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Felt-Boards: Creation and Use in the Classroom

A Waldorf-Inspired Approach

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I work at the International Community School (ICS) in Gunma. Our students are from 2 to 10 years old. Our curriculum for all ages is trilingual (English, Portuguese and Japanese). ICS uses a Waldorf-based home schooling curriculum from the Oak Meadow educational service, which is accredited in the U.S. We have of necessity adapted the curriculum for grades 1 through 4, to include linguistic, social and cultural elements from Brazil, Japan and the U.S.

The primacy of storytelling in Waldorf-based education is particularly useful and effective in our multicultural and multi-lingual educational environment. The use of felt-boards for story telling is particularly helpful in the classroom. Colorful felt shapes, with great visual and

tactile appeal, draw children's interest and focus. What follows is practical information for the creation and use of felt-boards in the classroom.

Flexible Felt: In my experience, the teacher of children has limited time and resources for creating stimulating, multi-use materials for his or her lessons. There are felt- and story-boards available for purchase in educational supply catalogs. However, the cost is prohibitive; and the use of the materials may be limited to just the story for which the felt shapes were created. I have found that making a few felt-board bases, and shapes for storytelling, is a much more open-ended and flexible--and less expensive--option for teachers.

In making and using my felt-boards, I was inspired by the Waldorf principle of providing toys that are as natural, generalized and open-ended as possible. The idea is that children will generate and project the dolls' character, emotions and story independently and creatively, not constrained by pre-formed physical shapes and numerous accessories. Soft, flexible felt is easily cut, glued, sewn and marked, in shapes limited only by the imagination.

Making a Felt-Board: There are a few materials needed to create felt-boards and shapes for a variety of uses. They are available at home improvement sections of Sekichu or Cainz Home, and at local arts and crafts stores. For the basic felt board, you will need:

-1 sheet of plywood, rectangular or square according to preference. The size should be large enough to provide a good visible surface for children to see during story time or other classroom activities, but small enough to be held and moved about the classroom. My smaller felt-board is 30 cm x 45 cm. The larger board is 45 cm x 60 cm. Both boards are 1 cm thick.

-Sand Paper

-Hot Glue Gun and Glue Sticks

-Felt--various sizes and colors

The Felt-Board

Check the plywood for rough or sharp edges; sand away any such areas you find. Use a large piece of felt to cover the board surface. Depending on the supply of felt at your craft store, you might be able to find a sheet large enough to cover the entire surface. Or, you might have to use several squares of felt to cover the entire surface. For readers new to the use of the glue gun, be sure to plug it in several minutes before you begin so that it will be hot enough to melt the glue stick. Please check the instruction sheet for instructions and illustrations. Cover your work surface with newspaper or other protective material, to protect from drips and fine glue threads that form. It is easier to cover a small area of wood surface at a time with the melted glue, and press the felt on top of that section. If you spread glue over a large section, the glue will dry before the felt can be applied, and you must add more. I begin in the upper left corner, lay down a few stripes of glue, press on the felt, and repeat the process until I reach the lower right corner. If there are "bubbles" under the felt, remove them by pulling up the felt carefully and re-gluing the area before you continue laying down more felt. Pulling up the felt tends to stretch the fibers out, so it is best to proceed slowly and methodically to avoid "bubbling" and any subsequent stretching.

For more versatility, cover both sides of the plywood with felt of different colors for different background effects. Once you have a basic felt-board, you might want to try to make others with specific background details. Here are some ideas:

Four Seasons: Using different colors create four general seasonal backgrounds. Bright green grass, blue sky and budding tree for spring; darker green grass and a tree with full foliage for summer; brown dried grass and a tree with autumn foliage for fall; snowy white ground and a leafless tree for winter.



Day and Night: Bright green grass and blue sky for day; forest green grass and indigo blue for night.

Big Blue Sea: Wide, wave-shaped strips of various blue tones for waves and the depths of the sea.

These backgrounds need not be detailed. They can suggest the environment in a general way, and thus be used to support a variety of felt shapes, lesson-work, or stories than more specifically-detailed backgrounds. For storytelling, I can choose the Sea felt-board for books such as *Swimmy*, or the Day and Night board for a chapter from a *Frog and Toad* book.

Felt Shapes and Uses

Felt, constructed by pressing fibers together, does not unravel or fray, and so needs very little finishing once cut. For example, you might wish to cut out a variety of fruit shapes, without further detail. It is quite easy, though, to add a few details with your glue gun and smaller bits of felt: a few stripes of darker green on a watermelon, or a stem on an apple. You can add simple details with a laundry marker or fabric

paint. (I use "Scribbles 3D Paint" which I buy in the U.S.) You can decide how simple or detailed your shapes will be, according to the time and resources you have. I will note here that, although cutting felt shapes might seem a good activity for small children, felt cannot be easily cut with children's blunter scissors. Using sharper scissors to cut felt is best left to older students. Be sure to cut your shapes large enough to be easily visible during story or lesson time, and to be easily handled by your students. Very small pieces are not as useful in class, nor are they very durable, and they are all too easily lost. I have found it easiest to store felt shapes in plastic zip-lock bags. Here are some ideas for felt shape collections:

Numbers and Math: Cut sets of numbers 0-9, plus and minus shapes, in several colors. Make "equals" signs on squares of felt using laundry marking pens or fabric paint. You can use the numbers in teacher-led activities for counting. For example, I have used numbers on a felt-board to sing the song, "5 Little Monkeys." Students can also use the numbers on their own to practice math skills they've studied, such as a order, counting by 2s, and so forth.

The Alphabet: Make a few sets of the alphabet in both upper- and lower-cases. You can use the letters in so many ways: teaching the ABCs, phonics, word-families and other literacy-based activities.

The Weather: Make shapes of clouds, the sun, thunderbolts and lightning, snowflakes, raindrops and so on. At ICS, we chat about the weather every morning and sing "The Weather Song," using the felt shapes to teach phrases such as, "It's cloudy" and "It's rainy."

Geometric Shapes: Cut a wide variety of basic shapes (Square, rectangle, oval, circle, and triangle) in various sizes and colors. These shapes are very adaptable and can be used to shape animals, buildings, natural objects and people, to support a variety of stories. I supply an empty cookie tin full of geometric felt shapes, with 3 mini felt-boards for students' individual use. Sometimes I give a "challenge" and ask them to copy a series of objects I've modeled for them. At other times, I provide them for free play.

Specific Stories, Songs and Poems: I made shapes for such songs as "I Know an Old Woman," and "Do You Hear What I Hear". I also made shapes for the poem, "This is the House that Jack Built." This has provided me with a number of shapes that can be reused for different stories:

the forlorn maid of one poem becomes a cook in the story, "The Country Mouse and the City Mouse." The king from the Christmas song becomes a vain emperor always wanting more splendid clothing.

When choosing a story, song, or poem to illustrate with felt shapes, it is best to choose one that is not too long or detailed. A story supported and enhanced by a few, well-chosen and colorful felt shapes and characters will be much more interesting, magical, and understandable for young students, than one with numerous characters or twists of plot. Wherever possible, I like to tell the story by memory, adding a few details spontaneously or adapting it to my students' level or cultural backgrounds. If this is not possible, I have an assistant manipulate the felt pieces on the board as I read the book to the children.

I hope that I have provided useful information to at least a few stressed, tired teachers. It may be that, as has happened with me, after you make your first felt-board and collection of shapes to use with it, you find yourself wanting to create ever more detailed and complicated shapes or backgrounds, to illustrate a great song or story you plan to teach. If you have the time and energy, indeed, do so. However, my advice is: Keep It Simple. Let the imaginations of your students add detail to the song or story, so that they, too, become part of the colorful, creative process.

For further ideas and printable templates please visit the following websites:

http://www.dltk-kids.com/type/felt_board.htm

<http://www.amug.org/~jbpratt/education/mypages/flannelstories.html>

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