



'We're going on a language hunt' Reflections from The Nursery World Show masterclass 2016

CASE STUDIES

Response from Julia MacDonell, LEYMN Apprentice

Early February I attended a masterclass on storytelling - looking at the special place rhyme and storytelling has in early years development - at the Nursery World Conference. The masterclass was presented by three speakers: the lauded Michael Rosen the keynote speaker of 'We're Going on a Language Hunt', Penny Tassoni on 'Story sharing with 3-5 year olds', and Alice Sharpe on the subject of 'Story and rhyme time for under 3s'.

The parallels between storytelling and music in the early years seemed to me to have a clear connection. My early years practice has storytelling as part of every session I deliver. To me a story is a magical thing in which adults and children alike create whole worlds in - familiar worlds to feel confident in, strange worlds to explore the unknown and not to mention the worlds that seem most wonderfully bonkers as well. Stories are the platform which I use as a spring board to go to song, to play my instrument, it's the scaffold that I place a session around.

At the masterclass I was very shocked to see books everywhere. People were touching, turning pages, each object something to be treasured. Books I treasure for sure, but in my early years practice a book is something I read months ago, but generally only as a springboard to jog my memory to craft a script which (I often throw out the window anyhow). Gosh, I thought, I don't belong here in this seminar. I don't work in a nursery. I don't sit down with groups of children and read them books and point at the beautiful pictures. My alienation was only further extended when a speaker expressed her hate for the recorder followed by laughs all around (I very proudly deliver what I think to be a diverse, exciting and creative recorder programme at a number of schools for a music hub).

But when Michael Rosen began to talk my concerns melted away.

Michael Rosen's talk was a masterclass in moving away from dogmatic epistemologies that place emphasis on "retrieval and inference" as a metric for achievement. This is in short, judging you've mastered 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar' when you can relate that the feeling the caterpillar is having is hunger (opposed to being tired etc.) and are able to infer from the book that the reason that the caterpillar was hungry was because he needed something to eat (or maybe he needed extra energy to become a butterfly). Rosen argued that it denies the beautiful truth that we read books to interpret them, in order to understand them and that is a source of powerful wisdom.

My proverbial penny dropped. I was in the right place; we were just using different elements to explore the same thing. What I did learn is that books allow a powerful act of interpretation: books can be platforms for asking questions, swapping stories, and exploring interrelations between the material in the book and our day to day lives, a platform for passing wisdom. Books are not closed - even though they look like they are being inanimate objects - they're an invitation to possibilities.

Music-making draws significant parallels: music can be a platform for jumping into new modes of interpretation and music is an excellent tool to explore a book. Examples of such were given in the masterclass.

Michael Rosen offered an example of using music as a tool within a story, and he used a situation that arose with his most famous work: 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt'. Upon being asked, by a child, why the bear was so sad in the illustration, Rosen asked the group of children to list possible reasons and he scribed the suggestions. Rosen created a simple chorus "I'm a bear!" and created an impromptu song using each of the suggestions.

Alice Sharpe explores songs and rhymes and gave example of how they could be extrapolated into worlds of interpretation, stories, using props. With 'Humpty Dumpty' she has three humpty dolls, eggs of various shapes and sizes, with 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' she has a collection of stars. These objects can be counted, grouped, described and whole new stories written, they are a stimulus for conversation and vocabulary.

Finally, I what I learnt from the seminar is that not only books but any of those modes of expression like visual art, or music can be is an invitation to possibilities. It is our responsibility as practitioners is to continue to be creative enough to give children and their parents spaces and the tools to wade in and get messy in those worlds. Thank you so much to LEYMN for giving me the opportunity as an apprentice to attend such an eye-opening event.

