



With the national economic slowdown and increased emphasis on standardized testing, artists who work in the schools are more in demand if they can address educational content in their performances. This article aims to help puppeteers find a new place in the school system, by learning to integrate curriculum standards, choose relevant topics, create study guides and evaluation forms, and market their educational production.

FILLING A NEED

Since the recent *NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND* mandate, many teachers express regret that they have little time for creativity in the classroom; although it has been proven in numerous national studies that students who participate in creative activities do better statistically in reading, math and science. With so much emphasis on "teaching the tests", many educators are discouraged from inviting extracurricular activities that don't support "curriculum goals." Most teachers are required to justify every hour spent in the classroom according to prescribed standards. Unless your production supports or enhances the standard course of study, your chances of being booked diminish.

The good news is that by addressing curriculum standards in your production, you may become as smart as a fifth grader. It is an opportunity to explore an academic subject that interests you in a deeper way. At the same time, you can fill a need within the system and be a welcome support to teachers (who really deserve our support).

CURRICULUM STANDARDS

Curriculum encompasses most everything experienced in the classroom including subject matter, moral values, hands-on and intellectual skills, social habits, citizenship, health and nutrition and attitudes. There are voluntary National Education Standards (www.education-world.com/standards/national/index.shtml), which offer guidelines for what is expected at specific grade levels in several subject areas; but much of the specific interpretation is determined by the States. The standards are thoughtfully designed and adapted through years of research by special Task Forces. The Standard Course of Study is a useful tool to gain understanding of how the educational system thinks, and be able to speak their language.

State Curriculum Standards are easy to find online. Review the guidelines for the States you most often perform in. Most of them are

similar in how they follow the national model. The examples I include in this article are from the State of North Carolina.

Standards are divided into subject areas such as English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies; but most include guidelines for Music, Theatre Arts, Visual Arts, and Dance. There are several competency goals outlined for each grade followed by a list of specific objectives that help the learner achieve the goals.

CHOOSING A TOPIC

Just about anything you are interested in is probably covered in the curriculum standards.

Theatre Arts curriculum includes viewing performances and puppet shows (for lower grades) as one of their requirements. In older grades, Drama teachers are required to teach non-Western forms of theatre. My experience has been that many of these teachers have little experience with non-Western forms and welcome the input of puppeteers who know something about Bunraku or Indonesian shadow theatre.

Elementary Social Studies include learning about stories and customs from other cultures, and Language Arts include the study of fairytales and fables.

The more curriculum areas you can embrace (without just being obnoxious) the better chance you have of appealing to several grade levels. Look carefully at where the most curriculum overlap is and target the show for the grades that are most likely to request you. You may get helpful ideas from the "standards" which can shape the show's direction.

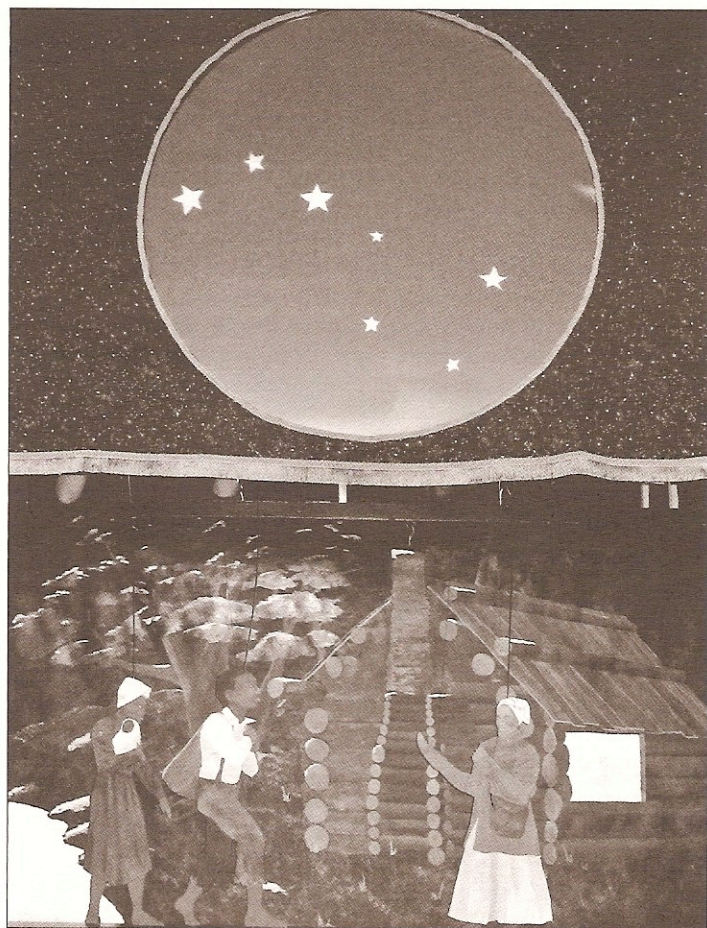


Shaumai and her teacher Loshi from THE BIG DIPPER: Calendar, Compass, and Clock.

Photo by Nancy O'Brien and Richard Ashman
Marionettes by Lisa Sturz/Red Herring Puppets

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Our latest show (Red Herring Puppets) is titled "The Big Dipper: Calendar, Compass, and Clock."* It explores how the stars can be used to tell time, find your way at night, and keep track of the seasons. It addresses Social Studies in multiple grade levels by including stories from different cultures performed with marionettes designed and clothed to bring the audience into another place. Each story supports the basic premise by illustrating the many ways the stars can be used. The show addresses tolerance and diversity by showing how different people interpret the same seven stars based on their unique perspective - some cultures see a plough, a bear, the leg of a bull, Odin's wagon, an Aztec God or a gourd. It embraces science curriculum by explaining how the earth rotates on its axis and revolves around the sun. The show is coherent in design, while encompassing many "standard" areas.



Shadow image of The Big Dipper above a scene from "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd" Figures and background painted by C.J. Randall

In North Carolina, 3rd and 5th graders study the solar system. Grades 2 and 4 learn about Harriet Tubman and the nocturnal flight of Southern slaves who learned to "Follow The Drinkin' Gourd." We use this song in the performance to support how The Big Dipper can function as a compass. (Often students are taught the song in Music class.) We tell a Micmac Indian legend to illustrate how the stars move through the season like a calendar marking when to plant new seeds. This coincides with 4th graders learning about native tribal customs. We use a shadow screen to illustrate the relative distance of stars in the sky and touch on basic mathematics astronomy, and early technology.

*"The Big Dipper: Calendar, Compass, and Clock" was partially funded with a grant from the Puppeteers of America's Endowment Fund.

The beauty of all this is that it brings together diverse subject areas into a compelling and integral experience. It helps students understand how Social Studies and Science are interconnected. It explains how knowledge of the stars helped slaves find freedom in the North. It encourages students to make connections – and that's what learning is about. Students can go outside the night of the performance and recognize The Big Dipper in the sky and remember how to extend the dipper in the front to find the North Star. We have gotten great feedback from teachers and students who describe the "AHA" moments they experienced during the show and even months later.

DISCUSSION AFTER THE SHOW

If time allows, most audiences enjoy a chance to meet the performers and ask questions following the show. Presenters appreciate this added educational component. Audiences want to know how the puppets are built and operated. They want to understand what is involved in being a puppeteer and creating a puppet show. If you have any special effects in the show, you may want to talk about how they work (or not if you prefer to keep it a secret). If your performance involves challenging subject material, be prepared to explain ideas without talking over or under their ability to comprehend. Kids are smart and will surprise you with astute observations and questions. If your audience is very young, it is better to prepare a demonstration. Most of them won't really know what a question is and may raise their hand to tell you about their favorite teddy bear.

STUDY GUIDES

If you perform in the schools, you will most likely be asked for your study guide or classroom materials. State Arts Councils and organizations that present in the schools, often require this information before you can be approved as a teaching or touring artist. Sometimes funding for your show is directly linked to the quality of the educational materials you provide.

The study guide generally contains a description of the show, a short biography of your company, and background materials on your art form and your production. It may contain vocabulary definitions of foreign words or technical terms used in the show. It may contain a mathematical formula for figuring out the Chinese sign for the year you were born, or an explanation of the life cycle of a butterfly – whatever is relevant to your show. Some performers include related pre-show and post-show activities, discussion questions, hands-on puppet making activities, writing prompts, and bibliographies for further reading.

There are two basic approaches for designing your study guide. Decide if you are preparing it for the teacher or for the student. If you are targeting second graders, keep it simple and don't use words they are unlikely to recognize. You may want to create a puzzle or a connect-the-dot game that relates to your topic. If you target the teacher, remember they are too busy to read a 20-page instruction manual. Identify what will help them prepare the students to gain a deeper understanding of their show.

In the *Big Dipper Study Guide*, we include a brief cultural background for the four different stories and annotated lyrics of "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd." We give a short history of astronomy and include a template for a rotating star clock that can be cut out and assembled.

You may want to include a list of curriculum areas the show addresses and what your specific goals are for



Jon Jones, Lisa Sturz, and Robin Stevens of Red Herring Puppets
In performance of THE BIG DIPPER: Calendar, Compass, and Clock

enrichment. Whether or not you decide to include these in your study guide, it is a good exercise to outline your goals and make sure you stay on target when creating the show. Knowing what curriculum content you are reinforcing will also be the key to marketing the production.

MARKETING MATERIALS

Come up with a provocative title and a few sentences that quickly describe your show and the educational goals the performance achieves. Be clear and specific. A great photo is essential. You can request mailing lists online from the Boards of Education in most areas. If your show is science based, you may request contact information for all the science teachers in a particular area. Often it is the media specialist or the music teacher or the school principal who makes the decisions about assembly programs. Find out, and get your information to the right person.

BOOKING CONFERENCES

Most States or regions hold annual booking conferences to bring together artists and educators. There is usually a small fee to rent a display table or audition for a showcase slot. This is a good opportunity to meet the people who are likely to book you face to face and get your marketing materials in their hands. Talk to them and find out what they are looking for. It might not be you this time, but it is good to know their agenda. Teachers network with each other and share information from previous years about whom they recommend. Schools in a certain geographic region sometime have special meetings at these conferences to "block book" a performer in all of their schools so they can share transportation costs and get a better price.

If selected, you will have the opportunity to showcase your piece for 3- 8 minutes (depending on the organization) as part of an all day line-up with short breaks every 10 groups or so. Showcase slots are usually granted through a review process. Artists are asked to submit performance samples and educational materials to a selection committee. Most try to give priority to artists who were not seen the previous year.

Creating the perfect showcase is an art form in itself. I find it particularly challenging as a puppeteer who needs an hour to set up in order to present the show properly. The time it takes for you to move your stage into position from the wings, counts as part of your seven minutes. (It is more difficult than grabbing a guitar and going up to a microphone.) If you have a long set-up you can request to be first or last in your session. It can be challenging to decide what segment of your show will tell your story in the clearest way. (A musician can easily perform a few songs in seven minutes, but a puppeteer really needs to

hone in on the message.) You are allowed a few introductory sentences. Those who go on and on talking about themselves are usually not making the best of their time. You can always invite the audience back to your booth for conversation.

Another challenge is the audience itself. You may be used to a group of adoring six-year-olds who laugh contagiously every time the fox slides down the tree. In the showcase environment you are confronted with 75 overworked adults who have just seen 25 performers and have already chosen two. They are hungry and tired and not easily amused. If you have never showcased before, I would highly recommend not trying to showcase your first time out. Watch the veteran performers and learn from them. Often someone will find a clever way to "steal the day" and walk off with several weeks of work. Don't expect that to happen your first try. It takes time for people to get to know you. They need to see you a few times before they know you are reliable and will be there the following year. Word of mouth is one of your best tools and that takes time to develop.

EVALUATION FORMS

Evaluation forms are generally a single page list of questions that can be quickly marked by teachers. Typically questions are followed by blank circles from 1 to 5 – poor to excellent. They address age appropriateness, meeting curriculum goals, professionalism, artistry, skill, rapport and content.

Many touring programs will use their own evaluation forms to gather information about the success of the program you present. Often there will be one for you to fill out about the school and one for the school to fill out about your performance. Many times these are required before you receive payment. If you create your own evaluation form, you may want to get feedback on how well you achieve your outlined goals.

Evaluation forms can be an excellent way to gain honest feedback. Look for patterns of agreement and listen to it. The evaluation form is a gift to help you improve your show and groove with the audience you are trying to serve.

SHAPE THE FUTURE

Work in the schools can be a rewarding and meaningful partnership. Puppetry addresses the multiple intelligences by tapping into the different ways in which students learn. By weaving together various curriculum areas in an imaginative and entertaining production, you can move your audience (and yourself) beyond learning into understanding. We are privileged to influence the development of young minds through our magical art form. If we are successful, we can inspire the next generation of puppet artists to express themselves through this deep rooted and beloved tradition.

Lisa Sturz will lead a workshop on this topic at the National Festival in Atlanta this coming July. Her company, Red Herring Puppets, is based in North Carolina.