



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

Creative Play: Thinking, Imagining, Inventing

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Abstract:

As a children's book author, illustrator, and college professor I have provided workshops for the elementary school students, college students and adult educators. Through this experience I have observed the power of playing illustration games that encourage inventive thinking and making. The exercises that I've created foster deeper curiosity and lead to further exploration of topics, projects, research based inquires and the creation of art. This intellectual exploration is the direct result of creative play. I will review the specific projects, workshops and exercises that continue to lead to the expansion of creative thinking in both children and adults. The three areas to be discussed are storytelling, collaborative creation and kinesthetic connection to materials through drawing. Each of the projects to be reviewed will touch upon themes related to utilizing specific elements to engage imagination as a teaching practice that can be replicated in the classroom by educators of children.

Key Words: creativity, storytelling, inventive thinking, imagination, collaboration, education, exploration, curiosity, illustration, kinesthetic connection, creativity, playing, communication, empowerment, drawing

1. Introduction

The act of playing creatively comes naturally for children. Their ability to imagine and invent through storytelling, creating art and connecting to objects in a tangible way is innate and therefore should be encouraged and cultivated as part of their education. As noted by Nikola Tesla from My Inventions, "The progressive development of man is vitally

dependent on invention. It is the most important product of his creative brain.” (Nikola Tesla, Ben Johnson, 1919) The premise of this paper is that cultivating the imagination through creative play is a critical requirement for stimulating thinking, imagining and inventing. Storytelling is the first step of engagement in active learning. When you look at the first slide that appears on the screen (Figure. 1), do you have an innate response to this image? Do you create in your mind an idea of who or what these silhouettes might represent? Do descriptions spring forth without prompting? Storytelling is an innately human act, one of our most basic tools that we’ve invented for the purpose of understanding. According to author Ursula K. Le Guin “There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.” (Ursula K. Le Guin, 1979)

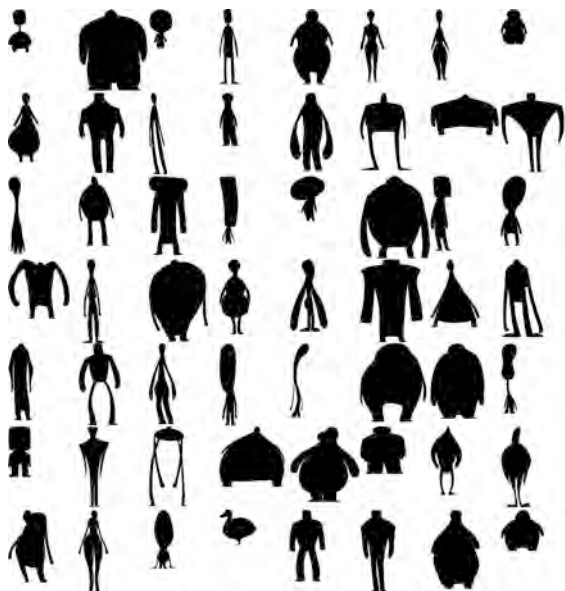


Figure. 1 Shadow Shapes

2. Shadow Shaping and the Idea Laboratory

The first illustration exercise I’ll discuss is *Shadow Shaping*. It is an exercise that is designed to facilitate inventions of characters based on a prompt in the form of a silhouette shape. The concept derives from a primal ability to discern instant information from the shape of a silhouette. Is it friend or foe? Creature or human? What is its emotional state and physical power? By using this natural human response, students are able to derive

enough information to be prompted to create through words and/or pictures, a character, and narrative for the character. The exercise is intended to foster writing and drawing skills as well as inventive thinking and making. This project has been performed with children, college students and adult educators as a method to inculcate imaginative thinking with simple tools: paper and pen, pencil, or marker. I open the exercise with a slide presentation that identifies the main aspects of character development. The various characteristics include: silhouette, facial expression, body movement and anatomy, and costume design. The examples are designed by illustrators who create characters for well known animations and comics. By using familiar characters, the children are able to associate familiar personalities with the deconstruction of traits that comprise each character.



Figure. 2 Familiar Characters from Animations

After the presentation, the group is asked to choose a silhouette or shadow shape that appeals to them and start by taking descriptive notes using adjectives to describe their characters and/or drawing the character that cast the shadow shape.



Figure. 4 Children Drawing from Shadow Shapes

For children, the exercise is a springboard for creativity, prompting a natural segue for storytelling and creative thinking, drawing and writing. After each child has chosen their silhouette, they start to draw a figure with the materials at hand, and with prompting from myself and the classroom teachers, are asked to describe their shadow shape. The questions are intended to prompt further thoughts and ideas about their initial response, and expand on that idea. As the current configuration of many classrooms typically do not encourage individual thinking and making in this methodology, students are sometimes stymied by this freedom to think and create from their own imagination. As noted by Temple University professor Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, an expert in developmental psychology, “Years of research have demonstrated the importance of play for childhood development, yet the ‘either/or’ argument between play and academics, with their strict standards and assessments, has inhibited making playtime more prominent in the early grades. No Child Left Behind was a play killer.”(Kate Stringer, 2018)

Once the children are sure that they can really draw freely, they begin to fill in details like expression, costume, additional characters and environment. The younger K- 2nd grade students articulations of their stories is typically oral, primarily because they have not yet mastered writing skills. The upper grades of 3rd - 5th grade tend to write and illustrate

their characters' stories. This single exercise prompts individual expression through story-telling, invention and artistic exploration with simple accessible artistic tools.



Figure. 5 Children Displaying Drawings

Although the classroom visit lasts for approximately one hour, the long term affect documented by teachers from many of my school visits is that the creation of the one character prompts students to continue the “tale” of their invented character. The emotional and intellectual investment in one drawing instigates a desire to continue creating from the initial idea. I provide this same assignment in the undergraduate program at Rhode Island School of Design in a course entitled *What’s Your Story*, a narrative image making class. Similar to the younger students, after viewing the slide presentation and choosing a silhouette, the students are prompted to write and explore their shadow shape in multiple iterations on large sheets of paper.

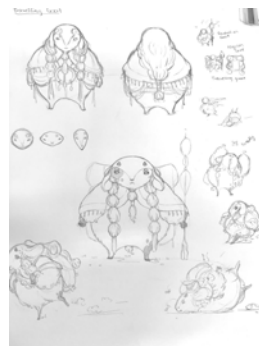


Figure. 7 and 8 Silhouette Shadow Shape and Drawing from Shape
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As there is more time in the college classroom, the students are expected to ideate and investigate multiple possibilities for their characters, rather than settling on one idea. This investigation leads to stream of consciousness and “mind play” meant to open creative pathways and exercise problem solving as a multifaceted opportunity. In their case, the character creation leads to a larger project involving the development of an illustration that depicts an interaction between the initial character and a newly developed foil character.

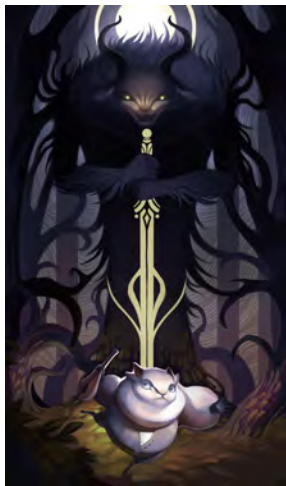


Figure. 9 RISD Student Narrative Illustration

I've used the same exercise for elementary school teachers to help initiate creative thinking. Although they tend to write out narratives based on their shadow shape more than relying on drawing, they are employing the same kind of creative inventive free flow of ideas to craft a story from their imagination as the college students.



Figure. 10 Educators' Words and Pictures

This kind of idea development or “riffing” is a source of exploration for another project entitled *The Idea Laboratory* that was designed to initiate collaborative idea creation through written prompts. This project is facilitated by the reading of a book that I illustrated entitled *R is for Rhode Island Red*, an ABC book about the state of Rhode Island published by Sleeping Bear Press, part of the Discover America series.

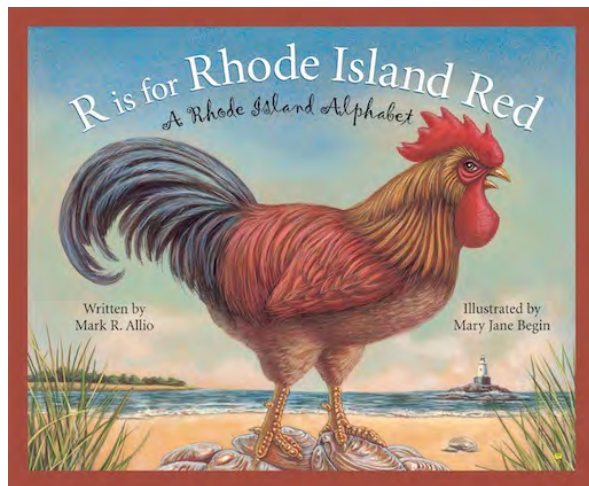


Figure. 11 Cover of R is for Rhode Island Red

The book and grant funded workshop is part of a history research project that requires each child to read the book, research a particular subject about their region linked to a letter of the alphabet. Each student is expected to write expository text, a poem in conjunction with their chosen subject and requires illustrations to explain the text they've written. All of the materials are to be compiled as a single book project created by the class. The exercise I've designed for this project involves formulating key words that represent themes related to the group project, written on pieces of paper that are then placed in a container. A student is selected to draw a theme from the container and read it aloud to the rest of the class. The children then respond to the theme by “riffing” or ideating on the subject, using markers, pencils and pens on a large shared piece of paper.



Figure. 12 and 13 Class Drawing and Collaboration

The exercise encourages creative bouncing of ideas from one mind to another, strengthening each imagination through cooperative play. Each large sheet of paper has pairs of children working together, so that the larger effort results in a collage of ideas. The visual end result is intended to represent cooperation and invention rather than competition and individual comparison. It's designed to display collective ideation in a visual form. The students continue on the project for several weeks after my classroom visit and the project culminates in a self published book that compiles all of the work by the students.



Figure. 14 Final Book Project

As articulated by Larissa Mulholland, master teacher at Educare Chicago, part of the Ounce of Prevention Fund, “ “[Play] is a collaborative process. It is about joint meaning, shared meaning, critical for social-emotional learning and, more broadly, for citizenship. We don’t want to isolate children, because the learning they do together is so much richer.” (Kate Stringer, 2018)

3. The Scribble Game

The final project entitled the scribble game is an exercise in visual narrative that I have provided for more than thirty-four years in classrooms from kindergarten through middle school. The exercise is intended to encourage the innate storytelling skills in children, and empower them to use their imaginations to invent something wholly new as a group. As I’m typically invited as an author/illustrator to provide a presentation on my work, I start by presenting a slide show about my picture books that deconstructs the process of writing and illustrating.



Figure. 15 Picture Book Covers

I review the process of writing books by deconstructing how I invent stories and how I imagine the pictures as an act of visualizing the story. My latest book project entitled Ping Meets Pang began with a visit to Chengdu, China, where the story idea was conceived. After witnessing the two types of pandas, red pandas and giant pandas living on separate

sides of a wall in the panda sanctuary, I began to ruminate on the idea of “otherness”. I imagined that each panda would not believe the other is a panda because they look and act so differently. Because my stories tend to start with drawing before writing, I show the source visual “prompts” from the visit to the panda sanctuary alongside the rough character studies that were my first attempt at “finding” the story.



Figures. 16 and 17 Panda Photo References



Figure. 18 Panda Character Studies

To more fully describe the process of creating a book, I explain the next steps of writing the texts, pagination and show the students an example of a layout that I create from my initial sketches.

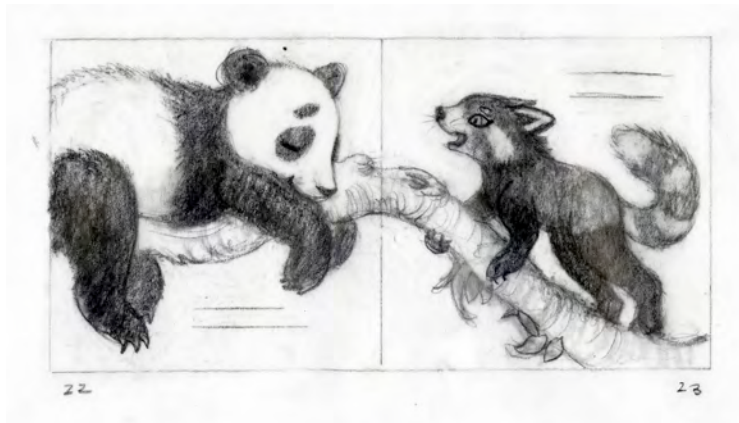


Figure.19 Layout Page for Ping Meets Pang

By moving through the process of how the writing affects the pictures, and explaining how the pictures are in service of illuminating the meaning behind the words, I am breaking down the creative process of my imagination into a visual language. The concept is to engender, not only an appreciation of books and literacy from a more concrete perspective, but also to build tangible, visual intellectual pathways for their own creative process.



Figure. 20 Finished illustration Layout for Book

After the students ask many questions about the making of the stories and illustrations, I then describe how to play the scribble game. This exercise requires a large pad of paper on an easel and many colorful markers. I then ask for a volunteer to make the scribble.



Figure. 21 Scribble Drawing Game

Once the scribble is made, I hold up the drawing pad and ask the students to use their imagination to “see what they can see”. I turn the pad upside down and flip the pad on its side to be sure that the students can visualize many possibilities for the scribble and to encourage thinking about solutions as multifaceted. I make sure that all students have had a chance to contribute, then I begin to draw without a clear or firm plan. By doing this, I leave the illustration open to the ideas presented by the kids, and make it a more fluid act of creativity. I see characters in every scribble, providing an excellent starting point for prompt questions for the students. I ask questions to initiate creative thinking and storytelling: “What does it (the scribble) look like? If it’s a bird, what are the characteristics of a bird? If it looks like a serpent, what features might it have? Is this creature from earth or another place? Does it have horns? Feathers, fur? Where does it live? What does it eat? Does it have friends?”



Figure. 22 Questions for Students

All of these questions encourage the students to draw both upon what they know and add to what I have already drawn on the pad based on the other students ideas. The ultimate result of this activity is a narrative image that tells a story about a character, developed as a collaboration to encourage collaborative creative thinking.



Figure. 23 Final Scribble Drawing

Lastly, I ask the students to think of what happened before that scene we've created, and then what will happen next. I suggest that they draw it out themselves, provide a name for the character, and continue the story. The purpose of this recommendation to both the students on their own, and as an exercise for the classroom, is to encourage students to use the game to invent story as a celebration of their own fertile imagination. I also recommend that they "play" the scribble game with a partner and trade scribbles, to see what someone else can see, draw and tell about the other person's scribble. This is an exercise intended to open communication between people, through the visual language of drawing and invention and to encourage comprehension and understanding as a communal act. Teachers often, by request from the students, go back to their classrooms after my presentation and want to continue playing the game.

After so many years of playing this game in classrooms with very young children who have little to no writing skills, through middle school grades where children have a complex capacity to write and draw out stories, I've found that the end result is the same: children have an innate desire to express their ideas, and when presented with an opportunity to freely associate ideas with a group, their imaginations prompt their intellectual capacity for inventive thinking. The scribble game is an exercise in collaborative creation born out of storytelling and narrative expression and is designed to encourage collaborative storytelling through character creation, world building and idea generation. Communal creation removes competition and creates a collaborative creative space that encourages a sense of community. Participating in a work of art that starts with a scribble made by a classmate makes the concept of invention and imagination tangible for children. This idea is well expressed by Dr. Stuart Brown, "Imagination is perhaps the most powerful human ability. It allows us to create simulated realities that we can explore without giving up access to the real world." (Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan, 2009)

4. Conclusion

The intention of all of the projects reviewed are to empower children, young people and educators with the tools that prompt play. The shadow shaping exercise encourages individual inventive narrative creation for children and adults and the scribble game and idea laboratory, instill creativity as a source of inventive social engagement. Each of the projects rely on our innate ability to tap our imaginations to express invention through stories. All of the projects utilize the act of thinking and drawing integrated, thus bringing both hand and body together to access imaginative creation.

I will conclude with an illustration that I created for the HOW Design conference for lynda.com, an online learning educational company. The visual narrative celebrates creativity and skills building as an act of thinking, imagining and inventing our own worlds with joyful vision. The message of the image is a call to embrace, at this conference, the same spirit of creative play, invention and engagement as a prompt for further dialogue. To quote Stuart Brown “When we engage in fantasy play at any age, we bend the reality of our ordinary lives, and in the process germinate new ideas and ways of being.” (Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan, 2009)



Figure. 24 Design for HOW Conference Poster

5. References

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