

Puppet Palooza: A Puppetmaking Collaboration Project

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As COVID closures and social distancing regulations forced many classrooms to shift to being entirely remote, many faculty were forced to implement new and creative teaching modalities. This was especially prevalent in classes that required one on one interaction with non-campus personnel such as teaching practicums and field study. This particular project was centered around a course in the Child and Family Studies major which frequently collaborates with the Early Childhood Education Center on campus to place students for field study coursework. Students in the course were tasked to design and sew their own Sesame Street style puppet and create an online lesson plan to be delivered over Zoom to pre-school children in the Early Childhood Education Center. The instructor for the course collaborated with a faculty member in the Fashion Design and Retailing department to create patterns and instructions for the students to create their own personal puppets at home.

This project took place in CSFT 312 Pre-School Curriculum: Integrating Math, Science, Social Studies, and Art. Students in the course gain experience developing lesson plans, curriculum development, and assessment of pre-school student learning environments and interactions. The CSFT 312 course prioritizes the use of concrete, practical applications of different philosophies and theories embedded in early childhood education curricula. Students engage in inquiry and project work for developing, implementing, and assessing curriculum. The focus is on planning stimulating learning environments that promote discovery and curiosity. With COVID restrictions and remote teaching restrictions in place, students in the CSFT course could not be placed directly into the classrooms. Students were instead tasked with interacting with pre-school students over Zoom and virtual classrooms. In response to these new regulations, the instructor for the CSFT 312 course tasked their students with creating lesson plans and interactive environments that would resonate with pre-school children interacting over Zoom using handmade puppets as a learning tool.

Previous studies in the early childhood education field have noted that puppets are an effective tool for building engagement and interaction with young children (Salmon & Sainato, 2005). The use of bright colors, interesting textures, and animated mannerisms and personalities help with keeping young children's attention and promote participation in activities. Puppets are also a useful tool for providing a more approachable and whimsical voice for delivering lessons and information to shy or hesitant children. With time, a puppeteer can learn to develop a unique personality and set behaviors unique to each puppet, making them into characters that young children would grow comfortable interacting with.

The collaboration on this project began with the instructor of CSFT 312 reaching out to the Fashion Design and Retailing Department looking for assistance and advice on developing patterns and instructions for creating puppets from scratch. The Fashion faculty member

responded volunteering to assist and the brainstorming on materials, shapes, and fabrics that would be most appropriate. The two authors met over Zoom several times to discuss potential puppet types (monster vs sock puppet vs humanoid) and the ease of constructing each style by hand. Several online resources were shared including the work of YouTube puppeteer Adam Kreutinger as a jumping off point.

A survey was conducted amongst the students in the CSFT 312 course regarding the preferred style of puppet. Meanwhile, the Fashion Design faculty member developed a series of patterns for foam head shapes, body coverings, mouth pieces, and arm coverings. Several iterations of the puppets were made as prototypes to test size and ease of construction. Since the students creating the puppets had little to no experience with sewing, all instructions were made with minimal stitching required. Each step in the process was filmed and edited together into two 15-minute-long tutorial videos that were shared with the CSFT class. PDFs were created of all pattern pieces. Students were allowed to pick from a curated list of materials that were either mailed to the student or left on campus for students to pick up.

Once each student constructed their own puppet, they developed names, personalities, and a unique lesson plan for each character. Students were tasked with creating lessons related to topics of culture and diversity. Examples of lessons included dealing with emotions, making friends, understanding different cultures, and self-expression. Students rehearsed their lesson plans during class times and provided feedback to each other (Figure 1). The students then performed their lessons with their puppets during a Zoom session with children in the Early Childhood Education center on campus.

After the conclusion of the project, students were interviewed by the campus newspaper about their experience with the project. Students noted that while they were nervous at first about having to create their puppet from scratch, once they began developing their character it became a fun and creative activity and that they would see themselves using their puppet for future lessons in their classrooms after graduation. This success of this project serves as an example of the benefits of collaboration between Fashion departments and Childhood Education departments in a University setting. Future collaborations could expand upon the concept; such as having design students construct the puppets as part of a sewing class, or inviting students in the acting program to perform as the puppets alongside the education students giving the lesson.

Salmon, M. D., & Sainato, D. M. (2005). Beyond Pinocchio: Puppets as Teaching Tools in Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms. *Young Exceptional Children*, 8(3), 12–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10962506050080030>