



Shadow puppet play: audience view.

Exhibition Blues

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In a shadow puppet play, the audience sees only shadows on a screen while the puppeteer's dexterity, skill, story writing, and preparation remain invisible. At exhibition in a project-based school, the audience sees only the final student projects; the teacher's craft and students' learning are represented but remain hidden. Under the pressure of my first project exhibition and in fear of being judged on students' final products, I found myself in a panic.

Exhibition night, two hours before show-time—*My stomach has been aching all day, and I am completely exhausted. I have been putting on a strong and confident face for the students, but the truth is, I am absolutely terrified about this exhibition. What was I thinking two months ago? A puppet show? Already two people, one a parent, have told me today that they associate puppet shows with grade school. Never mind that shadow puppets are treated as legitimate theatre production globally; no one in this country has that context. My students are going to go out there tonight, deliver the culmination of two months work, and parents will leave wondering why they chose project-based learning and whether their students are doing any “serious” academic work at all. Moreover, the plays are not ready. Despite having a deadline for a finished play three days ago, many groups were practicing their play for the first time this morning. I fear for them. Students who finished on time had plays that needed serious revisions.*



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puppeteers' view.

I have been closely guiding their revision and narration efforts, and they are making some progress. But for what? A puppet show? Why did I do this? This is ridiculous, laughable, and I want out. Although I have never passed a stone, this feels like an emotional version.

Two days after the exhibition—*I cannot believe the quality of the student reflections from this project. I am one who has never been huge on having students reflect because it can so easily become inauthentic. But I am coming to believe, thanks to the shadow puppet plays, that if the learning is meaningful and authentic, then the reflection following can be authentic as well. One of my highest-achieving students, a student who had complained of not being challenged in the past, the child whose parent remarked that puppet shows are for little kids, just mentioned to me that he really had to learn Plato's cave in a deep way to pull off a shadow puppet play about it. I am beginning to realize that the exhibition format challenges students, parents, and teachers to rethink what learning really is, and what constitutes legitimate representations of student learning. That student said it best in his reflection:*

What was the most valuable thing you learned from this project?

The most valuable thing that I learned through this project is that project based learning is actually a valid form of education. Before this project, I never felt like I was really learning anything from projects, but now I realize that these projects really help to solidify our knowledge of the subjects we are learning. Through these

projects we are also learning the value of good, hard work. I am learning to put the time and effort into things for school, even if I won't necessarily get points for it.

If you were a teacher, what would you say about yourself during this project?

"How are you getting so much work done while having such a good time?" would probably be what I would say. It was really interesting learning how to make sounds for a production like a shadow puppet play. It was also fun learning how to manipulate the puppets and making the actions match the sound. It was also a lot of fun because we weren't exactly making the most serious of plays possible. We made it pretty stupid and funny. Taking limited resources and making them into something beautiful is really hard and I am really glad I had the opportunity to do that.

As an upshot of this, I am seeing a significant boost in classroom culture. After pulling off an entire theatre production in two and a half weeks with plot design, content connections, scripts, puppet design, audio, and lighting, we feel much more like a family. Every student contributed significantly to the plays, and on their faces you can see a new swagger. I feel like I have this class engaged now. I am so excited to carry this culture of enthusiasm into our investigation of 20th century conflicts.

Two weeks after the exhibition—*I can't wait to do this project again. I can make it much better, and many people have given me great ideas for how to do that. To deal with my biggest concern, the little kid question, I can have students include some shadow puppet play history in our brochure, and contextualize and legitimize the form as part of the production. I can do a better job of teaching allegory and having students do more reading and writing around stories that convey a message. I was so focused on academic content during this project that I had them write formal essays, but I think next time I will have them write allegories and analyze each other's work. This new writing component will hopefully help to make the writing as engaging as the plays were, and will provide students with drafts of stories they can turn into plays as well. Even with all these revisions, I am proud of how the plays went now that the anxiety has subsided. I think shadow puppets are a brilliant way to teach the Enlightenment.*

During this project we highlighted the idea that experience is a better teacher than reason or argument. What we didn't focus on as much was that learning through experience can be grueling. The experience of exhibition can be painful for new teachers and for students because it is a radically different way of assessing teaching and learning. It is hard to trust that learning is happening when it is not always visible. But in my experience, exhibition can deepen the learning that takes place and create incentives to reflect and refine like no other context. That is the type of experience that, over time, can lead to real perspective and wisdom, for students and teachers alike.