fictional character, George Milton, for killing his partner with an intellectual disability. For the last eight school days, the class divided into two legal teams—prosecution and defense—to prove his guilt or innocence. The students must assume the roles of lawyers, novella character witnesses, and research expert witnesses. The students were given role-specific packets with individualized role details, rubrics, examples, graphic organizers, and daily check lists. The mock trial performance and its corresponding writing assignments—opening and closing statement scripts, direct- and cross-examination questions and responses, and witnesses’ testimonies—will function as the unit’s final assessment.

Best Practices advocate that curriculum should be experiential because “students learn most powerfully from doing, not just listening” (Zemelman 12). The project-based learning format requires students to critically evaluate the book’s plot, characters, and authorial intention, so they can construct a focused and persuasive argument, while also anticipating the opposing team’s counterargument. A mock trial is a deconstructed and collaborative persuasive paper, but students hardly recognized this because it builds on prior knowledge and encourages creativity. Furthermore, Best Practices argue that the class should be interactive and collaborative (Zemelman 16-7). While I conducted team conferences and provided individual feedback, the extensive nature of the project also necessitated that students hold themselves and each other accountable and encouraged. Each team nominated a team leader, who helped maintain timelines and ensure cohesion.

Today’s Learning Focus:

The mock trial culminates the fruits of the students’ writing and strategic labors and adds performative, speaking, and listening elements. Common Core Standards necessitates that students learn how to “present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task” (SL.9-10.4). While the students’ writing has been created in fragmented parts, today we will see if the students have pieced the sections together in a coherent and persuasive way. Additionally, 9th grade students must “adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate” (SL.9-10.6). Students must present themselves in a way that suits their role, i.e. character witnesses are encouraged to adopt the speech and behavior displayed in the novella, while expert witnesses and lawyers will use formal language and jargon. Today’s lesson is simultaneously blending written, verbal, and social skills.
Learning-centered Inquiry
1. Write any evidence of students developing and exercising their writing and speaking skills as well as reading comprehension.

2. How do students show that they are following the development of the trial? Record evidence of their contributions, confusions, etc.

Practice-centered Inquiry:
1. Is a mock trial an effective form of assessing student understanding?

2. Do the students seem engaged by this activity? Given its collaborative nature, are the students working together to reinforce ideas and efforts, clarify misunderstandings, and positively encourage their peers?