



Storymaking with Puppets

Approach outline

This is a group approach to creative writing by primary school children, particularly useful for children with special educational needs.

The group leader is the scribe, who writes down a story created by the children. The characters and events in the story arise from the puppets drawn by the children from a bag or other receptacle, and the action is developed by questioning from the group leader, interaction between the characters, and suggestions from the child holding or manipulating the character, other group members and the group leader.

The completed stories and artwork can be collated and presented in booklet or display form.

Process of a session

Prior to the group starting, gather together any finger or glove puppets, small animal or people toys, to be the possible characters. Put these in one or more bags (maybe one for animals, one for people) or in another receptacle – a multi-pocketed apron or waistcoat, separate envelopes or small boxes can all work well.

When the group starts, explain we are all going to make a story together. Choose the first child who must, without looking, put their hand into the bag, draw out a character, name that character, and say something about them. The next child selects their character, names it, and the interaction between the first two characters begins the story.

The group leader scribes immediately what she/he is told as the story, reading it out as she does so, and checking back with the first two – and the other children – that she is writing the story correctly. When there are disagreements among group members on what to write, the leader chooses. As the story develops, the group leader must periodically read back what has so far been created, focusing the group back on the detail and direction of the tale, but always accepting surreal or 'nonsensical' twists in the story if the group wish them.

At the end of the session, or when the story has reached an apparent ending, or end of a chapter, read the text of the tale again, emphasising the role of the puppets/objects and the individual contributions of children. They will want to play out the action by manipulating the characters. Adult helpers can assist less able, more withdrawn or more fractious children to participate at whatever level they can.

The length of a session depends on the group dynamics – when the group becomes uninspired or bored, or too fractious, have a break with an action song, or visual arts work illustrating the story so far, or finish the session.

What next?

Before the next session the writing should be typed up so it can be shared with the children (on paper, smartboard, as posters). Over four or five sessions enough narrative will have been created for the making of an A5 booklet. This will include all the authors' and helpers' names, when the stories were made, titles for the tales, etc.

It is usually good to include a visual arts element, in which the children illustrate the characters and action. This can start in the second or third session, but in the first session the focus should be on storymaking only. The illustrations can be scanned and incorporated into the A5 booklet, or used as wall illustrations.

The final session should be a celebration of what has been created, with if appropriate and possible some form of performance or showing of the work to which parents can be invited.

NOTES

Judging the group consensus or majority opinion on what should be in or out of the story is a matter for the group leader's judgement regarding what will best keep up the pace and the group's sense of purpose and achievement.

When the story has been 'made', go over it with the group and ask questions that will fill in discontinuities and correct contradictions, and seek to enlarge and enrich the action and descriptive detail, and where appropriate insert description and dialogue.

On occasion, particularly when the pace has sagged, stories can be created quickly verbally, without scribing, and with less care for continuity and 'sense'.

Endings – satisfactory endings are the hardest element of any story creating. A good ending feels essential for adults, but kids enjoy the 'journey' and content of the story more than the resolution. Settle for what you can get, and the group leader or helpers should not hold back on helping create the ending.

Props – in addition to bags containing characters, create a separate bag with small 'props' – shells, toys, small boxes with or without surprising contents, (noise-makers only if the group can sensibly be expected to cope with these), foreign coins, ornaments, bric-a-brac. Use this to vary pace from only having characters, to enrich the detail of a story.

Group size – six pupils are ideal, minimum group size of four and maximum of eight.

Age groups – this approach has worked with a wide range of ages and abilities but seems less effective with children under the age of eight years.

Setting – round a table is best by far.

Troubleshooting!

Fighting – instinctive fighting with hand puppets breaks out, playful when there is no active hostility in the group, more purposeful when there is hostility – you need a 'no fighting by puppets' rule. When necessary the puppets must be taken off, put in a heap in the centre of the table, or even back in the bag, and a new story started. Where there is active hostility the two must be reseated apart.

The quiet/mute group member – sometimes a helper must speak for them, sometimes the group leader must interpret and articulate their physical actions to incorporate in the story, or even when essential invent something for them (saying to them and the group that it is an invention for them] so the flow of work is not broken completely. But always working towards them participating as they can.

The confident/loud/controlling group member – they help the group get going and keep it flowing, but need holding back. Restraining their enthusiasm is helped by going round the circle and emphasising whose turn it is. While acknowledging the value of all contributions, this gives a reminder of a group rule about who can speak when.

Ewan McVicar 2007

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