



The power of creative storytelling

It's a timeless pleasure getting lost in a story. Harness its unique power with **Tonya Meers** and **Natasha Dennis**, as they combine literacy and language with fun, hands-on activities to develop children's knowledge and skills in drama, D&T, history, science and more.

We all know children have a great capacity for creativity – we see it in classrooms all the time. We see the ones who work on creating something so diligently, those that get stuck right in, and those whose imagination seems to have no bounds and can see all sorts of things from a simple cardboard tube that we can't.

We also see the children who get so absorbed in a story they are taken to a different place. There is something so wonderful about being lost in a story, and it's a great way to learn new things. After all, people have taught through stories since the beginning civilisation, passing on knowledge and values from generation to generation. It never takes much to jog our memory of a story, does it? A phrase, a name, even just couple of words can do it.

Here at Little Creative Days, we wondered: why not combine stories with creativity? Before you worry about space on the timetable, covering the curriculum or whether Ofsted will approve, see Ofsted's own research report into schools with creative

teaching.¹ They found that there was no conflict in these schools between creative approaches and the teachers' coverage of the National Curriculum – the pupils were meeting, and in many cases exceeding, national standards. In fact, Ofsted are looking for teachers to use a variety of teaching techniques to achieve outstanding outcomes. We believe one such technique is creative storytelling.

What is creative storytelling?

Creative storytelling combines stories with creative activities to help children better understand a particular topic. We are not simply talking about drawing a picture of a story; we mean creating items to help children interact with a story and take their understanding to another level. Activities such as puppet making and role play bring the stories to life and help children imagine themselves in another time or place.

It's a simple concept, but creating and making has a wide range of other benefits that lead to successful and prolonged learning.



The benefits of creative storytelling

1. Develops a love of learning

In her study of primary schools with the most creative curriculums, Judith Ashley found that an 'emphasis on a creative, cross-curricular and skills-based learning engendered an enjoyment of learning.'²

With the new curriculum, many teachers are returning to a more cross-curricular, topic-based approach to teaching – which is great news for us, as creative storytelling fits perfectly with this! By choosing the right stories, teachers can cover many curriculum areas in a way that's engaging and exciting for learners. They will be motivated – hopefully independently – to find out more about the topic and to make their creative project the best it can be.

One of the headteachers Ashley interviewed summed it up nicely. She said: 'Creativity is vital to enable children to learn to think for themselves, become adaptable and learn key skills for life. It plays an important part in the curriculum by motivating and engaging the children and enabling them to become more independent and confident learners.'³

2. Increases knowledge retention

Children (and adults) tend to retain facts they are most interested in. It follows, then, that using stories and activities that increase children's interest and engagement to teach key curriculum content will help them remember it.

Creative storytelling also helps children make connections and apply their learning to different contexts. For instance, when looking at stories from Ancient Egypt, why not make canopic jars? This will lead to a discussion of what they were used for and why. You could also try to create a pyramid, or if you're studying the ancient Romans, an amphitheatre. This will lead to lots of research and discussion about how these structures were built and what they were used for. Once built, the children can imagine the characters from the story you're reading in those settings, which could lead to them developing and writing their own stories. What maths did they use during construction? This could also lead to science-related topics such as levers and pulleys. The story and the creative projects that follow put these key curriculum topics into a context that children will remember with enthusiasm.

This was confirmed in research carried out by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education who found that linking language and literacy learning to creative arts projects had a very powerful impact on children's retention.⁴ They found it aided sustained learning, as the children made strong connections between reading, writing and their work in creative arts. They also found it enhanced oral language skills – the more the children heard stories, or were given an opportunity to tell them, the more confident they became. Doing something practical as a way of learning increases retention rates by up to 70 or 80 percent.⁵



3. Promotes inclusivity

Creative storytelling gives all children a voice and the opportunity to shine. During a testing session for one of our creative storytelling kits, we came across one boy who, at eight years old, had only just learned to read and had recently been found to have dyslexia. We were unaware of this at the time. After hearing our chosen story and finding out that the children were going to put on a puppet show, this little boy decided he wanted to make and play the lead character. He became so determined to play his part that, supported by his group, he made a real effort to learn his lines. When he completed the play, he felt such a sense of pride and elation; it gave his confidence a real boost, which can only go on to help him realise that he can achieve whatever he wants to.

This multi-sensory way of learning really speaks to children with a special educational need (SEN). They can feel included in the group when sometimes their SEN keeps them out. Their personal, social and emotional development is enhanced as they learn to play and work cooperatively together, and to develop empathy and understanding of others' feelings and values through exploration of the story.

Choosing a story to inspire

The benefits of creative storytelling are manifold, but how can teachers go about introducing this exciting technique to their own classrooms?

The first step is to choose a story that relates to your topic and that the children will enjoy and learn from. History topics are always a good choice – at Little Creative Days, we have produced stories on the Normans, ancient Egyptians, Romans and the Gunpowder Plot. Pirate stories are great for teaching compass points and geography. One teacher in Newcastle is using our Normans story, *Pojo and the Knights of Chepstow Castle*, to create simple dialogues in French with a mixed Year 4 and 5 class.

It's always a good idea to choose a story with lots of dialogue, although how much will depend on the age of the children. Be careful choosing books where the story is mostly told in images, even with younger children, as this limits the opportunities to use the creative objects you make. Repeated phrases are good as they encourage the children to interact with the story. They're also very memorable – does 'I'll huff and I'll puff...' sound familiar? Such phrases act as a hook, often warning the listener that something is about to happen and enabling the storyteller to build suspense and excitement.

Aside from our own stories following the adventures of Pojo the dog, we have used a range of books over the years. *Rainbow Fish to the Rescue* by Marcus Pfister is a good one; this tells the story of a fish torn between his new friends and a lonely fish who is unable to join the group because he is different. There's a lot of dialogue in this book, many opportunities for movement (especially when the hungry shark appears!) and a lovely moral message. Another good story is *We All Went on Safari* by Laurie Krebs and Julia Cairns, which is set on the Serengeti Plains of Tanzania and tells the story of four children who go on an adventure and count the wildlife they see on the way. The numbers are given in both English and Swahili which the children always enjoy learning.

For older pupils, stories with more detailed descriptions of characters, important objects and settings will illustrate the type of language the children need to use, whether they're narrating a play or writing their own story, and will also help them design their puppets, models or backdrops. Stories with multiple characters are useful if you plan to act the story out – mainly because it allows more children to play a part! You can also have the pupils retell the story from the point of view of different characters, which will help develop empathy and narrative voice. Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is a good example of a story with lots of interesting characters. See the box 'Books for creative storytelling' for more ideas.

Choosing an activity to engage

You'll now need to decide on a creative project for the children to get stuck into after reading the story. Clearly, this will depend on your chosen story and curriculum topic. If you're teaching the Romans, for example, you could have the children build a chariot, which will teach them about wheels and axles. Once the chariots are complete, use them to inspire a radio sports commentary of a brutal Roman chariot race – especially useful to develop children's descriptive vocabulary, as they will need to describe a scene to somebody who can't see it.

Puppet making is a key creative storytelling activity.

The children get quite attached to the characters they make, which helps develop empathy. One school used our *Pojo Saves the Rainforest* story to teach the children about deforestation and its effect on the animals. The teacher told us that creating puppets of the characters in the story helped the children understand the concept





of deforestation and to realise that it's a problem for real animals. It was no longer abstract to them. She told us that once the children had their puppets, they were more engaged in the story as they followed what their characters were doing.

Puppet making also gives children the opportunity to learn a range of practical skills, such as working with templates, following instructions, and sewing and cutting. Make it simple for young children with sock or finger puppets. You can find a **template for the finger puppets** we used to tell the aboriginal tale, *Rainbow Bird*, on our blog. There's a bird, a crocodile, two trees and a flame – just enough for one hand! All the children have to do is colour the pictures in, cut them out and attach some card loops to keep them on their fingers.

There are, of course, many other activities that can come from creative storytelling. Get the children to write their own stories about the characters, to use their puppets or models to create simple stop animation projects, or to act out a play of the story (some books come with a pre-prepared script but the children can also write their own). Put the pupils in pairs to encourage dialogue and imaginative ideas. For younger children, ask them to create sound effects as you tell the story, or to join in saying a repeated rhyme or phrase. Such activities will help the children with their literacy, oracy and presentations skills and also to grow their vocabulary as they experience a rich variety of language.

Another activity we have used with great success was a grassland story box, following a Reception class reading of *We All Went on Safari*. Due to limited time, we had pre-prepared the boxes by removing the four flaps from the top (using shoe boxes would remove the need to do this), cutting off one of the longest sides and painting the three remaining sides blue to represent the sky. The children then lined the bottom of the boxes with parcel paper to represent the savannah ground, then added raffia for the grasslands. We created trees from twigs and moss, then added our 3D animals, which had been made over a number of weeks.

Good books for creative storytelling

We have used many books over the years, but here are some of the most recent. Most can be adapted for use with both KS1 and 2.

- *How the Camel Got His Hump*, a retelling of Rudyard Kipling's famous tale by Shoo Raynor – the children learnt about the desert environment and made desert sand boxes with camels and meerkats.
- *The Hidden Forest* by Jeannie Baker, a beautifully illustrated book about the kelp forests under the sea. The children made a story box, decorating fish, divers and a whale and sticking them to a sheet of sticky back plastic. The plastic covered the box and made it look like the creatures were swimming around inside.
- *The Big Dark* by John Prater, a great story about a little Inuit boy living at the North pole – the children learnt how the North Pole has very little daylight in winter and long days in summer. We paired this story with *Baby Bear and the Big Wide World* by Ellie Paterson and made our own arctic waterless snow globes with clear plastic cups.
- *Wombat Goes Walkabout* by Michael Morpurgo. The children made wombat masks and enjoyed playing the part of the baby wombat, acting out the digging and thinking actions from the story.
- *Mairi's Mermaid* by Michael Morpurgo. Are mermaids real? The children had great fun discussing this. Next, we made mermaid puppets with sparkly pieces of material and a craft stick, as well as a sea-life background to use as a story setting.
- *The Night Tree* by Eve Bunting, a lovely Christmas story about giving – the family in the story decorate a tree every year with food for the animals. We used a box, moss, twigs and leaves to create a woodland box for an array of woodland animals. Previously, we've made bird feeders out of oranges and wool.
- *Charlie and the Cheesemonster* by Justin C H Birch. We used this during World Space Week to discuss the phases of the moon. We then created paper models to show how light reflects off the moon to make it shine in the sky.

You can find out more about our work with these books and more **on our blog!**



The children loved it! We put the boxes together and had our own safari. We counted the animals in English and Swahili. The children learnt about the animals – they found it especially interesting that animals like giraffes, zebras, tigers and elephants aren't always jungle animals like they are often portrayed, but grassland animals. At the end of the session, the children used the boxes and their animals to make up their own stories. It was lovely to see them engaging their imaginations and natural storytelling abilities. Find out how to make 3D paper **tigers**, **elephants**, **zebras** and **giraffes** on our blog.

Plus, why not create story boxes for other animal tales, such as *Chicken Licken*, *The Three Little Pigs* or *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. We have made **goats**, **chickens**, **pigs**, **cows** and **horses** – follow the links for instructions. Animals also make great face masks. We have made **ladybird masks**, **bee masks** and even **wombat masks**!





Five benefits of creative storytelling

1. Develops communication and language skills by broadening vocabulary
2. Boosts creativity and imagination
3. Boosts confidence and social skills
4. Develops problem solving skills as children make their own design decisions
5. Develops early storytelling through puppets and models

We have also used boxes to create **fish tanks** based on *Rainbow Fish to the Rescue*, while shoebox lids made brilliant surfing dioramas for the story *Malu Kangaroo* by Judith Moorcroft. In the story, Malu Kangaroo makes the first surfboard and teaches the children to ride the waves. Instructions to **make your own diorama**, plus a template to create little surfer puppets, can be found on our blog.

A simple yet powerful approach

In their study mentioned at the outset, Ofsted found that common strengths of schools that most effectively promoted creative learning were:

- Well-organised cross-curricular links that allow scope for independent enquiry
- Inclusiveness, ensuring activities are accessible and relevant to all pupils
- A focus on experiential learning and skills developed through first-hand practical experience and evaluation.⁶

We believe creative storytelling to be a remarkable vehicle to achieving all of these things. The principle is so simple, yet the results can be extraordinary. The key is integrating stories and creativity across the entire curriculum, so children have the opportunity to make connections between topics, apply their knowledge to new contexts and embed their learning. Invite the children to use their imaginations. Stretch them. Foster curiosity.

The new National Curriculum is less prescriptive for primary teachers. Why not use the opportunity to try creative storytelling in your classroom? We are positive you won't be disappointed!

Tonya Meers and Natasha Dennis run Little Creative Days – a producer of puppet-making kits based on stories for KS1 and 2. For more information, visit: www.littlecreatedays.co.uk. For further creative ideas, activities and resources, visit their blog at: littlecreatedays.wordpress.com.

References

1. Ofsted (2010) Learning: creative approaches that raise standards. [online] Available at: dera.ioe.ac.uk/1093 [Accessed 11 March 2016].
2. Ashley, J. (2010) Promoting a creative curriculum and achieving high standards: primary leadership considerations. [online] Available at: dera.ioe.ac.uk/2078 [Accessed 11 March 2016].
3. *ibid.*
4. Safford, K. and Barrs, M. (2005) Creativity and Literacy: many routes to meaning. [pdf] London: Centre for Literacy in Primary Education. Available at: www.clpe.org.uk/sites/default/files/Many%20routes%20to%20meaning%20childrens%20language%20and%20literacy%20learning%20in%20creative%20arts%20work_0.pdf [Accessed 11 March 2016].
5. Changing Minds (n.d.) Active Learning. [online] Available at: changingminds.org/explanations/learning/active_learning [Accessed 11 March 2016].
6. Ofsted (2010) *Op cit.*

Knowledge trails

1. **The storytelling curriculum** – Sue Lyle reports on a daring approach to literacy that involves no formal teaching of reading and writing, simply complete immersion in stories and imagination. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/thestorytellingcurriculum
2. **Literacy learning through crochet** – Knitting arts and crafts with literacy and reading proved a resounding success with a class of disadvantaged eight-year-olds in the US. Kathleen Hunter explains. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/literacy-learning-through-crochet