

Puppets in the Drama Classroom

Resource: <http://www.childdrama.com/puppetlunch.html>

I use puppets a great deal in my drama classes. Puppetry is a great way to bring more reticent or shy children out of their shells, and to help everyone become more expressive. Children who are afraid to speak or act in front of the class will often enthusiastically emote in the character of a puppet. When a child operates a puppet, the focus is on the puppet, rather than on the puppeteer, and the child forgets to be self-conscious. If you watch a child operating a puppet, you see that every emotion and every movement of the puppet is mirrored in the puppeteer. The child really is "acting." The puppet simply provides a safety net--an extra level of reality between the performer and her audience. Even my shyest students will perform loudly and boldly when using puppets. You can get puppets from a variety of sources, of course. Most toy stores have fairly inexpensive "stuffed animal" type puppets, and the more educationally oriented ones usually also carry puppet kits, stages, etc. However, often the best puppet experiences come when children make their own puppets. That way the puppet characters are personal to their operators, and the sense of ownership that comes from making the puppets invests their manipulation with added importance. Plus, by introducing "arts and crafts" into the drama classroom you begin to explore the connected nature of all the arts, and you give your students another way to excel. Sometimes the most creative puppet comes from a surprising source--that child you've been worried about all semester, who seems so unsure. My students are very open and honest with each other, and can appreciate the creativity of one another's work. Puppets in the classroom are a great way to boost self-esteem and to bring the class to a better sense of unity and cooperation.

It is not necessary to have any kind of "puppet theatre" to use puppets in the classroom. Of course such theatres can be a lot of fun, and if you have the space and the resources, by all means get one. You can build it yourself (I hope soon to get some suggestions online), or you can buy one ready made. But I have been using puppets with my classes for years without any stage at all, and in fact even when I have a stage available I don't use it all the time. Having the puppet and puppeteer out in the open allows the teacher to watch the child, rather than only the puppet, and see the way he is expressing the puppet's emotions in his own face. It allows the puppet to interact directly with the puppeteer. Plus, working without a stage means the whole class can work at once, which is often desirable. Many puppet traditions, such as the Bunraku in Japan, never use "puppet theatres" in the sense we think of in the west. The puppeteer is always visible along with the puppet. Interestingly, it is not necessary for the shy child to "hide" behind a puppet stage in order to lose his shyness--just the fact of the puppet's presence as central focus usually does the trick.

I define a puppet as "**Any inanimate object that is manipulated so as to appear animate.**" I make and use puppets of one kind or another with nearly every grade level I teach. My very youngest students make "puppets" out of their hands. Some students make lunchbag puppets. Older students make newspaper puppets in teams. We make paper analogs of Japanese doll theatre puppets when my students are studying Japan. When I have the resources available, I make shadow puppets with older students. Nearly every grade makes found object puppets at some point. Most of these projects are pretty easy to do. Click on a link above to go to any of my pages on various kinds of puppets. (Some of these I invented myself, but most are borrowed or adapted from other sources buried somewhere in my past.) All of the puppet projects here are fairly simple, and can be made during class using materials readily available. I'll be adding new projects to this page periodically.

Found Object Puppets

As I often tell my students, *anything* can be a puppet. I try very hard to get them past their narrow ideas of what constitutes a puppet. This lesson helps.

You Will Need

- A collection of everyday items.
- Some traditional puppets for show.

Discussion

- I usually begin the discussion by mentioning some things everyone knows are puppets--the Muppets, "Lamb Chop," etc. I bring out some of my own puppets (I am an avid puppet maker and collector) and show them in action. I usually allow the students to handle some of the less fragile puppets themselves. So far we're all in agreement about what is a puppet.
- But then I put the puppets away and bring out a collection of everyday items--for example, a pair of sunglasses, a small square cardboard box, a paper-punch, a shoe, a ruler. I lay these items in front of the students and say, "Are these puppets?"
- Of course at first the children all say, "no," and laugh at the question. But then I pick up one of the items--say, the sunglasses--and begin to manipulate it so it becomes a character.

Note: If you have not been a puppeteer it is a good idea to practice this ahead of time, and to deliberately select objects you know you can manipulate successfully. This is a very individual thing, but I'll give you some hints. Sunglasses, with their bows spread wide, become a very convincing ant's head, complete with reflective eyes and two antennae, if the manipulator is skilled enough. A shoe has a tongue and can talk, or it can use its laces like tentacles. The paper-punch can obviously become a baracuda. If it has a hinged lid, a cardboard box becomes a big-mouthed character with a ferocious appetite. (Mine is named "Stocky," because he used to contain a stock pot, and his schtick is box-related humor: "Hey, Stocky--what's your favorite food?" "Box lunch." "Who's your favorite actor?" "Bruce Boxleitner.") A ruler behind a notebook becomes a shy character who keeps peeking out and darting back out of sight.

- Children are normally delighted with the characters I create, and I often let them suggest other objects and try to "stump" me. (Don't make this offer unless you feel confident that they won't stump you, though.) I lead the conversation to the idea that anything can be a puppet if a person manipulates it, and creates a character from it. With older students I give them--or guide them to discover for themselves--the following definition: "A puppet is an inanimate object that is manipulated so as to appear animate." Obviously these big words won't work with younger students.

Making Our Own Puppets

- Once the concept of creating puppet characters from everyday objects has been explored, I challenge each student to find an object and create a puppet from it. I discourage them from altering the objects in any way. (It is not necessary to paint eyes on a chair to make a character of it.) Depending on the age of the students and on the timing, I will either have them use objects they can find in my room, or I'll assign the project as "homework."

Manipulating the Puppets

- It is important when doing a project like this not to skimp on the actual manipulation of the puppets. I usually spend a whole class period working with my students on character and story, on manipulating their invented characters and interacting with others. I suggest that they allow the nature of the chosen object to help them determine the personality of the puppet. (Which is lazier--an old bedroom slipper or a high-heeled shoe? How is the attitude of a pair of pliers different from the attitude of an oven mitt?) You will want to experiment with this project, to see what works for you.

Lunchbag Puppets



These big-mouth puppets are a great deal of fun, especially for younger children. Most everyone can make a puppet of a sort out of a paper bag, but this design is a little more expressive and allows for more creativity. I make these puppets with my second-graders, and sometimes first

and third. It is important when working with a group of children to go slowly, step-by-step through the process, and stress that everyone, even if they are sure they know what to do, should stay with the group and not move ahead a step.

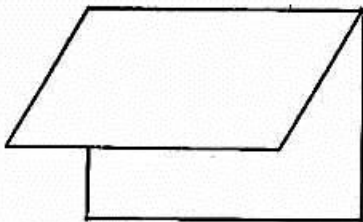
You Will Need

- Paper lunchbags (small size)--enough for one for each student, plus some extras in case of error or emergency. (It is best to use brand new bags, because opening and using the bags makes them difficult to work with. You can usually find lunchbags sold by the hundred at the grocery store.)
- Construction paper, various colors, enough for everyone to use a full sheet, plus extra for details.
- Glue sticks. (I like to have enough for everyone in the class to have their own. You can buy them by the dozen. I use glue sticks that are purple until the glue dries--although it dries clear. This makes the glue easier to see and simplifies the project.)
- Scissors--enough for everyone to share easily.
- Markers or crayons.
- (A few completed lunchbag puppets for show.)

Making the Puppets

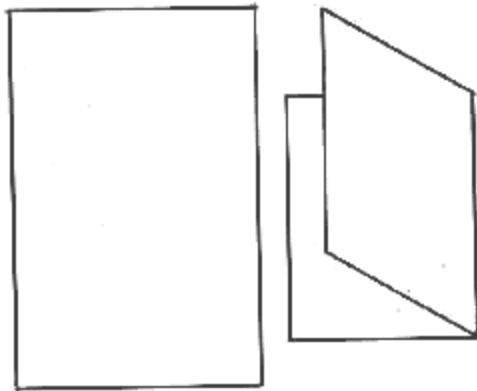
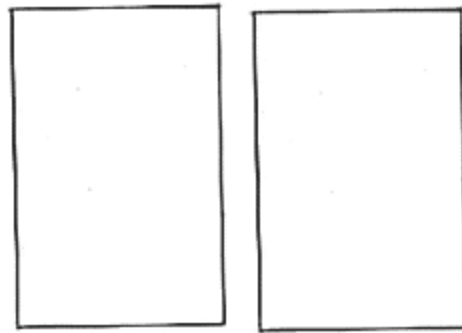
What follows is a transcription of what I say as I do this project with my students. As I narrate the instructions I also make a puppet in front of the class.

Today we're going to make Lunchbag Puppets, like the ones I have here. You can make your puppet anything you want--it can be an animal, a person, real or imaginary. But we're going to go through the first part--the actual putting-together of the puppets--all together. Even if you think you know how, try not to get ahead.



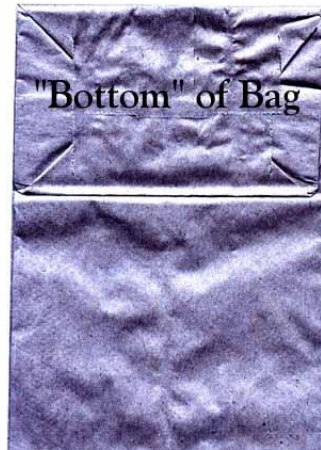
We start with one sheet of construction paper. This is the main color of your puppet, so choose carefully. Fold the paper in half the short way (like a hamburger, not like a hot dog).

Open it up and cut along the fold. Now you have two smaller rectangles of paper.



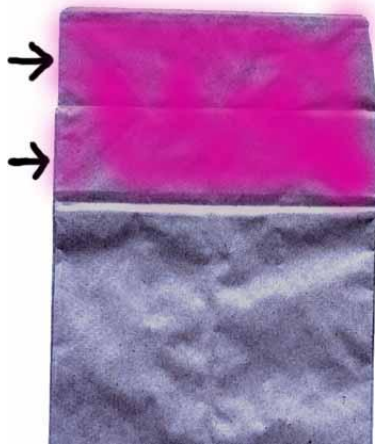
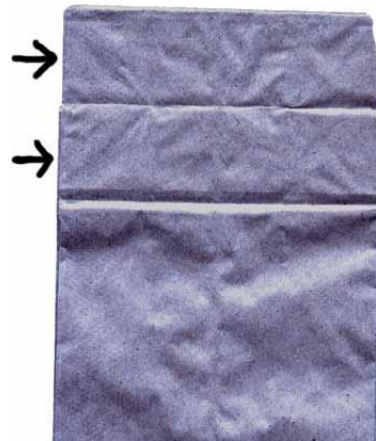
Fold one of the rectangles in half again, the short way, but don't cut it. Now you have one folded and one unfolded rectangle of construction paper.

Take your lunchbag but don't open it up! Examine it until you have found the rectangle of paper that becomes the "bottom" of the bag when it is opened. (At this point I generally have to go around to everyone and make sure they have it right.) Place the bag on the desk so that the "bottom" of the bag is at the top and facing you. (Make sure everyone gets it.)



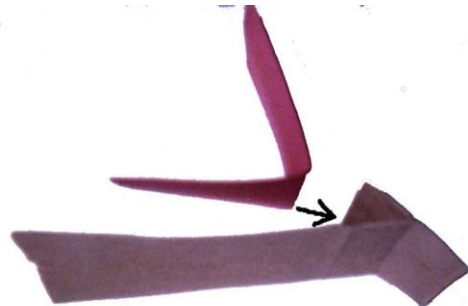
Lift up the "bottom" of the bag as if you were opening a mouth, and fold it back.

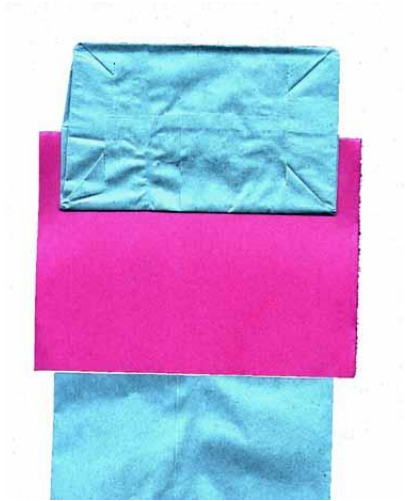
This should reveal a flat surface marked by creases into two long, narrow rectangles. (Check that everyone is on the right page.)



Take your glue stick and cover both of these rectangles with glue. It is almost impossible to use too much. (Help whoever needs it.)

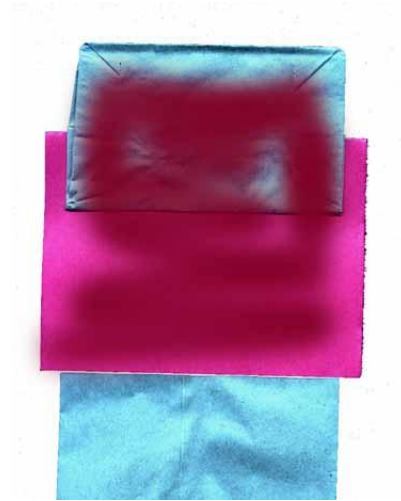
Now take your folded piece of construction paper and fit the fold of the paper into the crease between the rectangles in the bag. Close the "mouth" down on the paper and press to set the glue. (Help whoever needs it. Many students will be tempted at this point to put their hands in their puppets and make the mouths go, but try to prevent it, because it is often difficult or impossible to get the bag folded flat again afterwards, and you'll need to.)





Place your puppet on your desk so that it is "face up," and you can see the "bottom" of the bag and the lower part of your folded construction paper.

Take your glue stick and cover all of the visible construction paper and the "bottom" of the bag with glue.



Now take your other rectangle of construction paper and glue it to the puppet so that the bottom edge of the unfolded paper matches the bottom edge of the folded paper, and the top of the unfolded paper sticks off the top of the puppet.

Now you have finished the assembly part of the puppet-making process. You can put your hand inside and make the mouth work, like this. Don't do it too much, though, until the glue has a chance to really dry.



Your next step is to cut the top of the head and the mouth into whatever shape you want. One warning, though: You can cut the paper into any shape or size as long as you **DON'T CUT THE BAG!** (I generally have to go around and show everyone how to tell where the bag stops, so they can avoid cutting into it when shaping their mouths, and still a few usually manage to do it. That's why the extra bags, and why I always make one myself, which I can let a student have if one makes a mistake.)

Once you've cut your puppet's head to the shape you want, you can decorate it with markers or by gluing more construction paper to it. By the way, that's another way to make the head a different shape. If you want really long ears, for instance, don't try to cut them into the puppet's head--cut them out of a second sheet and glue them on. You can also glue arms, legs, tails, etc onto the body of your puppet if you want.





You're done! Wow!

Manipulating the Puppets

Since these are big-mouth puppets, their primary ability is talking. In fact it's the only thing they really do. So I try to exploit this when working with these puppets, and to create lessons that stress the verbal. The simplest way to go about it is to have everyone sit on the floor in a circle, each with his or her puppet. Explain that while everyone talks, everyone talks in their own way. What sort of voice do you think your puppet might have? What sorts of things might it say? One by one, the puppets speak--each making a short speech, sometimes as short as, "Hi!" As the students gain confidence the speeches tend to lengthen, so I usually go around the circle a couple of times to let everyone express themselves. Then we go around the circle again, with the instruction that each puppet must directly address one of the other puppets. The puppeteers should choose which puppet to address logically. (For instance, a dog might say to a cat, "Look out, I'm going to get you.") Usually I go around the circle at least twice this way as well, and don't allow the students to address the same other puppet each time.

Newspaper Puppets

This is a great project for older elementary through adult. In addition to exploring characterization and puppet manipulation skills, it builds teamwork and can bring a cast to a closer collaboration.

You Will Need:

- A whole lot of old newspapers. Figure a stack 6-12 inches tall for each group of three or four students.
- Tons of masking tape. Figure four or five rolls per group. (Masking tape is fortunately really cheap.)

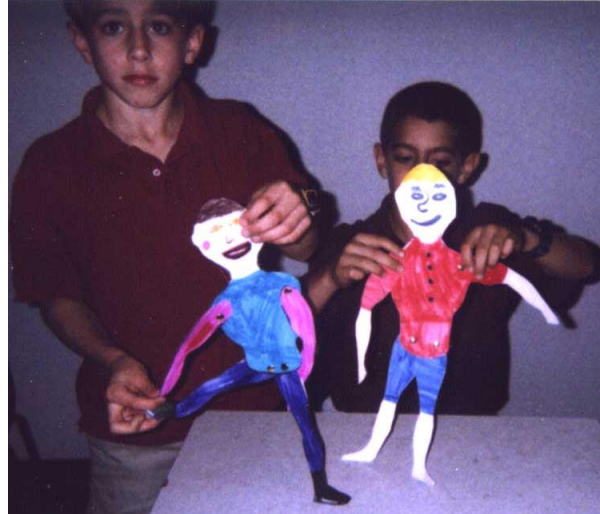
Making the Puppets

- Divide the class or cast into groups of three or four, and give each some newspapers and some tape.
- Each group must build a giant figure--it can be a person or an animal, real or fantastic--out of rolled up, folded or wadded newspaper and masking tape. Generally limbs are made by rolling paper into long, stiff tubes held together by tape, while solid masses, such as torsos are made by loosely wadding paper and wrapping it thoroughly with tape. There is no such thing as using too much tape! I usually allow no scissors, but paper may be torn to shape. In general the figures should be about the size of the students themselves (although they are of course much lighter) and the more flexible joints and movable limbs the better. (I once made a marvelous spider.)
- Even as they are building the figure, the group should be thinking about how it will move. This is not the kind of puppet one puts hands inside, but rather the kind one manipulates from the outside. All team members should have a role in manipulating the finished puppet. (For instance, one might operate the feet, one the hands, one the head, etc.)

Manipulating the Puppets

- When the puppets are finished, including whatever changes have to be made to accommodate movement, the groups rehearse manipulation. They must focus on working together so that their creature moves as a unified whole rather than a collection of independent parts. They may experiment with the sound their creation might make. They rehearse until they can smoothly operate the puppet.
- Finally, in a controlled way, bring two or more puppets into interaction. Do they fight? Fall in love with one another? Fear one another? Cooperate on some task? Coach the students to explore all the possibilities.
- When the project is over, I usually end up just tossing the puppets in the trash. That's the beauty of a rough-and-ready puppet project like this. (Naturally if someone really wants to take a puppet home I allow them to do so.)
- With older students I compare the process of manipulating our Newspaper Puppets to other puppet techniques they may have seen, such as the huge, multi-puppeteer creations in *The Lion King*, Spanish *Muerte* puppets, Bunraku, etc. We also discuss the level of concentration and cooperation necessary to make the puppets work.

Japanese Doll Theatre Puppets



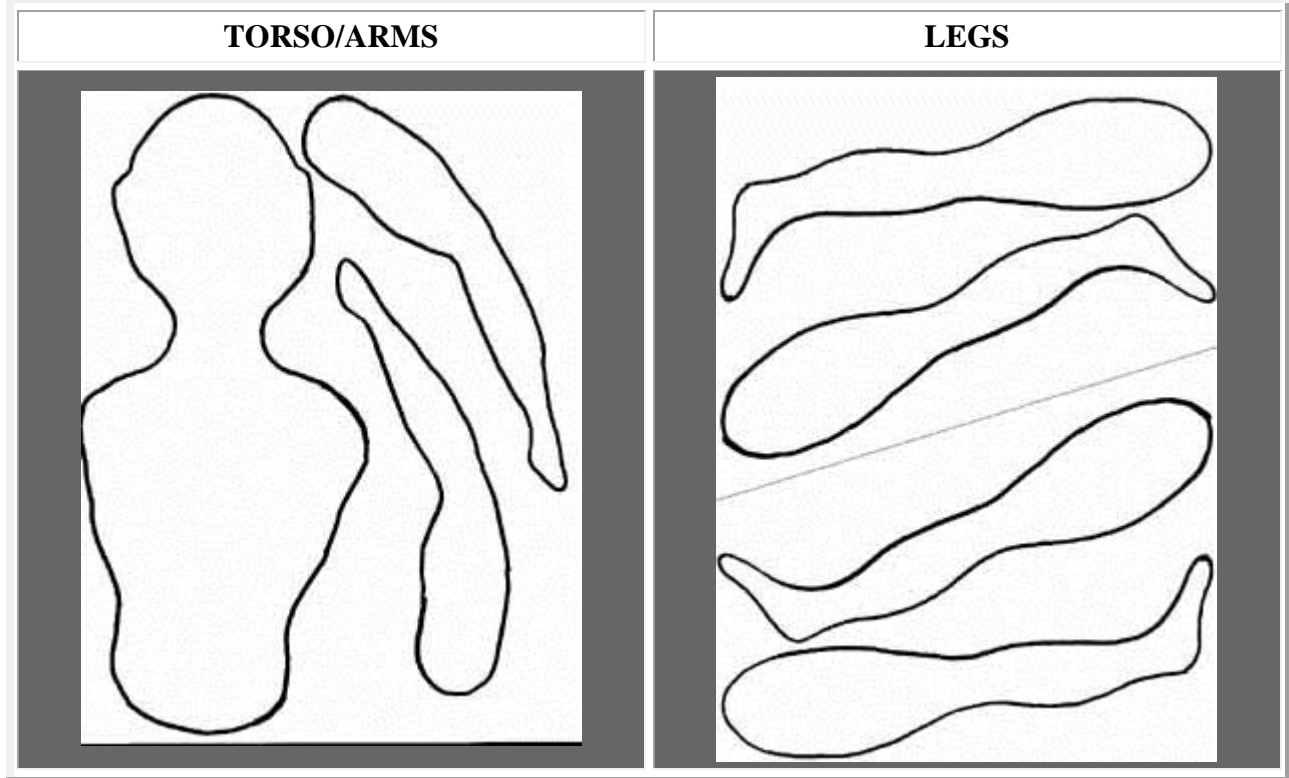
These puppets are not intended to duplicate any kind of Japanese puppet. Rather, they are similar in CONCEPT to the puppets used in Bunraku and other Japanese "doll theatres." They are incredibly simplified compared to these puppets, which can take a lifetime to learn to make, but they allow students to begin to understand some of the ideas of this kind of puppetry. Central to the project is the fact that, as in Bunraku, the puppeteers are always plainly visible--indeed, as a friend of mine put it, in a way the puppeteer IS the puppet. Also important is the idea of creating a puppet whose character is clearly delineated by its dress and appearance. I usually show my students lots of pictures of Bunraku puppetry before we begin, but they are not required to try and make their puppets "look like" the puppets in the pictures. (Although I see no reason you couldn't do that if you wanted to.) Rather, they are asked to imitate the level of detail (many students refuse to believe, at first, that they are looking at puppets rather than real people) and the way that the puppets' dress and appearance define them. When it comes time to manipulate the puppets, we again imitate concept rather than actual story. Instead of acting out "Japanese" stories with the puppets, we concentrate on making the movements of the puppets lifelike, on convincing interaction between puppets, and on the way that the body of the puppeteer reflects the affect of the puppet.

You Will Need:

- Heavy card stock (8.5x11), enough for two sheets (one and a half, really) per student.
- A printout of the two templates below (or just draw your own).
- One-inch brass fasteners (brads), enough for four per student.
- Scissors to share.
- Markers or crayons to share.
- Paper punch to share.

Templates

Print these so that each just fits an 8.5x11 sheet. (Or you can just draw your own.) Photocopy **on card stock** enough for everyone to have one "torso/arms" sheet and every two people can share one "legs" sheet. (I usually cut the "legs" sheets in half ahead of time to avoid acrimony.) **Everyone's browser and printer combo handles scale differently. If you click on the images below, they'll take you to images that *should* just fit on 8.5x11 sheets, but you may not be able to print them that size--it'll depend on your printer. Otherwise you can print them any size and enlarge them on a photocopier, or draw your own, using these as models.**



Making the Puppets

- Each student gets one torso, two arms, and two legs (naturally). Do not cut them out right away, however. The decorating comes first, for reasons that will become clear. Set out markers or crayons, etc.
- The idea is to decorate the puppets so that they represent clear characters. I usually say something like, "When you look at a real person, you usually can't tell from the way he's dressed or the way his face looks what kind of person he is--other than obvious things like recognizing a cop from his uniform. But you should be able to tell by looking at your puppet who he is and what he is like. (The puppet below, made by a student who really understood the assignment, is supposed to be Bill Gates!)"



- We look at pictures of Japanese puppets to get an idea of the level of detail attained, but don't necessarily try to imitate them.
- The puppets as drawn on the templates are more-or-less naked (or at any rate in form-fitting clothes). Some students will want to draw clothing on them that goes "outside the lines." This is perfectly okay. (Equally, one can make a character who is thinner or fatter than the template.) That's why we don't cut them out until after they are decorated. (Plus, that way they students don't get as much ink on their desks.)
- When the decorating is complete (which should take quite a while, if the students are serious about the details), cut out the puppets carefully.
- Using a paper punch, make four holes in the torso--two shoulders and two hips--and corresponding holes in the arms and legs.
- Using brass fasteners, attach the arms and legs as shown.
- For the most part it works best to put the legs behind the torso and the arms in front of it. That way the legs look more natural, and the arms can move in front of the body. Sometimes a student will have a specific reason for doing it the other way. (A character who is a ballet dancer looks better with the legs in front, and one of my students once made a burglar, and wanted him to be able to put his hands behind his back for handcuffs.) That's perfectly okay. One of the things I like about this project is the creative ideas it stimulates.
- Occasionally students want to put elbows or knees on their puppets. I generally allow this, after pointing out that it makes the arms or legs a little shorter than they "should" be. (If you wanted to, you could of course design templates that allowed for this. The reason mine don't is that with only one puppeteer, four joints are about all they can reasonably handle.)

Manipulating the Puppets

Real Bunraku puppeteers spend years learning their craft. They use their whole bodies to manipulate their puppets. Obviously we can't really approach this level of skill in a single drama lesson. But my students are usually able to get facile enough with these enormously simplified puppets to make them move fairly naturally, and interact with each other. I stress that, as in Japanese puppetry, there is no need to hide the presence of the puppeteer. Rather than putting handles or something on the backs of the puppets, I demonstrate manipulating the puppets by simply moving their various parts with my hands, in plain sight. The children quickly perceive that they are able, as audience, to watch the puppets while ignoring my hands, and after that they have no difficulty doing it themselves. Since these puppets are mostly about moving bodies rather than talking, we do mostly "pantomime" stories. One student might narrate a familiar story, while two or three others' puppets "act it out." Try to leave time for the manipulation, or the lesson becomes simply an arts-and-crafts project. (Nothing inherently wrong with that, but if you're the drama teacher, you want to go beyond it.)

