

Empowering Children To Tell Stories Black

by Judith

For children, telling a story is not as easy as you might think. Many helpful curriculum guides will direct: “Now have the children tell the story in a circle.” However, if you have not carefully laid the foundation for this skill, it will collapse in on itself. What building blocks does a child need before they can retell or create an original story with others? They must be able to listen, transform information through their experience, verbalize that information, and pass it on.

Childhood learning begins in the physical. We are sensory-motor learners for the entire first part of our lives, and many of us remain most comfortable in this modality, even into adulthood. When I need to perform a new action on the computer and a whiz kid of 20 “machine-guns” the sequence of 15 simple actions that will do the job, I weep. When a slightly more empathetic person performs them slowly, while I look on, I weep in private. When someone who understands motor learners puts me in the chair behind the computer and allows me to initiate the sequence as they dictate it, asking questions and making notes as we go along, I exhale and learn it. How many of us formal operational thinkers still learn best in this modality? So too, stories begin in our bodies and imaginations.

Building Block 1: Creating Structure – THE DRUM

Little learning can happen during chaos. Children crave structure and with 18-25 bodies moving in the space of a classroom, structure is the only variable that makes participatory activities safe, fun, and integrative.

Buy yourself a rhythm drum. I have tried using my hands, my voice, and other less-resonant instruments, and none speak so well to the children as the drum. Drums are the core of cultural rituals and music for many African and Indigenous tribes. I have heard drumming described as the ‘the heart beat of the earth’ and as ‘the heart beat of the people.’ It has a deep resonance for humans, and also serves as something beyond you and your voice that gives definite, unqualified structure and shape to movement participation.

Move the desks back and create open space. Ask participants to find a space that is ‘all their own.’ Finding a positive way to phrase instructions brings a better result. “Don’t you dare touch each other” is an invitation to rebel and do just that. “Can you find a piece of space that is all your own?” is a challenge. Explain that you are going to beat the drum slowly and when you do (“not yet”...they always want to start early), “ask your body to take one step into open space for each beat of the drum.” Beat the drum once and snap out “Freeze.” Compliment the children that were able to take one step and freeze, note their body position or anything interesting about their frozen position, and challenge the others to have their body listen more closely to the drum. Beat it twice and call out ‘freeze.’ They will inevitably all start to travel towards the center of the group. Ask them what would happen if they continue in this pattern. “Right, a big crash!” Coach them to use all the available space that you have designated for the exercise. Beat the drum twice for 2 steps, call “change directions”, one more beat and freeze. Repeat this process, lengthen the amount of time

they travel to the drum beat with each progressive segment until they can control their bodies, responding appropriately to changing speeds, freezes, and traveling into *open* space. This ability to monitor their own physical participation in response to rhythmic cues of the drum is essential before moving on. This is great fun for them, but what you are doing is building a structure upon which all other participation can be built.

Troubleshooting:

- *“What if my students just run wild and can’t listen to the drum?”* Some groups will require more structure than others. Often children who emerge from chaotic environments at home have a more difficult time self-monitoring. We want them to experience success, not frustration, with this process. The answer is to always break the exercise down into its essential components. In this case, that essential component is moving a single limb of their bodies to the beat of a drum. Set as many chairs as you will need in a circle. Don’t have them on the floor. There is too much wiggle room, and at this point you want structure. With each child in a chair challenge them: “I am going to beat this drum once. When I do, can each of you lift your left arm...?” Repeat this a number of times with arms and legs alone and then in various combinations. Try standing and sitting to the beat of the drum. Add more beats each time they are successful. Only when it feels like they can control their bodies and respond to the drums cues do you remove those chairs and start with the exercise above.
- *“What should I do if a child just keeps knocking into others and running wild?”* Yes, we want to build success for every child into this process, but they’ll never experience it if a handful of the others cannot attend. First, you want to analyze if this behavior is organic or reactive. I would ask that child what their understanding of ‘open space’ is, and quietly consult with the classroom teacher to find out if the child has any learning disorders that keep him/her from participating fully. If that is the case, make them your partner, holding your hand during the movement or even allowing them the role of drummer. On the other hand, if this is a child testing the new teacher, or acting out to impress peers, I find that quick, judgment-free (you’re eventually going to want to make friends with this child) action works well. I give them one warning to stay in open space, and the next time they knock into another student, they are called out and must sit on the side. When you do this a number of things happen:
 1. The remaining children feel protected
 2. Other potential rebels usually get with the program
 3. Your friend in the making gets the structure he/she needs to function well, and knows you are good for your word.
- *“What do I do about the child who simply can’t move to the rhythm?”* If the child simply does not hear rhythms, have them be your partner or partner them up with a child who has a strong rhythmic sense. Holding hands while traveling can help the first student. If many students are having this problem, go back to the first exercise and continue with a simpler approach until they are ready to progress.

- *“What should I do about a child who is too shy or fearful to participate?”* If this type of learning is completely foreign to a child, they will be reticent about joining in. I would allow them to sit quietly and watch from outside the movement area. Eventually they almost always want to join in.

Expanding Movement:

Once your students can start, travel safely in open space, and stop to the beat of the drum, you can add more challenges! Explore the many modalities of travel available to them: Can they travel at: a low level? Medium level? Elbow First? Head First? As if they were traveling through jell-o? The possibilities are endless! As they travel to the beating drum in one of these new ways, always acknowledge, by name, the child who is doing something particularly interesting or creative. For example, “I see Eric moving like a caterpillar, scrunching up his back and straightening down. Alicia is traveling in a low level backwards way...good. Martina is scurrying like a mouse.” When the body leads, the mind follows. Beyond helping your students learn to use their bodies expressively and create structure, you can integrate curriculum objectives.

New Vocabulary:

“When I beat the drum slowly, you going to travel in slow, smooth sustained ways. What travels this way?” Collect their suggestions and have them travel to a slow beat, using every part of their body in sustained ways until they hear the freeze cue. Again, reinforce their movements through your coaching: “Andrea is moving her arms in a smooth sustained way,” or “Kevin is using his whole torso in a smooth sustained way.” This technique will help them integrate new vocabulary at paces you’ll find dizzying because the words now have a context and a sensory-motor base. You can also use this technique to reinforce classroom topics. For example, “We are going to travel through a viscous fluid today. Can any of you name a viscous fluid?” Or, “We are going to travel through helium today. Do any of you know what helium is used for?”

Natural Environments:

“Today we are traveling in a jungle and each of us will become something that lives and moves in a jungle. Let’s list them and each of us will choose one to imitate as we travel.” You can create grouping activities by asking them to travel as something that lives in an environment you have been studying in class: a desert, a rainforest, an inner city...the possibilities are endless, and as you coach the students during the exercise, always reinforce those movers who are trying to creatively participate. (“Jose looks just like a creeping vine in the jungle!”)

Troubleshooting:

- *“What about the student who puts a bunny in the desert?”* If you are traveling through the desert and someone is hopping like a bunny, ask what animal they are. They might be a kangaroo and therefore perfectly appropriate to an Australian desert setting! If they have chosen an inappropriate animal (in this instance, a bunny), here are some options:

- While the rest of the group continues to travel to the beat of the drum, have that child step out and watch the others with you, trying to identify what creatures their classmates are. When ready, ask the child to choose an animal appropriate to the desert.
- If a number of the students have morphed into inappropriate critters for the chosen environment, have them freeze. Recall a story that you read to them or a film they saw that took place in the chosen environment. What creatures were there? Create the list and ask them to choose from it and begin the exercise again.
- *“What if one traditionally rowdy youth becomes a rattlesnake?”* Compliment their choice but reinforce that even the rattler must travel in it’s own space! Once they have physically integrated this lesson, it will never be lost.

Building Block 2: Listening and Observation – ‘MIRRORS’

Creativity is really just the act of accepting physical, musical, verbal, visual, and emotional suggestion, and allowing it to pass through you. It always comes out changed. We are all creative beings, and the way to help children tap into that creativity, oddly enough, is through structure. Our next step is to help the children strengthen their skills of observation and listening. A teacher can cry out a dozen times in the day “You are not listening!” But often, a child doesn’t even know exactly what listening feels like. Children are not often listened to with great gravitas, so how can they learn a skill around which they have little experience? You can easily tell which of your students have been engaged in conversation and listened to. Their hands will always be up, because they were following the lesson and now want to be heard on the subject. The rest remain in the mode they have most often experienced: silence.

Now, it’s time help them observe one another, accept cues, let those cues pass through their own bodies, and give them to the next student. I think of this as a level of listening that emanates from a student’s entire being. A great way to inspire this ‘whole body listening’ is through an old Viola Spolin (a pioneer in the field of theater education) favorite, the game of ‘Mirrors.’ Put the children into pairs, and have them stand 2-3 feet apart, facing each other. Have them decide who is partner A and who is partner B. When the drum begins, partner A will make large, slow, simple movements that partner B can mirror. The objective is to look exactly like a mirror so that no one looking could tell which partner is the initiator of the movements. Coach them to breathe together, to move predictably, to complete movements in an organic way. After they seem to understand the exercise, tell the children that you are going to count down from 5 to 1, and that when you reach 1 they will change roles but not positions (B will initiate while A mirrors). Let them know that this is merely a practice for a competition. The team that can fool the most people (because they will not be able to designate an initiator and mirror) will be the winner. (It is motivating to have some type of prize. It matters less what the prize is then that it represents ‘winning.’)

Coaching Tips:

- Are you breathing together?
- Initiator, are you moving slowly enough that your mirror can follow you?

- Initiator, are your movements large and simple enough that your mirror can imitate them?
- Mirror and initiator, are you able to see and focus on your partner?

Once both A and B have had an opportunity to play both roles fully, divide the class into 3 or 4 groups. Have each team decide secretly who the initiator and who the mirror is. Have them stand in such a way that the rest of class can see all the active pairs. Beginnings are very important, so give them a countdown and remind them to breathe together before their first simultaneous movement. Coach them as you did the entire class to help them keep on track and after 30-45 seconds give them another countdown so that they can end simultaneously. Ask the classmates who were watching to vote on which person in each team was the initiator and which was the mirror. The team who flummoxes the most students is the winner, but the real winners are the students, who have now discovered what complete focus feels like. "Listen to me as if I was your mirrors partner." That is listening with one's whole being, and it can become an important reference point. "But there was no dialogue!" You may protest, but listening and observing are twin embryos in the growing body of group telling.

Building Block 3: Group Listening – 'PASS THE SHAPE'

Now that the students understand the powerful focus required for this work and have some experience with give and take, it's time to expand their tool belt. Form a circle (create 2 circles if there are more than 20 students) and begin by asking the person to your right to make a simple, repetitive movement. Invite every one to copy the movement (keeping everyone meteorically involved is a big plus in this exercise). After a rhythm has been established, you (the person to the left) are going to morph the movement. Morphing is different from changing the movement. You are asking yourself to begin in the movement you are given and continue its repetition, allowing your body, not your brain, to explore it. Coach yourself as you will coach everyone in the circle when they are being asked to morph the movement: you may let it grow larger or smaller; you may discover that your body wants it go faster or slower. One small movement might become slowly accentuated, or a sudden, large movement might morph slowly into a smoother movement. When the movement has morphed/transformed into something that feels just right, look towards your left: if that person is doing it the way you intended, then you can pass it to them, and they become the new "morpher." The entire class is invited to mirror the morpher, but only one person at a time is able to explore the actual process of morphing the movement.

Troubleshooting:

If someone stops dead and starts a new movement, or takes the movement and immediately turns it into something they have preplanned to do, or you see their little brain cogitating over what to do, STOP THEM. Explain gently that no thinking is allowed! They are being asked to stay in the moment and simply play with the movement they receive. This is truly important because the reason we are not receptive to learning (social, emotional or cognitive) is that our inner voices take over and begin to dictate past experiences. Self talk such as:

- *I'm going to look stupid. I'd better plan something that will look good.*
- *Oh man I was thinking about lunch and not watching.*

- *I have to do something that will make everyone laugh*
- *I'm not good with stuff like this. I'm really not good. I have to think of something that will look OK...*

Gently demonstrate how easy it is to just imitate a movement and then fit it to your own body and inclinations by playing with it until it feels right. This is a basic step in learning and creativity; taking in information and interpreting it. Beginning with a physical exercise places this skill in an accessible realm to all children.

Pass the Shape and Sound:

If they liked 'pass the shape,' add on a level of difficulty. Once a student has discovered their repetitive movement, add a sound that feels as if it compliments the movement. Pass it on, and the next person can transform the movement and sound simultaneously or let the movement morph and then find a sound that works with it.

Building Block 4: Integrating the Spoken Word

You needn't do all of these exercises, but pick and choose those that will most help the students you are working with.

'SENTENCE IN A CIRCLE'

Your students are now astute observers, listeners, and morphers. It's time to add words. Begin by having one student speak a word. The person to their left in the circle adds a word, and the speakers continue to change in this manner until a sentence, exclamation, or question is completed. Depending upon the students' level of grammatical knowledge, you can welcome them to use their turn to punctuate. Repeat each sentence back to them after it is created and start again. Coach them to not think ahead, but simply listen to what is being constructed as it comes their way.

Troubleshooting:

- Your little ADD darlings will often be in the ozone while the words are adding up and add something from another time/space continuum. When this happens, gently repeat the sentence as it has come to him/her and ask him/her to add something that will make sense to us here and now.
- Words inappropriate for an educational setting will occasionally pop up. Before the laughter takes over, stop the sentence and ask the child to repeat the word, and repeat it again and again and again. Have the child continue to repeat it until it feels like vowels and consonants and loses its power to titillate. If you don't have the latitude to do this, simply ask them if they can please find a different word for the sentence. They'll know what you mean.
- If your group cannot complete a sentence feel free to be the punctuation person and when necessary simply add "period" "question mark" "exclamation" and end it.

'STORY IN A CIRCLE'

Old Story: Begin with a story they have heard. If it was not heard or read recently, review it with them. You can always watch one of the free shows that are posted my web site¹. Ask one student to begin with a single phrase or sentence and have each student in the

circle add on another phrase or sentence until the story is completed. You can use the booklet of pictures they have made to guide this retelling, and always feel free to summarize where the group is for the child who zoned out. We want them to be successful with this activity.

New Story: When beginning a new story, it is best for you to begin this with a sentence or phrase that will welcome possibilities: “Once the streets of this town were filled with alligators...” or “Once this class was chosen for a moon landing...” or “Elephants were heard dancing on the roof of the school...” Ask each student to add on a phrase or sentence until a tale is completed. Coach the children to not plan on what they will add. Remind them that listening is the only thing they are required to do.

Adding Curriculum Content:

If you are studying grammar you could say: “Every time someone uses a noun, put your hands on your head.” “Every time someone uses a conjunction, wink” “Every time someone uses a verb, shake your fingers in the air.” Start with only one of these challenges and build towards more. (You can see how the possibilities are endless.) If you are studying Geography, challenge them to take the story to three or 4 adjoining states or nations. If you are studying natural sciences, challenge them to create the story in a specific environment and include as much of the natural landscape and its inhabitants as they can.

Troubleshooting:

Do you have a child who will always turn whatever comes his/her way into a bloody fray? A gentle hand on their shoulder can help them focusⁱⁱ. Coach them to simply listen and trust that they will come up with an appropriate extension to the action. If the story starts to become so long and disjointed that no one can follow it, frame the exercise. IF you have any inkling that your students won't be able to create the story by this time, framing is also a good idea. Here are some basic ideas for framing the story:

- The story must be completed after a single go around in our circle.
- The story can only have 3 or 4 characters.
- The story must take place in a single setting such as a forest/castle/school.
- Begin with an opening sentence and a closing sentence. (“Once the streets of this town were filled with alligators...” and “That’s why alligators no longer roam the streets of this town.”) Tell the students that their job is to move the story from open to close. Offer whatever parameters they need to create a successful story in a circle.

There are many places you can take your students from here, but by this point they should have attuned observation, listening, and the ability to grow one another ideas. These are essential components of not only story making, but also learningⁱⁱⁱ.

i 7 programs of stories around various themes designed for elementary students, with accompanying curriculum guides, are available free of charge at: http://www.storiesalive.com/Stories_in_Edu_main.html
(If they aren't all up when you visit, they soon will be.)

ii Simple, gentle, physical contact can often do and say more than a thousand words. In this instance, it can say: "I am here for you. I care about you. I want you to be part of this activity." I know that physical contact with students has come into disrepute. There is, however, something about a well-intentioned human touch that is powerful, and calming. Obviously, if you are in an environment that will not tolerate it, you won't use this option, but if at all possible, do consider its wordless power to communicate.

iii I am writing an article that will articulate more games and exercises that can support story telling and story making. In the meantime, you might want to pick up Martha Hamilton and Mitch Weiss's book *Children Tell Stories*, from Owen publishers. They offer many useful ideas for the classroom setting.