

## Story-making with Young Children

### *Outline of the NAWE Workshop at Writers in Schools Skills-sharing day in Leicester.*

The workshop focused on an approach to story-making with 'Foundation and Key Stage One children', as we call them, or 3-6 year olds in old money. I used it as a rare opportunity to work with grown-ups, and share some of the ideas that I have developed over several years of work in this field.

In writing this, I should make clear as I did on what was a really enjoyable and fruitful day, that this is not intended as any kind of blueprint for what a writer should do – simply a description of what I tend to do, which may or may not have some value to others – a very important distinction, I think.

My background is in doing drama with children, firstly as a member of a specialised Theatre-in-Education team and latterly as a writer and director within theatre. Alongside this I have always gone into schools, originally mostly to 'do drama' in some way, but nowadays more often in the guise of a writer, although I am involved in many of the same activities. The younger the children involved, the more art form divisions seem blurred, and I know that what I do in early years owes much to the work I have done alongside dancers, musicians and visual artists, as well as drama people. But some of the approach has evolved from the principles of drama-in-education which have underpinned most of my work. So the sessions with young children can feel like an extended role play, and I have in effect over the years created a kind of version of myself for use in these contexts. In Leicester I asked the group to pretend to be young children for a while [which they did remarkably plausibly!] and we did a quick version of the kind of session I might do at the start of work with a young group, and then explored the issues it brought up.

At the beginning of the session, 'Peter' arrives with an old wooden box, which he sits on. He comes across as slightly hopeless, managing to introduce himself to children but getting a little confused as he tries to learn names. It is not a full-on performance, it is a real conversation, but there is some subtle [on a good day] signalling going on that what is going to happen is a kind of game, and that Peter is likely to need help. In particular he forgets things, but he is excited and very pleased with anything they say or do. He establishes that they are going to be doing stories, but then realises he has forgotten his box, until they remind him that he is sitting on it. Then he introduces the box. They describe it to him, and guess about it, and then he tells them the true story of how the box belonged to his auntie, who had it when she was a little girl. She had had to escape from Czechoslovakia on the 'Kindertransport', leaving her parents, and come all the way to England with only this box. In later life she was a librarian, and loved stories. When she was an old lady, she gave him the box, and it is special because it belonged to somebody he loved, and has stories of its own. There is nothing of his auntie's still in it, but it contains stories. What do they think will be in it?

Often the question, 'what do you think will be in a story box?' is enough to start a story...maybe there is a princess in there, or a crocodile, or a pink flower. Other times it has 'books' and 'pages', a 'table of contents', or even 'the blurb' - depressing but true, though much less likely with the really young. A series of open questions will build a story from there.. 'what colour crocodile?', 'where does the princess live?', etc.. and we are away. If we need help to start, we look in the box, and find a book. 'Oh good, now I can read a story'.. but it is full of empty pages. Someone will suggest that we are supposed to make up a new story, and this provides the framework for the session. Depending on the group, the age, the story, the space, the time, it may develop into an activity of

being the characters and physically creating the story, 'hot-seating' children in role to develop characters, or sitting around a big piece of paper, drawing and building the story, or just calling out ideas, while Peter notes them in his book, and finishing with him 'reading' back the story we have created. The book can be the incentive for further work on pictures and words, because it is these days so easy to present back in a really nice book form very quickly. Other projects take this process into poetry, into video or film or performance. If at any point the session needs another nudge, we will look in the box once more and find a random object to take us on. The box is a higher authority presenting us all with possibilities, challenges and questions.

What I asked the group to look for, and was trying to explore in this session, was not so much any of these specific activities, but the principles of the approach. I have come to believe that the most exciting and imaginative story-making activities can be made bad by the wrong relationship with children, the wrong tone or atmosphere, and really very simple or mundane activities made wonderful by getting it right. So we discussed mostly the differences between these. A few key elements of the approach emerged. The seriousness and truth of the 'kindertransport' story – a discussion about this brought up the value of sharing things about your own life with young children, and giving them permission to be serious or sad too. We identified the value of being unstructured, of going off on tangents. The group saw some of the session as clowning, and we discussed the importance of fun, the value of making mistakes or 'falling over', and the strategies I was using to try to get a balance of engagement and involvement across a diverse group.

The activity of story-making is a golden one, because there are genuinely no right answers, and so children are released from the possibility of getting it wrong, and the fear of that which dogs so much education. It is hard for us as adults to remember this all the time, because our own minds are jumping ahead to where the story may go, and that can easily lead to asking questions with a particular answer in mind. But if we do this we throw away the great advantage of the activity - I always feel if I have ever given the impression that a suggestion made by a child is missing the point, then I have failed. Any suggestion genuinely is positive, there is no such thing as an idea that will not work.

My 'role', my position as being in need of help, is a classic drama ploy, giving the children the 'mantle of the expert'. The dynamic of these sessions becomes different from that in many school situations, because it is not led by an authority figure, but is a joint game in which we are involved together. When it works it is tapping into a very natural way in which children learn through play. When that happens it doesn't feel like working. It feels like being a child again.

Another important element of the tone is modelled by 'Peter's enthusiasm. He may be a bit hopeless, but he loves words a lot, and gets very excited by stories, and so the incentive to make suggestions or act out or join in is very strong. I am trying within this role to exert quite a bit of influence on what happens, but in ways I have acquired over time which do not upset this crucial dynamic. If it is getting noisy, for example, then finding something quiet that needs hearing is a more useful strategy than breaking everything by stopping and telling people to be quiet. I approach this work with the aim of never stepping outside the game in order to exert control. I do not always succeed, but it remains a central aim.

In Leicester we discussed these issues and shared mostly very positive experiences of working with the age-group, and the way that young children with the soup of real life, stories, dreams, TV

sloshing around in their imaginations, produce the most genuinely imaginative stories of all, with their particular style and logic. My own favourite story from this work is about the time when I was with a group of three-year-olds on the floor of a nursery, and we were being chased by a tiger. 'Where can we hide?' I asked, and a girl quickly told me 'Pizza Hut'. 'Why Pizza Hut?' 'Because there is a boys' toilet and a girls' toilet, but no toilet for tigers'. I defy any grown-up writer to think of a better escape strategy than that.

My only worry in doing the session in Leicester [and writing this article] is that I am broadcasting the fact that I spend days just playing with children, having fun making up crazy stories, pretending to be dinosaurs and getting paid for it, and that someone will find me out and tell me I can't do it any more because I am supposed to be a grown-up. So please don't tell anyone.