

# Crankies in the Music Classroom

By Eleanor Lincoln

After ten years in the public school music classroom, I have seen many technology initiatives go in and out of fashion. When funding is available, districts are embracing iPads, Smartboards, Chrome books, and Mimio systems as tools for increasing student engagement and improving skills. While I am happy to equip myself with as many tools as possible, I feel strongly that the music classroom is a place where children can reconnect with each other through songs and games, dances and drum circles. The crankie, in all its low-tech glory, has proven to be a wonderful way to build student engagement while continuing to support group music making, as well as being a screen-free time in my students' day.

I first experienced a crankie at CDSS Harmony of Song and Dance week at Pinewoods Camp in Massachusetts. I still recall the hush of the darkened camp house as everyone gathered to watch the beautiful colored images slowly scroll by while Julie Vallimont sang out the story of the Gumtree Canoe. Campers hummed along, and adults and children alike sat mesmerized. How could something so simple in concept—drawings on paper, wooden box and crank, a solo voice—be so captivating? I set to making my own once I returned home from camp and was thrilled that my students' response was just as positive. I have been making crankies with students ever since, and it is often a highlight of the year.

A crankie is, in the most general sense, a form of storytelling usually combining singing or narration with a scroll of paper or cloth turned using a crank mechanism. The modern crankie has its roots in the moving picture art form made famous in the mid-nineteenth century. The moving panorama, as it was called, often depicted beautiful journeys along the Mississippi river or trips to the Middle East or India. These were typically painted canvas, and some are still preserved today, including the enormous, 140-foot-long Garibaldi panorama, which is part of the collection at Brown University. Crankies are making a resurgence in the folk world with wonderful work by artists like Anna and Elizabeth, Julie Vallimont, Anna Patton, and Brendan Taaffe, to name just a few.

You can see a number of beautiful examples online by searching “crankies” on YouTube or attending a crankie festival. I recommend showing examples to your students if you plan to create one with them, since most of them are probably unfamiliar with the term.

The first group crankie I ever made with students was part of an arts integration unit around immigration, a major curricular topic for fourth graders in Massachusetts. There are many powerful and descriptive ballads written by immigrants and about the immigrant experience in America, but it can be challenging to teach long-form songs to children when they come to music class just once a week for 40 minutes. The crankie seemed like an ideal way to combine the storytelling power of ballads with an engaging project that would keep the students excited. My fourth-graders created a 16 foot paper scroll to the song “Emigrant’s Farewell”, and we had a grand time looking up photos of sailing vessels that would have brought people from Ireland to Boston in the mid-1800s. Students worked in pairs to draw large scale



**Above:** Third graders from Crocker Farm Elementary in Amherst, MA posing with their crankie ‘Seed in the Ground’.

Photo by Author.

images of rolling waves, ships, green hills of Ireland, and sad family members waving goodbye. Sharing the finished product with families at an open house event was a moment of pride for the students and a nice way to round out a collaborative unit between the classroom teacher and myself.

Creating any group project requires logistic as well as artistic planning. I've included a few tips below that I build into my planning process each time I create a crankie with students. Building or acquiring a crankie box is a good first step. Mine is a 20 by 24 inch wooden frame with two slots cut in for 1-inch dowels to stand in. The dowels have holes drilled horizontally through the top where I can fit a pencil to use as a crank. I typically spend six class periods on a crankie, with five minutes at the beginning and end of class reserved for a game or music literacy activity not necessarily connected to the project. I have found that small-scale performances in the classroom or library to be the most effective as audience members will want to see the details of the students' art.

Although they can be a bit of an undertaking in terms of time and space, I have found the process of making a crankie with students to be incredibly rewarding for all involved and would absolutely encourage others who make music with students to give it a try!

## Project Tips:

1. Show students multiple examples of what a crankie is and how the images flow together. YouTube is a valuable resource.
2. Look for song material with strong visual images (animals, plants, oceans, characters).
3. Give students a chance to draft image ideas on individual papers first.
4. Be mindful of work space as a single crankie scroll can stretch well over 12 feet. I map out 2-foot sections for each student to work in.
5. Help students understand the sense of scale you will need to make the images visible to an audience.
6. Have a plan for how the students will perform the crankie at the end of the project. Will everyone sing or use a recording? Have you left time to rehearse the music?

## Example songs that I have used:

- “Emigrant’s Farewell” (Trad. Irish)
- “Pastures of Plenty” (Woody Guthrie)
- “Wind and the Rain” (Trad. American)
- “Bought Me a Cat” (Trad. American)
- “Los Pollitos” (Trad. Latin America)
- “Seed in the Ground” (Connie Kaldor)



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