



The Creative Skills Podcast

Episode 4: Collaborative Storytelling, Comfort Zones and Voice with Amy Hall-Gibson

Transcript

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Transcript

Heather Armstrong (00:09):

Welcome to episode four of Starcatchers Creative Skills Online. I'm Heather Armstrong. On this podcast, we're hosting a series of chats with amazing artists who usually deliver our Creative Skills training for the early years workforce in Scotland.

Now, we're recording this episode in the run up to Christmas 2020, and it's probably an understatement to say we're all dealing with a lot of uncertainty and a fair bit of stress right now. The arts can play a big role in self-care, both for you and the wee ones you work with - whether you're listening to music, singing your favourite songs, or losing yourself in what they call a state of "creative flow" - so some people might think of it as when you're "in the zone".

In that moment when you're completely absorbed in whatever it is you're doing, it could be painting, dancing, lost in your own imagination - in that moment you're not worrying about the past or the future you've left all your stress behind. It's been likened to a kind of active meditation and the good news is you get all the same mental health benefits as engaging in other forms of mindfulness. Which is great if you're the type of person who doesn't know how to sit still!

So, no matter how busy you get during this festive season, take care of yourself and remember to flex your creative muscles. And that's what this podcast is here to help you do.

Today we are joined by a wonderful drama and storytelling artist: Amy Hall-Gibson. Hi Amy, how you doing?

Amy Hall-Gibson (01:28):

Hello! I'm good, thank you. Thanks for having me.

Heather Armstrong (01:31):

So I'm going to kick off the same way I do with everybody: tell us a wee bit about your practice and why you love working with wee ones.

Amy Hall-Gibson (01:39):

Oh that's such a good question and something, actually that I constantly ask myself, because I think I need to remind myself why I love what I do. I think over lockdown that was really clear cause then I was like: "So what am I missing?" and I was missing the collaboration. I think that's the big key for me... I plant a seed in children's imaginations and they make it grow, they water it, they provide the sunshine and they nurture. This little seed that I've just simply planted and they make it go the way they want it to go. That's one of the reasons why I love working with little people is that they just... they will take it somewhere that I have never gone before. And they're not... Most of them don't have the kind of fear as we do as adults.

In my practice I use drama as a kind of tool to encourage that kind of empowerment of young

people to explore that... These ideas that in everyday life aren't possible I guess - without an imagination anyway. So, I like to play a lot of games, I like to go on kind of journeys and storytelling is a big part of it, but it's not your traditional storytelling. So, it's not sitting down with a storybook reading it because that has its own place and its own time, which is equally as valuable. Mine is very much about creating your own story or adapting a story - and we do that in various different ways... either with our voices, physicality, and just really bringing their own ideas to life through this kind of story. And the reason it's a story is it has a beginning, a middle and an end, and that's kind of, that's kind of where the story element comes in and we share it with one another - stories are about sharing!

Heather Armstrong (03:25):

That's such a lovely ethos. Just the idea of giving the children that permission and kind of saying: "Well, actually this is, this is yours!" and feeling it grow. And I think, you know, I know there's lots of research about how shared creative activity helps with bonding with young children and their carers - whether that's in the home or whether that's in more professional settings. And I think sometimes a lot of that is... It's that sense of wonder that we feel as adults, isn't it, [when] you explore things with imagination and you just get to go: "You're amazing! You little tiny person with your amazing brain!"

Amy Hall-Gibson (04:00):

Absolutely. Yeah. And I missed that during lockdown because I was very much just kind of me. And so, I was missing those amazing little moments. You don't get those amazing moments over digital platforms - definitely not. I did run a couple of things with slightly older children, but yeah, it just wasn't the same.

Heather Armstrong (04:23):

So we have a new challenge now don't we? I talk about this job sometimes like throwing feathers down a well - you know you're doing it, you know they're landing, you don't always know the impact - you can't see it. So just a wee reminder to everybody listening right now, if you are using some of the ideas from Creative Skills, any of the stuff we've been sharing, then please get in touch and let us know how it's been going!

Anyways. So, what's some of the favourite ideas that you share when you're running Creative Skills sessions?

Amy Hall-Gibson (04:49):

Most of the ideas that I like to do are ones that are just going to bring joy. So initially it brings fear because as adults we go: "Oh dear, I don't want to do that. I don't want to play in front of other adults!" - but [we're] absolutely fine to play with other children. But as soon as we all in the room start to play, fun and enjoyment comes!

It's about the practitioner taking that first step. And, honestly, once you take that first step, you will totally understand the impact - and even if it doesn't go quite right at first, try it again! That's exactly what I do. And all the Creative Skills training is that... you know, if mistakes happen, that is great because then we can all learn from them - even me.

What I really like to do is this idea of playing with voice. So, when we're reading stories we sometimes get caught up in just reading the words and asking the questions - which is equally important - but also, it's about...

There're two elements you bring into it: you're bringing the fun element [and] the engagement element as well, and children will be engaged in picture books because of the pictures and you're engaging them with the questions. But what about adding that element of - I'm going to use a funny voice? And you see the reaction that the children get. But not only are you going to encourage a reaction, you're also going to encourage the children to play with their own voices too - which they do naturally - but you are initiating something there. So, you might [puts on a low voice] do a really low voice like this - and they may copy it, they may not right there and then, but it may happen later on.

And that's just... d'you know - as an adult, you're modelling it and you're giving them the encouragement and the confidence, the self-belief that: "You know, what? - If I can do it, you can try it!"

And what I do is if I am reading a book due to the interest of the children or if the setting sort of said "This is what we're working on". Then I go with it cause it's their interest and I ask the children to give me a sound. So, I don't ask them to give me a voice because that can be quite tricky but a sound is totally different. So, if I say to them, can you give me a sound? - and it can be any sound, and then I then just interpret that and create a voice.

And sometimes I get lots of giggles, sometimes I get "NO! That's not right, that's not right Amy!" And if I get that, I'm like: "Great! What can I do different?" [because] then what they're doing is completely leading that - because they are telling me, they're giving me instructions, they are problem-solving. They might even just do it themselves, which is great. So actually, it becomes less about the words and the story and more about the sound and pattern of language, which is something that's so key for learning and literacy.

But as adults, as well as it's a real confidence boost to actually say: "You know what, I am going to do that I am, I'm going to give it a go!" Usually we are much more comfortable when we're just with the children [and] it can be a little bit more intimidating with other adults. But I always say practice and sometimes, you know, that idea of: "Oh, I'm not, I'm not doing that. I'm not practicing in front of the mirror." and that is totally...you know... I get that, but it's practicing just reading the story. Cause I think if you're comfortable with it - the more comfortable you are and familiar with it - the more you'll feel enabled and empowered to actually try something different.

So, if you know a story that you already know - the traditional rhymes, Little Red Riding Hood, something like that. And you'll find that actually the book kind of becomes...You know, just kind of gets put to the side. And then it's just more about communication.

Heather Armstrong (08:42):

In my head now... I'm now seeing early years practitioners up and down the country telling

themselves *Little Red Riding Hood* but pretending to be duck as they do it or pretending to be a vampire and just really like the sillier the better - that just makes me so happy! I want that to happen.

And I really love the idea about asking the children for a sound as well, because right from the beginning they are shaping the experience. They are taking the lead in the experience and you can bring all the vocabulary and you can bring the narrative and hang it altogether - but straight away... so if they are going through a phase where they're really interested in dinosaurs am I right in thinking, then you would then be reading *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* as a dinosaur?

Amy Hall-Gibson (09:29):

Absolutely. Yeah!

Heather Armstrong (09:30):

[laughs] I'm so excited!

Amy Hall-Gibson (09:34):

The great thing about it is that there really is no right or wrong, you know? And when the children say "No, that's not the right voice." That is not saying that your voice is "wrong". It's just saying that's not what they were *imagining* - so it gives them that opportunity to help you. Which I think is fab.

Heather Armstrong (09:50):

What a lovely way to phrase it as well - give them the opportunity to help you. So, it's not about you being wrong, it's about working together to make it right! Aww.

What you were saying as well about that - why it's so important in terms of development and things is really... I always think about that so much. I remember talking to a practitioner, I think it was in Edinburgh a couple of years ago, and we were talking about stories and she was quite dismissive of what she did - and she went "Och! I'm just the daft, I put on the silly voices and do the silly faces and everyone thinks - och we'll just leave her, she's weird, et cetera." And for me, it was a moment to go "But don't you realise all the amazing things you're doing there?"

So, you know, as you're modulating your voice, you're helping children identify different parts of the words and helping with vocabulary, you know, with your facial expressions, you're helping with engagement and making something which sometimes children aren't that engaged with - just in a kind of "Someone's reading a story. Yeah? Big deal." I said, you're making that really engaging and you're helping develop their language skills and their pre-literacy skills and it's just... What you're doing is amazing! And don't let other people's attitudes erode that.

We say it all the time in the training. [Participants are like] "I'm alright in front of the kids [but not other adults]," which I absolutely understand, particularly when you're not used to it - the idea of like, you know, twenty adults going into a room and pretending to be dinosaurs is, you know a bit outside the comfort zone!

So, there's two reasons why it's really good to become comfortable in front of other adults doing this - one is about modelling confidence to the children that you work with. So, you know, if you're reading *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* as a dinosaur [does a dinosaur voice] "And then they came in!" - if your colleague walks by and you suddenly get shy and then you shut that down and then you start, you know, you start reading normally - air quotes! - then what's that telling the children?

There's all these subconscious messages that they are getting - is that, you know, by being expressive and enjoying yourself and being silly, then - "No that's wrong, that's something slightly shameful", you know, "We can do that a little bit but, you know, actually we shouldn't be encouraging this really".

And the other reason why I'm such a big fan of adults being comfortable, being silly in front of other adults is when it comes time for a, you know, whether it's about your local authority coming in to see how you're doing, whether it's about the Care Inspectorate coming in and just to be able to own your practice and say "Well, actually, yes, I am silly! And I do put on these voices and I, you know, I do pretend to be a pterodactyl and actually, that's a really important part of the job that I do."

So, if they can be confident doing all those things in front of other adults, then it means that when the crunch time comes - there's always going to be an element of nerves -so the more confident you can be in that, I think the better.

With every podcast, we organise live Zoom sessions - I know we've got some scheduled in for you as well. And I'm now just so excited to get all the practitioners together, online and be like "Right okay!"

Amy Hall-Gibson (13:00):

"Dinosaur voice!"

Heather Armstrong (13:05):

I mean... no pressure Amy, you get to choose what happens in your own session, but if you don't do that, I'm going to be very disappointed! [laughs]

Amy Hall-Gibson (13:12):

I think all the listeners might be as well! [laughs]

Heather Armstrong (13:17):

You spoke - when we had our little kind of "pre-chat" before we starting recording - you spoke about characters as well, do you want to talk a little bit about what you do for developing characters?

Amy Hall-Gibson (13:27):

Yeah, so obviously we all know characters are in stories and the range: from people to animals, to inanimate objects that come to life. And it's that idea of the difference between - well, I think there's a slight difference between role-play and characterisation - and the difference is simply the

characterisation is just pushing role-play just that little bit further. I know, just from my own knowledge - which isn't as up to date as all the ELCs will be - but role-play is kind of like when you set up a home area and then the role-play happens within the home area, the hospital... and it tends to kind of be around skills for life: skills for working, like understanding jobs and the world around me.

So my idea of that characterisation is pushing the role-play further and thinking about not just about a job, a career - it's more about if I was a lion, if I was a dinosaur, and it's understanding how my body moves and how to create that character.

So we can take the voice away, because there are a lot of children who are non-verbal so the voice play that I do mean not work for them. So, the characterisation comes in - and this works with tiny, tiny ones - I'm talking babies that are crawling [or] maybe not quite crawling yet. So, for me, what I do is I would... I observe them - because I don't know them, but as a practitioner, you would know them - but just watch them just for a minute. And then I animate their movements, but I make them bigger - so a little movement, say little wave of a hand my, my whole arm is, you know... Podcasts are not great [for demonstrating] but [if they do a little wave] my whole arm is going to be like, waving about in the wind, like a flag!

I'm not stapling that as a character. I'm not saying "Oh, that is a flag. That is that, that is this." But what I am doing is creating character through my physicality and actually the child has given me the stimulus for that. Again, it comes back to that adult initiation - I'm initiating it by copying, by mimicking them, but I'm actually going to make it bigger. And eventually what happens is I am then a character. I then - or, you know, whether I choose to do or whether the child gives me the sound - I then create the voice. And before I know it I have a full character that's come from something so simple and so small.

But the other kind of strand of that is that characters can come from their interests as well. So, if they're interested in *Room on the Broom* - that kind of "witchy-ness" - that's a character from a story, so we bring that character to life - but you know what? It doesn't have to be exactly like the book. We can change it, we can make it our own. And so maybe the witch walks with a limp, maybe she hops everywhere, maybe she skips or something totally different, you know?

It's all about kind of... It's like the voice [idea], but we're turning it into the physicality where we are exploding our bodies and really finding this awareness. And it ties into coordination as well - how do we make ourselves bigger? Smaller? That kind of concept of understanding that as well, which I guess, I guess that'll tie into the element of dance, but I'm taking a kind of drama sort of viewpoint to that and the characterisation point.

The story element of it is that then the children can create their own story about that. I mean - imagine the child creating this character and from nothing, you know, from the simplest little movement and then going home and telling whoever's at home this whole story about this character, that's completely come from their own imagination and they're now... they feel that they can share that with home. And you can build on it and you can add in so many different elements to it.

And I think this idea of Christmas as well - it's going to be so different and there's not going to be the nativity play as it has been in past years. There's not going to be the Christmas show. But actually children, if they feel completely nurtured and supported, they can go home and they can do their own mini performances at home.

And bringing the parents on board with that is key to it - so if parents understand it doesn't have to be the traditional tale of Christmas, it can be a made up one. And I think that is more important than re-enacting *A Christmas Carol* or the nativity story. Take the nativity story as a *stimulus*, take the characters, take the animals, but then let the children decide where it goes from there. And it doesn't need the voice - so when I'm saying they can tell the story, they can tell it through their movements. I think that's really powerful.

Heather Armstrong (18:46):

Yeah. That idea of that nonverbal communication and telling stories through physicality is really powerful, isn't it? I think so often when we think about performance and - I'm thinking specifically about kind of nativity and Christmas shows and things with an audience - we think about the lines, don't we? And it's that kind of thing of like: "Who can we trust to stand up and say a line?" and then we practice the line and then we drill into the line and as long as we have the line then everything's going to be all right! But actually, yeah, particularly for pre and non-verbal children - and for children whose vocabulary is still emerging - physicality is such powerful tool that they've got for communication and for them to be able to be confident about communicating using their bodies is going to help in terms of other kind of communication as well.

It's so funny because when you were talking about that nativity and [the fact] it's not going to happen and parental expectations - this is something that's been kind of whirling round my head for years. When we were running the practical training, we realised in the first year that actually we couldn't really run any sessions in December. And what was happening was practitioners were coming back and they were saying to me, even if they got the time to come and attend the session, what they didn't have time to do was to go and try things in between sessions. And a depressing number of practitioners came back and said to me: "We just don't have time to do anything creative in December. We don't have time. We don't have time to be creative. We don't have time to try things out and fail." and to me it was like - well this is the month of the year where there is probably more focus on the expressive arts than any other months of the year, you know? This is the month of the year where we are looking at music and singing and acting and movement and all these things.

But I was like: there is something about those expectations of a nativity that takes the ethos - and whether it's about a nativity, whether it's about making Christmas decorations - there is something about it that can take this amazing child-led flexible ethos that's going through ELC in Scotland and - you know, not for all settings, but for some settings - it's like it gets compromised because: "But we need to do the show" or "We need to get... everybody needs a Christmas decoration." and I find that really, really interesting.

Because you're right, this episode is going to be coming out in the run-up to Christmas. I wonder if

the circumstances that we're in this year might change that... I wonder in some ways if it might free people up?

And I know not all settings do - some settings have been very clear - and actually when my daughter was wee, the nursery that she went to, they were very clear and they said: "We don't do a show for parents, we don't invite you in - we explore that, we'll take photographs of it, we'll let you know what's happening - but you're not going to see a nativity."

And I'm going to be completely honest from a professional developmental - child development - I was like "That's absolutely fine. Developmentally, it's not particularly appropriate. It's not what they need". As a parent, I was still a little bit like: "Aww... I want to see her as a star or the donkey!"

It's societal expectations, isn't it? And it really there's such an important job to do to communicate with parents and to help them understand actually what your child is doing as amazing - but just you don't necessarily - or rather your solution is fantastic. They do get to see it! They get to see it in the hoose!

Amy Hall-Gibson (22:20):

Exactly, yeah! [laughs]

Heather Armstrong (22:22):

You get to be a part of it!

Amy Hall-Gibson (22:24):

Yeah. Because I'm the same as you Heather, when my children were little - again, it was a similar kind of setting that were kind of like: "We're not doing nativity" and I absolutely, from a parent point of view had that kind of pang in my heart go "Oh, I'm not going to get to see that!". But again, from a professional point of view, I was like, "Oh, this is great!" and I understand why you're not doing it. And I understand that yeah, it's probably better.

My daughter was very competent at coming home and re-enacting it front of me anyway! [But] I thought, but not all children will have that and sometimes as well, not all children choose the best moment to show the parent and sometimes - you're cooking the dinner - you can accidentally be a little bit dismissive and, you know, that can knock them. I think if that conversation and that communication is there between home and setting, that: "This is what we're... we're going to do this. We're gonna attempt this this year."

And you know what the beauty is? At home, [no one is] gonna say: " No, you've not said that right" [or] "No, you've not done that right". cause they have no idea! So, the child can go completely... can do something totally different - and hopefully that child feels they have that comfortableness to be able to do it.

For me in my head, I've got simple thing of - for doing it at home *sound* is really good. So, I'm thinking you pick a song, you pick a sound and then you let the children run with it. You tell the

parents, the parents say: "Right, are you ready? Do you fancy showing me, do you fancy doing something and playing the song?" And then-

Heather Armstrong (24:08):

Ah! So it's almost like using like a song or a soundscape as a stimulus?

Amy Hall-Gibson (24:13):

Yeah!

Heather Armstrong (24:13):

So if settings are able to share that with home then that means that - without having to put a pressure, like "It's time for you to show me your show!" - it's just that that's what we've listening to as we've been exploring imaginative play and in nursery or in the family centre, or creche or whatever - and so it means that just naturally they'll probably start to share what they've been doing?

Amy Hall-Gibson (24:39):

Yep!

Heather Armstrong (24:40):

Och, you're so clever!

Amy Hall-Gibson (24:43):

[laughs]

Heather Armstrong (24:43):

This is why I love I'm speaking to my artists! Every time I'm just like "Oh, that's so clever!" I'm so glad I work with you and that we get to share these ideas.

Here's a question I know we were talking about taking a story that they know, but then being able to kind of expand and vary from it. Do you ever find working with wee children that they're quite resistant to that?

Amy Hall-Gibson (25:05):

Yes. There are some. There are some that feel totally freed up that they go: [excitedly] "What do you mean we can change the story? We can change the ending?" but yes, there are definitely children who are: "No, this is the way the story is, and this is how it should be." And that is absolutely fine because then what I do as a practitioner is I then change *how* I'm asking my questions - and when I say how I'm asking my question, I don't [always] ask them orally. I am maybe doing that through my movement, maybe through my suggestions.

But what I'll do is what's *not* in the book. So, for instance - let's just go back to *Room on the Broom*, because I already used that - it doesn't say how the witch walks. There isn't a mention of how she actually moves. Her voice is there, but it doesn't say how her voice is. So those are the elements in which we can change. There's the mention of the dragon, but it doesn't say where the dragon...

how he wakes up - it just says "the dragon wakes up". Those would be the bits that I would focus on because then we are still sticking to the story line, but we're exploring what's not in the story. So, for children who are very much: "But this is what story is" – yeah, that *is* what story is, and can we just expand a little bit on this bit?

So, it's just about finding those little moments and whether you can do it by asking the question orally or whether it's about through the movement of: "No, the witch doesn't move like this it's, you know, clearly this witch moves like that".

Equally, we all move differently. So, I never ever say we all have to move the same. I might say let's all fly on a broomstick but it will never look the same. And if somebody says: "I'm flying on my Hoover!" then absolutely! Everybody fly whatever you want, you know?

So yeah, there are definitely children who - you just need to take a different approach to it and as an adult, makes me think a little bit deeper about how I am trying to free up a child. So, the ones who are like "Yeah!" and run with it - great, easy. But the other ones that's where the challenge for me is an adult - and I always see it as my challenge because it's me that that needs to think about how I need to change. There's a great quote in the - and you know the correct... because I called it "Raising the Ambition". It's "Realising"?

Heather Armstrong (27:44):

"Realising the Ambition: Being Me".

Amy Hall-Gibson (27:47):

There's a great thing in there that says about children "borrow" adults' knowledge and skills¹. They borrow it for when they need it, but then it goes back to the child being in the lead. And for me that bringing the storybook to life is absolutely that - they are borrowing you, borrowing your skills, but then you're then using your own knowledge and understanding to think about "Right, how else can I change this?" to open that door to them to let them see that you can do this little bit. We're still sticking to the story so that they don't get upset about that. But they can add in that little bit of imagination and do you know what? The moment that you do that, the moment that child will realise: "I can do this!"

Heather Armstrong (28:36):

There's something really beautiful about that, about recognising everyone's comfort zone, isn't it? So, I, again, [demonstrating is] terrible on Zoom. I'll put it somewhere physical online². I'm just going to mime this now [laughs].

If you can imagine almost like a dartboard where there's a circle in the centre and that's your

¹ Full quote: "Learning [is] a co-operative process between children and adults, where children 'borrow' adult knowledge and skills, and at any given moment the lead and responsibility passes back and forth. From the adult's point of view, one can imagine this as a 'ladder' that they can go up and down, always aware of the child's interest and initiative." *Realising the Ambition: Being Me*, page 50

² See the diagram on our Reflective Practice worksheet, downloadable here: www.starcatchers.org.uk/episode4

"comfort zone". And then there's another line outside it which is your "learning zone". And then another line outside it, which is the "panic zone". I think, definitely with adults, but sometimes with children, if you go straight bang into "We're going to do something imaginative and crazy!" you can take them from their comfort zone straight to the panic zone and it's too much and that can be about the children as people, it can be about the experience that they've had before then.

So, what you were talking about there is really lovely - this idea of saying "Well, actually I recognise your comfort zone and your comfort zone is this book, and you're not comfortable with my changing anything that's in the story, and that's fine. I don't want to take you to the panic zone, which is too far, but I'm gonna take you to your learning zone - the bit where you're a little bit outside your comfort zone - but that's where you're going to progress."

You know, it's that old adage, isn't it? If you always stay in your comfort zone, you're comfortable because you're doing the same thing over and over - so you're not learning, you're not growing. You're just comfortable and you're safe and that's important, but actually being able to go and just push outside a little bit into that learning zone, particularly if they're going in thinking "I can't do this." So maybe just raise those parameters just a little bit and then suddenly - you see the transformation, don't you?

Amy Hall-Gibson (30:12):

Oh yeah, absolutely. And I think actually if I was doing it for the very first time with a group of children I really didn't know that well, I would be doing exactly that - I would take it in baby steps because yes, there may be children within that group that're happy to kind of take it further, but I'm very aware of group dynamics as well.

Heather Armstrong (30:33):

And what you don't want is that, even if that are kind of like two or three, really creative outgoing children, that are extremely comfortable - if you set this challenge, that's too overwhelming for most of them - if that are two or three, then it's great for those two or three, but actually - it's what you're saying about the group dynamic isn't it? The rest of them may end up feeling "Well, I could never, I could never do that."

And although we do talk a lot about, you know, we talk a lot about children who are... they're just naturally creative and we are all born with that creativity, but I've absolutely worked with children that by the time they're three or four, they're just like, "No, I can't do that. I can't draw, I can't, I'm not doing that." and that's about the experiences they've had up until that point. So, to be able to offer them those creative opportunities that are going to stretch them a little bit, but without freaking them out is just really, really lovely.

Amy Hall-Gibson (31:26):

Yeah. It was really interesting actually, because I was working in a nursery [and] one of the activities we did was drawing this treasure map that we were then going to bring to life. But this child was really struggling with drawing in the sense of that they felt every mark they made was "wrong" and "wasn't right". And yet it was [right]! And it didn't really matter the amount of encouragement that both myself and the early years practitioner were giving - because they were

fab, that nursery was amazing - it was just that was the way they were.

But yet when we brought the treasure map to life, and me and the early years practitioner were able to recall what the child had drawn - and in their eyes had drawn "wrong" - when we brought it to life, we still included it.

And that child slowly over time - we're talking quite a long time, months rather than weeks - eventually I did do another. I felt like this was the time to do another kind of drawing activity - a mark-making activity - and there was a difference. It wasn't sort of "Oh! It's amazing. It's all fandabidozi!" No, no, but they were happy to draw something. And then they stopped before everyone else and were like "no, I can't do the rest," but compared to the very first time!

So yeah. I've seen that kind of first hand and that was... It was really good experience for me - but they being able to include their ideas, even though they weren't happy with the mark-making? Yeah. They were still part of it.

Heather Armstrong (33:01):

Yeah. Aww. I miss it so much! [laughs]

Amy Hall-Gibson (33:01):

[laughs] I know, so do I. It's not the same!

Heather Armstrong (33:08):

I mean, I say regularly to early years practitioners - you've got the best job in the world and I think this is really bringing it home to us - quite a lot!

Amy Hall-Gibson (33:18):

Absolutely.

Heather Armstrong (33:21):

So the third thing that I was really keen to talk to you about was this idea of story play, which we've kind of touched on a little bit, but can you expand on that and share your knowledge?

Amy Hall-Gibson (33:31):

Yeah. So, the structure of a story always has a beginning, a middle and an end. So, it's this idea that how can we structure that with the really young children? So, taking all those ideas that we've just shared about voice play, characterisation, even taking books that you're familiar with - how do we get that knowledge and understanding of there's a beginning, a middle and an end?

Because certainly I know from my own practice is that it's always "and then, and then" and there's a "the end!" - [it's] quite difficult to get to "the end". So instead of seeing the end, I always say "to be continued" because the reason that the children are saying: "And then! And then!" is because they don't want it to end. Story books end, but then you just go back and reread them and you can read them in a different voice, you can reread them as a different character, move about as a different character.

But how do - because I know that some settings really like this idea of creating a story as a nursery, or as a group. The beginning is the kind of easy part. So how I do it personally, is I plant the seed, which is the stimulus - so say, superheroes [for example]. So usually if I say: "Right, I want you to draw [or] mark-make some superheroes" and then we'll do a chat about the superheroes - what do superheroes do? Can you show me? Can you show me a pose? What do they sound like? - that type of thing. And again, I'll do a couple of suggestions, but I take their lead on it.

Nine times out of ten, it's always the Marvel ones, the DC Comics, and that is really difficult to get them to think about different superheroes. So how I did it was I modelled myself as a completely new superhero and I took the elements of the heroes that they like - because they like them for a reason. And I want to value that I don't want to discard it and say "That's wrong. It's not what I want". As soon as I put two things together - so say I put Spider-Man shooting web - I changed by changed it to... I think maybe one time I sprayed glitter.

Heather Armstrong (35:42):

Nice!

Amy Hall-Gibson (35:42):

But sometimes I don't know - spray a washing line, spray smelly socks! And I took the strength of Hulk and kind of combine them together. As soon as I did that, the door opened and they were open-minded, they didn't say I was wrong. And then there, they just took - some of them created completely new things themselves. They were like: "Oh, I'm a slippery superhero! I slide everywhere!" So that was the beginning. There's the beginning of the story. There're your characters, there's the beginning.

Then the middle part is what happens. So, then that was just again, through play. It was kind of watching them, what are they doing? And then I just, again, just kind of brought that together. In my own voice I said "Well, I can see you're doing that [and] you're doing that. What happens if we all come together?" And that was literally all I did was: what happens when we all come together? Sometimes they need a little bit more prompting. And again, I'll model it - I try not to talk too much, which is great [because] most of the time I talk a lot!

Heather Armstrong (36:44):

[laughs]

Amy Hall-Gibson (36:44):

So when I'm with the children I can not talk! [laughs]. And again, I'll just do a movement. I'll just make a sound and the children interpret it. There's your middle.

And then the end, that's a very much reading the group sort of figuring out - right, how are the group feeling about this? Again, I can suggest something. The kind of safe option is to just go to sleep, start snorting, whatever. But again, I'll initiate it - similar with the middle - but I don't say "the end". I always say "to be continued".

I have had a pre-schoolers ask the question, what does that mean though Amy? And I said "Well, that means that the story hasn't finished, it's having a break, a pause right now, but you can come back and visit any time." And usually when I revisit the nursery they've been playing it without me there and they are so keen to share with me this new part of the story.

And that this is how they understand a beginning, a middle and an ending, but it doesn't mean that it's a final end. It just means we're having a break. You know, the story stopping - I think it really kind of gets this idea of the pattern of how a story works, and when they go into the creative writing, once they move further up the education system, that's really inbuilt in them now - that is clear to them why there's a beginning, a middle and an end.

That choice they've had as well about choosing the character - they've chosen what's happened and they've chosen the ending as well. They've chosen... Some of them wanted to be "the end" - don't get me wrong - there are some like "No, no it is the end! We're not doing this!" and that's fine as well. You're also building up this idea of open-mindedness - everything is possible and don't just close off or dismiss something. And like you said earlier about the modelling, it is about modelling - about not dismissing ideas and just welcoming them all. Even if we don't agree with them or like them, it's not...Yeah. It's kind of like... kind of dealing with that. Yeah.

Heather Armstrong (38:46):

It sounds like that going through this process can actually stimulate some really important discussions. And it's those kinds of discussions that are going to help children develop what they call "divergent thinking" - the fact that there is more than one solution to a problem, there is more than one ending to a story. And just by... I think bringing that ethos in to say "well, that's her ending. That's, you know, that's her superhero, that's his superhero."

It's a really great life skill for children to be able to develop because it's partly the way brains develop. It's very natural for very young children to think in very like black and white terms and, you know, very binary - it's right, or it's wrong - but we're realising now that actually being right isn't a life skill! [We're realising] that we do need to think about creativity and divergent thinking and we do need to realise that, you know, there's, there's lots of different solutions to problems.

Because obviously what's going to happen is that as children grow up - it's that thing isn't it, probably most of the jobs they end up doing haven't even been invented yet. So how does the education system, including early education, how do we help prepare children for that? As well as just, you know, learning and enjoying in the moment.

Amy Hall-Gibson (40:01):

Absolutely. Yeah. It's that unconscious learning, isn't it? They're just playing. We all know play is important and that's kind of why I picked those three things. Cause it really made me... One thing lockdown has definitely done is kind of give that reflective opportunity to really look back and [ask] why is what I do important? Why should early years practitioners do it?

You know, I don't want early years practitioners to feel that they absolutely can't do something

because they've not had the training or whatever. And I say that to them. I go: "You're the professionals, you are the expert in early years, I'm coming in and I'm offering you my ideas, but you take them and you interpret them for your own setting because everybody works across such a variety and you all work with amazing unique little ones."

So, what I say in this podcast and in the room for the training will be adapted because it has to be because that's how I would do it. And even when they say, but how would you do it? And I can't... it's really hard to explain how because I'd need to actually be in the room. I need to show you how it's a really... yeah. It's a difficult question that, that one. [jokingly] so don't ask me that!

Heather Armstrong (41:20):

What I really love about the way you talk about your practice is that it absolutely honours this idea of being child led. So, I know when we've run sessions before and we've had artists sharing amazing ideas - really inspiring, wonderful ideas - and I've had practitioners come back and say "[We're] loving the ideas, but we're a child led setting so we can't introduce ideas" and I would have this moment where I'd be like: "Um... Really?" [laughs] But you know, obviously coming from an arts background, as you said we're here to share our ideas and try to inspire people - we're not here to tell people how to do their jobs. Absolutely. At all.

But I did have lots of conversations about this idea of being child led with my contacts and local authorities, people in education, and Education Scotland, did a bit of work with the Care Inspectorate - and I was like, please talk to me about this!

And actually, I think *Realising the Ambition* does a really good job of this is it says, kind of more explicitly than ever before, yes, we are absolutely about being child led and about picking up on children's interests and needs, and absolutely our practice has to be driven by that. But, as the adult in the room, we should be bringing wonder, we should be bringing ideas, we should be bringing inspiration and we should be seeing what they're interested in and then building on it³. But also, occasionally just bringing it in something that's just going to - maybe they're not going to be interested and that's fine - maybe it's going to blow their minds! Maybe the idea of, you know, reading *Room on the Broom* as a sloth is going to completely revolutionise the way they think about learning!

It's lovely hearing you talk about it and hearing you talk about drama and imagination. And it's less about this - I think sometimes there's a fear that if we put in too many ideas, then we're just telling them what to do. And so, I think when people feel scared, the natural - very natural - but the natural reaction is just to like stand back and have that kind of like, you know, crossed arms, "I'm going to lean against the wall. I'm not too sure about this, so I don't want to interfere" and there's a real art in knowing when to step in and give your ideas and then knowing when to step back and see what happens. And I think you've done a really lovely job of taking us through that today.

I'm really looking forward to developing all the resources are going to go with this. So, we'll get Wee Inspirations cards done, we'll get some filming done. And I'm really looking forward to your

³ See *Realising the Ambition: Being Me* page 30, page 49-50, page 67

Zoom sessions as well.

Amy Hall-Gibson (43:55):

Hopefully it'll be fun, you know? So more than anything you'll... everyone will have a giggle at least! And learn as well.

Heather Armstrong (44:03):

Listen, thank you so much for sharing your practice today, Amy. It has been lovely talking to you. Stay safe, stay healthy and I shall catch you for those live Zoom sessions soon!

Amy Hall-Gibson (44:14):

Thank you very much. Bye!

Heather Armstrong (44:16):

Bye!

Catherine Wilson (44:20):

The Creative Skills Podcast was hosted by Heather Armstrong, and our guest was Amy Hall-Gibson. You can find out more about Amy by following her on Twitter @AmyHallGibson.

Every episode of our podcast comes with resources you can access online to continue the creative conversation and spark even more inspiration. To find this episode's videos, Reflective Practice Worksheet and sign up for a live online chat with Amy go to www.starcatchers.org.uk/episode4

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