

USING DRAMA TO PROMOTE WRITING

Pam Bowell

THE TOYSHOP



As part of an occasional series, here Pam Bowell offers another extended example of a whole class drama. This unit, designed for Reception Year children, has an anti-bullying theme but also provides opportunities for team work and problem-solving. Writing opportunities arising from the drama are also suggested.

Although the unit provides step-by-step guidance, it is flexible and open to adaptation. It is important to remember, though, that it cannot include the contributions of the children to the drama and you will need to be ready to respond to what they offer as the drama unfolds.

YEAR: RECEPTION

This drama scheme is set in a toyshop. There are a number of different challenges to be met but the sustained setting and roles hold them together.



Dramatic Context

Where the drama is set:

- A toyshop

Roles

Who the children are going to be in the drama:

- Toys

Who you are going to be in the drama:

- The Shopkeeper and a Toy – Session 1
- A Toy – Session 2
- A Toy and the Tin Soldier – Session 3
- A Toy and the Tin Soldier – Session 4
- Tin Soldier & Shopkeeper – Sessions 5/6

Frame

The thing that gives tension to the drama:

- The toys have a secret life at night when the humans are sleeping

Sign

Things that help children focus in the drama:

- The letters of 'help' on individual sheets (for Session 1)
- A note which says 'I am up here' (for Session 2)
- A large label with the words 'Tin Soldier' (for Session 3)
- A large outline shape of a tin soldier (for Session 3)
- A clip board, paper and pencil (for Session 4)
- Party items (for Session 6)

Strategies

The different ways of working in drama:

- Still image
- Mime
- Improvisation
- Teacher in role
- Writing/drawing in role
- Role on the Wall
- Thought tracking

SESSION ONE

- Out of role explain to the children that our drama is going to be in a toyshop and ask them to talk to the person next to them and decide what might be found there. (You could have some dolls, teddies and so on in the classroom. The day before, you could have asked them to bring in their favourite from home, for today.)

Writing opportunity: with teacher as scribe, make a list of suggestions

- Ask them who or what they think we are going to be in the drama. We are aiming to be toys, and it would be best if they were in the role of toys that are human-like rather than Lego bricks and so on! But, it is important not to completely reject suggestions as all process drama is founded on the participants helping to shape the direction of their learning and have a sense of ownership about it. I usually find the following form of words to work well.
‘A model aeroplane? Well, yes, we could be a model aeroplane, but not today.’
- Ask them to decide, without telling anyone else, which particular toy they are going to be.
- Once everyone has an idea, ask the children to imagine what shape their toy would have.
- Ask them to find a space and tell them that you will count to three and then clap your hands (or any signal that you chose; I usually click my fingers but I have a loud click!)
- When they hear the clap it is the signal to freeze in the shape of their toy as if someone had taken a photo of them in the toyshop.

- Move around and identify some of them: ‘I can see a teddy bear here, I think’ and so on.

Writing opportunity: You could actually take digital photographs of the children in their frozen shapes and use them later to caption with the names of the toys.

- Now, gather them back together and tell them that the drama is almost ready to begin but that there are two very important things they still need to know.
- Firstly, tell them that you are going to be in the drama, too, and to begin with you are going to be the Shopkeeper who works in the shop and lives in the flat upstairs. (You could use a small piece of costume here if it would help you take on the role. It needs to be something that you can easily and quickly put on and take off – a pair of spectacles, for example.)
- But secondly and most important of all, the toys have a very special secret that only they know. Every night, when the town hall clock strikes midnight and all the humans are asleep in bed, the toys come to life and meet and talk with each other, talking about what has happened in the shop that day. They do things they like doing (ballerina dolls liked to dance etc.) They have to be very quiet so as not to wake the shopkeeper upstairs!!
- Now tell the children that the drama is going to begin. Send them back to their place in the shop and ask them to get into their toy shape and be absolutely still so that the Shopkeeper does not suspect that they have a secret life.
- Tell them that the next time you speak you will be the Shopkeeper and that it is almost time to close

the shop of the night and go upstairs for your tea. Then put on your spectacles and begin.

- Move around the shop and talk to yourself; things like, ‘I thought I’d misplaced that teddy!’; ‘Oh dear! I’m not sure I really know exactly how many toys I’ve got in my shop. I must find time to make a list then I can rearrange the shelves’; ‘Look at the time, I must lock the door and go upstairs for my tea. It’s been a busy day and I’m really tired. Perhaps I’ll have an early night!’
- Mime locking the door, turning off the shop lights and climbing the stairs. Your ‘performance’ should only take about 30 seconds. We don’t want to keep the children immobile for a long period of time.
- Then, remove your spectacles and in storytelling mode:
‘The toys heard the Shopkeeper go upstairs. They heard the door of the flat creak open (you could give the sound effect if you want). They heard the pots and pans banging in the kitchen as s/he made tea. They heard the television as the Shopkeeper watched his/her favourite programme. They were very impatient for him/her to go to bed. At last, the flat above them fell silent except of the gentle snoring noise that came from the Shopkeeper’s bedroom.
Finally, when all was dark and quiet outside the town hall clock began to strike midnight. The toys counted each one of the twelve strokes. They knew that as soon as the last bong had sounded they would be able to move and talk to each other and do what they do. Bong, bong, etc. (You could use your fingers to count off with the children.)’

- On the last stroke you become a toy yourself and move around with the children asking about what happened in the shop, telling them what had happened you. 'Did anyone think of buying you today?' and so on. You can also move in the way that your toy moves.

Writing opportunity: the children can tell stories of what they do in the shop at night and these could be written up or illustrated later in a class 'Toyshop Book'.

- Then clap your hands or any other signal to get the children's attention and say, 'Freeze' and then in storytelling mode: 'The toys met and talked and enjoyed themselves every night in shop until one night something strange happened. Would you like to go back to the shop and find out what it was?' (I'm sure you'll have a big yes).
- Then say, 'When I clap again we'll be back in the shop but this time I'll have something strange to report.'
- Clap and restart the drama. You will need to have in your hand or pocket the resource with the letter 'h' on it.
- Gather the toys together and, in role, tell them that you have found something odd and you are not sure what it is or where it has really come from. Show them the letter and get them to talk to each other about what it could be. They are sure to ask you where you found it and you will need to decide where in the working space that part of the toyshop will be.
- If the children don't suggest it, be prepared to suggest that a search is made to see if any other pieces of paper are to be found. (The 'e', 'l', and 'p' should be near the same part of the room/shop)
- Gather together again with the new evidence and then you will need to be at a loss as to what it means. The children need to be in a circle at this point so that they can all see. Get them to talk to the toy next to them to see if they can make sense of the pieces of paper. Draw the ideas together. Nudge them in the right direction if necessary but without telling them at once what it says.
- The climax to this part will be the realisation that the letters spell 'help' and that someone somewhere is in trouble and asking us for assistance.
- Process dramas are rather like soap operas and you need to leave the children with a cliff-hanger. So:
- The children will probably want to search for the person asking for help but just at that moment draw their attention to the fact that it is daylight. Suddenly hear a noise from upstairs. 'It's the Shopkeeper getting up. What are we to do? Quickly back to the shelves and our positions before the Shopkeeper comes. Freeze.'
- Out of role announce that this is where we must stop our drama for today. We will have to wait until next time to find out who needs the help and work out if we can give it to them.

Writing opportunity: the children could speculate on who might need help and make a list of the suggestions.



SESSION TWO

- Out of role, recap on the events of the last drama.
- Ask children to get back into their positions as toys in the shop.
- Count down to midnight when they can move and talk.
- In role yourself as your toy, call a meeting of the toys to work out where to go next.
- Inject some tension by hearing the Shopkeeper turnover in bed. We will have to be extra quiet because if he catches us we will never be able to find out who needs us.
- Reveal new developments and introduce the new note, 'I am up here'.
- We need to decide what to do. Talk to a toy next to you and see if you can think about what we need to do.

Writing opportunity: you could write a large copy of their instructions in sequence and the children could mime them.

- What you will know but the children will not is that the note

has come from an old, neglected toy that was thrown onto a very high, old shelf at the back of the shop by a thoughtless child. This was because when you were made, they forgot to paint you and so you are just plain tin and not coloured in with all the details that are shown on the label of your box. The task for the children in this session is to work out how to get on to the shelf to see if there is anyone there. The shelf will be the only place 'up here' that they themselves are not displayed on.

- One of the key tasks for the teacher in process drama is to help build a consensus with the children by melding their ideas together. So, in this story, there will be many ways that the toys could get up to the high shelf and it will be perfectly fine for them to get up there by different ways.
- So, having carried out the mime of the search, if they children have not suggested a high shelf you might suggest it yourself. The problem now is how to get up.

Writing opportunity: write a collective note to say that help is on the way

- If you have written the note you could discuss how to get it up to the shelf.
- Gather the toys together and in pairs get them to discuss what might be in the toyshop to help them get to the shelf. They could come up with things like the ladder on the toy fire engine, Lego bricks, building blocks, skipping ropes and so on. Remember, we are looking for their ideas: you can ask questions and clarify but try hard not to veto.
- You and the toys also need to devise a plan for when you first get up to the shelf. What you do not want is for them to go 'gal-

loping off'. You could suggest that it might be better if we all waited together until everyone was safely on the shelf. Remind them that they will be right underneath the Shopkeeper's bedroom!!

- Now the toys quietly move about the toyshop to collect the equipment they will need and carry it carefully back to the part of the shop nearest to the shelf where the letters spelling 'Help' were originally found.
- Ask each toy to say what they have collected so we can know which ways we can choose to get up to the shelf.
- Mime the ascent to the shelf. If you are concerned that the children might 'get away from you' here, you could narrate in storyteller mode the ascent and have the children act out your description, again emphasising the nearness of the Shopkeeper.
- Gather together on the shelf and ask the toys to make sure that everyone has arrived safely.
- Then everyone looks to the right along the shelf and then looks to the left along the shelf. Ask if anyone can see anything. You will get lots of answers. If you are a bit unsure about dealing with them then you could spot an old, battered box at the farthest end of the shelf.
- Call, 'Stop! Quiet everyone! I think I can hear crying and it's coming from that box!'
- Then use your signal, a clap or whatever, and call, 'Freeze!' and say, 'That's where we must end our drama for today. We will have to wait until next time to see who is in the box.'

Writing opportunity: the children could tell the story of their Big Climb to get up to the shelf. These could be written or illustrated and form the next chapter in the Toyshop Book.

SESSION THREE

- Make sure you have the label with the words 'tin solder' on you at the beginning.
- You will also need a large outline shape of a tin soldier to hand.
- Out of role, ask the children to recall what had happened at the end of the last drama.
- Ask them to gather around you as they were on the shelf when you heard the crying from the box.
- Tell them that the toys will need to decide what to do when the drama begins. Ask them to talk to their neighbour and think of what should be done.
- Then tell them that when you clap the drama will have started and you will all be the toys on the shelf and crying is still coming from the box.



- Ask for ideas about what to do. Explain that you have never had to do anything like this before and that you really are unsure about how to proceed. Eventually the lid will need to be lifted and the toys will need to talk to the toy in the box.

- As the toys creep slowly towards the box, in storytelling mode narrate this part of the drama.

'The toys moved slowly and silently towards the old box. They could hear the Shopkeeper snoring in bed just above their heads. They knew this was a tricky and dangerous moment. One false move and s/he would hear them and that would be disaster! As they got closer to the box the crying seemed louder. They moved around it until they made a circle with the box in the middle. Then they sat down.

As the toys looked closely at the box they could see that it had a label on it with some writing on it and a picture. (Unfurl the label). The words said, 'Tin Soldier' and the picture looked like this.' (Produce the big outline and place it on the floor in middle of the circle)

- Ask the children who they think might be in the box.

Writing opportunity: ask the children to describe what the picture would look like if it was filled in: colour, details etc. With you as scribe, write what they say on the part of the outline they indicate.

- Move the outline to the side of the room or Blotak it to the wall.
- Out of role, tell the children that it is time to take the lid from the box but before this can be done, you have a very important question to ask them:

'Would you like to have an imaginary Tin Soldier or would you like me to be the soldier for you?'

- They will almost certainly say that they want you to be the soldier but it really does not matter if they ask for an imaginary one. In this case you would simply narrate the events.
- Back into the drama, get the children to decide how they are going to lift the lid off and what they are going to do and say when they meet the soldier. Stress that the Shopkeeper is still just above their heads and ask them to choose one word that they think might say how the soldier might be feeling now.

Writing opportunity: these words could be added later to the outline of the soldier. This would not be the time to do it, as the drama needs to flow at this point.

- Sit in the middle of the circle and tell them that when you clap they will have to lift the lid off and put their plan into action. You will need to be quietly crying to yourself and not be aware at first that they have found you.
- Ask if they are the toys that come to life in the toyshop every night. Ask how they knew where to find you, how they got to you. This will allow the children to recount the events and you to tell them how great they are!
- They are certain to ask why you are crying, especially if you went over this at stage where they were planning what to do when they lifted the lid of the box.
- You now explain what the child did and tell the children why. Explain that you are so very sad and lonely, especially when you hear them all together each

night, playing and having a nice time. Tell them how you cry yourself to sleep wishing that you could be playing with them too instead of being stuck all alone on the old, high shelf.

- The children will almost certainly ask you to come down and join them but you cannot. You have another problem. All the crying has made you rusty and your joints can't move! What are you to do? Who can possibly help with this situation?
- The children will clamour to help. But just at that moment you will hear a noise from above you: the Shopkeeper is awake and making breakfast and will soon be coming down to the shop.
- The toys will have to go back to their places in the shop. As they go, ask them if they will come back to rescue you as soon as they can. Ask them to 'Freeze'.
- 'And this is where we have to stop our drama for today.'

Writing opportunity: the children could collectively recount the sequence of events leading to the Big Discovery. Add what they felt when they first saw the Tin Soldier. This could be written up or illustrated to become the next chapter of the Toyshop Book.

SESSION FOUR

- Out of role, recap where the drama stopped last time. If you have been developing the Toyshop Book as you have been going along you could read aloud the latest chapter. This would give you the chance to use your storytelling skills to evoke the tension and excitement of the situation, so making it even easier for the children to slip back into the drama.
- Ask the children to take up their positions in the toyshop and then count down the striking of the town hall clock at midnight.
- Call the toys to a meeting: 'I've been worrying all day. How are we going to get the Tin Soldier down? I know we said we would help but I've never had to rescue a Tin Soldier before.'
- Draw the children's ideas together ideas to form the rescue plan. What they come up with cannot really be predicted so you will have to think on your feet here.
- Ask them if they think we should practise first before we climb back up to the shelf. We don't want to get it wrong.
- Practise the rescue plan.

Writing opportunity: write the steps for the rescue 'so we don't forget what to do'.

- At this point you could climb back up to the shelf again or you could stop the drama for a moment and skip to being on the shelf already.

- You will need to take up your role again as the Tin Soldier and be rescued! It would work well if you were very uncertain and wobbly.
- Back in the shop ask the toys to show you where they lived in the shop and practice your marching as you move about. You need to be very pleased and happy.
- Then you need to hear the Shopkeeper upstairs. Ask the toys to show you what happens now. But you have nowhere to go! Ask the toys help you again. Freeze.
- In role as the Shopkeeper (remembering your spectacles) come down stairs and unlock the shop door. You need to be carrying your clipboard and pencil.

'I'm going to count all my toys today just to see how many I have in my shop. I think there should be..' (The number needs to be the number of children so that the Tin Soldier is extra). Count heads and discover the extra one. 'That's not right, I'm sure there should only be Hello, what's this old toy lurking at the back. It's not even painted. I can't remember that being here before. I'll have to get rid of it when the dustmen come.'

'And that's were we must stop our drama for today'.

Writing opportunity 1: make the inventory of the toys with each child contributing what toy they are. You could count how many of each type there is in the shop.

Writing opportunity 2: write or illustrate the next chapter of the book – the Big Rescue.

SESSION FIVE

- Out of role, begin with a recap. You could use the book again but be sure to remind them of what the Shopkeeper said about the Tin Soldier if they do not recall it.
- 'Toys' go back on 'shelves' and you count down to midnight.
- In role as the Tin Soldier, gather the toys together. You are very worried indeed. You do not want to be put out for the dustmen just when you had been rescued and found new friends and a nice bright shelf to be on. It is all too much. You just cannot put it into words how you are feeling it has been so long since you really talked to any one. Could the children put into words how you are feeling? Just one word each.
- One by one ask the toys to come and touch you on the shoulder and say their word. You could react physically to what they say. You could develop this by asking the children to come back again and say something nice about the Tin Soldier to cheer you up.

Writing opportunity: you could make a tape recording of what they say and transcribe it later and add these to the outline of the soldier.

- But the problem still remains. What can possibly be done? Surely the toys would not be willing to help you again?
- The problem is how to ensure the Tin Soldier is not put out for the dustmen.
- Once again the toys will need to solve this problem and you will need to help them shape their response by helping them to draw their ideas together.

It is likewise impossible to predict what they will say. It could be anything from painting him so he is smart to hiding him or something else entirely. Just remember that you can draw on mime, still image, narration and so on to make it happen in the story.

- Draw this session together by demonstrating in role the Shopkeeper coming down stairs again and either seeing the freshly painted Tin Soldier and realising that s/he had made a mistake or, if the soldier has been hidden, then not discovering it and thinking that s/he must have imagined it.

Because the Tin Soldier is so happy he sends a Chinese whisper around the shop (even though the Shopkeeper is there and it is daylight) to say, 'Let's have a party to celebrate.'

- 'But we must stop our drama now for today.'

Writing opportunity: recount the events of the *Tin Soldier's Lucky Escape* and add to the book.

SESSION SIX

- Recap
- Count down from midnight and gather the toys together to plan the party.

Writing opportunity:

- list of food for the party
- list of other things needed for example cups, plates
- design and produce invitations for the party
- Ask the toys what things from the classroom we can use for the party in the toyshop. Gather things together.
- As a special thank you you could offer to put on a display of your best marching and ask the other toys to do a party piece. These will need to be rehearsed.
- If it is possible it would be nice to have a little something to eat, perhaps a slice of apple, but this is not essential.
- Use a piece of jolly music, such as *The Teddy Bears' Picnic* to play while the toys are doing their party pieces.
- You could freeze the action and thought track: touch the toys one by one on the shoulder and ask them to speak out loud a word that says how they are feeling. Leave yourself as the Tin Soldier until last.
- When the party is in full swing burst in as the Shopkeeper (with spectacles) to demand what is going on. 'Stay where you are. Who are...' Stop mid-sentence in utter disbelief. Look slowly at each toy in turn. Let your face break into a broad smile. Freeze.

- 'And now it is time to stop our drama.'

Writing opportunity: collectively recount the story of the party and speculate on what happened next. Use this to complete the final chapter of *The Toyshop Book*.



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