

The Interactive Storytelling Program

Overview

Too often theatres that have educational programs focus their work on children no younger than 3rd grade. Many elementary schools are actively looking for programming that impacts their neglected early elementary students. Interactive Storytelling fills this void. By creating programming that focuses on exploring with young children (grades K-2) their creativity through movement and character creation and emphasizing a respect for all people's creative ideas, Interactive Storytelling fosters vital critical and creative thinking skills and helps prepare the way for life-long love of art and theatre.

Interactive Storytelling uses the boundless creativity of young children to create new works of theatre. Students learn how to focus their imagination into play creation, group collaboration, and theatrical expression. Even the youngest students can create a play that reflects their unique imagination and experience.

Workshop Outline

The Interactive Storytelling program is laid out over a 9 week residency in an elementary school. Starting with the kindergarten classes, programming enters the classroom for 1 to 1 ½ hours per week for 3 consecutive weeks. Each class receives 3 workshops covering creative movement exploration, character creation, and story creation. At the completion of the kindergarten classes' stories, the 3 week section for the 1st grade classes begins. Likewise the 2nd grade section follows. Each classroom, therefore, receives 3 - 4 ½ hours of workshop experience (depending on the time constraints of individual schools' curriculum.)

Day 1

All workshop sessions begin with a discussion of creativity and respect and the importance of listening and supporting each other's creativity. The first workshop session each classroom explores Creative Movement and Improvisation. Students work in physically-active leading and response games that center on the act of creation. Games range from creating imaginative verbal and texture *expression* to forming bodies into shapes that are unfamiliar and expressive. Following these sometimes frantic, creative outbursts students move on to *listening and sharing games* that focus on showing their creative work to a supportive group of their classmates. The final games of the first workshop day are designed around *character creation*: using movement, body shapes, creative words and sounds to build a living character. At this point the workshop transitions into small groups of students working collaboratively to begin a text-based character outline. Groups of students and one adult scribe work through a series of character outline points including: Name, type of character, family, job, fears, wants, favorites (colors, foods, people), etc....

Day 2

The second workshop day, one week later, focuses completely on Character Creation. The session begins with a replaying some of the previously learned character creation games. Once again students are reminded of respect and creativity. Returning to their groups, students will revisit and finish their character outlines. Students then asked to use the skills they learned in last week's body

shaping games to showcase their group's shapes from their character outline (i.e. shapes of favorite foods, fears, people, etc...). This exercise is deliberately expressionistic to reinforce the support of any idea no matter how absurd. The shaping games are moved by the facilitator towards more improvisation and students are given more and more abstract concepts to shape-- learning that when it comes to creativity, there are no wrong answers and shapes. As the shaping games culminate in a student-driven shaping story performed for their adult scribes and leaders, the activity returns to their more concrete character outlines. Using their newly found body shaping talents student groups now show their classmates their finished character outlines. The final activity of Day Two begins the creation of each group's character puppet or sketch based on their outline.

Day 3

The final day of the workshop is centered around Story Creation. The groups are first charged to finish their work on the character puppets or sketches. The final 30 minutes are spent as the Facilitator/Storyteller tells the tale of the characters the students created. While this is an adult storyteller (a necessity at the early ages), he/she is subservient to the answers the students give regarding the decisions made by the characters they created. In other words, as the storyteller is telling the tale, he/she consistently stops to ask the creative groups what their character would do in the current situation. In this way the students tell the story through the storyteller. When the story is finished the students are given, along with the praise of a story well created, the charge to be continue to be a respectful and creative storyteller in everything they do. They are reminded that there is no difference between the creativity of the storytellers who made their favorite movie, play or book and their own creativity. They are all storytellers.

Impact

Within the early elementary student community, Interactive Storytelling's programming affects positive change within the students' learning process by developing their skills in the following areas: **Celebrating Differences**, by applauding and supporting vastly different creative output and approaches; **Thinking Creatively**, by encouraging students to think beyond normal answers; creating new words, sounds, movements and shapes never before heard or seen- answers that may have been previously dismissed as silly or wrong; **Respect and Listening**, by emphasizing the importance of hearing and supporting each other's creativity and expression and by exchange, being supported and heard; **Group Collaboration**, by expecting students to work in a group to create one character and one story, in support of one concept. Interactive Storytelling further impacts the overall curriculum of the classroom and the school by fostering development not only in improved and successful group collaboration, but by exploring the areas of writing and spelling, listening, art, and teacher development.

Measuring Success

Interactive Storytelling's success is measured by students' creation of engaging stories and the resulting immediate effect on self-confidence and imagination that is inherent in any creative endeavor (particularly in a first time creative endeavor). In addition, Interactive Storytelling also strives to result in long term student skill development in strong critical thinking, creative problem solving and in an overall appreciation of ideas and art. Furthermore the workshops hopefully give teachers brief respite and support as well as a demonstration of new, creative ways to approach curriculum. This program

strives to reach children that have yet to explore their creativity, to see them encouraged by their success in outlandish expression, physically and intellectually. In addition, fostering new avenues for early childhood creativity energizes and encourages the artists working in the workshops and, hopefully, the teachers involved as well.

Origin and Staffing

Interactive Storytelling is conceptualized and spearheaded by Coleman Crenshaw. I am an actor and storyteller with experience working with children in and out of schools. I hold a B.A. in Communications: Theatre Arts and an M.F.A in Theatre: Performance and Society. My experience performing and working with children ranges from touring theatre ministry performing at youth camps and rallies to storytelling with young children's classes and groups. Interactive Storytelling was developed out of my work with The Manton Avenue Project based at the William D'Abate Elementary School in Olneyville, RI. The Manton Avenue Project works with children in grades 3rd - 6th developing their playwriting skills, creating plays that are produced by professional actors and directors. This program is inspired and seeded out of the 52nd Street Project in New York and uses many of the same techniques and philosophies (and in turn, so does Interactive Storytelling). Interactive Storytelling has been successfully implemented in schools, clubs, and theatres in Providence, RI, Boston, MA, Topeka, KS, and Kansas City, MO/KS. The program averages 70 students (K-2) creating 15 characters and 3 complete tales in each 3 week residency.

In large student groups Interactive Storytelling often uses volunteers in addition to the lead storyteller (myself). These volunteers act mostly as scribes and helpers for the character outlines and sketching/puppet creation, and as a calming and focusing figure for the groups in other settings like the storytelling or the group sharing experiences. Volunteers are drawn from a mixture of interested parents of students, other artists, and area college students studying the fields of early elementary education and/or theatre.

Target

Interactive Storytelling uses the unlimited imagination of children to unlock their ability to think critically and creatively, thereby revealing to students and teachers new ways to connect to their curriculum. Furthermore, the workshops give a boost to student's self-confidence and bolster their sense of the importance of being respectful and being respected in return. The demonstrated enthusiasm that children have for creating is remarkably energizing to all the artists involved and very often buoying to the teachers as well. Finally, fostering a trust and exuberance for the arts in young children is paramount for the survival of artistic expression and for the development of creative thought in all areas of education.

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