



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

Design and Delivery of an Experiential Learning Model for Children

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Abstract: 'Design and Delivery of an Experiential Learning Model' deals with the construction and delivery of a reading program for ages 6-8 years - The Pomegranate Magic Reading Room. This paper looks at the process of book selection, identification of story attributes, constructing methodology and lesson plans, delivery of the program, assessment and observations.

Key words: *Experiential, story attributes, creative, theatre, visual art, workshop, methodology, construction.*

1. Introduction

"A story that matters to us whether ancient or modern becomes a bundle in which we wrap truth, hope and dread. Stories are how we teach, how we explain, how we entertain...and for those reasons they are central to civilization." Robert Fulford, *Triumph of the Narrative*

The Pomegranate Workshop develops and delivers experiential learning programs through institutions, as well as independent programs, with a network of over 35 leading practitioners in the fields of visual art, performing art, language arts and math and design.

The paper 'Design and Delivery of an Experiential Learning Model for Children' will take an in depth look at the construction and delivery of a Reading Program by Pomegranate Workshop. This program titled The Pomegranate Magic Reading Room (MRR) has been put together with key components from practitioners in writing, theatre and visual art.

The program engages practitioners (writers, theatre professionals, contemporary artists) at every stage to assimilate best in class practices and create effective learning methods.

Narratives are being increasingly appreciated as possibly the most powerful drivers of learning in young children.

2. Selection of Books for the Program

The core reading list of 40 books each for grades 1,2 and 3 was drawn up by a published children's writer. The books have been picked for their universal and timeless qualities. A strong conceptual element, an enjoyable story with a vibrant and inspiring emotional element, a humanistic theme wherever possible, and absorbing, colourful visuals were points of focus whilst drawing up the list.

Most of the books in the MRR list are winners of prestigious international awards like the Caldecott Medal (USA) or the Kate Greenaway Prize (UK) for their art.

3. Governing Principles for Methodology

Pomegranate MRR decided to adopt the workshopping process for every session with the following points of focus:

- Workshop as a Socializing process - curiosity, interest, enthusiasm - as a class the children need to develop a cohesive social fabric which lends itself towards reading. All facilitators needed to be aware that a first of all a 'socializing' process for the group.
- Arriving at an equality or level playing field in the workshop. This is an ongoing challenge because children are very different in any given class. But within the framework of the workshop a level playing field was worked at consciously.
- Overcoming inhibitions. An Ice breaker one day alone is not enough. Consistent 'ice breakers' are necessary. So all processes which aid in preparation of the child's loosening of inhibitions and 'confidence building' are being carried out in every session.
- The Evaluation is not a numeric one but one that lends itself to ongoing developments with the child.
- Creating an experience in the course of the session. The story needs to relate to the experience of life and for this it becomes imperative that every session weaves in simulated situations that will enable the child to experience some aspect of the story right there.

4. Lesson Plan Construction

Each lesson has a broad pattern that aligns itself with the overall objectives of the program. Pomegranate MRR has become a 'popular' period but not disruptive period within the school day. A lesson plan template has been generated and every individual facilitator is able to make plans that ensure continuity and progression of the overall program.

The primary tool is non - instructional teaching. The facilitator always leads by example and initiates activities in a way where children gravitate towards him/her.

The Pomegranate Associate who is with the program right through, manages the program in terms of continuity, session focus areas, familiarity with the children and assessments of the children. Assessments are purely done through observation and not testing of any kind.

4.1 The Identification of Book Attributes & Session Construction

Transferring the material text to experiential learning methodology is a challenge. Why is it necessary though? Since we are working with multiple practitioners from performing and visual art, they need some common markers which would help them translate the book into their own realm of practice. The attributes of any give book were identified under the following heads:

Story attributes/ orientation									
ORIENTATION: LOW , MEDIUM , HIGH									
Class I Books	Author / Publication	Title	Strong Visuals	Simply 'Fun'	Narrative	Issues	Scope for play	Vocabulary	Verse
1	Graham Tether	<i>The Hair Book</i>							
2	Dr. Seuss	<i>The Cat in the Hat</i>							
3	Laura Numeroff & Felicia Bond	<i>If You Give a Mouse a Cookie</i>							
4	Quentin Blake	<i>Mister Magnolia</i>							

Table 1. Book List with Story Attributes

Class I Books	Author / Publication	Title	KEYWORDS
1	Graham Tether	<i>The Hair Book</i>	Non-narrative, fun with language, rhythm, beat, body parts identification, most importantly: recognition of varieties in physical types and diversity in the world
2	Dr. Seuss	<i>The Cat in the Hat</i>	Introduction to narrative, a sense of suspense, mischief, fun and a bit of danger; an interplay between what is allowed and not allowed; the understanding that a story moves forward with every page-turn
3	Laura Numeroff & Felicia Bond	<i>If You Give a Mouse a Cookie</i>	Cause-and-effect and sequencing as important aspects of story; the idea of caring for someone; understanding that the child is the 'parent' here, and the mouse is the demanding child. The idea of possibility.
4	Quentin Blake	<i>Mister Magnolia</i>	First instance of nonsense as a literary genre here. Magnolia's eccentricities and oddness are played with here. The resolution when it comes is upside down too.

Table 2. Book List with Keywords

4.2 Program Progression

The chart below is a sample of how the first three segments (each segment is roughly 5 weeks) are expected to proceed in terms of book progression, learning outcomes and strategies employed.

	GRADE ONE	Segment 1	
<i>Book</i>	Learning Outcomes	Strategies	Assessment Criteria
<i>From Head to Toe</i>	Starting children off on a journey with non-narrative texts and gradually introducing narratives,	Creating excitement around reading using games and	Oral language development. Ability to comprehend.
<i>The Foot Book</i>			

<i>The Hair Book</i>	with an emphasis on rhythm and beat.	activities drawn from theatre which encourage expression and creative responses in children.	Creative expression and responses. Understanding print concepts.
<i>The Cat in the Hat</i>			

	GRADE ONE	Segment 2	
<i>Books</i>	Learning Outcomes	Strategies	Assessment Criteria
<i>If You Give a Mouse a Cookie</i>	This richly varied selection of books will equip children with skills that will create a reading readiness.	Varying the material content of the session with possibly more art and writing-led activities and usage of props to create experiences that children can relate to the books.	Oral language development. Ability to comprehend and sustain attention. Creative expression and responses. Understanding print concepts. Engagement with the story.
<i>Mister Magnolia</i>			
<i>Madeline</i>			
<i>Inside, Outside, Upside, Down</i>			

	GRADE ONE	Segment 3	
<i>Books</i>	Learning Outcomes	Strategies	Assessment Criteria
<i>A Great Day for Up</i>	Self-reading.		Oral language development. Ability to comprehend and sustain attention. Creative expression and responses. Comfort with basic reading. Engagement with the story.
<i>Green Eggs and Ham</i>			
<i>Franklin Goes to School</i>			
<i>Tec and the Cake</i>			

Table 3. Program Progression Chart

The progression of the books and learning outcomes are very closely interlinked. The first four books of grade one for instance start the children off on a journey with non narrative texts with emphasis on rhythm and beat, body parts and even 'non sense'.

The strategies in segment two undergo a marked change with the material content of the sessions undergoing a change. Leading in from segment two, segment three continues the progress with a gradual introduction to self reading.

4.3 Learning Outcomes

The children progress from understanding Pomegranate MRR as a safe space into exploring the material content of the sessions through art, storytelling and reading. Now let's turn to the defined learning outcomes.

Oral language development was identified as a key criterion for development of the reading habit. Since this is an English language reading program, the point of focus here is comfort with English. Every session incorporates a great deal of discussion time with children. Creating the safe space right from the start was therefore crucial.

Ability to comprehend and sustain attention - again this is a core pre requisite for reading. Comprehension is not gauged through predictable tasks like answering questions. The ability to understand the brief for an activity and see it through is also a clear indicator.

5. Session Construction

5.1 Extension of Book Attributes into Methodology

The construction of individual lesson plans draws heavily from theatre practices to make every book a lived experience and this is a significant component of the Pomegranate MRR.

With Grade 3 whilst dealing with Amelia Bedelia, a book series where the protagonist constantly assigns new meanings to words thereby 'messing up' on tasks given to her. The lesson began with the children in a circle where they were handed a typical object - a toy plastic plane. They were asked to use it as anything but a plane. So the plane became a steering wheel, a game, float, gun, paintbrush, shaving razor, gameboy, racquet, spinning top, comb, iron, fairy wand, polish shoes in the hands of the children. Getting them to interpret a given object laterally thereby legitimizing the 'anything is possible' premise. The facilitator then 'made up' a story about a series of confusing incidents which had the children in splits. The session then transitted into the reading of the book. Amelia Bedelia continued to be one of the class' favourite characters for a good part of the year. It also succeeded in making books the 'talking point' in the class for the first time. Other titles like Franklin The Turtle, Madeline the little girl, Dr Seuss and all of his titles for young readers became very popular at discussion time and the children grew increasingly comfortable with negotiating book titles in regular conversation.

5.2 Creating Play and Creative Response Opportunities

For the story of the Monkey and The Crocodile, the facilitator played a 'conscience game' where children were picked in turns and made to hear a 'good voice' and a 'bad voice' on any given issue (the 'voices' were two classmates standing of the child and giving them instructions).

So a child confronted with an open fridge door and fridge laden with goodies for a party in the evening was encouraged to go and ahead and nibble at something by one voice while the other actively dissuaded the child. The child had to take a call depending on whose argument he/she found most compelling. In order to ensure success of this exercise it was important for the facilitator not to be judgmental about the choices. Many children opted to go with the 'bad voice'.

Usage of props is another theatre application that is being continuously explored. For the book titled 'My Mothers Sari', the children were given saris and asked to construct stories around it as a prop. The sari was transformed from hospital stretcher to flowing river by the children depending on their story.

In the case of The Foot Book by Dr Seuss which belongs in genre of 'non-sense' the session began with the three legged race where children had one leg each tied together so between them they had three legs to negotiate with. After the race, they traces their own feet out on paper and then filled the outline with any theme of their choice. Once 'feet' were established as the core of the session tin this way, the facilitator took them through the 'Foot Book'

5.3 Simulating Life Situations

For the book Madeline where a little girl in an orphanage gets sick, the facilitator began with a discussion on the last time the children felt really sick, what it felt like and whether they felt cared for. Curiously, the children slipped into this mode very easily recounting all sorts of real and imaginary instances of sickness! The children then made each other 'get well soon' cards following which the book was actually introduced and all their sympathies were with Madeline right through.

5.4 The 'Anything is Possible' Principle

It is important to emphasize constantly that anything is possible in class. The Pomegranate MRR constantly has games that hinge on the 'non sensical. Eg an imaginary ball is passed

around. Its size, shape, colour, dimension are all imaginary but the children pass it around with great care not ever altering the imaginary dimensions. Sometimes they even 'bounce it off the floor' and kick it to the next person. Creating this zone of non-sense becomes important since often in books like 'Cat in the Hat' or Wacky Wednesday by Dr. Seuss for instance where non sense drives the whole book. The sessions have also had 'exaggeration circles' where one action is begun by a child and it is carried around the circle with each child getting progressively more exaggerated with the action till the action has assumed a huge magnitude. Words that often don't go together like 'happy sickness' for instance are given to the children who need to enact the two words together. In another instance of anything is possible games, the children climbed into an imaginary box, crouched together in it and then described the box in detail from the inside! These facilitated activities help greatly in putting the children in a state of readiness for books that harbour on non sense or books like Franklin Goes To School where there are fleeting and transitory emotions.

5.5 Incorporating Physical Movement

Physical movement is a pre requisite for all children's workshops. A good part of any Pomegranate program session is devoted to physical games and activities like the ones described above that often directly link up with the book for the session. It puts children in a state of readiness for the book and has also helped them connect with one another as a class. Whilst dealing with 'The Nutcracker', the children actually watched and tried out the dance movements in Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Ballet.

6. The Role of Visual Art in Pomegranate MRR

In the third month of the program, The Pomegranate Magic Reading room revisited some of the books that had already been tackled in the first couple of months, using the visual medium entirely. Aspects of central character, narrative and sequencing were all dealt with entirely through art based activities.

6.1 Revisiting Text with Art

For Grade one, we revisited 'Head to Toe' By Eric Carle which draws attention to body parts and movement entirely through riveting illustration. The facilitators handed out sheets of white paper on which certain scenes had already been drawn out with white wax crayon and were therefore invisible. The children were then told the story of 'Sunny' a boy who wakes up one morning, sees a lion appear at his bedroom window and then run away. Sunny follows the lion and the story takes the children from scene to scene drawing attention to Sunny and his physical movements through the story. The children then used

flat brushes to apply ink on this wax drawn surface so the scene became 'visible'. Each child had an entirely different scene on his/her paper. They started talking among themselves and realized gradually that all the magically appeared scenes they had between themselves made for a continuous single story. The facilitator then handed out Sunny's limbs, torso, head and clothes which had been cut out from glossy magazine paper. Each child was handed a set of these and had to assemble Sunny from 'head to toe' appropriately on the page to complete the scene. The session this dealt with the central character, the composition of this character, narrative progression and sequencing all at one shot. When each child's scene was placed one after the other on completion, the children actually saw the whole story that they had created.





Figure.1 Artworks of Grades One and Two

6.2 Character, Narrative, Sequencing with Art

Similarly drawing attention to character, narrative and sequencing, grades 2 and 3 worked on The Little Egg and The Nutcracker stories. For the Little Egg where the egg has a minor adventure of sorts before it hatches, the children applied a thick coat of wax on their individual sheets of paper and followed that up with a thick coat of dark paint. While the

paper was drying they were individually given a scene from a made up story where a space shuttle loses its way, lands on earth and the adventures it has. Once the paper dried each child got down to 'scraping out' their respective scenes with a sharpened ice cream stick that scraped away the paint and wax coat to show up embossed images. The technique was fascinating and in addition the children each interpreted their own scene working the material in different ways. Finally the sheets were all put up on the class notice board in sequential order.

6.3 Focus on Central Character

For a revisit of the Nutcracker, the children were given ice cream sticks to create a 'candy man', the candy man was given very specific body movements for interpretation in each scene and the children created their own backdrops for the candyman depending on the requirements of the scene he was part of.

In all of the above, the central character was emphasized continuously through which the children constructed narratives and followed through with sequencing thereby taking the story apart in their own way and reassembling it with their own imagination. The central character was a 'dhoti' in one of the visual art sessions where the dhoti slips off a clothesline and lands up as a fisherman's net. The dhoti was a piece of gauze handed out to each child. With some children the attention to detail was so great that they made marks to soil the gauze as it proceeded on its adventure!

7. Assessment

The Assessment at Pomegranate MRR is a non numeric one. The children are observed and assessed on the above mentioned criteria. They are rated as Over Proficient, Proficient, Developing and Beginner under various heads. The words for rating have also been chosen keeping in mind positive reinforcement and avoidance of negative terms.

Please refer seg 4.2 Table 3 Program Progression for assessment criteria and learning outcomes

The observations are shared with parents every quarter.

8. Observations and Conclusions

Being within a conventional school setup the Pomegranate MRR had to establish itself as relevant and a valuable resource within the school. The program also had to establish the importance of narratives in general for all learning environments. Gradually class teachers of grades 1-3 started approaching the Pomegranate Associate for stories dealing with

concepts in class like body parts, germination, and air. The teachers began to report back that story building activities in regular class were getting popular and the children were developing an extensive vocabulary. Concepts of sequencing which was a topic for the first grade was actually dealt with through art and narrative (explained above) in the Pomegranate MRR. The school began to organize teacher workshops with Pomegranate particularly dealing with story creation so teachers could start constructing narratives to propel the learning process.

Stories we believe are indeed complete learning packages. The best acknowledgement of this premise lies in the fact that we now see immense interest in teachers who want to develop basic story construction skills so they can facilitate the understanding of concepts across language, science, math and history.

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