

While attending the Higher Diploma in Adult & Further Education in Maynooth College last year, one of my lecturers, Michael Kenny, was telling the class about Grundtvig workshops. Curiously, I went online, accessed the Grundtvig catalogue and browsed through the various workshops on offer all over Europe. There was a workshop in Santona, Spain that caught my attention – ‘Learning by Puppets’. Reading through the workshops main activities I was drawn to the suggestion that one could creatively use ‘puppetry as a powerful tool to foster the learners to express themselves’ and ‘to reduce low performance in reading and writing’. I sent off an application form and a short video (as requested) and hoped for the best.



After been accepted onto the workshop, and having finalised all travel arrangements, I finally got to meet the course organisers Ricardo Cuadrado and Isadora Norman who were waiting for me in arrivals in Santander airport. There I met another participant from Ireland, Jane Savage working with Kerry ETB, who I could tell was a creative being like me. This whole adventure, of meeting new people from different parts of Europe, in a different country had me excited. I honestly hadn't a clue what to expect.

From the start, this course was excellently organised to engage and stimulate the participants. After being welcomed by the local Mayor in the Town Hall, we met all the staff at Centro de Enseñanza de Personas Adultas de Santoña (Adult Education Centre) who were all very welcoming. Later we were brought to a hall, where playing imaginary volleyball (while making various grunting sounds) served as a fantastic icebreaker and broke down any self inhibitions there may have been in the group.

This icebreaker was facilitated by Jeronimo Arenal (Tito), a wonderful character, who we later learned is a successful Spanish Theatre Actor with Atalaya Tnt in Sevilla. Another wonderful course tutor was Angel Salcedo Santa, who is an artistic director at El Árbol Rojo (The Red Tree), a theatrical production company for children in Murcia. Also, Sonia Rivero Fernandez was a fantastic facilitator of body movement and imagination. As a facilitator/ teacher of art, I observed how these tutors facilitated and engaged us – they were amazing!



As part of the course, we had to write a script for our puppet play. We worked in groups with everyone sharing ideas and utilising their skills. We also had a puppet making workshop where we learned about different types of puppets and then designed our own hand puppet and made the clothes from material supplied by the course facilitators. Our job was to perform a play to a small audience using our puppets and script. Our group chose to use an overhead projector and a small projector for shadow puppets and a puppet theatre box where our hands puppets could perform. All through the process the course

facilitators were on hand to give constructive feedback and assist us in vocal coaching.

Everything about this course was excellent! I was sharing an apartment, one block from the coastline, with two girls from Greece – they were the perfect roommates. All of the participants truly gelled together in a weave of creativity and friendliness. The cultural trips and events planned after the workshop enabled us to assimilate into Spanish culture and be accepted as European companions. We were also invited to speak on the local radio station with Adrian Gutierrez. This was a truly wonderful experience, one I will not forget for a long time.



When I returned from the workshop in Santona, I shared my experience with other likeminded educationalists I thought might be interested. One of my friends Suzanne Meehan is a secondary school teacher in Rosary College, Crumlin. Suzanne is a 'behaviour for learning' teacher, which is support by the NBSS. Last year Suzanne created a puppet theatre in their skills room with some social skills students, where they transformed the skills room into a theatre, designed their own puppets and performed a play for other children in the school about Christmas. This was so successful that Suzanne is hoping to run another puppet theatre workshop this year.

Puppetry is a fantastic tool for learning, building self confidence and communication by empowering the student to use their voice. If you would like further information about running a workshop or just general advice you can contact Michelle Culligan at michelle_culligan@hotmail.com.

