Are flannel boards out of style?

As computers and other technological devices make their way into early care and education classrooms, we may wonder whether it’s time to throw out flannel boards. Will parents question our methods as old-fashioned? Will other teachers tell us to get up-to-date?

In early childhood classrooms, it’s clear: Props matter. Children need hands-on materials to explore and master independently. And while technology offers an array of on-screen opportunities that are developmentally appropriate, it limits the child-child and child-adult conversations and interactions that build essential social and cognitive skills. Just as an old cardboard box can morph into a playhouse and a blueprint and ruler can turn the writing center into an architect’s office, felt props can energize learning into dynamic, active, and vibrant learning across the curriculum.

You already read books and tell stories to children. A flannel board is a simple prop that can help build dimension to your work. It helps you, and the children, retell a story using the figures and diagrams that establish sequence, action, and plot. Recall the food in Eric Carle’s *Very Hungry Caterpillar* and imagine a collection of images that reinforce the caterpillar’s eating sequence and its metamorphosis into a butterfly. Flannel board figures help children make the story real (and interactive) while building memory, creativity, science, math, vocabulary, and literacy skills.

**Boards that work**
The most successful boards are sturdy and attractive. You can make basic boards in a little time and with inexpensive materials; you can also purchase boards from teacher supply stores and online. Before you build or buy, however, have a good look at both indoor and outdoor learning spaces. Where might you best reinforce story retelling? Is a permanent installation feasible? Do you anticipate using flannel/felt figures or those that affix with magnets? How much space do...
you have available in each area or learning center?

**Flannel board**

**Here’s what you need:**
- backing material such as thin plywood, fiberboard, or heavy cardboard
- fabric covering such as felt, heavy flannel, hook-and-loop fabric, or velour in a dark, neutral color like green, gray, or brown
- scissors
- tape
- stapler and staples
- vinyl edging

1. Choose the size of the board that will work best in the area. A 6-inch by 12-inch board might fit above the desk in a writing center used by only a couple of children at a time. In contrast, a larger 2- by 3-foot board is more useful for large group activities.
2. Cut the cover material to fit the board with a 3-inch wrap on the back of the board.
3. Tape the fabric to the back of the board and reinforce with staples about 3 inches apart, as appropriate.
4. Add vinyl edging around the bottom and side of the board to provide a non-slip surface. **Variations:** You can cover cardboard (flat sheets or boxes) with fabric for groups of children to use the props independently. Tape boxes closed before covering. Fold cardboard sheets into a triangle shape to form a base for stability.

**Magnet boards**

**Here’s what you need:**
- sheets of steel purchased from a building supply store
- wall fasteners for permanent installation
- plywood or fiberboard cut to the same size as the metal
- glue
- cloth tape

1. Determine the size and location of the magnet board. Note that a magnet board is most durable for outdoor use.
2. Encase the edges of the board with cloth tape as a safety measure.
3. Install the metal sheet permanently on a wall or the back of a shelf unit, for example.
4. For a portable board, glue the metal to the backing material. **Variations:** Metal baking sheets make lightweight portable magnet boards.

**Figures**

Magnet board and flannel board figures are the same save the backing or sticking material. For a magnet board, attach self-adhesive magnetic strips to the backs of the props and story figures. For a flannel board, glue small strips of sandpaper or the hook side of Velcro® or other hook-and-loop tape on the back side of the figure.

Make images for the board with either self-adhering, heavy piled materials like felt, flannel, and velvet or paper.

Draw, trace, or copy images from coloring books, magazines, or books.

To make fabric props, cut out the traced image and add dimensional fabric paint to outline simple shapes or add features. Other fuzzy or napped materials like pipe cleaners, pom poms, burlap, feathers, and wool yarn will adhere to the flannel board with no additional backing.
You can also use non-adhering materials such as paper and poster board. While construction is a bit more involved, the figures are sturdier and more realistic than those made of fabric. Copy or draw images onto heavy paper. If you use a traced image, mount it to construction paper or cardboard because paper figures can bend and will be flimsy and challenging to store. Color the figures with crayons, pencils, watercolor, or markers. Outline the figure with fine-line black marker and then laminate or cover with clear, adhesive-backed vinyl. Trim the plastic about ¼-inch from the paper. Glue a small strip of felt, flannel, or sandpaper to the back.

Some teachers scour used book stores for duplicate but damaged copies of class favorites. Cut out, mount, and laminate the images as above. Encourage children to use the images to retell the story or to create alternative scripts for the characters they know and enjoy.

Test your figures to make sure they adhere to the board. Replace the backing when a figure no longer sticks because of heat, humidity, or frequent use.

Storage
Point-of-use storage is key with successful flannel and magnet board props. Keep each story or activity separate, and avoid trying to mix and match story characters. For example, the bears in the Goldilocks story should be distinct from the single bear illustrated in Nancy White Carlstrom’s Jesse Bear, What Will You Wear? or Bruce Degen’s dancing bear in Jamberry. Make the effort to offer stylistically consistent images to reinforce children’s regard for book illustrations (and illustrators) and to avoid your own frustration as you hunt for the missing piece of a planned story retelling.

Try the systems below for managing magnet and flannel board images; remember to label each with the story title and the character pieces. Store scripts and activity notes with the images.
- Accordion file pockets,
- Flat pizza boxes, or
- Zip-top plastic bags fitted into a three-ring binder.

Activities across the curriculum
Use magnet and flannel boards in all areas of the classroom—indoors and out. Some of these ideas may get you started.

Language and literacy.
Stories, rhymes, poems, finger plays, songs, and rebus symbols contribute to children’s developing literacy skills. Flannel and magnet board characters—from pumpkins, apples, and bears on a hunt to gruff billy goats, trolls, beanstalks, and spiders crawling up a drain spout—reinforce skills and encourage creativity.
- Adapt familiar books for board use. Encourage children to extend the story with additional props. For example, read It Looked Like Spilt Milk by Charles Shaw. Add additional cloud shapes like a cooking pot, fish, and truck to continue with the story’s refrain, “It looks like a fish, but it isn’t a fish.” Other books that are easy to adapt include the following:
  - Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain by Verna Aardema
  - The Mitten by Jan Brett
- May I Bring a Friend by Beatrice DeRigniers
- Are You My Mother? By P. D. Eastman
- Little Blue, Little Yellow by Leo Lionni
- Max’s New Suit by Rosemary Wells
- It Could Always Be Worse by Margaret Zemach

Use folktales. For example, The Great Big Enormous Turnip, One Fine Day, and The Little Red Hen become exciting, interactive tales when children join the telling with board figures.

Use props to help children remember the sequence of cumulative songs like I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly or We’re Going on a Bear Hunt.

Use props to make rhymes and songs easier to remember—and expand. For example, Down by the Bay is a silly, laughter-producing song. Challenge children to add animals—and rhyming words—to extend the song.

Pick images from a basket—three children, a fire truck, and an assortment of foods, for example—and challenge children to make up a story.

Mount magnet-backed letters in the writing center. Encourage children to manipulate the letters to match sounds and words.

**Math and manipulatives.**

Use board props like magnet strips cut to precise measurements, pom poms, numerals, and shapes to encourage sequencing and ordering activities.

Make props for number rhymes and finger plays like Three Little Pumpkins, Over in the Meadow, The Little White Duck, and Johnny Works with a Hammer.

Use colored pom poms for matching and sorting activities. Add symbols for more than (>), less than (<), and equal to (=) to reinforce your conversations.

Write number words on heavy paper and draw or copy corresponding numbers of familiar objects like bananas, leaves, or books. Challenge children to match the word with the appropriate number of objects.

Introduce shapes and then related geometric terms helping children recognize a triangle as having three sides and the word three, for example.

Chart and graph with the boards. For example, write 0, 2, 4, and 6 on each of four cards prepared for the board. Collect images of animals—snakes, worms, turtles, spiders, grasshoppers, and grizzly bears, for example—and challenge children to match the animal with the number of legs on that animal.

**Discovery and science.**

Use board props to help children understand sequence, classification, health habits, nutrition, and daily classroom activities.

Make sequence story cards—four stages of plant growth, insect metamorphosis, or hand washing technique, for example. Encourage children to place the cards in order and tell the corresponding story.

Prepare magazine pictures for boards. Build activities that encourage children to determine and classify items by whether they sink or float, have fur, use electricity, or make noise, for example. Or children can classify animals by habitat or movement or separate healthy snacks from those with empty calories.

Use props to help children practice observation skills. Place an array of characters on the board. Review them and then play a concentration game by removing one of the characters and challenging children to identify which is missing. Use animals, shapes, colors, and numerals for the activity.

Take photographs of children in typical daily activities, and prepare the photos for board work. Use the sequence to help the youngest learners understand that after lunch comes nap time. The sequence can held older learners associate activities with the daily schedule and clock time.

**Resources**
