

Know what your doing, part 1 - Description

Knowing what you're doing sounds so obvious that it hardly needs stating. But have you ever found that your practice runs away with you and you are caught in a tumble of one event after another without really inhabiting any of them? I know I have and I have seen even experienced professionals struggle with this. Stories are not things. They are alive and working with them is more like working with animals or people than objects or information.

So how do we approach our material and allow ourselves to be affected by it without losing our balance? One answer is to be really focused on the mode of telling we are in and stick with it. I reckon there are five useful modes of telling and I will look at just one here (more coming later).

Description

What happens when you go for a walk and you look at the view? More often than not you will stop. It's the same in a story. When you go into description the forward motion of the story is suspended and you can take your time to pull out descriptive detail. The landscape of the story behaves exactly like a real landscape. The more you look the more you see. You can afford to take the time to really have a look around. Use all the senses - have a listen to what is both near and far; pick things up and have a sniff; feel the texture and weight of the objects you find. Don't be shy, you can have a proper rummage around - the story won't mind.

Working with a Partner

Our work is all about communication but we so often find ourselves preparing and practicing on our own. This is a shame and if you can buddy up with someone you will have much more fun and experience much more freedom.



Try this...

Find someone to work with and decide who will tell and who will listen. Sit close and use a low-key, social style of telling. The teller starts and as soon as the curiosity of the listener is piqued (this is normally a few seconds into the story) they ask a sensation based question about the size, texture, feel or style of something. It is really important to stay rigorously in the sensation world of the story and not get distracted into commentary or evaluation. This exercise usually has a companionable and social feel and often yields huge amounts of detail. Much more than you could ever use but none of it is ever wasted. You are beginning to pay real attention to the story and stories like that. Don't we all?

I have done this exercise, and variants of it, with adults and young people as young as Foundation Stage and it just works. One of the astonishing things about this exercise is that if you let your imagination really explore the detail of the story you will never come up with contradictory detail (for example, a character who you have decided is short bangs their head on a door lintel later in the story). It might bring up combinations that are paradoxical, but never contradictory.

The implications of this are startling. It means that our perception of the world is not made up of individual bits stacked in some mental warehouse for later retrieval but that, in stories at least, we are using a wider sense of mind that expands outside what we think we know so that when your listening partner asks you a sensation-based question you have the answer already without having to think. This new knowledge feels like something you already knew.

As with all the exercises I use, these are storyteller focused and the listener should stay in a facilitation role. You can be engaged and active in your responses and questions as a listening partner but avoid the urge to fix things. Wonkiness in the early stages of making work is a good sign. The other temptation for the listening partner to start asking interpretative questions like "Why do you think she did that?". Staying in the world of sensation and keeping the creative focus with the teller is part of the rigour of this exercise.

Beware of the story!

Beware of the story when you are doing this exercise! Stories are attention getting creatures and the way they get you is by making you want to know what happens next. As the listening partner it is very tempting to sink into the story and become a regular story listener and just go with its flow. Your job is to interrupt the patterns and perceptions that the storyteller already has so that something richer and more real can emerge. It's harder than you think as you will find out. A broad guideline is that if more than thirty seconds has gone by you need to ask another question.

Obviously you won't get very far in the actual narrative of the story using this method but of course you can start at any point in the story and use this method to add detail wherever it is lacking. It doesn't matter that the questioner may not have the context for their questions. The exercise is not for the facilitator, its for the storyteller.

I've mentioned rigour a couple of times in this first **Storytellers' Hints and Tips**. It sounds scary but actually working out the rigour of your practice is a great liberation. More about all that another time. In the meantime, have fun with description and if you have any comments or queries let me know and I will try and address them next time.