Newspaper Theater: Storytelling with Puppets and Music

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Abstract

This project was inspired by Judith O’Hare and George Latshaw. Inspired by Japanese Bunraku puppetry, this project demonstrates how the arts can help teachers and puppeteers reach the different intelligences of students (based on Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences theory). In groups of 4-5, participants will tell a story from a culture unfamiliar to them, manipulate a puppet, and play music that they have specifically orchestrated for the story.

Participants in groups create their own life-sized puppet from newspaper and masking tape—definitely a problem solving challenge. I provide the stories and musical instruments. My story collection evolved by asking former students to each bring in a one-page story of their choice from a culture unfamiliar to them.

The participants in groups of 4-6 (flexible) choose a story. Then they build the puppet, decide how to manipulate the puppet they have built (which is the storyteller, not necessarily a character from the story), decide who will be the “chanter”—that is, the actual teller or reader—and decide who will be the musicians and what music would best highlight the telling. Given the time constraints, the chanter will most likely read the story, not tell it, but certainly not memorize it.

Then they perform their piece for the class and perhaps even for the Potpourri.

We end with a discussion of k-12 or college classroom applications (for example, second-language learning, validation of students’ own lives as stories, etc.) and with how many of the intelligences have been touched upon.

For puppeteers, the goal is to learn a new way to use recycled papers and create a new kind of puppet show with new musical possibilities. As Cheryl Youmans, high school science teacher, Spartanburg, SC, said, “The Bunraku performances were more moving than I expected. The groups actually became their puppets as they told their stories. You could see expression and movement in the puppeteers as well as in the puppets. The groups tried to achieve perfection starting with nothing more than newspaper, tape, and a good story.”

We also discuss the combining of Multiple Intelligence theory with this quick and simple project.

The goal for teachers is to encourage them to be willing to take risks:
1) to reach students with intelligences the teacher may not be strong in or
2) to use art forms the teacher may not be comfortable with. Teachers becoming comfortable with their own creativity in turn become more confident and charismatic.
3) to learn how performance creates community.

There is no way the puppet will be “perfect,” and teachers who lack confidence in these arts gain wonderful experience. The project is also an inexpensive way to create a wonderful performance. The expense is in the number of instruments that any teacher wants to use. But really only rattles and drums and necessary.

Here are a few comments from teachers (inexperienced in the arts):
Amber Pitts, Spartanburg, SC 1st grade teacher.
“[We had to] expand our ideas with puppets. The puppets we made were not like puppets we were used to seeing or using. We didn’t have any pictures or real specific details to go by so we had to work together as a team to decide..."
what our puppet should look like and how we would make it...[We saw] how easy it is to incorporate others cultures into activities that children could also do. We had a story from one culture and then the Bunraku puppetry that was from Japanese culture...the puppets were able to move and really become a part of the storytelling.”