Bringing Puppets to Life: Voice, Personality, and Appearance

No Best Way, No One Way

Mary Beth says she's not sure whether she would try repeating the experience. In other words, she is open to new approaches. Even if something "works," she won't hope for an exact replica of the original experience. She will modify the approach to changing situations. Using puppets helps stimulate a penchant for variety. Once puppets are in the picture, you become disinclined to rely on formula teaching.

Her approach is instructive because it suggests we approach the subject of puppet characterization - bringing a puppet to life - with an open mind. There is no one way to make a puppet come to life. And no way to predict a situation in which that puppet may be the right character. You can have a plan worked out or no plan at all. A puppet's corny or ad-libbed comments, no matter how unsure or faltering, will stimulate banter, inquiry, hellos and curiosity that carry the user's efforts along. However, as will be shown, a simple structure or idea sketched out beforehand, either in the user's mind or on paper, will help keep the user and the puppet on a conceptual track.

A script is not recommended because the user tends to rely on reading, rather than playing. Particularly if the user is just starting out, a spontaneous question from a child that interrupts the reading can rattle the user, turning potential play and creativity into an upsetting experience. In time, each user discovers how much structure and guideline he requires to help keep him comfortable, natural but educationally effective.

You will make mistakes, but so does anybody learning to play an instrument. As a role model, the user learning to use a puppet communicates to others that order and control do not always prevail in a learning environment. By giving yourself permission to make mistakes, fine-tune a phrase, catch a breath, clear your throat, lose a voice and find it, you give others who watch a signal that it's OK for them to do the same. It's not the puppet itself that matters, but what it means to the learning process. It's not only all right to make mistakes; it's expected. Learning to play means
learning to make and accept mistakes in yourself. If you allow yourself this experience, you will further develop abilities to think quickly, imaginatively and spontaneously. The element of play "at work" in the learning and teaching process can bring exciting and unexpected results.

Consider the experience of the third grade teacher who decided to make and use a puppet for story telling. She made a tall fabric puppet, and was quite proud of its elaborate detail. However, on the day of the puppet's debut, the teacher suddenly found herself - puppet in hand - standing in front of the class totally unable to utter a word. To her amazement (and relief) the class was not only entertained by the puppet and its random movements, but responded with enthusiastic questions as to its origin and name. Seizing on the children's interest, the teacher decided to keep the puppet silent. She had the children communicate with the silent story teller (whom they named Allie) through notes and letters. The children wrote faithfully to Allie. The teacher used Allie throughout the year as a tool for developing language skills and concepts. The teacher later found her puppet voice in other characters whom she would introduce, but Allie would always hold a special place in her heart because only he knew the secret of his silence and would never tell.

A puppet's "character" is not usually arrived at all at once. A puppet's voice, personality, movement and status in a group also emerge from reactions the puppet inevitably receives from people it comes in contact with. A puppet, after all, does assume a life and power of its own. And therein lies its magic.

This outline of ways for you to begin bringing puppets to life will first provide you with personal guidelines. Then we will provide a conceptual outline you can follow based on puppetry's four basic qualities: Voice, Movement, Character and Appearance.

Understanding these qualities will equip you with a basic working knowledge for bringing a puppet to life. These qualities do not develop in any particular sequence, but they will begin to work together as you begin "warming up" with a puppet you have decided to use. Again, our purpose is not to impose puppetry as "art", but to select key elements in the medium to work for you. Let's look first at the element of voice.

**Voice**

Taken by themselves, puppet voices are fun and exaggerated. Exaggerating a voice will make your puppet an individual easy to identify and interesting to listen to. But a puppet's voice, no matter how cute or zany, really belongs to its user.

Using a puppet for teaching or for communication gives the user a singular opportunity to expand the use of his voice. Through voice emerges the user's personality, movements, sounds, expressiveness with words; a sense of boldness and
contrasts in the process of "letting it go."

The medium of puppetry naturally calls for new possibilities in the exercise and use of voice as one of the main avenues of educational presentation. To avoid exploration of voice is to avoid developing one of the most fundamental parts of the educator whose job is not only to convey information conceptually, but emotionally. Depending upon how it is used, voice can carry great emotion, a fact readily acknowledged but usually glossed over in day-to-day teaching. Not unlike our attitude about listening, we want children to ask questions and speak up. Yet, we often fail to teach and reinforce basic and required communication skills. To prime their participation engines, I know one teacher who involves her children in voice exercises each morning. Children learn to relax their voices by making sounds and warming up the vocal chords. Music is sometimes included as children "get away from words," and use their voices simply as a means of self-expression, an activity reminiscent of a baby's vocalization of sounds. Without such invitation to play and create, children's voices remain confined to a limited range of expression in most classrooms.

Puppets provide opportunity for the user to free herself from the constraints of using the same voice - however pleasant - every minute of every day. On days when a teacher feels fresh and renewed, her voice reflects the feeling. When a teacher is tired, her voice reflects fatigue. Puppets keep a teacher's use of voice poised and primed for creative timing and strategies.

To alter the voice is a compelling educational statement. It rivets the attention of children and at the same time reaches deeply within to spark the user's personal resources and creativity. With a changed voice you are no longer regular fare, neither to the children nor to yourself. With a change in tone, the teacher is also a strong role model for the positive expression of voice and use of language. If teachers do not learn a more varied and skillful use of voice, then they must take responsibility for their students' lack of oral expressiveness. Do not assume that by changing your voice children will automatically follow suit. They need permission, need to be shown and encouraged.

A different voice can be shocking, surprising, dramatic and fun. It can signify a specific purpose or activity to those listening. Knowing that alternative voices are part of your repertoire, the listener is more apt to remain attentive and responsive. When this channel is open and appropriate for learning (and is encouraged by the teacher or adult) it invites greater participation and self-expression from those in your group. In a classroom, this can mean the difference between working with a group of children you constantly exhort to "stop talking," or a group that feels free enough for responsible play and participation. It can mean the difference between a class of readers who nasally drone words or readers who enjoy highlighting and emphasizing words
they read with avid enthusiasm. The passion for learning and the desire to take part can emerge through varieties of voice expressiveness. For the teacher or group leader, voice is a highly educational, creative road.

**Here They Come.......**

New voices emerge in all of us simply by changing pitch to achieve a higher or lower tone, inflection to emphasize certain words, loudness, word speed, and breath quality. Snakes, for example, love words that end in 'S', because they can extend and exaggerate special 'S' wordsssssssss to create a sssssnakey sssssssounding 'hisssssssss.'

In playing with puppet voices, and in choosing one that is suitable for your puppet, think of voice extremes such as the following: Very high or low whisper or projected yawning loud or soft hoarse or clear chipper slow or fast sweet or growling choppy deep or squeeky grumpy or happy

_Eloongate....... wooorrrrrrds....... aaaaand........ sennnntennnnces to give a puppet...... a "sloooow" voice. Orspeakabruptly...todistinguishtheppettes... a "fast talker."_

In order to create a high voice, think how a witch might sound; higher still, for a mouse. Think of a giant's deep bellow or a bear's low belly laugh.

Select a voice that reflects the spirit of the puppet. If you want the puppet to display an assertive character who knows what he likes, give it a voice that is strong, upbeat and clear.

Another key to creating different puppet voices is to hold your mouth and lips in different ways: almost closed, wide open, to the side, puckered, pinched or pouted. This will force your voice to sound different; an excellent exercise for a group that has just made puppets. It takes a little bit of practice, but comes easily after awhile.

To help remember a voice, think of a key sound or line for your puppet. This line or pet phrase may become part of the puppet's personality. You will begin to "hear" this line in your mind, and it will help you recall the puppet's voice. Holiday Horse makes every one of his appearances with a "HI YA, HI YA, HI YA," a line which can be used to "tune in" to the voice, movement and character of the puppet.

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**PUPPET VOICE EXERCISES**

Next to each puppet name listed below, write a few words under VOICE QUALITY that best describe the voice you think of for that puppet.

**PUPPET NAME VOICE QUALITY**

EXAMPLE: Eeeky Mouse high & squeeky

a) Merry Monster
b) Bonnie Bee
c) Suzi the Sneezer
d) Marvelous Marv

e) (Puppet you have made)

Puppet voices can be developed by adding a whistle, a cheer, a groan, a rhyme or song. These voice "extras" will help draw attention to your puppets, and help children remember them. In between your puppet's words or sentences, for example, you can give a bird a happy whistle, or a witch an evil cry: "Hee Hee Hee!" Ready-Rhymer might say, "Summer, Spring, Winter, Fall - all four seasons - I love them all!" Before the mouse speaks, it can always let out a little "squeek."

Next to each voice "extra" listed below, write the name or type of puppet that comes to mind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VOICE EXTRA</th>
<th>PUPPET CHARACTER</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Tweet</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wonder Word Dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Beep Beep</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Ho Ho Ho</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Sniff Sniff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Oh Hum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) Ouch Ouch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g) Ah Ha</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h) Hee Hee Hee</td>
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Movement

Movement may be the strongest quality puppet quality. Puppet movement is what attracts and keeps the eye of the viewer attentive to your presentation. Make a little sound, and whoever is in the vicinity - child or adult - will look to see where it has come from. Sound may get the attention of the viewer, but movement is what seems to hold it. It is possible to use a puppet which is without a voice, distinct character or elaborate appearance. But it is not possible, under most circumstances, to use a puppet effectively in communication if it does not move. Start by using contrasts in movement to get a feel for movement with a puppet. Move the puppet in the following ways:

- Side to side bend forward to bow as if running up and down in a wiggling motion as if jumping forward and back quickly and slowly as if pointing in circles as if walking as if laughing

You will find that certain movements are more appropriate for certain kinds of puppets. Operated by strings attached to head, arms and a flowing gown, marionettes can be made to dance gracefully to music. They cannot pick up and carry small objects, as can hand puppets whose heads and arms move to the directions of your fingers inside cloth robes.

Paper talker puppets can also hold cards, paper, pencils and books in their folded mouths. The most important movement in a paper talker puppet is obviously in the
mouth, but you can add even more expression to this puppet by moving its head from side to side, tilting it at different angles, forward and back, up and down, twisting your wrist to make the puppet turn its head.

"Ollie the Dragon," is a famous cloth talker from the "Kukla, Fran and Ollie" show created by puppeteer Burr Tillstrom. Ollie is loved for the way he twists his neck and plops his lower jaw on the stage, one tooth showing. Shari Lewis’ lovable "Lambchop" had a way of turning her head upside down on the stage. These examples illustrate how certain movements, often exaggerated, distinguish particular puppets, and make them easy to remember. Children and adults also enjoy a certain degree of repetition in a peculiar or funny puppet movement.

Stick or tongue-depressor puppets move stiffly, though with humor, and cup and cylinder puppets with moveable heads, wings, etc. move with a distinct rhythm usually enhanced and supported by their puppet words and voices.

**Move the puppet in natural tempo to what it says.** With or without a mouth that opens and closes, the puppet will look as if it is talking. Make the puppet dance and move to your words. Feel the exaggeration in your voice or movements as your puppet comes more and more to life.

Experimenting with different puppet movements will help you develop your puppet's overall character. It will also help you select puppets appropriate for various teaching and communications activities.

You can practice puppet movement in front of a mirror or to voice rhythm and music. As you begin to do this exercise, you will probably feel hesitant, particularly if you haven't done this before. Don't forget to look behind you to see if somebody is watching. All clear? Now with renewed vigor, force yourself to let go a little. Be expansive in your movements. The above example of snake puppets who love to attach "S" sounds to the endssss of wordssss, comes to life even more if you imagine the snake actually moving to accentuate its hissy word endings. Use the entire range of your voice and arms movement. You may feel silly, but part of what you feel is the excitement of letting go a little. Keep in mind that you are expressing yourself - not merely talking as you normally do.

Notice that the puppet's movement alone has a distinct life to it. The potential "life" that you see in the puppet's dancing reflection will be real and immediate when you introduce the puppet to children. Feel the contrast between that and your normal self, and imagine its potential impact on your group. Puppet in hand, you are making it move and talk. There is no stage. The children can see you, but their eyes are on the puppet. While you may wonder how you appear, your self-conscious state inevitably changes. Whereas you've been preoccupied with the puppet, now your need to integrate the subject
and connect with the children takes over. Your snakey character, for example, suddenly has a purpose. He wants to build sentences with words. Certain words are action words; other words are connectors, descriptors, etc. Suddenly, the snake has become another member of the class and a teaching assistant all in one. You are two distinct individuals now, and the lesson is a new learning experience for all involved.

PERSONALITY (Or Who Is This Character Anyway?!) 

Like people, puppets possess certain elements in their character. Some of these elements slowly emerge through use and interaction; others, like the puppet's name, are given to him immediately and constitute an important part of his total character.

Elements of a puppet's personality can come about with no rhyme or reason in the course of puppet play. However, these elements can help define a puppet's communications role or educational purpose. Here are some typical puppet character elements:

Name Humor Job (vocation) Tastes in clothing Friends Personal History Favorite Foods Special Interests Pet Phrases

The Personality Sketch

To illustrate how these elements can define a puppet's communications role, a sample "personality sketch" is outlined below. A personality sketch can serve as a multi-purpose user's guide for a given puppet. In a Personality Sketch, a puppet's role as a communications tool and its overall personality are mapped out clearly and can be absorbed at a glance. With a Personality Sketch in your hip pocket, so to speak, you can more easily wade into the experience of actually using the puppet before a group.

The format and structure of a Personality Sketch make it useful for many purposes:

In the classroom, a Personality Sketch can supplement work for book reports and oral reports. On an intermediate and secondary level, it can also serve as a guideline for developing attention to detail in writing, and provide a framework for studying literary "character development."

For the teacher, the Personality Sketch can serve as a short form lesson plan. It can also be used for developing a product or logo in sales, promotion and public relations.

Below is a sample Personality Sketch for a puppet of infamous proportion.
Sample Personality Sketch

Name: Polluted Pete

Point of View: Pollution is a good thing

Taste in Clothing: Pete dresses in black and wears pop-top neck jewelry

Taste in Food: Instead of pepper, Pete prefers carbon particles on his gelatin dessert

Humor: Pete "coughs" at funny jokes

Friends: Hangs out with Dirty Ernie and Noisy Nick

Interests: Loves Litterers

Job/ Pastime: Promotes the virtues of Pollution

Pet Phrases: "Three cheers for Pollution!"

Polluted Pete is obviously not going to win a popularity contest. He thrives on the full-bodied boo's that children hurl at him. As a negative role model, Polluted Pete is an over-simplified symbol of society's most pressing environmental concern. As such, Pete is dramatic. He doesn't like the dirty work of raising the environmental awareness of young people. But, darn it, somebody's got to do it. Children not only remember him, but meeting the likes of him charges their values and awareness of the environment. Children's letters to Pete convey this down-to-earth understanding.

Puppet Personality & Name

As Polluted Pete's name suggests, there is power and purpose in a puppet's name. A puppet's name almost becomes the cornerstone of its personality. Of course, this isn't always the case, but choice of name can lead us to create other facets of a puppet's personality. Let's look at the character make-up of several Puppetools Puppet Models to further illustrate how personality is developed in a puppet.

Interro-gator's name suggests his educational purpose. Interro-gator is a green, toothy reptile paper talker puppet who loves to ask questions. His voice matches his slow undulating motion. Because he thinks carefully before he asks his questions, Interro-gator movements are usually slow, except when he gets excited. (When might that happen?) Interro-gator's best friend is Summary Sam, who wears an information funnel cup atop his head.
Phil Phonics is a somewhat "showy" kind of guy. Phil is somewhat "full of himself." He thinks he's the luckiest soul on earth. And why not? Do you know many characters who carry the alphabet around in their left ear? The brighter Phil's letter-decorated tie, the better he likes it. Phil is confident. His voice always conveys this quality, except when he's run across a word he can't sound out. When Phil gets excited about words and letters, his movements become quick and flashy. His buoyancy adds lightness to language learning and infects children with his love for words. Like Interro-gator, Phil's purpose is reflected in his name, which is printed in bold letters on a dapper paper hat. It always enhances a puppet's special purpose to advertise it whenever and wherever you can.

Two additional Personality Sketches are provided below. Created by other teachers, they include additional references to voice, movement and appearance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Sketch By Donna Seidell, New Haven, Connecticut</th>
<th>Personality Sketch By Sheila Flaxman, Norwalk Connecticut</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NAME OF PUPPET: Miss Crazy Compound</td>
<td>NAME OF PUPPET: Lady the Bug</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATIONAL PURPOSE: Teaches compound words by making appropriate matches (stressing word meanings and that more than one combination is possible.)</td>
<td>EDUCATIONAL PURPOSE: Teaches children about pests which are harmful to crops, plants, trees. She is part of a science lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPEARANCE: Rolled paper for hair. She wears glasses, a professor's cap and a neck-tie</td>
<td>APPEARANCE: She is made of red paper attached to a paper talker hinge. She has black construction paper strips for legs, and black paper spots glued to her body and wings. She has floppy antennas and big blue eyes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOICE: abrupt and authoratative like a professor</td>
<td>VOICE: Sweet, low with southern accent. Slow, exaggerated tempo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOVEMENT: Jerky. Her jerky movement is enhanced by curly hair</td>
<td>MOVEMENT: She seems to hover, then suddenly dart here and there, up and down, side to side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERESTS: matching words to make compounds</td>
<td>INTERESTS: Lady the Bug loves nibbling and flitting around. She looks for harmful garden pests, but also likes to tell children about helpful insects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRIENDS: Sally Synonym, Henrietta Homonym, Al Antonym</td>
<td>FRIENDS: Other bugs and people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTIVITIES WITH CHILDREN: Miss Crazy Compound throws word cards on a table, and asks children to find the right</td>
<td>ACTIVITIES WITH CHILDREN: She asks children to help identify harmful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
matches. She pleads with the children to help her, and when the correct compound is found, she says, "I knew that was the answer!"

HABITS (GOOD OR BAD): She becomes easily confused.

FAVORITE FOODS: Cupcakes that come in packages of two.

PET SAYINGS: "Two Words in One Can Be Fun!"

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: Miss Crazy Compound likes to put word cards with felt backing on flannel boards. She likes to look at words which children match up.

pests. She visits children sometimes when they are working.

HABITS (GOOD OR BAD): Never has a bad word for anybody. (She’s very sensitive)

FAVORITE FOODS: Loves to nibble on juicy tender flowers, mostly wildflowers

PET SAYINGS: "My oh My..It's time to Fly"
The "Total Look"

A puppet's appearance is largely determined by how it is constructed. However, appearance also works together with its other lifelike qualities to create a believable character. For example, we have seen how different shapes create different faces. How these shapes are arranged, as the puppet's features, will determine the puppet's expressions. A skinny puppet will likely not want a large round face with crayon dimples. Ever-ready Freddy won't have sleepy eyes. A slight turn of the eyes can make all the difference between a happy, sad or angry look.

Change the expressions of your puppet's features to experiment with puppet faces. Remember that a puppet's original appearance can be changed to help further develop its character or alter its original communications purpose. Asking the following questions, as you construct the puppet, may help you shape your puppet's communications value and bring it to life.

1. What are the points you want the children to remember, and how will the puppet's exaggerated voice, movement, personality and appearance help emphasize those points?

2. How will you introduce the puppet? As a new friend? As a surprise from behind a book? Or in conjunction with other support materials?

3. What can the puppet ask children to do?

4. Have you added details or accessories to the puppet to enhance its visual appearance and communications value?

5. What simple props, such as a poster, can you use with the puppet?

6. Are your ideas simple enough? Make using the puppet manageable.

7. Are you using a puppet you enjoy and feel comfortable with?

On Fear And Trembling

A discussion on bringing puppets to life must necessarily include words like "fear" and "anxiety." After all, they go right to the heart of the matter for the newcomer. Actually, anybody who teaches or presents information knows anxiety intimately. The anxiety induced by the prospect of using a puppet is part necessary tension and part excitement. Fear is normal. But to allow fear to keep you from using a puppet is to embody the same fear of failure daily encountered in our students' faces. Do we try something new as an example to them? Or do we stay only in
the comfort zone? The small entity on the end of your arm - the puppet - makes mockery of that little devil - anxiety.

High on my list are those educators who put the question of fear and anxiety into perspective by viewing puppet-use as nothing that far out of the ordinary. As they see it, using a puppet is a reasonable, perhaps risky step. They accept risk as a given in order to find ways to better involve their students and are willing to try something different.

The more at home you are with puppets, the more things you are apt to try in using them. Bringing a puppet to life is also a process of reaching into yourself, through your imagination. As if into a grabbag, you reach in and offer up to yourself and the world an entire constellation of puppet characteristics including smiles, noises, faces, movements, attitudes, and new ways of being - all shades of your self released and free at play in the living, breathing puppet form.

An adult's first puppet experience may be as careful and tentative as picking up a newborn baby. The puppet says something or makes a noise, and you are surprised, shocked, amazed or all nervous giggles...at yourself. Some of us haven't played like this since we were children. In time, you get to know the puppet a little better. You give him a nick-name. It takes on his special characteristics (She always says that.....He always does that”), and it becomes part of the family, the group. Months have passed in this process, and you find yourself reaching for the puppet without thinking. Another teacher, not even picking the puppet up, makes serious reference to it in an effort to get children’s attention. She has come a long way in bringing the power of her imagination into her teaching. A state of mind, the puppet has become part of the classroom, and part of her life.

Sometimes this process happens instantly. Not too long ago in a workshop, a hospital volunteer made a simple paper talker rabbit. I commented on its floppy paper ears, stuffed with cotton, and its whimsical face which peered out from behind its long scraggly paper whiskers. "I don't really like him," she said.

"You don't?!” replied the chorus of staff and other volunteers who overheard her remark and turned their attention to the rabbit and its creator. They all gathered around and spoke up in defense of the rabbit.

"What's his name?” somebody inquired.

Not quite knowing how to answer the question, she hesitated.

"Does he talk fast rabbit talk?” I asked, taking another tack.

"Not this rabbit,” she replied. "He's a Southern rabbit."
And then, with slow exaggeration as if out of the blue, she added, "His....Name....is....BER....NARD!

Her voice grew louder and bolder as the puppet took control of his own name in this transformational process. Her impromptu workshop audience broke into laughter. A volley of comments and questions came Bernard's way. Slow-talking, Southern-accented Bernard was now in the limelight, speaking on behalf of his own value which, only moments before, his user had doubted.

I then turned my attention to another participant who had a related question. We talked briefly for several minutes. During our conversation, I thought it would be fruitful to turn back to Bernard's user, whose name had momentarily escaped me.

"Excuse me," I said. "Could you tell me your name, again?"

"My.....name.....is....Berrr...nard," she said without a pause. Her eyes were twinkling.