

PUPPETRY IN THE WRITING CURRICULUM

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The uniquely playful nature of the art of puppetry leads students to learn while engaging them in a process of interaction, imagination, and creativity. Puppetry in the classroom curriculum offers teachers and students a fun and inspiring tool to enliven many areas of the standard course of study.

The ancient and global art of puppetry communicates via a combination of visual imagery and playwriting. Students will construct simple puppets during this unit, however, the focus will be on *learning to create multidimensional characters as well as effective stories and plays.* The use of puppets as a fun and inspirational tool to stimulate an understanding of well-crafted and meaningful stories is at the heart of the students' work.

The following describes a brief unit on puppetry appropriate for the K-5th grades, that directly reinforces the goals of the elementary level language arts curriculum, including story mapping, character development, literary genres, and methods of editing/critique.

UNIT CONTENTS:

- 1) Make a stress-free puppet
- 2) Understanding Character Development
- 3) From Story Mapping to Storytelling
- 4) From Improvisation to Performance



NORTH CAROLINA STANDARD COURSE OF STUDY GOALS ADDRESSED:

Competency Goals 1 – 4 of the English Language Arts Curriculum Grades K – 5

Competency Goals 1 – 8 of the Theater Arts Curriculum Grades K – 5

Competency Goals 1, 7 and 8 of the Elementary Guidance Curriculum

Oral and Written Language Developmental Continuum; Grades k-2 and 3-5

The Unit described follows the NC Guidelines for Thinking Skills
(Knowing, Organizing, Applying, Analyzing, Generating, Integrating, Evaluating)

The unit addresses multiple learning styles.

STRESS-FREE PUPPET-MAKING

No Water, No Paint, No Glue, (and almost) No Scissors...

It has been my experience that many classroom teachers are almost phobic about the idea of constructing puppets in their classrooms. I think it conjures up frightening visions of goopy paper-mache covered balloons drying for days on windowsills! Here is the simplest possible method that I have found to create puppets with lots of individual character, and very little prep or clean-up.

In an average class, this will take approximately 1 hour

You Will Need:

One Styrofoam egg per student (preferably 4 inch)

Tongue Depressors

Pipe Cleaners (Multicolored, cut into 4ths, plus a few uncut)

Colored craft pom-poms

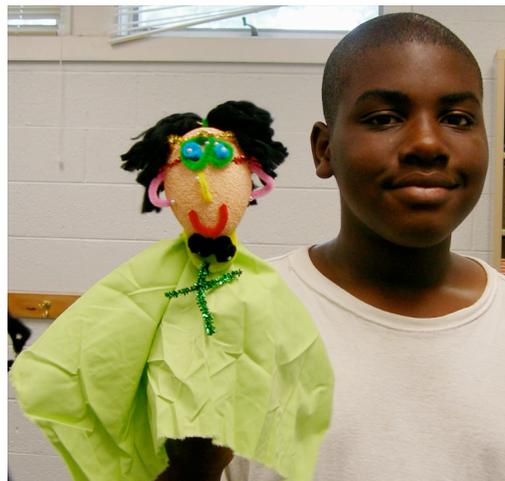
Fat Yarn (Roving)

Long Map Pins (straight pins with the little plastic ball on the end)*

* Don't worry, in 20 years I have yet to see a single pin injury!

Cheap bed sheets torn into approx 1 ft squares (one twin flat = 12 squares)

- 1) Insert tongue depressor at the base of the egg, behind the point, which becomes the chin.
- 2) Use straight pins to affix pom-poms for eyes
- 3) Push pipe cleaners into the egg to form, nose, mouth, eyebrows, antennae, etc
- 4) Loop yarn around your hand 6 –8 times and affix to head with a pipe cleaner. Cut the loops. Note: younger students will need help with this step.
- 5) Remove head from stick, drape cloth over stick, push the cloth covered stick firmly back into the egg where it came out.



CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Puppetry is an amazingly effective tool for character development, combining literary, visual and theater arts.

After constructing their puppets, students will work on developing the puppets character, in essence, creating a life for it. We will use an interactive interview process to tease out the components of a character including habits and habitats, hopes and dreams, and very big problems. These components can then be written into puppet biographies and offer a jumping off point for a discussion of story-form.

Exercises:

1) Discuss and define the words character and characteristics.

What are the traits that make us who we are? Make a distinction between physical characteristics and personality traits. Discuss how one might affect the other.

2) Create a “TV Studio” in your classroom and host a talk show. With younger grades, the teacher will be the host and interview the puppets. Use a “microphone” (a fat marker will do) and focus your attention on the puppet, not the child. Try to tease out as many details as possible. Take questions from your “studio audience” (the class), have the puppet elaborate as much as possible. Find out about their likes and dislikes, families, and their opinions. Each character should have a big dream, and one serious problem, this makes for a more interesting and lifelike character.



NOTE: Often, this process of character development will reveal an insight into the (sometimes hidden) reality of a child's own personal life. Be aware, and be gentle! I have interviewed many puppets whose parents are divorcing, who wish they had a dad, who have no friends, etc. I have even experienced indicators of trauma and abuse. Sometimes it is a child's imagination, but sometimes it is real. It should always be kept in mind that a puppet can often say things that a child cannot.

1) Autobiography:

The puppeteer writes from the perspective of the puppet in first person. Be sure to use the phrases “I think” and “I feel”

2) Biography:

In pairs, each student further questions the partner's puppet and writes it's biography. Biographers may share their own ideas *about* the character as well.

FROM STORY MAPPING TO STORYTELLING:

Puppetry provides a great opportunity to reinforce an understanding of story form and construction.

Students are usually chomping at the bit to “play” with their puppets. All you need to do is provide a specific structure to harness and organize that energy. I often like to use a “cooking” metaphor because it seems to be one that is clear and that kids relate to easily. Make sure to use lots of interesting details as “the spice”.

EXERCISES:

1) Introduce or review story form.

If students are already familiar with the template that your curriculum suggests, then use the same one. If not, I like to use a **recipe** with the following **ingredients**:

Situation = Who or what, where, and when.

Conflict = Problem

Transformation = Change (where the magic happens)

Resolution = Tie up loose ends into The End.

2) Develop a group story with your class.

Use a brainstorming format and follow the “recipe”. Begin with the phrase “once upon a time there was a...” then add details, tease out a setting, etc. As the moderator, choose the most interesting and/or workable ideas and re-tell the story at each new phase of the process (as each new ingredient is added and mixed in).

3) Discuss and demonstrate the difference between narrative and dialogue.

How could you get the puppets to speak to explain the group story? What might a character say? What would they sound like? Reference any storybook with quotation marks.

4) What is a script and how is it used?

Using the group story, develop a script for the characters. This can be done either as individual writers (for more writing practice) or as a group, brainstorming and writing on the board (for a more engaging script).



FROM IMPROVISATION TO PERFORMANCE

The small group portion of the unit is as much about social skills as it is about writing skills.

As the stories evolve students will need to practice effective teamwork and the art of compromise. Try to emphasize that the initial improvisation is a *first draft*, some of it might work, some will not, sometimes the ideas that come out of perceived “mistakes” turn out to be the best ideas of all!

1) Divide students into small groups. Have each group decide on a single problem to serve as the basis for a brief puppet play.

Pass out puppets and have students develop movement and dialogue to enact the story. Sometimes it's helpful to appoint one puppet to be the narrator. Once a story has been invented, students will work on the telling of it through dialogue and movement. Although it can be a challenging transition to move from narrative to dialogue, by this time the puppets are dying to talk, which makes the journey easier and fun.

NOTE: Students will tend to continue to change and elaborate resulting in a complex soap opera. Once they have a VERY basic plot, see if they can practice the SAME story 3 times without changing it.

NOTE: Students will often want to use small props. These will become distracting and unwieldy. Stick to straight dialogue between puppets at first.

2) Define and discuss the idea of IMPROVISATION.

This is the same as your FIRST DRAFT. For these first simple shows students should NOT use a written script. It is impossible to manipulate a puppet while reading from a page. After about 10-15 minutes of working together, invite small groups up to present skits. Use a table covered with a sheet as your stage.

ABC's OF PUPPET PERFORMANCE

- a. Keep your eyes on your puppet
- b. Use your normal voice (for now) and speak loudly and clearly
- c. Move your puppet deliberately, pausing in between movements
- d. You don't have to hide to be invisible, you just have to really FOCUS on your puppet. If you believe you can bring it to life, your audience will too!

3) Discuss Constructive Criticism as a way to EDIT and IMPROVE the plays, the same way you edit your writing. After each improvisation, invite the class to offer a “problem sandwich” eg: tell us something that worked well, something that needs work, and something else that worked well. As facilitator, make sure to pump up the praise and soften the criticism if necessary.

4) Look at sample scripts. Have students write a script for their show.

Be sure to include stage directions both physical (exit stage right) and emotional (shaking his head sadly).

5) Perform skits for another class or another grade level.

6) Compile and publish scripts for your library