Using Puppetry as a Tool to Create an Immersive Elementary Music Classroom

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Abstract

Research shows that puppetry can be used in an educational setting to facilitate creativity, teamwork activities, and perspective thinking. For the elementary music classroom, puppetry may help students overcome performance anxiety and learn musical concepts in an engaging way. It is pertinent for educators to utilize various tools to keep the student engaged and further develop educational growth. Puppetry is one of the many pedagogical tools that provides immersive engagement that encapsulates students wholistically. The purpose of this study is to examine the immersive nature of puppetry and whether it can be used as a tool to create an immersive elementary music classroom. To learn about innovative and engaging ways of implementing puppetry in the classroom, the oral history methodology was used and 3 professional puppeteers and 5 educators who have created an immersive environment with puppets were interviewed. This methodology's purpose was to learn how their professional practices could lead to an immersive learning environment. By obtaining authentic experiences of puppeteers and educators, these combined experiences can benefit educators to utilize puppetry to immerse students to learn music. The culmination of this research is to not only spread awareness of the ways effective puppetry can be utilized in the elementary music classroom, but with contingency on also learning to implement characters into learning as an aid to keep students engaged. The presentation of the information gathered will inspire current and future educators who wish to learn more about immersive puppetry and its uses in the classroom.

Picture this Ernie and Bert skit on *Sesame Street*: Bert asks Ernie to help carry in the groceries. Ernie declines this invitation and when asked why he cannot help, he names all of the actions he is currently performing: sitting, breathing, watching, thinking… While what children see is an excuse to make Bert flustered, the programming is actually teaching them mindfulness. Through the action of suspension of disbelief, the child watches the puppets and is able to perceive that they are living and speaking because they are well-written characters that these children are encapsulated by. This is the idea of immersive learning.

Puppetry is an age-old art form of storytelling. Being as old as theater, proof of puppetry has been found in ancient civilizations (Weiger, 1974, p. 55). While a

common tool utilized in the music classroom, not as much has been explored pertaining to proper puppetry technique and character-building in relation to this implementation. By learning from professional puppeteers and other educators, elementary music educators can utilize puppetry to create an immersive classroom environment.

Methodology

This project is an investigation of how puppeteers can inform music educators on their use of puppetry and characters in the classroom. Thus, the Oral History methodology was used, which is the use of interviews to gather personal experiences to connect with the literature gathered for research. Among the interviewed were seven people: 2 professional puppeteers and 5 Educators who utilize puppetry in the classroom (music and otherwise. With the variety of types of educators and puppet experience, the professional puppeteers were able to inform the educators' perspective and the educators were able to inform the puppeteers' perspective.

Findings

In "the Journal of Educational Thought", it states that "casting an invisible net" of roleplay or dramatic narrative over students can make the students more comfortable and engaged (Martin-Smith, 1995, p. 35). With immersion including roleplay and narratives, puppetry is part of that category. Suspension of disbelief, which is described as ones' ability to watch a film or novel occur in front of them and "believing it is happening", is also included.(Ask the Brains, 2014). Overall, there were three common themes presented in the interviews that seem to make up this "invisible net". These are what I call the "three Cs of Character" that make up

immersion: character creation, character purpose, and character dynamics.

Character creation is a multifaceted process. Many actors, including theater professor Victor Capecce and professional puppeteer Haley Jenkins, have very thought-out character creation processes. Victor Capecce stated that he takes many things into account, including movement capabilities, character appearance, and expression (October 2021). Haley Jenkins stated that when creating a character, she learns how to inject assets of her personality into the characters, which makes them more relatable and real (January 2022). Adam Kreutinger, an art educator and puppeteer, said that he tries to come up with the voice first, and then create a character background (A. Kreutinger, personal communication, October 2022). With these being a few examples, these are what individuals who are familiar with puppetry view as valuable to creating characters. This is also the first step to building immersive characters.

Character purpose is essentially just defined as "why puppets?" In essence, the puppetry is immersive due to when and how it is utilized. For example, Dr. Phillip Tacka, music educator and co-author of *Kodaly Today*, cites that puppetry as a tool is best utilized in the classroom when used to teach musical concepts. For example, he had a raccoon puppet that would *only* be utilized to learn rhythm (November 2021). Professor Anne Stuart, a music educator, also stated that when utilizing puppets to help teach more mundane topics (such as singing in head voice), students tend to be more invested in that topic (September 2021). Benton Spiker, an English educator, utilizes puppetry in his high school English classroom to teach students how to write essays and to reenact novels that are being read in class. He utilizes puppets to make materials such as Shakespeare accessible (October 2021). Even as these students are

older, they still are able to utilize the suspension of disbelief to become immersed in these characters created by their own educator. Overall, puppetry is effective because of the ability that it has to teach concepts through characterization, as aforementioned. However, it is essential for these characters to have a purpose to be effective.

Character dynamic may be the most essential piece of immersion for students. The character dynamic refers to interactions with the puppets and the reception from students. Dr. Phillip Tacka stated that the roles and manipulation of the characters are what provided meaning to his students when using puppets (November 2021). What is great about this quote is that Dr. Tacka had described the culminaton of all three Cs. For Kate Umble, she had cited the consistency

of the Calliope character that tours with her brass ensemble as the reason elementary students receive her well (December 2021). (October

Conclusion

Findings from interviews have shown that the key to puppetry being effective in the elementary music classroom is immersion. The three common themes that were taken from the interviews (the Three Cs) prove to be very essential elements of utilizing immersion through puppetry and characters in the elementary music classroom.

References

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