

TAG CITIZENS
THEATRE

DRAGONFLY

STORYTELLING & STORY ACTING FOR EARLY YEARS CHILDREN



A COMPREHENSIVE PACK FOR EARLY YEARS STAFF

INTRODUCTION

Dragonfly is an intensive Early Years project that uses creative arts to empower the child. The aims of Dragonfly are to place the child at the heart of his or her own learning and enhance the nursery community, making it a community where the children listen and speak freely.

Citizens Learning & TAG has been developing the technique for 2 years now and over 800 children aged 3-5 years have already participated in our programme. Citizens Learning & TAG is one of the major players in the children and young people's theatre sector in Scotland. TAG is part of the Citizens Theatre in the Gorbals.

This pack has been designed for Early Years teachers to use in the classroom. Included in the pack is a step by step guide to the technique, allowing teachers and nursery staff to gain confidence in their ability. There are also examples of stories that real children have told us. These stories may be useful when the technique is first introduced, as it is useful to have a bank of stories at hand.

We hope you enjoy using this pack and find it helpful. Your feedback is always welcome and you can contact Citizens Learning & TAG at any time through our website www.tag-theatre.co.uk or by phoning Angela Smith on 0141 418 6271.

THE PROJECT

Dragonfly puts play, storytelling and story acting at the heart of the classroom. Each child is granted the space to be listened to and acknowledged. Drama, play and stories are essential tools with which to examine the social and emotional worlds that are the foundations of literacy and learning. This project equips child and adult alike to learn with confidence, freedom of expression and individuality.

Based on the work of the renowned Early Years practitioner Vivian Paley, Dragonfly brings her ideas and practice vividly to life with the added drama specialism of Citizens Learning & TAG. The methodology used in the project is outlined by Paley in her book 'The Boy who would be Helicopter'. It has been successfully practiced throughout North America and in London.

Engaging the whole staff community in the process is vital to the success of the project. TAG staff will train the Early Years teachers and support staff to enable the project to be implemented within the nursery or lower primary routine. This document outlines the project and gives a step by step guide as an introduction.

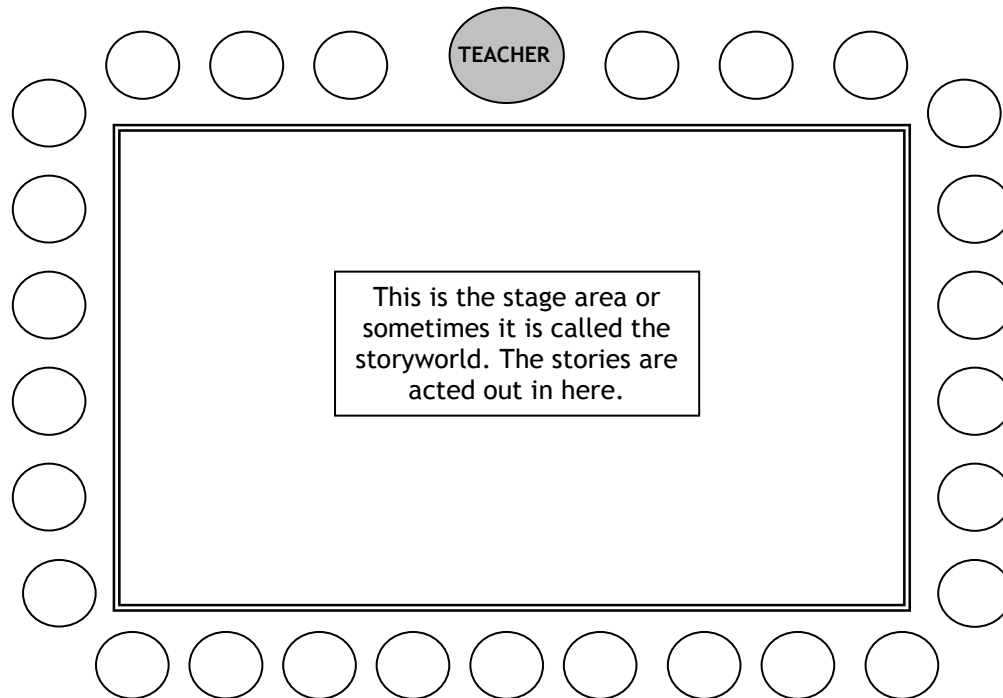
"There could be no curriculum any of us could develop that would teach essential human emotion, empathy, essential to all of our civilised societies, the emotion without which nothing we ever do toward a more peaceful world would ever work. And there it is, demonstrated, giving us optimistic understanding: Yes it's there. It's worth pursuing. It's worth working for, because we see in this involving play and story, that it's there. Furthermore the children see it."

Vivian Paley



THE STORY ACTING PROCESS

In order to participate in the story acting element of the project the children are sat on the floor, around a marked out square or rectangle with an open space in the middle. This is the stage.



The Initial Introduction

Explain to the class that they are going to be telling stories today and that they will also get to act in the stories and play different characters. You may take a moment to explain what it means to act out and play a character. The explanation should be kept as simple as possible.

You should then explain that in order to act out stories they'll need a stage. LX tape or masking tape can be used to mark out the stage area (shown above by the double line of the rectangle). Allowing the children to see this being done will mean they are less likely to try and pull it off the floor and also they will feel that they were a part of the creation process. You can also ask them to help you pat it down to make sure it is properly stuck to the floor.

You should position yourself in a central position within the seated area around the stage (shown by the grey coloured circle above). This is the best position to maintain control of the group and to see everyone clearly.



Introducing Stories

Once the idea of telling and acting out stories has been introduced and the stage area has been marked out it is now time to tell some stories! Explain to the children that you are going to tell them a story that another boy or girl their age made up (as TAG has been delivering this project for a while we have a stack of stories to access on our website). Read the story out and whenever a new character appears invite someone sitting round the stage to get up and play that character. For example, if the story has a bear, a rabbit and a jumping bean it, you would invite three different people to get up and come into the stage area to act out the story being told; one would play the bear, one would play the rabbit and one would play the jumping bean. After the story has ended (they are usually very short) ask everyone to thank the actors by giving them a round of applause. The actors will then return to their positions around the stage area.

Once you have led the group through the first story you can then read out one or two more stories that are quite different in content from the first story, in order to demonstrate to the children that their stories can be about absolutely anything. The same process of inviting the children up to perform should be followed.

Some helpful tips

- When choosing people to get up and act out the story, always work your way round the group, choosing the next available person. This is a fair way of choosing who should play which part. It means that the tutor/teacher is showing no bias towards certain people. It also means that there will not be situations where a child says they don't want to play the Princess because they'd rather play the dragon. If they know the rule is that the next available person plays the next character they will accept it and get on with it.
- When a child gets up to play a character in a story do not demonstrate what you want them to do ("Do the train like this Freddie. See, choo choo!") This technique encourages the children to express themselves the way they want to. If a child is acting out the train and has their own way of making it move, that should be encouraged. Sometimes you will get a child who just doesn't know what a certain thing is, e.g. a wild boar. If you think a child doesn't know what it is you could let them know by saying what it is similar to. Also, if the child is struggling to come up with a way of acting out their character you can invite the rest of the group to give ideas. If the actor then wants to take on board one of the suggestions from the audience they can. They should always be asked though, e.g. "oh look Freddie, Anna thinks the train might look like this. What do you think? Would you like to do it that way?" Sometimes the actor will take on board the suggestion and other times they will be clear that they would rather do it their own way.
- Because of the democratic way people are chosen to come up and play characters, sometimes boys will be chosen to play female roles and vice versa. This is to be encouraged. You will get some resistance to this for the first couple of sessions. However, if you persevere and DO NOT give in, you will eventually find that boys will happily get up and play female parts. If someone refuses to get up, that's okay. They do not have to get up if they don't want to. Some of the quieter children will want to observe for a while before giving it a try themselves. If you get a refusal because of the gender issue then remind the child that they will have to wait until everyone else has had a go before it comes back round to them again. If they still refuse just say that it's okay and move on to the next person without making a fuss.



After the initial introduction

It is now time to show the children what is involved in the story telling process. Invite a volunteer to come and sit in front of you in the stage area (facing you). This volunteer is going to tell a story that they will make up. Explain to the whole group that you will be writing the story down as it is being told to you. An A5 piece of paper should be used for this (blank pages). The child who is telling their story (let's call her Amy) will have her name written at the top of the page. Explain that Amy can tell as short a story as she likes but it can be as long as one page. The reason we limit it to one page is because you can easily get stories that just go on and on and on otherwise. Remind Amy that her story can be about anything at all and ask her if she is ready to tell her story.

When Amy begins to tell her story, repeat every word she says and write each word as you say it aloud. A natural rhythm for this will develop as you become more experienced in the technique. By allowing Amy to see and hear you doing this she will, over time, develop her literacy skills as she links the sounds she says with the shapes you make on the page. Also, young children naturally become fascinated by seeing you do this and like to see their story coming to life on the page.

Once Amy has finished her story thank her and explain that it will be read back to her to make sure it is accurate. You should then read the whole story aloud. Remind Amy which characters appeared in her story, e.g. "Amy, in your story there is a donkey, a scary monster, a dragon and a sparkling star." At this point Amy should be asked which character she would like to play when her story is acted out (N.B. the only time when children get to choose which character they want to be is when it is *their own* story). You should then circle the character that Amy chooses in order to remind yourself of her choice when it is time to read out Amy's story. The story can then either be acted out by the group straight away or kept for later in the session to be acted out.

An example of a child's story

Amy's story

Once upon a time there was a **dog called Bad** and he was very bad. He barks all the time and chases his tail. One day Bad runs away and no one can find him again. And then a **big horsey** came and there was a **bad horse** too. The bad horsey sticks its tongue out at the big horsey. And then **Jo** came and said 'Bad horsey! Don't do that again!' and Jo left the bad horsey in the stable. Jo took the big horsey for a walk. They had lots of fun. It was night time and Jo takes the big horsey back to the stable and they all go to sleep.



The story list

Once all the children have seen the example of how the story dictation works, ask who else would like to tell a story today. Explain that a list of names will be taken and anyone who wants to put their name on the list can do so. Limit the list to no more than 6 names. If more than 6 people want to tell a story you should explain to the children that there won't be enough time for everyone to do it today but some people can do it tomorrow (or the day after).

At this point you should set the children a task they can work on without lots of input from you (perhaps their 'Active Learning' stations) to allow time for you to go round and gather the individual stories from the people on the list. Each child can then tell their story and have individual attention from you. The same process is followed for all stories that are gathered.

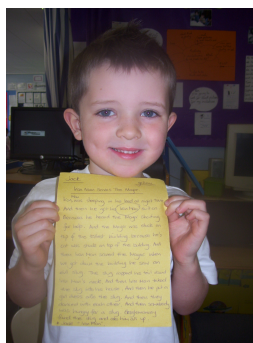
Once you have spent time with all the children whose names were on the story list, and written down their stories, the entire class is gathered back around the stage area for the story acting part of the session. Again, this follows the same format as before with children being asked to get up and play characters in each person's story.

After all the stories have been acted out you can thank the group and get them to thank each other. The session can then finish at this point or you can do some evaluation with the group by asking questions about the stories and what the children liked, didn't like, found exciting etc.

Subsequent sessions

Future sessions follow a very similar format as the initial one, although they should run much more smoothly as the children become more familiar with the rules of the technique. Similarly, you will need to 'lead' far less the more often you run the technique because the children will naturally become more confident in their storytelling and their acting.

Continuation of the project should be straight forward, as staff will have seen the technique up and running. Usually subsequent sessions will start with a quick gathering of the children to remind them that they will be telling more stories today and then you can get straight into the story list of names before the children are allowed to break away into free play or Active Learning.



EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S STORIES

Below are some children's stories. These are useful as examples that can be read out to a group who are being newly introduced to the technique. They are also useful to get an idea of the kind of story to expect to get out of the children.

Well, Belle went out for a walk one day. She went to the park for a walk, and she went on the chute. After that, she went on the swings. And then she went on the roundabout. She went on the climbing frame you hold onto. She went on one of the things you go on. A helter skelter.

My story is about a dog that went out one day to the shops, he is a big dog. My mum went out to take me to the shops and we ran up the stairs and needed to go to the shops and we needed the toilets. And I'm frightened of him. Then a big spider came and frightened him and a big spider was strong and then the spider went to his own house. Then he got his bone and then he saw a large, large dog and he went all the way back home to his mum. And then they went shopping.

It's about a horsey and he lost his mummy and he is in a field and he can't find her and a wee horsey can't jump over the fence. Her mum is in the stable and he looked in the stable and found a mum.

Once upon a time there was little monkey jumping on a bed and he was so funny. And her mother says 'Don't jump on the bed', and he says 'I want to.' And he went off and his brothers said 'Don't jump on the bed' and he said 'I want to.' Then he flew off and his sisters said don't jump on the bed and he said, 'I want to.' And he flew off. And his Dad said don't jump on the bed and he said, 'I want to' and he flew off, and the end.

Mysteries about Sleeping Beauty and she got into a cage, and then a handsome prince came and rescued her. And they went bumpity bumpity bump on the way to the castle and then went to their own castles on their ponies. And that's the end of the story and they lived happily ever after.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

This part of the pack contains answers to some frequent questions that teachers ask about this technique. Obviously most obstacles are easier to overcome when you can practically try things out, but we have found that the most common problems can usually be sorted out quickly and easily with just some minor adjustments of how the session is managed.

1. A girl in my class says she wants to tell a story and then she doesn't say anything!

- A. Some children will naturally prefer to hold back and wait until they feel comfortable with the project before they will volunteer a story. Children who listen to other people's stories are as valuable a part of the project as those who always put their hand up first. They are benefiting from it and will eventually tell a story when they are happy to. If a child has signed up to tell a story and then just sits there saying nothing, ask the child, "Do you want to tell a story?" If they are unsure you can remind them, "You don't have to if you don't want to. Maybe you could tell one another day?" Usually that is enough to let the child know they are free to go if they want.

2. I can't keep up when I write down the story. How do I slow the children down?!

- A. Sometimes you will get a child who talks very quickly and wants to just blurt their story out as fast as they can. If you are faced with this you should stop the child completely and explain to them that you have to try and keep up with them so it would be helpful if they let you write down what they have said before they say the next part. Usually the child will agree to slow down after this explanation. If you are still struggling, try to repeat the story back to them in a way that makes it clear you don't want to hear any more from them until you have finished speaking. It might seem harsh, but with some children it is the only way!

3. The stories that I get told are always really, really long!

- A. If you do not set proper boundaries for how long the stories can be the children will just keep going and going. Therefore, every time a child is about to tell a story it is important to remind them that their story can be as short as they like or as long as one page. If they are telling their story and it is getting close to the bottom of the page you can remind them that they only have a little amount of space left to finish their story.

4. I keep getting told stories with characters that die or are violent. Should I censor them?

- A. At least half the stories you will be told will have some kind of violence or death in them. It is completely natural for children of that age to include these things in their stories. Unless a clear disclosure is made by a child it is important not to censor parts of stories that include violence or death. Quite often a character that dies will later come back to life! The leader must find a way to act out any violence in a controlled manner. Slow motion is always a good format to use. The children will find it fun and, at any moment, the leader can freeze the action. During these moments it can be really interesting to ask everyone to freeze and ask a specific character how they feel about what is happening to them. The children will usually respond by answering as their characters and after the session has ended you can then have a group discussion about it, e.g. "Do we think it is okay to hit people?"





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