

## Special Issue: Issues in Teaching Theatre Design

Carly Holzwarth, Guest Editor  
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### Puppetry for a Plague Year: A Syllabus?

Amanda Petefish-Schrag  
Iowa State University, United States of America

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#### Abstract

At its core, puppetry lives at the edge of impossibility, teeming with contradictions: puppets are simultaneously alive and dead, old and new, art and science, tangible and imagined. So how does one effectively teach a nearly impossible craft when paired with equally impossible conditions of teaching and learning within a pandemic and its many reverberations? In this case study, a puppetry instructor considers the question of teaching “impossibility” through the lens of a puppetry design and performance course taught at Iowa State University in the Fall semester of 2021. In doing so, she examines the learning context, curricular structures, and pedagogies applied in the course. This includes discussion of the instructor’s efforts to develop a more responsive and flexible instructional framework that coupled the inherent incongruities of the puppetry craft with students’ lived experiences within the pandemic.

## Introduction

What follows in this case study holds more mystery than hypothesis. I can't provide a tidy list of best practices supported by indisputable data. What I offer instead is context for my approach to teaching a puppetry course at Iowa State University in Fall 2021 and my subsequent efforts to not only understand the course's unusual potency, but to understand more about the nature of puppetry, teaching, and the historical moment in which we find ourselves.

To begin, here's a bit of that context, and even some data, informing why I keep returning to this course as a focus of inquiry:

- I have taught puppetry design and performance courses regularly over the past two decades at multiple academic institutions, ranging from a small, private, liberal arts college to a large Research I University.
- I have taught this puppetry design and performance course multiple times at my current institution.
- Since the pandemic began, student absenteeism has significantly impacted every course I teach except the Fall 2021 puppetry course. In this course, over half the class of 15 students had no absences, and only two students exceeded three absences for the semester.
- In this course, most students completed and submitted their work on time (also different from other pandemic-era courses). Over two-thirds of the class had no late assignments, and only two students exceeded more than three.
- The student work in the course was exceptionally strong, as in “better than the work I'd encountered in the preceding two decades of non-pandemic puppetry courses”. The engineering was more complex, the materials more considered, the aesthetics more refined, the ideas within designs and performances more connected and focused.

Beyond this, I can say with little doubt that the course was transformational, often even profound. Dynamic questions arose from our collective learning in the course—questions about puppets, art, ourselves, our relationships with “stuff”, and our path moving forward. Most semesters I would be thrilled to encounter questions like these a few times a semester; in this course they occurred daily. I observed this phenomenon in the classroom, and students spoke about it with each other and noted it in their course evaluations. What I cannot say with certainty is *why* it happened.

Since the onset of the pandemic, my approach to teaching has been one part careful and considered responsiveness to the ever-changing “new-normal” of our circumstances, and one part throwing things at the proverbial wall to see what sticks.

On the “careful and considered” end of my approach . . .

In the early pandemic semesters, I adapted teaching methods in all my courses to a more competency-based approach, offering students flexibility to choose from a variety of learning activities that matched their needs and curiosities while working toward critical learning outcomes. I took a similar approach to scheduling in-class discussions, games, and labs. If students responded well and demonstrated learning engagement, we lingered longer on the activity. If the activity wasn't a good match, I left enough flexibility in the schedule to allow for a different activity that served the same learning objectives. When teaching the puppetry course in the fall of 2021, I applied similar principles.

I also continued to incorporate what I have always sought to do in teaching puppetry, leaning into the unique nature of an art form where meaning lies in contradiction: puppets are simultaneously alive and dead, old and new, art and science, tangible and imagined. And in the pandemic, I hoped that this approach might allow us to bring our own fractured definitions, expectations, and experiences to our efforts to investigate and practice the art form.

Yet because what happened in the course differed significantly from my other puppetry and pandemic-era theater courses, I cannot fully attribute its successes to these factors. And so, in attempting to further debrief and interrogate what happened, I have put together what I call a "retroactive syllabus" — a syllabus that attempts to fuse Past Amanda's intentions for this puppetry course, Present Amanda's perceptions of what occurred, and Future Amanda's hopes to replicate the kind of learning "magic" that often occurred in the course.

### **Day One – Necromancy?**

A minor but memorable experience signaled a change in the course on the very first day. One of the foundational questions in a puppetry course is *What is a puppet?*. To investigate this question, on the first day of class I presented students with various definitions of puppet and puppetry from an array of global puppetry traditions, ranging from simple to complex. I posted these definitions around the classroom, and then asked students to consider the definitions from a variety of vantage points, such as "What definition feels most familiar to you?," "What definition do you like the most and least?," and "What definition is the strangest to you?" With each question, students moved to the posted definition that they chose in response. In all of my puppetry courses before 2021, two definitions consistently ranked as least liked and most strange to students. One, "Bringing a created figure from an unknowable 'somewhere else' to the living plane", and two, "A kind of necromancy in which lifeless forms are made to dance." In prior courses students consistently described these definitions as "creepy" "scary" and "weird".

But not in 2021. In this class, these definitions were the clear winners in response to both

“What definition do you like the most?”, and “What definition do you find most interesting?”

### **Week Two – Tableaux Vivant, Tableaux Mort**

In the second week of class, I typically bring in a variety of types of puppets for students to work with in exploring the way different puppets function. Usually, one of the first things students do with the puppet—no matter its type—is use it to fight another puppet.

But not in 2021. Notably, the students’ puppet play tended toward relationships defined by loss and grief: two birds trying to find their lost baby; a weeping child; a dog mourning over the corpse of their dead owner. These interactions were not coordinated or performative; students were simply given instructions to move around the space and literally play with different puppets. Yet with every interaction, these striking images and relationships kept emerging.

### **Week Five – Busy Hands, Broken Hearts**

Throughout the course, students commented on how much they were enjoying the process of working with their hands, especially as a counterpoint to the increase in virtual learning that they had encountered. The ability to navigate, negotiate, and connect with materials and objects in real time was, as one student articulated, “like the opposite of what I’m doing in every other class”. Another noted, “It feels weirdly real to make imaginary things.” Students also noted the satisfaction they felt being able to see and experience discernable markers of their progress, despite the frustration of grappling with materials, engineering, and new performance techniques. “You can tell right away,” one student commented, “it either works or it doesn’t. It’s a relief to just know.”

Students also reflected on the freedom to select projects that allowed them to pick up new hobbies and skill sets. To complete their puppets, students learned how to crochet, carve wood, and felt wool among other things. And many of them reported pursuing these hobbies beyond the individual project or class as a means of focus or reprieve as they attempted to navigate the many stresses, disruptions, and losses in their lives.

Over the course of the semester, I typically ask students to read and reflect on a variety of articles, essays, and interviews on puppetry practice and traditions throughout the world. I assign several readings on puppet and performing object use in funeral rites and mourning rituals, which we discuss during the first part of a class session. But the students in the class wanted to discuss this topic more, going so far as to request additional readings on the subject. We spent multiple class periods discussing the content. At the end of our class discussion, one student remarked in her weekly reflections:

I wish we did rituals like this. That we could make containers for our memories and grief. Literally live with our losses in a visible way. Because then we'd all be able to see what we've been through, and maybe we'd all be more careful with each other.

As a closing reflection on this course, I will note that, in most of my courses since 2020, I have frequently felt hidden trauma in the classroom threatening to boil over. But this course felt different, perhaps because students' trauma, loss, and grief were not concealed; they were present. But neither did the class resemble a therapy session. Students were not explaining or recounting lived experiences, but they did find expression in their designs, projects, and responses through means of their own choosing. In essence, they actively practiced those definitions of puppetry they were drawn to on the very first day: giving life and form to complex emotions, and creating figures from that “unknowable somewhere else” to find expression in the living plane.

### **About the Author**

Amanda Petefish-Schrag is an Associate Professor of Theatre at Iowa State University, where she teaches Puppetry, Theatre History, Script Analysis, and Directing. She is a professional puppeteer, playwright, and director who aims to foster community-centered theatre practices, reimagining what theatre can be and who it serves. Her research and practice in puppetry explore its social and ethical roles within communities, particularly concerning human relationships with ecology and the environment. Amanda's plays have been performed in theaters and festivals across the United States, as well as in the UK, Canada, and Ecuador. She is a member of the Dramatists Guild, the International Union of Marionette Artists, and the Puppeteers of America. She has also received the Kennedy Center National Teaching Artist Grant and the ATHE/KCACTF Innovative Teaching Award.

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