

TES Article about PWW and Story-Making

Top of the Props

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Karen Hooper sees an actor create stories with the help of a lamp, hairgrip and puppet in a primary class

Peter Wynne-Willson sits on a small wooden box, children gathered at his feet. As he projects the fruits of their labour, the story "Mr Light Loses his Lantern", on to the wall, he remind them how a lamp from his famous box inspired the story. Anticipation heightens as Peter slowly opens the box and brings out a Korean hairgrip. What have we here? Responses tumble from the children: "It belonged to someone really precious before you"; "It's an old granny tiger with false teeth."

The story takes off as Peter reaches into the box again, transforming the hairgrip into a tiger handpuppet. Soon he's pulling out more props, both real and imaginary. "It's a python", "It's a fluffy pink hedgehog", "It's a worm," "Eat it! Eat it!" chant the Year 2 children of Chase Terrace Primary School in Walsall, generating the ideas that appear later in their group performances.

"The box is a sort of higher authority, it has rules and it is a means of saying we're all in it together," says Peter, a former actor who set up Birmingham's first theatre-in-education company, Big Brum, in 1981. Since going freelance in 1991, he has been a driving force behind the educational power of theatre in the West Midlands and beyond.

Today is one of his five half-day writing and performance sessions, which link to drama, PSHE and multiculturalism. The school booked him through Book Communications as part of Birmingham Book Festival's Write On! project. "If I'm involved in something," he says, "I like it to be trying to change the world, in however small a way. You have to measure your success in individual moments. I like not being frightened by the big issues, like race and justice, which tend to be at the centre of theatre-in-education work with older children.

"You'll find serious issues opening up even among Year 2s if they feel they have a space to express themselves and their thoughts are valued. I am often struck by their insight when they are trusted to tackle challenging subjects."

Peter's work is closely related to the Reggio Emilia early years approach.

In the town of Reggio in northern Italy, artists are permanently attached to nurseries, and work on long projects that evolve with the children, constantly recording, analysing and responding to children's ideas.

Peter has been attached in this way to four early years' settings in the past two years, working often in role, while the teacher watches and records the children's participation. He says the approach also works when the issue is decided beforehand. This autumn he's working on health with Year 2 pupils from Kingshurst and Castle Bromwich infants' schools in Solihull.

"Teachers might be asked to focus on substance abuse, for example, but drama and story work can approach this best by looking at a broader context or more underlying issues," he says. "Making up stories gives room for feeding in individual experience in an unthreatening way, and makes it possible to look at why things happen."

"Whether I use my box, my giant puppets or what I've brought from Korea, what underpins my work is giving children choices and confidence. It is confidence that will be at the heart of protecting them from a great many dangers in their lives."

Peter has twice been visiting professor of theatre-in-education at the Korean National University of the Arts and Annette Fisher, the Chase Terrace Year 2 teacher, is delighted that her pupils can tap into his first-hand stories from another culture: "The visual stimulus such as the hairgrip and puppetry has impacted on their writing, listening and language skills. It's opened up their imagination and boosted self-esteem and confidence. It has also given me the chance to get away from the constraints of the classroom and think in different ways."

Peter has found his work benefiting from the Chase Terrace pupils' ideas.

"I'll ask, 'Why did a character get there? Something must have happened.' A child will say, 'He's been cursed by a witch'. Children don't need to be in control of the story and I've learned a lot from that."

The school integrated children from two classes for the project (the sessions accommodate 30 children) and then did parallel activities with the others. Annette's tip would be to organise a visit early in the term for lasting benefit.

"It wasn't difficult to organise," says the school's literacy co-ordinator Sue Clarke. "The initial meeting with authors and other schools in Birmingham was well co-ordinated and the Book Communications people who managed the project were really approachable. Don't be too prescriptive before you meet the author. We found Peter really open to our ideas. Now we are looking forward to our teachers-as-writers workshops."

Write On! is organised for the Orange Birmingham Book Festival by Book Communications, an independent agency that manages creative reading and writing projects. Funding for Write On! comes from schools, LEAs and Arts Council England. Schools in Birmingham, Solihull

and Staffordshire should approach their LEAs. Contact Book Communications on: Tel: 0121 246 2770 Email: info@bookcommunications.co.uk

Birmingham Book Festival www.bbf04.co.uk

There are examples of projects on www2.bgfl.org/writeontoo

For more on Peter's work see www.peterww.co.uk

Writing Together

If your school is interested in working with a writer, then you may like to take part in the Writing Together Challenge, which aims to encourage 1,000 schools to raise literacy standards by working with a writer this school year. The challenge offers funding towards the

cost of a writer's services. All schools that send details of their work will be able to contribute to an online anthology of creative writing, take part in a draw to win a visit from a writer and be eligible for a mystery prize. For more details: Tel: 020 8516 2976 Email: writingtogether@booktrust.org.uk. www.booktrust.org.uk/writingtogether

Writers in school

"I wouldn't want to tell teachers what to do," says Peter Wynne-Willson.

"These are just suggestions for how you might get the best from your writer."

- * Allow your writers to be writers and not replacement teachers. Encourage them to talk about their work and what they can offer outside the curriculum.
- * Make the most of the advice offered by the literary development agency if involved.
- * Don't plan too much in advance. It is hard to know the particular qualities of individual writers until you have seen them with your pupils; see what happens at the first session when you've seen them in action and plan from there.
- * Likewise with the project's evaluation, don't have a set of aims that need ticking; evaluate over the weeks.
- * View the programme as a liberation from your work, a golden opportunity to watch your children in a different context, but not an opportunity to do your marking. Take notes, get involved, be inspired.
- * Encourage children who are less confident about writing to draw and post their pictures on the website (if this is part of the project) and get them to put words to their drawings. Encourage them to get involved with other aspects of the session, such as drama and role play.
- * Make the most of any "teachers as writers" training that is on offer - it's an excellent opportunity to enjoy your own creativity. Often teachers are only involved in writing as a chore, and it can be inspiring to be reminded that writing can be fun.
- * Encourage parents to get involved with their children's writing if this is part of the programme.
- * Use the writer as a role model of someone who loves writing and makes a living from it. So much of the curriculum is about how to write, this can be a chance to look at why we should write.
- * To find a writer, visit the National Association of Writers in Education site: www.nawe.co.uk

