

Institut Pendidikan Guru Kampus Dato' Razali Ismail

# LGA3103 Stories for Young Learners

Topic 6: The Craft of Storytelling



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## Topic 6: The Craft of Storytelling

From Scholastic Education *The Art of Storytelling* (Barbour, 2008)

### The art of storytelling

7 April 2008

By **Rona Barbour** – *professional storyteller*

Rona Barbour shares a few tricks of the trade to help you bring stories to life.

People have been telling stories to pass on values and information, and to make sense of life, as long as we have had language. Storytelling is effective in relaying information because it engages our imagination, hearts and minds. There is something in a storytelling experience for everyone.



Dry data is boring, and delivering a set of facts and figures using this method means it is likely to be forgotten as quickly as it is absorbed. Because story engages us on so many levels, we easily retain it in our memory to use it as needed. The natural form of story makes sense to human beings. It contains all that we care about: people, problems and solutions. A story is really just a mass of information organised in the form of a situation with characters who we can relate to; settings we can envisage; problems we want to know the answer to; and resolutions that give us hope. Stories are food for thought. They help us to discern right from wrong, and give us the heroes and heroines we wish to model ourselves on.

A well-developed and presented story can hold the interest of an entire audience, and it will reach out and touch them at any age. Knowing and applying the few simple basics of storytelling will help strengthen your stories.

### The storytelling persona

The most successful storytellers will tell you that they have a totally separate persona which they adopt when working. Many will also tell you that it was something they only realised later, and developed over time. In other words, they were not initially aware they needed this separate identity, but that it came with experience. So, with this valuable experience now shared, remember before you begin to tell a story to take on your storytelling persona.

- Choose your persona and act it out right from the start. For example, you could be the 'storytelling fairy' or the 'old woman of the woods'.
- Whatever you choose as your persona, think of yourself as that person, and act and dress accordingly – your storytelling performance will be better for it.
- If you wish, you can have more than one storytelling persona.

### **The confident storyteller**

Confidence is something that grows with experience, so do not expect to be perfect first time. Keep in the forefront of your mind that the audience do not know what to expect, and you are in control. Do not worry about mistakes – they are part of storytelling. Even the most experienced storytellers make mistakes or omissions, but the audience do not realise because they do not know what you were going to say... so don't tell them!

- Confidence comes with experience, so practise whenever you can.
- Be well organised. Know which story you are going to tell and rehearse it.
- Prepare well in advance, until you are completely confident that you can tell the story on demand.
- Do not worry about telling the story word for word. Tell the story how you remember it and this will make it different every time.

### **Finding stories**

There are many kinds of stories you can work with. Try starting with simple fairy tales or folk tales that you know, for example, choose your favourite Grimm's fairy tale, and then, as your experience grows, you can explore various different types and branch out.

With time, you will probably find many kinds of tales that will interest you personally. There are all sorts to choose from, including folk tales from other countries and cultures; humorous tales; traditional fairy tales in numerous versions; wish tales; trickster tales; scary tales; tall tales; myths and legends; and Bible stories. The list is endless, but do not let that put you off.

It is far best to work with traditional folklore or tales in public domain, than to plagiarise a living author or storyteller without their permission. With experience, you may want to try a variety of stories, and perhaps even go on to tell your own personal stories.

### **Prepare and practise**

Once you decide on a story, spend plenty of time with it. For some people it may take some time and a number of 'tellings' before a new story becomes their own. Others are naturals and can pick up a story and run with it almost immediately. However, this does not necessarily make them any better in the long run.

### **Preparation**

- Read the story several times, first for pleasure, then with concentration.
- Analyse the story's appeal – the word pictures you want your listeners to see, and the mood you wish to create.
- Live with your story until the characters and setting become as real to you as the people and places you know in real life.

- Visualise the story. Imagine the sounds, tastes, smells and colours. Only when you see the story vividly yourself, will you be able to paint the 'word pictures' to enable your audience to see it.

### **Delivery techniques**

- Use your voice to good effect when you are telling the story in a calm and relaxed way.
- If you are telling the story to very young children, maintain their attention by keeping it quite short (approximately ten minutes).
- Show enthusiasm and use hand and eye gestures to convey meaning – younger children love this.
- Demonstrate sincerity and whole heartedness – be earnest.
- Express animation and variety in your storytelling to make the story seem more interesting.

### **Presentation**

- Practise in front of a mirror, or a friend, and ask for their honest feedback.
- Remember that the words are only part of the package that includes body language, clothing, tone and other components.
- Unless you are an accomplished musician who is used to talking while you play, do not use music as it will take away from the storytelling performance. Instead, use props, such as small hand bells or pipes, to indicate certain noises.
- Use various puppets if you feel confident about doing this and talking at the same time.

### **Story setting**

Storytelling is best carried out in a relaxed atmosphere that is free from distractions. The audience should be comfortable and sitting close together. Make sure that the room is quiet, and empty except for your audience.

Ensure that all toilet trips are carried out beforehand and, in the case of adults, all mobile phones are switched off or put on silent. Give careful attention to the setting beforehand, and be prepared to rearrange the room to bring the listeners closer, or use a backdrop or hanging to create the correct atmosphere, especially in early years' settings.

Remember to give credit to sources, but above all, enjoy telling stories!

(Wright, 1995)

## How to choose, tell, and read stories aloud

Telling and reading stories to children is a central part of classroom life. This section of the book is about how to choose, tell, and read aloud as well as possible. Of course, some people are 'born' storytellers, but that applies to every ability that we have. The fact is that we can all improve our storytelling and story reading, and that is what matters.

### Telling or reading aloud?

We need both salt and pepper in our cooking. Why should we want to say that one is better than the other?

Telling and reading aloud both have their strong points.

### *Reading aloud*

#### Good Points

1. You don't have to learn the story.
2. You don't have to worry about making mistakes in English.
3. If you read the story then the children will always hear exactly the same text and this will help them to predict what is to come.
4. It demonstrates that books are a source of interesting ideas and so encourages reading.
5. The children can, perhaps, borrow the book afterwards.
6. Pictures in the book can help the children's understanding.

#### Not so good points

1. You must be careful not to read too quickly.
2. It is easy to 'bury yourself' in a book and forget the listeners!

### *Telling*

#### Good points

1. The children feel that you are giving them something very personal. The story is yours; it is not coming out of a book.
2. Children, these days, are rarely used to the experience of hearing someone tell a story and it can have a powerful effect on them.
3. It is often easier to understand a story being told than one which is read aloud:
  - it is natural to repeat oneself when speaking;
  - you can see the children's faces and bodies and respond to their lack of comprehension, their joy, and their immediate concerns more readily;
  - you can make use of your body more effectively to heighten meaning;
  - you can use the language you know the children know.

#### Not so good points

1. You must learn the story well enough to tell it without the book (see the tips on page 12).
2. You might make some mistakes in English.

## Your English and the telling of stories

One of the best ways of improving your English is to learn stories to internalise a ten-minute flow of English. Traditional teaching did not develop fluency. Oral fluency needs time, opportunity, and encouragement to develop, and that applies to you as well as to the children. If you learn a story you have a real purpose – to communicate it to the children. And how lucky you are because children are an appreciative and kindly audience!

So, if your English is not very fluent and accurate then that is an excellent reason for telling stories to children!

### Choose a story:

- which will engage the children within the first few lines (note that children often accept and like a story in the foreign language they might feel was childish in their own language)
- which you like
- which you feel is appropriate for the children
- which the children will understand well enough to enjoy
- which offers the children a rich experience of language
- which does not have long descriptive passages
- which is right for the occasion and in its relation with other things you are doing with the children
- which you feel you can tell well

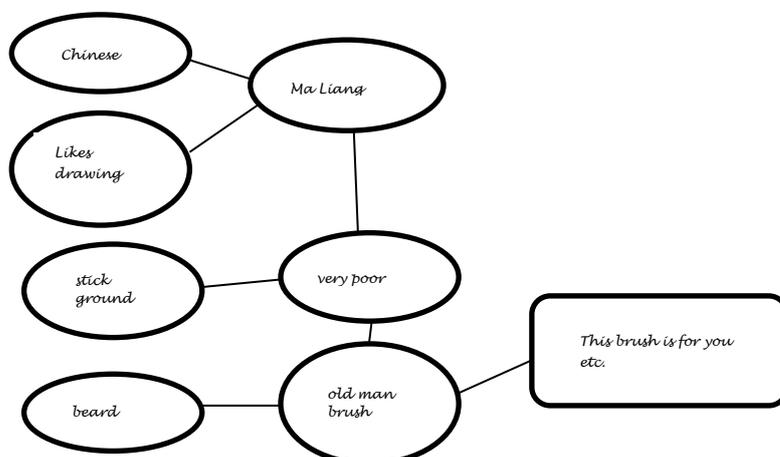
### Remembering a story

There are various ways of remembering stories, you must find the way most appropriate to you.

It is difficult to remember a written story word for word, like an actor – and in any case, it seems rather artificial when it is done like this. Why try to do it? Concentrate on learning the gist of the story rather than every detail of it.

Here are some techniques:

- read the story or listen to it a few times and then try to retell it on a tape or to a friend.
- explicitly select the key points, write them down, perhaps in bubbles as in the example here for 3.8, 'Ma Liang'.



*First part of my  
'bubbled' Ma Liang*

This is a technique that I use. Note how I have added extra details to the bubbles but if I forget them I know that I can still tell the story. It is important to make each bubbled story look different because it will then be easier to remember visually. It is the actual making of the bubbled story which helps me to get it into the memory. Later the bubbled story acts as a useful and rapid mnemonic.

- Instead of putting the key points in bubbles, you might prefer simply to write out the key points. This is called a story skeleton.
- See the story as a film in your imagination and let your telling of the story be guided by that inner vision.
- You could remember a dramatic or verbal rhythm in the story. (I think I am right in saying that the great West Indian storyteller, Grace Hallworth, learns her stories this way.)
- Remember the personalities of the characters and this will remind you of the story. (Duncan Williamson, one of whose many stories is 3.6, 'The little white cat', told me this is what he does.)

Whatever technique you use, it is probably best not to tell it dramatically the first time. Find a friend who will listen to you and try it on them. Warn them that you will just concentrate on getting the gist of the story right. Once you are confident that you can remember the basic story, you can concentrate on expressing what you feel about the story in future tellings. The more often you tell the story, the more you will feel 'at home' with it. Do not expect to tell it brilliantly the first time. Furthermore, the more stories you learn, the easier it is to learn new ones.

### **Just before you tell or read the story**

I am referring here to the craft of storytelling and story reading rather than to the pedagogical preparation, which is discussed in a later section (see pages 23-33 and 64). Half the success of a story depends on what you do before you begin! The children must be in the right 'frame of mind' for a story. If they think it is all part of the normal lesson they will be in their 'normal' frame of mind and not in their 'story' frame of mind, and you will probably not have much success.

So they must be in a story frame of mind!

- Try to get the children much nearer to you than is normally the case. This is partly because it is important for them to see you (and your book if you are using one), but it is also because it changes the relationship between you and them and each other. They know they are going to share something. Younger children can be asked to sit on the floor around your feet.
- If at all possible change the seating before the story is told. I always try to do this before the children come into the class. My preferred arrangement is a U-shape of chairs with a U-shape of table immediately behind. Some children sit on the chairs and some children sit on the edges of the tables.
- If you cannot change the arrangement of tables and chairs, then try to find some other way of helping the children to feel that something special is going to happen (rather than merely saying so). Children are so used to hearing you talk; they just assume it is going to be what they have had before. Some teachers always sit on their table or stand in a particular part of the room when they are going to tell a story and never do this at any other time.

- Some teachers have a 'story bag' (which might just be an ordinary plastic bag) which they have only to hold up for the children to get into their 'story frame of mind'. Other teachers often make use of a friendly puppet. Others might want to wear a particular hat or coat.
- You can put some music on – always use the same music and then the children will know and get themselves ready.
- Once, in a noisy class, I wrote on the board *I'd like to tell you a story*. Then I sat down on a chair in an open space in front of the children and waited. I didn't have to ask them to be quiet. You might write *A story for you* or just *Story time*.
- Perhaps have a regular time for your storytelling or story reading and the time will put them into the right frame of mind.
- For particular stories you might display a picture before you begin, or an object like an old umbrella, or a basket with food in it for 3.7, 'Little Red Riding Hood'. An antique doll can be used to tell the story of her times. A Cinderella puppet can tell the Cinderella story.

### **Different ways of beginning**

- Talk with the children about their experience of what you know will be a central topic of the story. For example, *Hairy Tree Man*, a story in my 'Spellbinders' series from Oxford University Press, is about brother and sister relationships. One way of beginning the story would be to ask the children about their relationships with brothers and sisters.
- Begin with an explicit introduction to the story: for example, 'I'm going to tell you a story about a little white cat'. Then you can tell them the 'Little white cat' story (3.6).
- Begin without any preparation at all, directly with the first line of the story, or with *Once upon a time ...*
- Don't begin until you have everyone's attention and total silence – unless you are confident that the sheer power of your own telling is going to quieten them down.

### **Your manner**

You must tell stories in your own way and that way must be a normal part of you. Grace Hallworth, the West Indian storyteller, is quiet and dignified as a person and as a storyteller she is just the same. Duncan Williamson, the Scottish storyteller, is full of fun in normal conversation and is just the same in his storytelling. I would say, heighten slightly what you are and see everything about yourself positively. If you are a quiet sort of person, then choose the stories you like and tell them quietly!

But I do think that, whatever kind of personality you have, you must give yourself totally to your story and to your listeners if you want to get back a strong quality of listening and appreciation from them. Many people who are not confident as storytellers don't want to risk failure, so they don't really give themselves and then they get a feeble response because of it.

### **Your voice**

The potential variety of the human voice includes: pitch, volume, rhythm, softness/harshness, pace and pause. Making use of this variety depends on the story, the personality of the teller, and the listeners. Of course, a dramatic use of the full variety of all these qualities would often be inappropriate. On the other hand, many people do not make sufficient use of this potential richness, and produce a monotone.

You have probably not got the time to go on a course in voice training! On the other hand, there are some basic things that we can all do.

- Sit or stand so that you can breathe easily – don't be 'all hunched up'.
- Keep breathing while talking so you don't become breathless.
- Speak loudly enough for the children at the back to hear easily, but not by using a harsh 'teacher's voice' designed to cut through school corridors and across school playgrounds.
- Adopt a different voice for the narrator and for each of the characters. Make these voices different: high/low, soft/harsh. A simple experiment – try saying an ordinary sentence so that it sounds like the start of an amazing story. For example, *I got up this morning and opened the curtain.*  
A second experiment – try saying the same sentence in several moods: happily, unhappily, wickedly, innocently, in a thoughtful way, in a casual way, in a frightened way.
- Pace and pause: the pause is one of the most powerful of all qualities in storytelling and reading. The listeners have to become active in order to fill it in – they try to predict what you will say next. It is one of the most vital elements in dramatic storytelling. Use it at key moments.
- Remember that in English we tend to stress the important words in a sentence. This helps to convey meaning.

### ***The language***

Be prepared to pre-teach important words and phrases which are an intrinsic part of the story. They might be important for the meaning of the story (for example, *chimney sweep* is an important pair of words in 3.6, 'The Little White Cat'), or they might be important for their play on words and sounds (for example, the repetition of *dark, dark*, in 3.2, 'In a dark, dark town').

Even simpler words can be spoken as if they are important. Speak slowly and enjoy the sound of the words you say. Of course, this is easier to do in one's mother tongue than in a foreign language. A feeling of rhythm and rhyme almost certainly helps people to learn and remember. Stories in verse are loved and effective.

Make sure you are confident of how to begin and finish the story. Many storytellers say that you should learn the first and the last lines by heart. Personally, I do this with some stories, but with others I like to slide the listeners into the story before they know they are in it.

Make the story yours and theirs. You might pause in the story to say to a child, if it is true, *You've been to China, haven't you, Hans?* Omit, add, change, and emphasise if you have a good reason. But be careful – the great traditional stories have stood the test of time.

### ***Your body and face***

It is probably true that we communicate as much or more through our bodily and facial movement than we do by the words we use. We can move quickly or slowly, jerkily or smoothly, with grand gestures, or with minor movements of our eyebrows. We can remain seated or we can move and act out not only the players within our story but even inanimate objects! The way we make use of this potential depends on our nature and on the nature of the story and the listeners.

Just as, in general, less experienced storytellers employ a monotonous voice, so they also fail to use the full potential of their body for communication. Indeed, they may use their body and face to communicate their primary concern, their own anxiety, rather than the quality of the story! Here are some tips.

- If you are telling a story rather than reading aloud from a book, you can easily move like Little Red Riding Hood as she picks the flowers (see 3.7), or you can hold up one of your hands in front of your face and slowly look around it with a wicked smile to represent the wolf. As you creep into the dark cave with the Little Indian Boy (3.4) you can hold out your hands and pretend to be putting them down on the ground very, very slowly and you can switch your eyes from side to side as if searching the darkness.
- Involve the children, for example, as you lift the axe off the paper in the 'Ma Liang' story (3.8), walk across to a child and pretend to give it to him or her.
- -Very often I find that I begin to make the action with my body a split second before I refer to it. So, for example, I might hold up my hand to my ear and switch my eyes to and fro just a moment before I say, 'He listened'.
- Make your movements simple, slow, and never apologetic! I think body movements in storytelling should be just a little slower and bigger than you would do them in normal conversation. Give the children time to appreciate your movements and time to feel how they contribute to the meaning of the story. We are gripped by stories and storytellers because we feel they really know what they are doing and saying; your storytelling must be clear and simple and not fleeting and confusing like normal life. But I say, 'think', because we must all find our own way of telling.
- -Look at people as you tell the story. Don't just scan their faces so that you can claim you were looking, but really look. (p18) It doesn't do any harm to look at one particular child for several moments as you tell the story. Other children feel that you are concentrating on them and not just the story.

### ***Interruptions***

One child might chatter to a neighbour. The school caretaker might knock at the door. Someone might drop a book. What do you do?

#### **Children not paying attention**

- If it is several children, it may be that you are not being dramatic enough. Liven things up. Move around as you tell the story.
- Involve the children, for example, by asking them what they would do in the situation in the story.
- If one child is chattering then go and stand very near to him or her as you tell the story or even tell the story directly to him or her.

#### **School caretaker knocking at the door**

Don't try to compete! Quietly ask someone to see who it is and deal with it in the normal way.

### **Dropping of a book**

- Pause, show no expression of annoyance, perhaps pick up the book yourself, and then carry on.
- Make a joke out of it, perhaps related to the story.

The important thing is not to break the magic spell. You have lifted the children off the ground and you are holding them there. Avoid returning, however momentarily, to your normal teaching voice and manner. That would jolt them off the magic carpet and out of their 'story frame of mind'.

Don't use the cancellation of a storytelling as a punishment.

### ***Extra tips on reading from a book***

- Read the story beforehand and get to know it and how to read it with some sense of drama. Also make sure you can pronounce all the words and know what they mean.
- Don't speak into the book. As general guidance, read the story to the children at the back of the group.
- Read slowly and with a more dramatic quality than in normal speech.
- Stop to comment, or to invite comments, quite often.
- Look up and try to make eye contact. Check that the whole group is with you.
- Stop to show the pictures and make sure all the children can see them.
- Have your finger ready to open the next page.
- Don't read for longer than about 10 minutes (less for younger children).

(Wright, 1995, pp. 10-19)

## Important Practical Considerations

No matter how good your story is and how well you have learnt to tell it, the following practical points also need your attention:

### Voice projection

The children need to be able to hear your voice no matter where they are in the room. This doesn't *necessarily* mean that you need to speak (more) loudly, and it certainly doesn't mean you should shout! You need to 'project' your voice – it's a bit like throwing it. Just like the LCD projector puts pictures up there on the screen.

Talk to the child who is furthest away from you. Look at them, and talk to them as if no one else is there – and then, of course, everyone else in between will be able to hear as well.

The key is often in your breathing – more air coming out generally creates more volume to your voice. Your poise (see below) will affect your ability to project your voice.

### Diction

No matter how loud your voice is, or how well you project your voice, if your diction is unclear then no one will understand your story.

The children may not understand every word in the story, but they will have a better idea of what you are saying if your speech is a little slower than usual, and if you enunciate your words clearly. Imagine they are trying to lip-read, and work your lips to show them the words.

Your face should be turned towards them – you should, of course, be endeavouring to establish eye-contact throughout the story – and you should keep your chin up, not looking down at your notes or the book – this is also part of your 'poise'.

### Poise

You can sit or stand to tell your story, but you should never slump. Some storytellers have a special chair that they sit in so that the children know when it is story time.

Your back should be straight, and your head should be held high. This is so that you can breathe well, project your voice, and demonstrate clear diction.

If you are using pictures, puppets, or realia, these need to be held up and out where the children can all see them. You may need to pause in your story to move around or move the picture/objects around for children to appreciate without being distracted from the actual story.

### Gesture

You can use gestures to help with understanding of vocabulary. Your gestures can also be used to build awareness of the different characters in the story.

You can gesture with your hands, better still make big gestures with your whole arm moving from the shoulder – make sure the children down the back can see your movements clearly, and maybe encourage them to follow or copy.

You can also make gestures by the movements of your head, hips, legs and feet. (Always be aware of safety, and especially if the children are moving around too.)

### **Facial expression**

Tell the story with your face! Your facial expression should depict the various characters, and their feelings, and your feelings in response to the events in the story. The children should be looking at your face and eyes and reading your lips. Don't be in a hurry. Allow the children to take in the expressions on your face, and even try copying them. Ask them to show with their faces how they feel, or how they think that a character feels. (And then, of course, they can try drawing this as a follow-up to the story.)

### **Body movement**

While you are being careful of your poise, and using gestures and facial expressions, your body can still do a lot of storytelling as well. For example, each of your important characters has a different way of standing, and walking. As you mention a character you can get into their special body shape, take a few steps the way they walk, use their particular gestures and facial expressions, and speak with their voice. (It is a lot to think about while you are nervously telling, but concentrate on one aspect the first time until it becomes natural.)

You can also use your body position in front of the children to make it obvious who is talking in the story, a bit like you are taking the place of two (or more!) different actors in a play. Stand on the left when the old man talks and on the right when the cat replies.

### **Time**

Young children, especially, cannot concentrate for more than 10 minutes at the most. Your story needs to be carefully planned so that you don't get too carried away on one particular point and then lose them before you get to the exciting ending. Write yourself a 'bubble' plan, or a series of pictures, or whatever works for you, and add the timing in minutes and/or seconds – and then practice. All of your brilliant work and preparation will go down the drain if you don't pay careful attention to your timing. (The opposite is bad, too, when the audience are ready and the story is all over in 30 seconds because you forgot parts of it!)

While you are keeping to a tight schedule, it is very important not to hurry – speaking too fast will simply mean no one gets what you are saying, and you will get into a muddle trying to do all your movements and gestures.

### **Intonation**

The English language has a very different 'tune' to Bahasa Malaysia. One of the (many) reasons for telling stories is to get the children used to this. So you need to make sure you are getting it right. Do not speak in a monotone. Make sure you emphasise the important words. Make sure you know when your voice should rise at the end of a sentence, and when it should fall. Practice.

### **Props**

Props are not essential, but can be very useful. This could include puppets to indicate the different characters, or even a puppet who pretends to be the storyteller, chatting with the teacher (you). You can also use simple costumes – a hat, umbrella, shoes, jacket – to give clues as to the setting and

characters and keep the children interested. And the children may also like to try using/wearing the costumes, become the characters ... leading on to a play or drama related to the story.

Other types of realia can be useful props – equipment, food, a toy, anything that relates to the story, gets the children interested, and even helps their understanding.

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## **An example of a Reading Aloud lesson**

(Cox, 2008, p. 216)

### **1:15-2:30 Reading Aloud and Story Dramatization**

Mauretta reads aloud Marcia Brown's (1957) picture book *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. She reads dramatically, with a lot of facial expressions and gestures. When she's finished the children applaud and ask her to read it again. She does, using as much expression as she did the first time. During the second reading she encourages the children to fill in whatever words they remember from the first reading. Since this is a predictable pattern book, with a repeated phrase, many students join in, chanting with the troll, "Who's that tramping over my bridge?" The children begin to imitate Mauretta's gestures, such as making a long nose with her hand for the troll and patting the floor to make the "trip-trap" sound as the billy goats cross the bridge, one by one. The children make this noise softly for the first and smallest billy goat and loudly for the last and biggest one.

After reading, the class talks about what happened in the story. Mauretta asks open-ended, aesthetic questions:

"What did you think about the story?"

"What was your favourite part?"

"Who was your favourite character?"

Next, the class dramatizes the story. First, the children spread out around the room, and pretend to be the different character, imitating one at a time. Mauretta says she will take one volunteer to act out each character. The rest of the students have rhythm sticks and will make the "Trip-trap" sound effects. The scene is set with green carpet squares for grass and a bridge made of wooden blocks. A narrator is chosen to tell the story. The students dramatize the story this way several times. Mauretta promises she will read it again the next day, giving more children chances to play the characters.

(Cox, 2008, p. 216)

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