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Adventures with Mr Monkey: Stimulating creative writing in the primary school classroom through play

Chloe Gordon

University of Wollongong, cg760@uowmail.edu.au

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Adventures with Mr Monkey: Stimulating creative writing in the primary school classroom through play

Abstract

The importance of learning through play is now accepted as an integral component of early childhood classrooms. However, including opportunities for play in the primary school classroom can be challenging when competing with an overcrowded school curriculum. In this article I share my reflections on how I used play to stimulate my Year one students' creative writing in 2013.

Keywords

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'Play is a minimally-scripted, open-ended exploration in which the participant is absorbed in the spontaneity of the experience.'

(Ortileb, 2010, p. 241)

The importance of learning through play is now accepted as an integral component of early childhood classrooms. However, including opportunities for play in the primary school classroom can be challenging when competing with an overcrowded school curriculum. In this article I share my reflections on how I used play to stimulate my Year one students' creative writing in 2013.

At the beginning of the year, my Year one class was introduced to 'Mr Monkey', a furry friend purchased from Toys R Us. My initial intention was to use Mr Monkey as a classroom management tool, rewarding students who displayed positive behaviour during the week with the opportunity to take Mr Monkey home over the weekend.

I was fascinated by the value that was placed on Mr Monkey by the students and began to look for ways to integrate him into learning experiences to provide further interest and motivation for student learning. What resulted was our 'Adventures with Mr Monkey' class journal. One student who displayed positive behaviour during the week was rewarded with the opportunity to take Mr Monkey home over the weekend and record their adventures with him on a two-page spread that combined visual and written text. Did you hear that? The reward for positive behaviour became the completion of an *additional homework activity involving writing!* Reading each student's adventures with Mr Monkey became the class's favourite Monday activity.

The creativity, imagination and humour displayed in my students' writing was impressive, as they re-told their weekend adventures with the personified Mr Monkey:

'When I got Mr Monkey he was dirty. So mum said he needs a wash. Mr Monkey was in the washing machine and hung on the washing line in our backyard because mum wasn't letting him in the house without cleaning.'

'When I took Mr Monkey home on Friday, I had to take him to my swimming lessons. But it was very cold so

I put on a shirt for Mr Monkey so he wouldn't catch a cold. Otherwise, he would get sick.'

'The next day my whole family and Mr Monkey went to church. He was a good listener and behaved quietly during the talk and singing.'

The learning experience also provided interesting insight into student home life and cultural backgrounds:

'I also introduced GiGi to my favourite doll, "Mashimaro"' [a Korean fictional character].

'He got to try some yummy Egyptian food for dinner.'

Of course there was also the incentive that Mr Monkey provided to the students to:

'Work hard at school to get him back.'



I can recall times in my classroom where listening to other students' writing was dull and tedious for the students. Yet in this activity, the students were bursting with excitement to not only share their own writing with the class, but also to listen to their peers' writing as they shared their weekend adventures with Mr Monkey. I have a few speculations on factors that contributed to the

success of this learning experience and what can be learnt:

- 1. Creating an authentic context for writing** – The importance of creating an authentic context for writing cannot be underestimated. The students' excitement to take Mr Monkey home and write about their weekend was a joy to see. Each facet of literacy – reading, writing, speaking and listening – was encompassed in this learning context. The learning experience not only provided an authentic context for writing but also invited parents to be involved in their child's literacy learning.
- 2. Using an 'animal'** – Children appear to have an innate interest in animals and develop strong emotional ties to their pets (including inanimate pets!). This was demonstrated by the children personifying Mr Monkey and waiting in eager anticipation for their chance to take him home.
- 3. Establishing class ownership** – Mr Monkey was not just a student toy or pet, he was our class's pet. This sense of class ownership added to student interest in hearing about their classmates' adventures with Mr Monkey.
- 4. Facilitating an open-ended, experience-based learning environment** – The students were free to create, and subsequently write, about their unique experiences with Mr Monkey. The open-ended nature of the task fostered creativity, imagination and humour in student writing as they learnt through their own experiences, without the fear of getting it wrong.

Given the success of Mr Monkey with my Year One class, I will certainly be introducing a 'furry friend' to my next class of students!

References

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Chloe Gordon is a former classroom teacher who is now completing her doctoral studies at the University of Wollongong. These involve the development, implementation and evaluation of an alcohol media literacy program for Australian upper-primary school children. Chloe is passionate about teaching children to be critical and intelligent consumers of what they see around them. Email: cg760@uowmail.edu.au



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Resources

For dual language texts see <http://www.brightbooks.co.uk/UserFiles/Docs/Cats/DualPDF.pdf>

For ideas for dual language classroom charts and songs see <http://www.pinterest.com/callmetrivi/dual-language/>

For article on sharing wordless picture books see <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/sharing-wordless-picture-books>

For list of top ten wordless picture books see <http://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com/2013/03/30/top-ten-wordless-picture-books-by-kristen-remenar/>

For sample on-line safety game produced in English, Dinka, Hindi, Thai, Arabic, Vietnamese and Traditional Chinese see <http://www.mpes.nsw.gov.au/content.php/1210.html>

Support document for engaging CALD parents in school settings see <http://cmj.net.au/publications/opening-school-gates>

Adele Amorsen is currently lecturing in the English and field experience units with pre-service teachers at Queensland University of Technology. Adele has over twenty-two years of experience in the field of education, with fifteen of those in early childhood classrooms across Queensland. Email: adeleamorsen@yahoo.com.au