

Scaffolding children's learning through story and drama

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Scaffolding is a well-known metaphor widely used in education and language teaching to describe the guidance, collaboration and support provided by teachers to lead children to new learning. As the metaphor implies, scaffolding is a temporary construct which can be put up, taken down, reinforced and strengthened, or dismantled piece by piece once it is no longer needed, and as children develop language and skills which enable them to act in an increasingly competent, confident and independent way (Read, 2006).

When working with children, storytelling and drama techniques can be integrated and combined in multiple ways to provide robust and flexible scaffolding. This underpins and props up children's learning in initial stages. It also provides appropriate support as they gain in confidence, and opens the way to new learning and the internalisation of language and skills in enjoyable and creative ways.

Features of stories and drama

Stories and drama share a number of features (Read, 2007) which make it natural to integrate and combine them in scaffolding learning during language lessons with children:

1 They build on children's capacity for play.

Events that happen in both stories and drama are playful. People may meet giants, escape from hungry lions, fall in love, get lost, angry, hurt or even die, but everybody *knows* that in the story or drama this is only 'pretend', and that these things don't really happen. Even very young children quickly learn to become adept at distinguishing between the conventions and boundaries of stories and drama on the one hand, and real, everyday life on the other. As well as being fascinating and pleasurable for children, exploring the differences between stories, drama and real life develops their potential for creativity and imagination in a similar way to when they are engaged in play. Although stories, drama and play are not the same, children's innate capacity for play allows them to construct personal understandings and meaning from stories and drama in a similar way.

2 They deal with significant issues.

Stories and drama both deal with issues that touch children's own lives closely, often in highly significant ways. Some

common examples from children's stories may be to do with making friends, not wanting to go to bed at bedtime, feeling scared of the dark, or fussy about particular foods. As Bruner (1996) has noted, we live our lives and shape our identities through stories. Stories and drama also help children to make sense of their own behaviour and others, and to develop aspects of emotional intelligence, such as empathy. As Bettelheim (1975) has also shown, the psychoanalytical constructs of fairy tales reach deep into issues of self, identity and the role of the family at both subconscious and unconscious levels. In terms of scaffolding learning, stories and drama focus on fictional characters which engage children's attention, relate to their personal experience in some way and at some level, and yet allow them to maintain a safe distance from any problems and issues which may beset their real lives. This enables children to reflect more securely and openly on matters which are significant to them because they remain at one remove (talking about fictional characters rather than directly about themselves), and this in turn helps to create appropriate affective conditions for learning.

3 They engage Multiple Intelligences.

In a pedagogical context, stories and drama provide opportunities for children to use different combinations of their Multiple Intelligences (linguistic, visual-spatial, musical, kinaesthetic, logical-deductive, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist) (Gardner, 1983) as "entrypoints" to learning (Gardner, 1999). Through engaging different intelligences in storytelling and drama activities, individual children have opportunities to build on their personal strengths in order to consolidate, extend and deepen their learning. This also provides for variety and helps to broaden and maximise the appeal of activities and activity cycles within lessons, a factor which is important with any group and particularly with large classes.

4 They appeal to different learning styles.

Stories and drama provide a wide appeal to children with predominantly different learning styles, whether visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, or a combination of these. Through the use of a wide range of storytelling and drama techniques, children can also be helped to develop and discover their own individual learning styles and preferences.

5 They suspend norms of time, place and identity.

Stories and drama both involve participants in colluding in the temporary suspension of time, place and identity. A story may take only 3-5 minutes to tell in real time, but in fictional time a hundred years or more may pass. Similarly, in a drama activity where, for example, children act out being monkeys in a forest, the real place of the classroom and the identity of the children are also temporarily transposed. This fantasy element intrinsic to both stories and drama helps to make learning memorable in the short and longer term.

6 They are social and communal.

Both stories and drama are shared classroom events which take place in real time. As such, they provide a vehicle for the teacher and children to be ‘intersubjectively engaged’, that is, in a state where ‘participants are jointly focused on the activity and its goals, and they draw each other’s attention in a common direction’ (van Lier 1996:161). This feature of stories and drama provides a framework for developing social skills such as cooperation, collaboration, listening and turn-taking and helps to create appropriate affective conditions for learning to take place.

7 They have rules and conventions.

As social events, stories and drama have inherent rules and conventions to guide them. For example, in drama, rules include that participants are usually expected to be seated and watch while others perform, and to actively participate when it is their turn. There are also conventions in terms of the narrative structure of stories and drama, for example, the initial disturbance of a state of equilibrium leading to the creation of tensions, conflict and final resolution. Children’s familiarity with the rules and conventions of story and drama may initially be transferred from their first language and provide a known context for effective scaffolding to take place.

An integrated approach

In an integrated approach, which combines storytelling and drama techniques to scaffold children’s learning, the aim at a global level may be that, over a series of lessons, possibly as many as eight or twelve, the children will come back to the story three or four times. During this period, their initial receptive understanding of the story will be scaffolded in order to enable them to act out and re-tell the story, to explore relevant issues it raises, and to personalise and transfer some of the language it contains to their own lives.

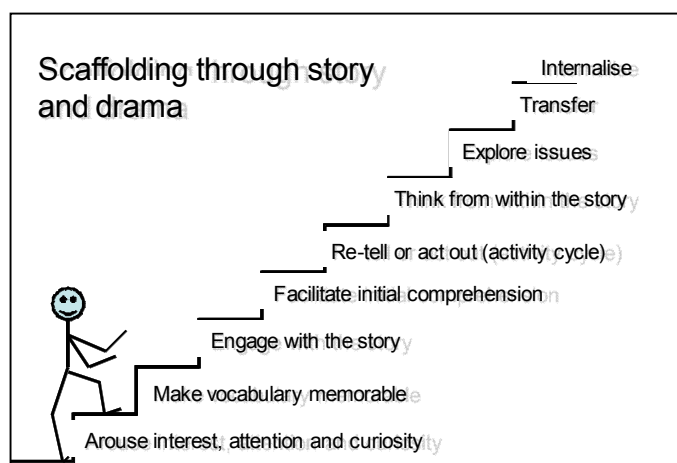


Figure 1: Scaffolding through story and drama

Figure 1 shows schematically how the process of scaffolding children’s learning might work in such an approach.

Scaffolding in practice

In order to illustrate this in practice, the following examples are based on *Giraffes can’t dance* (Andreae and Parker-Rees, 2000), a wonderful picture storybook in rhyming verses which tells of Gerald the Giraffe’s anguish at being mocked by all the other animals for his lack of dancing skills at the Jungle Dance.

The story starts:

*Gerald was a tall giraffe
Whose neck was long and slim,
But his knees were awfully bandy
And his legs were rather thin.* (Andreae & Parker-Rees, 2000)
We follow Gerald’s touching learning journey from his total loss of self-esteem to his meeting with the wise cricket which leads to his self-discovery and, finally, becoming the object of admiration of all the animals for his brilliant dancing at the end of the story. In terms of significant issues, the story touches on the power of positive thinking, believing in yourself and your ability to do things, as well as listening to and giving encouragement to others. A feature of the story is the strong rhythm and beat of the rhyming verses, similar to many children’s nursery rhymes, and which Cook (1999) speculates may also provide a way into the language.

Some examples of storytelling and drama activities and procedures using this story at each stage of the scaffolding process in figure 1 are:

Arouse interest, attention and curiosity

Children do two initial drama activities, a *Sound collage* and *Follow my leader* (based on Read, 2007) to create the atmosphere of the jungle in the story.

For the *Sound collage*, ask children to think of a jungle sound, for example, the pitter-patter of rain, the trickling of a stream, the whistling or hooting of birds, the footsteps of animals in the undergrowth or the buzz of insects. Instruct children to make their sound at regular intervals, loud enough for people around them to hear it, but not so loud that they can’t hear other people. Conduct the jungle sound collage with your hands. Children respond by making their sounds louder or softer, and finally leading to silence. The effect of creating a jungle atmosphere through this drama activity can often be uncannily authentic!

In *Follow my leader*, explain to the children that they’re going to follow you through the jungle to the Jungle Dance, and ask them to copy and mime everything you do on the spot. Keep up a commentary as you mime to convey the meaning e.g. *Let’s creep along carefully, push the long grasses aside, bend down under the branch; leap over the stream ... until we come to a clearing in the jungle and the Jungle Dance ...* Use the activity as an opportunity to introduce language children will meet in the story, e.g. clearing.

Make vocabulary memorable

In this story, key vocabulary items are the names of all the animals (giraffe, lion, chimp, baboon, warthog, rhino) and the dances they do (tango, waltz, rock 'n roll, Scottish reel, cha-cha-cha). This is made memorable through flashcards used for whole class vocabulary activities and games, the illustrations in the story, and through a drama activity, *Dancing statues*. In this activity, children listen to short extracts of different kinds of dance music from the story. In pairs, they identify each kind of music, dance together briefly and then freeze as statues as if doing each dance when you stop the music.

Engage with the story

Children are encouraged to engage with the story through prediction, hypothesising and using their imaginations, for example, *Which animals come to the Jungle Dance, do you think? Which animals can dance very well? What dances do they do? Which animal can't dance?*

Facilitate initial comprehension

As children listen to and follow the story for the first time, a range of storytelling techniques based on using the story illustrations, mime, gesture, facial expression, eye contact, voice including pitch, tone and intonation, as well as closed and open questions guide children to a general understanding of the story.

Re-tell or act out the story (activity cycles)

In this phase of the scaffolding process, children are led into participating in re-telling or acting out the story based on the script. This may involve one or more activity cycles over several lessons which familiarise children with additional vocabulary and language structures used in the story and build confidence in producing the language. In the case of *Giraffes can't dance*, for example, children do an activity in which they listen and supply missing rhyming words in the story; they also sequence the lines of verses from the story which they are given in jumbled order. In groups, children also do a drama activity, *Still images*, in which they freeze in position to make a tableau which illustrates one verse of the story. Other children then interpret what's happening in the tableau, which requires them to use language from the story. The group then say the verse they are representing to confirm the interpretation.

As a rhyming story, *Giraffes can't dance* is different from other stories which have more direct speech, for example, the series of stories about Charlie and Lola, such as *I will not ever never eat a tomato* (Child, 2000). In this kind of story, children very often join in acting out the story either themselves or e.g. using pencil or finger puppets at this stage.

It is very often at this stage in language classrooms, however, that the scaffolding process stops – perhaps getting children to complete an appropriate written record of the story, and also

inviting a personal response, before moving on to something else.

Think from within the story and explore significant issues

These stages of the scaffolding process encourage children to go beyond the script of the story and think about any key issues and dilemmas from within it. Although in many language classrooms the typical exploitation of stories often falls short of this, it is arguably a key building bridge or scaffold in leading children to internalise language and learning.

In order to think from within the story and explore significant issues, there is a need for guided questioning techniques that probe children to think about the implications of the characters' actions and analyse their behaviour, e.g. *How does Gerald feel? Why? What should he do?* etc. There is also a need for explicit language building through extending, re-modelling and re-casting children's ideas, and providing them with the functional language they will need to do more challenging activities, such as those described below, based on the story in English.

Examples of drama activities (based on Read 2007) which get children to think from within the story and explore significant issues are:

Role play For example, a role play between Gerald, when he is feeling hopeless about not being able to dance, and the cricket who is trying to advise and encourage him.

Hot seating For example, you or a child sits on a chair at the front of the class in the role of Gerald while others ask questions and try and cheer you up and advise you.

Thought tunnel For example, children prepare something to say to Gerald to help and advise or encourage him when he is at the lowest point in the story. They then stand in two lines. Choose one child to be Gerald who walks down the line, mimes being very sad, and listens to what the children say in turn. The child who is Gerald then reports back on the advice and encouragement he has received.

It happened to me Gerald or the cricket give a personal account of what happened to them in the story e.g. for a chat show on Jungle TV.

Bystander Children choose another character present at the Jungle dance, e.g. the zebra, who recounts what happened to a friend or is interviewed for the Jungle News.

Transfer

This stage gives children an opportunity to relate and apply their understandings from the story to their own lives. This needs to be handled sensitively and often indirectly e.g. *Why did the animals laugh at Gerald? Was it kind to laugh at him? What do you do if a friend can't do something?*

Internalise

The final stage and desired outcome is that children internalise language and learning from the story and drama. Although there is of course no guarantee that this will happen, it is arguably more likely given the carefully planned scaffolding process which engages children with the story in pleasurable, challenging and significant ways, with flexible and appropriate support, over time.

The use of ‘distancing strategies’

Throughout the scaffolding process, children are gradually led to greater independence and competence through the use of ‘distancing strategies’ (Sigel 1982, quoted in Berk and Winsler, 1995 and Read 2006). Three levels of ‘distancing strategies’ have been identified with low-level distancing referring to what’s visibly present in the immediate environment, medium-level distancing referring to the way things in the immediate environment relate to each other, and high-level distancing which encourages children to hypothesise and go beyond the immediate environment. Figure 2 shows how the concept of ‘distancing strategies’ can be applied in scaffolding children’s learning through story and drama.

‘Distancing’ strategies

	<i>Low level</i>	<i>Medium level</i>	<i>High level</i>
Story telling	What’s in the pictures	How the pictures relate to each other	Going beyond the pictures
Drama	Imitation, repetition, mime, gesture, voice, actions	Acting out, re-telling independently based on script	Exploration of issues and feelings beyond script

Figure 2 ‘Distancing strategies’ in story and drama

In relation to *Giraffes can’t dance*, examples of low-level distancing are questions about the story such as *What are the animals doing? / What’s Gerald looking at?* Examples of medium-level distancing are questions such as *Why is Gerald going home? / How does he feel?* Examples of high-level distancing are questions such as *How do you think the cricket can help Gerald? / How do you think the animals feel when they see Gerald can dance?* In relation to drama, examples of low-level distancing are activities such as *Sound collage*, *Follow my leader* and *Dancing statues* and an example of medium-level distancing is the activity *Still images*. Examples of high-level distancing are activities such as the *Role play*, *Bystander*, *It happened to me*, *Thought Tunnel* and *Hot seating* (although the first three could also be medium-level depending on how closely based on the story script they are set up to be).

In conclusion, story and drama share features which can be naturally combined to scaffold children’s learning in language lessons in enjoyable and creative ways. As part of the scaffolding process, a wide range of storytelling and drama techniques allow for appropriate ‘distancing’ and support at each stage. This potentially guides children to the internalisation of learning which has taken place.

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