

# Storytelling and Story Acting for Older Learners



A tool for imagining possibilities through storytelling.

Storytelling and Story Acting, developed by Vivian Gussin Paley, is a widely used approach for dictating and acting out stories in early childhood classrooms (Cooper, 2009)<sup>1</sup>. This tool expands the idea of Storytelling and Story Acting to older learners as a strategy for imagining possibilities in a playful way. Here's how it works:

1. **Choose a prompt.** Decide what prompt you want to use to spark storytelling, and give your learners a few minutes to think quietly about their story. Some examples:
  - ▷ To learn more about your learners' past experiences, ask them to think of a story from their own life. Relate the story prompt to your content area — e.g., ask science students to tell a story of a memorable experience doing science in the past.
  - ▷ As you near the end of a math unit, ask students to imagine a story about using their new mathematical knowledge in a real-life situation.
  - ▷ To support learners to transfer a new skill or approach beyond the classroom, ask them, "Imagine yourself five years from now. Tell the story of how you are now using \_\_\_\_\_ approach/strategy/practice in your life/work."
2. **Tell stories.** Group your learners into pairs. Each learner will have a chance to be a storyteller, and a chance to be a scribe and write down their partner's story.
  - ▷ **Storytellers:** Tell your story slowly enough that your partner can write the story down, word for word.
  - ▷ **Scribes:** Write down your partner's story word for word. Ask your storyteller to pause as needed, and repeat back what you have written as you go. You can write the story with pencil and paper, or type on a digital device. Read the finished story back to your storyteller. Ask, "Did I capture your story accurately? Is there anything you'd like me to add or change?"
3. **Act out stories.** Come back together as a whole class, or in larger groups of at least 10 learners per group. Choose some stories to act out, or act out all the stories if time allows.
  - ▷ Sit in a circle on chairs or on the floor — the space within the circle becomes the stage. The scribe reads the story aloud. As a new character appears in the story, the scribe asks learners one at a time to join in acting out that role. See example below.
  - ▷ **Suggestion:** To simplify choosing roles, go around the circle, and ask each learner in turn if they would like to play the role of the next character who appears in the story. Give the storyteller the first choice of which role to play, or the option of watching their story be enacted.

4. **Reflect on learning.** After learners act out the stories, invite them — individually, in pairs, or as a group —to reflect on how sharing, hearing, and seeing each other's stories influenced their thinking.

## A storytelling and story acting example

- ▷ **Prompt:** Tell a story about a time when you felt like a scientist
- ▷ **Context:** A high school biology class
- ▷ **The story told by one learner:** When I was a small child, I was playing outside behind my house. I found a huge beetle with horns in the grass. I was a little afraid and very curious. I went to tell my father, and he came outside to look at the beetle with me. We counted the legs together and looked at the horns. We noticed the color and the shape of its body. Then I made a little house for the beetle with leaves and sticks. The next day it was gone. I didn't feel like a scientist then, but thinking back on that experience, I was learning about a new creature in the natural world.
- ▷ **Acting it out:** One learner takes on the role of the child, one the role of the beetle, and one the father. No props or costumes are used — the actors simply pantomime the actions as the narrator reads the story aloud. The rest of the class is the audience and applauds at the end of the story.

## More than One Way

- ▷ If you do not have enough time in the classroom, ask students to prepare their stories outside of class and bring them in for acting together.
- ▷ To encourage brevity and succinctness, suggest that stories should be no longer than one handwritten page.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Cooper, *The Classrooms All Young Children Need: Lessons in Teaching* from Vivian Paley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009)