Playing with Shadows – Shadow Puppetry

A project description

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Abstract

An ancient form of storytelling is shadow puppetry. This paper is about an Art/Music project at the university college of teacher education of Lower Austria. It is meant to give input on how you can start, work and present a story in the style of shadow puppetry.

Keywords:	Schlüsselwörter:
Shadow puppetry	Schattentheater
Art/Music project	Musikalisches Kunstprojekt
Story telling through art and music	Geschichten erzählen mit Musik und Kunst
Acquiring language through telling stories	Sprachenerwerb durch Geschichten erzählen

1   Introduction

Shadow play which is also known as shadow puppetry, is an ancient form of storytelling and entertainment. The cut-out figures are held between a source of light and a screen. The project 'Playing with shadows – shadow puppetry' in German 'Performatives Umsetzen einer Handlung in Scherenschnitttechnik mit musikalischem Hintergrund' was offered as an elective subject in the final year of special needs and primary teacher education.

Over the last two years an average of 30 students per term attended the subject. They worked in groups of 4-5 with the aim of giving a small performance of a shadow play of their choice. Alternatively, they could also produce a movie of their shadow play. In addition, the students had to hand in a paper discussing the results of their group work as well as the individual contribution of each participant.

2   Shadow Play

Where there is light, there are shadows. Shadows are everywhere, mysterious, intriguing and fun. Shadows have a fleeting, poetic quality, and playing with shadows will let students' imaginations soar. A shadow puppet play has everything you need to have a great experience – it's artistic, scientific, interactive, fun and easy to put together.

In Western society, we associate shadows with menacing qualities. In literature, movies and TV, villains and monsters hide in the dark, crouch in the shadows, run form the light of truth. By contrast, numerous cultures around the globe have long used shadows to express heroism, redemption and humour in their art and entertainment. The oldest and most popular medium to employ shadows in this way is shadow puppetry. Shadow puppetry is an ancient art form that still thrives in many parts of the world.

There are two ways to perform shadow theatre: (1) The traditional way - puppets are held up against the performance screen and (2) the modern, projected way - shadows are cast utilizing the space between the light source and the screen. The main difference between these methods is the type of light source used and the size of shadows produced. Each approach has its own possibilities and limitations (Rossum van, 2016).

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Shadow puppetry is a great tool for teaching stories, myths and legends of cultures and religions from all over the world. It can also be used as a storytelling tool for stories that children write themselves. Furthermore it is also an appropriate tool for practising speaking and acquiring language. Whether you just use it as a class project, or to prepare a performance at your school, it is great fun for everybody involved. It is amazing what children can do in just a few hours, a week, or longer. Shadow puppetry is flexible, and it is cheap. And no matter how much drawing and cutting skills may vary, with a bit of help every puppet looks great from the other side of the screen. After all, they are only shadows!

3   The Art of Paper Cutting

Paper cutting is the art of cutting paper designs. The art has evolved uniquely all over the world to adapt to different cultural styles. The oldest surviving paper cut out is a symmetrical circle from the 6th century Six Dynasties period found in Xinjiang China. By the 8th or 9th century papercutting had also appeared in West Asia and in Turkey. Within a century, papercutting was done in most of middle Europe (Wikepedia, 2006).

4   The Art/Music Project

4.1   Preparation and Ideas

Thomas Edison said, that the value of an idea lies in the using of it (Brainquote, 2016). Starting with the preparation for the elective subject we agreed on a topic to start from. 'Playing with Shadows – Shadow Puppetry' is a platform where art and music can be brought together and where a group of people can be involved to explore, learn and share stories, beliefs and thoughts. This technique also holds the opportunity to use techniques and methods of both subjects – so participants can contribute all their acquired skills of arts, music and language.

This kind of elective subject allows students to embark on a journey of creativity. To express it in the words of Reggio Emilia *'hundred worlds to discover, a hundred worlds to invent and a hundred worlds to dream'* (The Innovative Teacher Project, 1998). There is one topic, thousands of different thoughts followed by an uncountable number of diverse presentations. There won't be a similar presentation of one story.

Through this art/music project all students are engaged with one another, and this allows us to celebrate our similarities and differences, to explore our feelings and emotions and ultimately to discover a deeper understanding of our ever-changing global world.

4.2   Starting the course

'Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.' (Henry Ford)

How can a group project, this journey of creativity as mentioned in the paragraph above, be started? First of all, the students choose this elective subject because of a catchy description and after enrolling in the course the students receive an e-mail for orientation, for dipping into the topic (links about the topic) and to have an estimate of the expenses they will have (a list of needed material). Students have to do some research before the start of the class.

In the first meeting of the class, the students form groups of four – five. These groups split responsibilities of the project, discuss a possible schedule, think about a topic of their presentation (pick a story, think about the content, figures and setting, etc.). There are no rules about picking a story. It is allowed to use a cartoon, a story they invent, or a familiar story such as fairy tales, ancient myths, or a story from a favourite picture book (own resource).

4.3   The Storyboard

After getting together in groups and picking a story, the story has to be structured through creation of a storyboard. A storyboard is one of the most important stages of planning a play or clip. It is a graphic representation of how the play/clip will unfold, shot by shot. It is made up of a number of squares with

illustrations or pictures representing each shot, with notes about what is going on in the scene and what is being said in the script during that shot.

A storyboard can be compared with a comic book version of the script. It is a visual aid which makes it easier to share and explain something – it offers the experience of visualizing a text, such as a script. It allows authors to show people exactly how a play/clip is going to be mapped out and what it will look like. It ensures the group won't forget any scenes and helps to piece together the play/clip according to the artistic vision. The storyboard also makes the creation process go more smoothly.
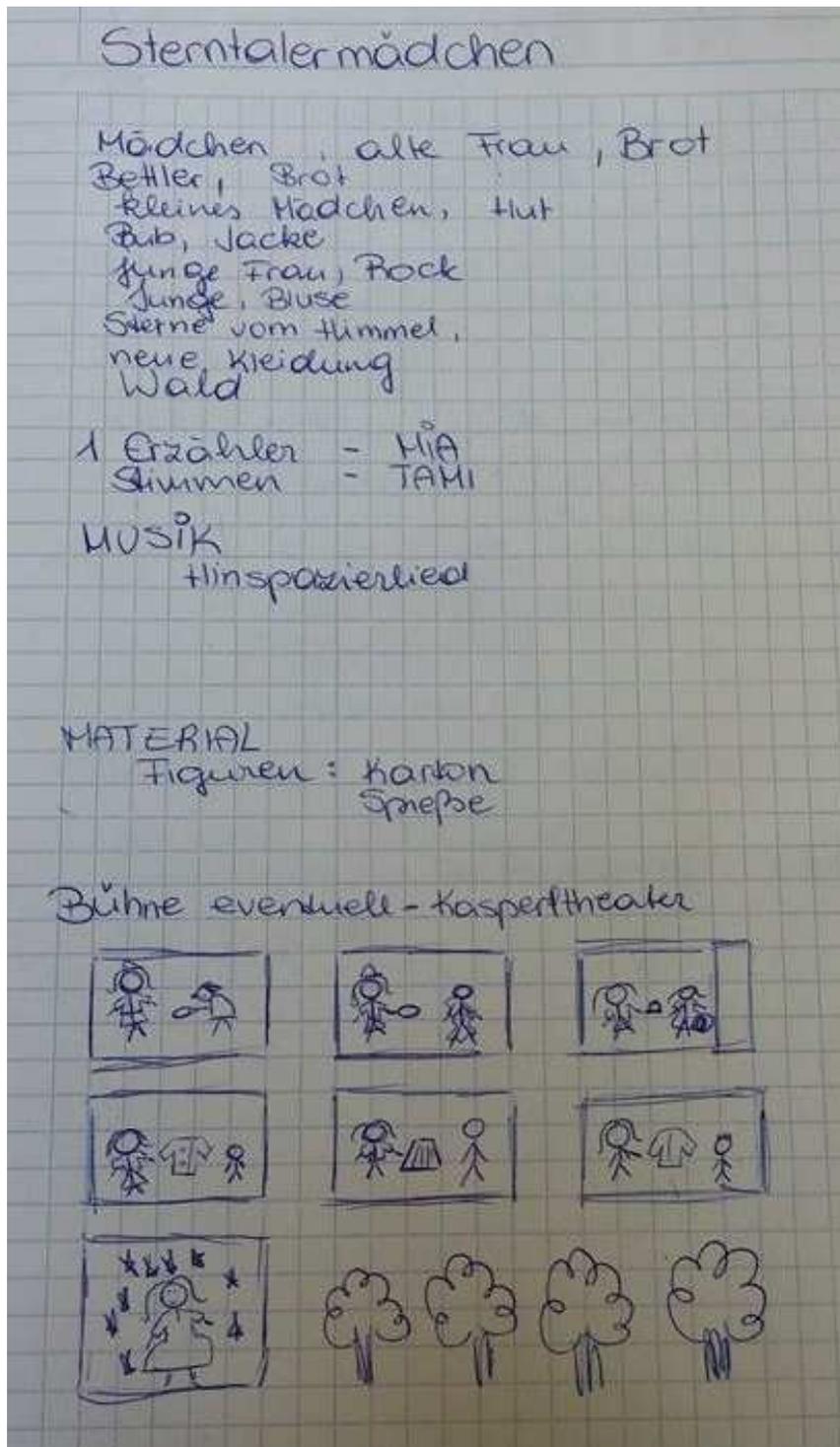

Illustration 1: planning of a play (storyboard) (own resource)

The first step of creating a storyboard is to draw a series of squares on a piece of paper. In the second step you have to think of these squares as a video frame. In each square a different shot or scene will take place. Beneath each picture, write the lines from the script that will be spoken in that scene and jot down some notes about what is happening. The storybook should read like a comic book, so readers can get a sense of exactly what will happen in your play/clip. Step three of creating a storybook is to sketch the story. Sketching the story means that you have to draw how each scene will look visually. A storyboard does not have to be extraordinarily detailed – it does not include the drawing of all props and there is no need of colour. The main thought is to provide enough visual detail to give an impression of what is happening, which characters are in the scene and what the general framing will look like. There can also be notes about camera angles and movement, transitions between shots and other details that will come in handy during production and post-production.

There are some rules to keep in mind: (1) Show, don't tell: The storyboard is used as a litmus test to determine if the story is truly being visualized. (2) Be cinematic: Does the video do things that movies do? Do people, places and things move or stand still? Does the camera move? (3) Make sure it is logical and coherent: A story is getting created – so the video should look visually consistent from beginning to end. (4) Pick a theme and include all relevant details. (5) Break up your script into smaller chunks and make note of important information. What is the setting or background for the scene? Is there a character on screen? If so, what action is the character performing? What props are in the scene? If so, those should fit in with the context of the background/setting used. What message are you trying to deliver? (Raindance, 2016)

4.4 Screen/stage

The available screen depends on the story, the acting group and the space where the play is taking place. The size and type of the screen, the size of the puppets and light can be adjusted according to what the group wants to do and what atmosphere they want to create. If a small group is only presenting their results to a class even a desk-top screen can be used. The screens are made from a cardboard or a display board for presentations.

If the shadow puppetry is a large performance such as class project a larger screen is needed and puppets that are big enough to be seen well by a large audience. Every screen has to be secured during the performance, to avoid any troubles with knocking them over and moving during performing.

Illustration 2: Screen/Stage (own resource)

Illustration 3: Scenery (own resource)

Illustration 4: final curtain (own resource)

4.5 Scenery

Illustration 5: cutting out the scenery (own resource)

Scenery can be built from cardboard which is stuck to the stage or is shown over the light source.

4.6 Light source

As light source, a desk lamp can be used, which may be put in front of the children or clipped to the desk. An overhead projector or a pocket lamp are also possible light sources. An overhead projector provides a safe, strong and even light and enables to project background scenes that can be drawn on transparencies with permanent markers. The projector sits on a desk behind the children, who hold the puppets above their heads to prevent casting their own shadows. Another source can be a data projector where pictures from a USB memory stick can be shown on the screen. Which light source to use also depends on the screen material which has to be transparent enough to let shadows appear on the other side.

4.7 Puppets and characters

After picking a story and creating a storyboard, the puppets have to be made. First, the puppets and props have to be designed on paper before being traced on poster board (or card stock, or cereal box). The design and look of puppets is up to the infinite imagination of the artist making them. What's common in all shadow puppetry is the use of negative space in designing and cutting out puppets. Coloured acetate and gels or ink-painted transparencies can add colour to the details of your puppets. The size and proportions are important. The puppets should not be too small! To create a character with a moving arm, the arm and the body have to be drawn separately. Both arm and body need to allow for overlapping to serve as a joint between them. This same idea applies to every other moving appendage. To make joints for the moving parts: (1) Drill or pierce a tiny hole into the appendage and the main body. (2) Align the holes on the appendage and the body, thread wire through the holes with the free end, and twist them together. To control the shadow puppets, a stick or wire has to be attached to manipulate the body and moving appendages. For moving arms, a manipulating rod with a small hole drilled through at one end is connected to the arm or hand as described above.

Illustration 7: Shadow puppet (own resource)

4.8 Special Effects

Shadow puppetry is loved because of the 'special effects'. You can make ghosts and monsters, transform people into animals, and make pigs fly too. With these 'special effects' you can transfer the story to the audience reality. For example, in a Christmas story you let Santa Claus ride his sleigh in the sky. Through those effects you can underline the story's atmosphere and show feelings like anger, happiness through using coloured transparency paper, different light sources, and different cut-outs of one character. Another helping hand of special effects is music. With the underlining music you can create the right atmosphere to get the right impression of the scene. It is also possible to act out the freeing of Little Red Riding Hood, when she gets out of the Big Bad Wolf's stomach.

4.9 Narration and Sound

Shadow puppetry works with narrators and different speakers. Sounds can be downloaded from free download areas and music can be played or sung by the actors.

4.10 Rehearsals

Now the performance has to be rehearsed. Therefore, the stage and puppets are tested in the way they are getting used in the play. The actors behind the stage have to experiment in order to experiment in order to discover how and where to stand as well as how to move their characters properly. All the split responsibilities, like music, light, scenery moves and so have to be rehearsed, too.

4.11 Performance

The show can be started! After a lot of rehearsals the day of the performance has come. This means that the stage has to be placed and fixed, the light source has to be placed and tested, the characters of the play have to be placed in order of appearance, the different sceneries have to be placed and tested, the music which is underlining the play has to be prepared and the speaker has to get ready, too.

After switching of the lights in the audience's room a silence sweeps through the room. The speaker starts with the introduction of the story in the darkness and the light source of the play brightens up the stage and its scenery of act 1. The play starts and the characters get into the play. The players behind the stage, the person for the music, the speaker and helping hands are fully concentrated. The group of puppet players ensnare the audience's attention. There are small breaks because of changes of the scenery but this is glossed over by correct picked music tracks. There are hardly any breaks because of changing characters because the players have rehearsed smooth passages. At the end of the play the audience is impressed and is applauding extensive.

Illustration 8: 1st Action Day of Cultural Education - Primary school class of Baden (own resource)

5   Resume

This project is and was an interesting journey for the students and teachers. We all started from the same point, but in the end we had different stories, which were told and shown and different ways. Playing with shadows is a dynamic theatre form that blends ancient forms with new ideas and technology.

The project has also had a real evaluation by being shown to primary school classes at the 1st Action Day of Cultural Education in Lower Austria. The small movies or clips of the students were presented at the 'Theater am Steg' in Baden and the pupils of the primary school gave real feedback on the shown Shadow Plays. The students talked about specific stories and if they liked them. They told us about which parts of well-known fairy tales the teacher students left out. One group had big discussions during the play because of the 'special effects´ which the students used. They thought that some of them were hilarious and gave us ideas for other ways of showing.

We hope that the article gives a good impression of the elective subject and shadow puppetry. However, we were hoping for more critical evaluation of the project as well as lessons learned from doing it. For example:

- What insights have you gained that would help others interested in doing such a project themselves?
- Anything to watch out for, any tips not found in the literature you used?
- How should such a project be designed to maximise the learning potential of students/children?
- How much time should be scheduled for rehearsals for which length of performance?

- Not theoretically, but from your experience: How long were your performances?
- How much preparation was needed? etc.

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