

Read, Play, Talk, Write:
A joyful approach to literacy for both teachers and children
by Lynda Henney

How can I make the teaching and learning of literacy more joyful? This question has guided my practice for many years. I have tried centres, themes, games, manipulatives, and free play times but it wasn't until I learned about Story Workshop that I saw new possibilities for truly playful literacy instruction and learning. (For more information about Story Workshop I highly recommend the book "*Story Workshop: New Possibilities for Young Writers*" by Susan Harris MacKay.) Unfortunately I only learned about this exciting process right before I retired from my teaching career! As a retired teacher I decided I wanted to continue exploring Story Workshop and help teachers and students in a very practical way. Two ideas grew out of this exploration: I would write children's books and I would develop a simple process to help use the books in a joyful way.

Foxy and Friends Books:

I began with the books. My background as a literacy coordinator helped me enormously. I knew there was a need for fun and engaging books for our very beginning readers. I wanted to write books that young children couldn't wait to read, not just because they could read them, but because they loved the stories. Richard Allington, a literacy expert and researcher, guided me with his wisdom. His research showed that children love book series (Allington, 2021). They love knowing all the characters and they embrace a familiar story structure. It is a wonderful way to "hook" children in, and at the same time, increase the volume children read. With this idea in mind, I created seven forest animals for a collection of books I called Foxy and Friends Books. I made the animals out of Fimo clay and I take them to beaches, mountains, forests,



streams, lakes, and deserts where I photograph them having adventures. To learn more about the animals and my books, see *Virtual Author Visit* video here: https://youtu.be/wvdQ_nw5AXs

I have several goals in mind when I write my books. First and foremost, I want the books to be joyful. The characters are good friends, kind and helpful, and they are playfully exploring their natural environment. I am thinking about the importance of outdoor play and how my books might inspire children to explore their natural environments. As I write the books I carefully choose words that very beginning readers can read,



decode, or figure out from context and pictures. I am constantly asking myself if the language I use in my books will be helpful for children in telling and writing their own stories.

The Process:

This brings me to my second idea: a process for teaching and learning using Foxy and Friends Books. I know it can be intimidating trying new approaches. Some people embrace change quickly while others take their time to explore and become more comfortable and confident. Story Workshop offers many entry points. The process I created is designed to help teachers begin their learning journey. I call it: Read, Play, Talk, Write.



Read

The Read step can take a variety of formats. It can be a simple Read Aloud where the teacher reads the books and everyone just enjoys the story. My personal favorite is to do a Shared Reading where the teacher reads with input from the children. This creates a wonderful opportunity to build community and common understandings. One of the most important goals of the Read phase is to help expand your children’s background knowledge and vocabulary. Older students may be doing the reading in a Guided Reading group. Whichever format you use, I encourage you to try this reading step outside, on a blanket or in a grassy space.

Play

Ah! The best part of every child’s day! This is the step that brings true joy to the process. Setting up a provocation in the forest, on the playground, or in the classroom is an invitation for the children to explore a question. What adventures could Foxy and his friends have in this

place? With these materials? The Play step requires time. Do not cut it short. Allow at least 45 minutes for children to create, develop, and expand their ideas. The children may be recreating favorite stories or finding their own stories. This is a time for the exploration of ideas. Socializing and communicating flow naturally out of play. The teacher's role is to observe, participate, and ask questions.

Possible questions to ask during the play, talk, or write phases:

Do these materials give you an idea for a story?

Does this place give you an idea for a story?

Are you finding a story, or do you already have an idea?

What is your idea?

What is your story?

How might your story begin?

What is going to happen next?

How will your story end? Will there be a surprise?

What might make your story interesting/ clear?

What words might an author use to describe this?

Is there something funny, sad, scary happening in your story?

Is there a problem in your story?

What colours/ sounds/ feelings do you think about with your story?

Are you working together or alone?

How can you use each other's ideas?

Adapted from: Equity and Access Through Story Workshop

<https://opalschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/equity-and-access-through-story-workshop.pdf>

Talk

Oral language is foundational to later literacy development. (Shanahan) By allowing time for conversations, stories are found and begin to unfold. When we provide the opportunity for children to share their stories orally, we set them up for successful writing experiences. Children find their stories in the place and the materials, and they explore them orally with their classmates and teachers. The teacher's role is to listen, appreciate, and respond authentically. We want to ask thoughtful questions that encourage our students to deepen their thinking and elaborate on their ideas.

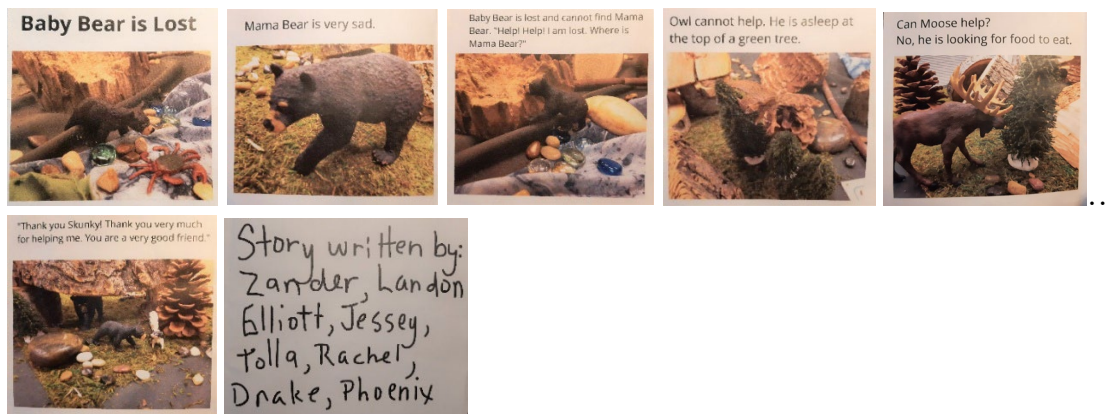
Write

As classroom teachers many of us have had children complain that they haven't got a story to write. We do not hear this complaint after children have participated in a story workshop process. Once children have had time to find their stories through books, play, and conversations, it is natural for them to want to record their ideas. The desire to learn about writing comes from the children. "It is critical for teachers of writing to remember that children don't make stories so they can learn how to write. They learn how to write so they can tell stories." (MacKay, p. 134)

I encourage you to let the children write their own stories. Some will be making scribbles, some will draw letter-like symbols, others will be using letters, and some will be matching letters to the sounds they need. The beauty of encouraging every stage of writing is the joy and satisfaction children feel as “writers”. Another way to approach writing with very young children is to create a group story. The teacher acts as a scribe and depending on the students, will share the pen with the children.

Several teachers have sent me copies of the stories their students have written. Some have gone on to create classroom books or videos.

The class created book, *Baby Bear is Lost*, was written by the students in Jacqueline Fierbach’s class at Hudson Road Elementary school in West Kelowna, British Columbia.



The class created video, *Foxy Gets a Goose Egg*, was written and performed by Erika Momeyer’s grade 2 students at Edgewood Elementary School in Edgewood, British Columbia <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=X4qEVvU49wA&feature=youtu.be>

The video *Renardo c’est le héros !* was written and told by Jamin McCreesh, a kindergarten student at Willow Elementary School in Victoria, British Columbia. <https://youtu.be/7Xjvzmpbarc>

When I see these stories I sense the joy and fun in their creation! They inspire me to write more Foxy and Friends books, and I hope they inspire you to try the Read, Play, Talk, Write process.

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