

Opal Story workshop – bits and pieces cut and pasted from the Opal School Story Workshop on-line course – The "I" in the document is the course facilitator from Opal School

My goal for Story Workshop is to nurture strong, proficient writers.

Setting up a culture of story workshop

I think it helps to share with you some of my hopes and intentions in the earliest days of constructing that culture:

- I want children to know that the environment and community they are working in is a safe space where they will find connections, work through problems and challenges, and feel a strong sense of belonging.
- I want them to know what it is we are doing during Story Workshop – to know that their words and ideas are what drives the curriculum, that what they care about matters, and that the work doesn't happen without those ideas. I want to support the development of their sense of agency, to care deeply about their work as authors and the impact it will have on others.
- Finally, I want them to know what resources are available to support them in these goals. I want them to know that we never do this work in isolation; that we will turn to mentor authors, materials, and each other along the way.

As children began using the materials in the classroom to find and capture their ideas, I noticed and was excited by what I saw. Using the language of ideas rather than stories (which was part of my original plan) seemed to encourage children to write beyond the traditional narrative.

Preparation

On the first day of Story Workshop, I invited children to either find or capture an idea. There were a variety of materials available to them, including watercolors, blocks, loose parts collage, small world, and small blank books with pens and markers. I noticed that about half of the children went to write ideas they already had and the other half chose to go to materials to either find or grow an idea.

Within each of these pieces of preparation, there are questions I try to ask myself to guide and clarify my thinking.

Examining my beliefs and assumptions:

What do I believe about children? What assumptions do I carry? How will I pay attention to how those beliefs and assumptions show up in my practice?

Making my thoughts, questions, and ideas visible:

What are my teacher-research questions?

What am I genuinely curious about exploring with the children I work with?

Setting intentions:

What is guiding the decisions I make? What will I pay attention to? What do I want the children to learn? What am I expected to support them to learn?

Preparing the physical environment, including the organization of materials:

What do I want the physical environment to communicate to the children? How can I create an environment that supports children to express the stories they have to tell, to share their gifts with a community of peers, and to learn by experience what it means to participate? What materials will be available to support this? How will the materials be organized so they are accessible, flexible, and inspiring?

Preparing for the organization of time and space:

When in our schedule will Story Workshop happen? What time will it start, how long will it last, and how many days in the week will it occur?

Preparing systems of organization for documentation and assessment:

How will I organize my time to listen to the children's stories? What tools will I use (journals, cameras, audio recording devices)? How will I keep track of and organize what I notice about children's choices, experiences, and skill development?

Wondering about the children themselves:

Who are these children? Where have they been? What do they care about? What are they curious about? How will I learn more about them? How will I support them to learn more about one another?

Provocation

When planning provocations we might ask ourselves:

What do I notice are the strengths, interests, and curiosities of the children I teach?

What are the children already doing? How might I build off those interests to engage their curiosities further?

What are the connections between my own intentions and what I notice the children doing?

What have I heard the children say that I might bring back to them to provoke further thinking?

What kinds of shared language and understanding do I hope we will create together?

Intentions

One way I try and support this is by asking children to reflect on the role of materials by asking questions such as:

- Where will you go during Story Workshop today? Why?
- How do you think that material will support your ideas?
- Why (or how) might that material help you tell your story?
- What happened when you painted (or built, or drew, etc.) your story?
- What did playing in blocks help you discover? How did your idea change or grow?
- How will you capture what you discovered in that material today?
- How do you know if a material is supporting you or distracting you? How will you find out?

During this time, we might ask questions such as:

- *What is your plan?*
- *Where will you go/what will you do during Story Workshop today?*
- *Will you go back to a story or start a new story?*
- *Are you finding a story or do you already have an idea?*
- *What is your idea? Will you share a sneak peek?*
- *Is this a story you care enough about to stick with?*
- *What material will support you to tell your story today? Why that one?*
- *What is your intention?*
- *I remember yesterday you said you'd try small blocks. What made you change your mind?*
- *Yesterday you told your story in collage. Would you like to try it in paint today?*
- *How will you capture that part of your story?*

Story Congress

Story Congress is the structure that supports us as teachers, to ensure that all of the writers in our classrooms have the chance to know what it feels like to be part of a community of authors and to feel heard.

Story Workshop closes each day with Story Congress. This is a time during which children receive feedback from peers and teachers in the form of comments, compliments, and questions in order to support the author's story development. Teachers also use Story Congress as an opportunity to build community, to practice listening and making connections, to inspire children to take on new challenges and to refine the values, expectations, and culture of Story Workshop.

Lucy Calkins writes, "As writers, what we all need more than anything else in the world is listeners, listeners who will respond with silent empathy, with sighs of recognition, with laughter and tears and questions and stories of their own. Writers need to be heard."

Questions that may guide my decisions for Story Congress:

What child or children might offer inspiration, challenge, provocation, or model for the others?

What group of authors' work will provide the most productive collection of models or contrasts on any given day?

How might one child's story or process - or another child's questions or connection to that story - be used to highlight and reflect on a skill or strategy I want the children to learn?

Who has tried something new that others might like to try?

Who needs a boost of confidence?

Who made particularly interesting use of that day's provocation?

Who has an important insight to share?

Who needs a chance to celebrate?

How can story Congress foster a sense of success, confidence, and a sense of belonging for all students?

I hope to support the development of a culture of Story Workshop where children see each other as resources. Having an audience listen to my story and provide genuine feedback is one of the resources that I rely on most as a writer - and my hope for the children is that they will find that from each other. I want children to have classmates that will ask questions, respond with emotion, offer suggestions, engage with, and care deeply about the ideas they are crafting.

After you take time to articulate your intentions, ask yourself, What are you doing to prepare yourself and your environment to pursue those intentions?

More questions to consider:

- How might I prepare the classroom environment to be interesting and inviting?
- How can I inspire each child to be engaged with and delighted by his own thinking and the thinking of others?
- What might inspire them to discover new stories?
- In what ways have I prepared them to work together with a strong sense of community?
- What materials and supplies can be accessible to the children?
- How will I organize the materials to be easily taken out and put away by the children?
- When I look around my setting, what unexpected materials might I collect to use in new ways?
- What materials do I already have that I might be able to see with new eyes? What is something new I could try?
- What materials do I imagine would draw out more stories?
- What other possibilities might I offer?
- What do I hope for and expect during Story Workshop?
- How does the environment help to communicate that?
- What does this environment communicate to children about what they are capable of?
- What systems of organization will I use? Who are these children?
- How will they enter this space?
- How can connections and a sense of belonging both be found and created?
- What do I know about these children?
- How can I find out more?
- What materials might reflect the interests of the children?
- What materials might help them extend?

In this discussion board, share a peek into your own preparation for Story Workshop by sharing some writing or images reflecting:

- the kinds of learning conditions you are trying to create,
- how you plan to document and organize what you notice,
- the set-up of your environment/ organization of materials,
- a peek into how Story Workshop fits into your weekly schedule
- your "first-week" plans

Whichever you choose, make sure to note how those decisions are connected to your intentions.

ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Our role as teacher during story creation is essential, and delicate, and important. Trusting means giving time, but it also means developing strong relationships, knowing our students, their needs, their capabilities, and knowing when the most supportive way to encourage them is with a nudge—even when that nudge might not be their first choice.

Engaging in a pedagogy of play during Story Workshop doesn't mean that things always feel fun. When I refer to play as children's most innate and natural learning strategy, I'm not referring to it as a means for entertaining children. The work of an author is incredibly challenging and learning is more likely to occur when the task at hand has required sustained effort. I view my role during Story Workshop as supportive of this kind of learning.

Beginning with play doesn't mean lowering our expectations to make things feel easy for our students. I want my students to know play can mean taking on challenges and I want them to experience the feeling that comes when you accomplish something difficult. Engaging in a pedagogy of play can mean supporting children to engage with the world playfully as they take on challenges, grapple with ideas, communicate, make meaning, and uncover their own capabilities, beyond what they may have believed possible on their own.

We don't want to teach children something that they can learn by themselves. We don't want to give them thoughts that they can come up with by themselves. What we want to do is activate within children the desire and will and great pleasure that comes from being the authors of their own learning.

Loris Malaguzzi

Writing:

The world outside the classroom is a resource where children are getting ideas and asking questions and we welcome that into the classroom. Writing is a way of making meaning of our lives. [Lucy Calkins says](#), **"Writing allows us to hold our life in our hands and make something of it. We grow a piece of writing not only by jotting notes and writing rough drafts, but also by noticing, wondering, remembering, questioning, and yearning."** Through Story Workshop, we are inviting children to make meaning of their lives. We are welcoming their experiences, what they've lived, what they're curious about, and what they're grappling with. Children naturally play and tell stories as a way to make meaning of their lives. Their work is to read the world, so their worlds become our texts.

About writing:

The wonderful author Cynthia Rylant, when asked how to teach writing to children, said, "Read to them...Read with the same feeling in your throat as when you first see the ocean after driving hours and hours to get there. Close the final page of the book with the same reverence you feel when you kiss your sleeping child at night...Teach your children to be moved and you will be preparing them to move others."

I'm wondering about the role of materials as a form of feedback for individual authors. I might invite a child to take their story to a material and pay attention: What happens when you take your story to paint? How does it change or grow? What new language or ideas come up for you?

During Story Workshop, I want to support children to find ideas they care about. I think that children have a right to write about the things that matter to them. And a big piece of what I love about Story Workshop is the role of materials and play in supporting children to find and express those ideas that matter most to them. I've seen again and again the transformation that takes place when typically hesitant writers become unable to put their pen down because they've finally found an idea they can't wait to write.

I spend a lot of time in the beginning of the year communicating the expectation that Story Workshop will be a place where authors find ideas that they care about and that they will write those ideas down. It's not uncommon for me to say to a child, "Hmmm, it looks like you're having a hard time staying focused. I wonder if this is an idea you really care about writing down?" I expect a high level of engagement because the work of an author is engaging and I know children are capable of doing that work.

Materials:

"Materials stimulate the senses, which respond by developing networks in the brain that in time enable us . . . to build relationships among complex ideas. Materials educate the hand, which drives language, movement, attention, planning and scores of other brain functions. The combination of hand and materials is essential to virtually every endeavor." - [Ann Lewin-Benham](#)