



The Creative Skills Podcast

Episode 6: Puppets, Sustained Shared Thinking and Sensory Wonders with Charlotte Allan
Transcript

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Transcript

Heather Armstrong (00:08)

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

We're nearly a year into the emotional rollercoaster that is the COVID-19 pandemic – a year ago I couldn't have imagined being able to run online, creative training for the early years workforce, and I think it's a massive testament to your creativity and adaptability that we're where we are today.

We've had thousands of downloads of resources, hundreds of people attend live, practical sessions online, and settings have even started making their own videos based on the ideas our artists have shared. Most importantly, whether they're at home or in settings, wee ones all over Scotland are still being encouraged to be creative and express themselves.

I know we all want to get back to the point where we can all be in the same room, sharing ideas, being creative and being inspired, but I hope these podcasts help bridge that gap in the meantime.

Today I'm joined by an early years theatre-maker and researcher Charlotte Allan. Charlotte runs sessions in drama and puppetry as part of the creative skills programme, and she's also the artistic director of Ipdip Theatre.

Hi Charlotte, how are you doing?

Charlotte Allan (01:25):

I'm good, I'm good!

Heather Armstrong (01:27):

So, I'm going to kick this off the same way I do with everybody and ask you to tell me a bit about your practice with wee ones.

Charlotte Allan (01:34):

What initially inspired me, as a theatre-maker, into making work for very young children was hearing talks from Starcatchers and Suzanne Zeedyk and talking about brain development and the research around how very young children interact with other humans from the very beginning. And I found that as an artist very fascinating - in terms of how do we communicate with pre-verbal people? And this idea of laying down neural pathways - I

was thinking [that] as a theatre-maker, I create things which you come into, you experience briefly once, and then you leave. And I thought how can that have an impact when it's all about repetition? So, I found that really interesting conundrum and that set me off down a journey of learning more about play theory. And as an artist, I was really inspired by research. And now I'm kind of like - having been on this like ten-year experience of making work and touring things and working more and more with Starcatchers and meeting more early years practitioners - and now [I'm] wanting to kind of take that step myself as a researcher and try and potentially produce some like useful learnings for the sector.

Heather Armstrong (2:51):

It's so exciting. Because normally what happens is as artists, when you work with wee ones, it tends to be that the art is the main focus and the interaction is the main focus and it's about that moment and that shared connection. And so, a lot of time my job is coming in and going "Well! Do you realise that actually you're building neurons? You're doing this with the brain! This contributes to literacy and numeracy!" But it's just, it's so lovely talking to an artist who's been on that journey and gone - well, actually I understand this in an artistic, kind of visceral level, but actually I'm really keen to understand it on a completely different level as well - kind of like looking at the research and the - like you're talking about - the brain development and all that kind of thing as well. It's massively exciting!

Charlotte Allan (03:40):

There is a place - I think there's a really strong place - for art to step in, you know, in these realms of the very deeply human and [the] really kind of essential stuff about who we are. Early developmental stuff, just strays very easily into philosophical concepts of the nature of humanity and reality and personhood and where do I end and you begin? - And all this kind of stuff. So, it's rich, I think for artists to play in that area. And especially when we're talking about embodied experiences and sensory experiences and non-verbal experiences that just have to be lived through.

In terms of where I come from as an artist, I've always been interested in shared creation and shared interactions, where it is that moment of magic where you are kind of hovering in this shared space of something new - kind of like comedy improv, which I've done as well.

And within that world there's a rule, the rule of improv is "yes and". Which is something that I like to share and bring into the sessions with Creative Skills with early years practitioners as, again, something to experience. So, the idea basically is you accept and then you advance, so you say: "yes and". And in the context of making a story together, you know, that looks like: "Once upon a time there was a tree." "Yes, and there was bird sitting

in it." "Yes, and the bird told me that I looked beautiful today." "Yes, and I smiled and you let it carry on." And the idea is that you don't stop and go "There was a bird in the tree, but it wasn't really a bird." It's like whoa whoa whoa no - we say "Yes!" and then we continue.

And that's a really verbal example, but in terms of how we play this out in a kind of creative play context it's still that same principle it's about [accepting in advancing]. In the Creative Skills sessions, we play a game where you catch an invisible ball. So that's an acceptance from somebody - you're accepting this imaginary ball and the "and" is that you can then change into something else. You can turn it into a tiny little balls, the size of a pea, or suddenly really heavy or whatever.

And then that's the "and" -it's like this lived through experience of always accepting somebody else and dealing with something else. So, it's like, you're not just following, but you're not just leading. And it's this lovely kind of flattened hierarchy of shared creation.

Heather Armstrong (06:17):

In early years, they refer to that as shared sustained thinking, don't they? It's this idea that you're both agreeing this world together, that your brains are kind of both going down the same path.

Charlotte Allan (06:26):

Yeah. And language does that. And that's what powers the giant that is human achievement, right? Because we have this incredible capacity for shared abstract thought and the sharing of something. That's a kind of a particular kind of special experience that sometimes can take a grown-up a bit of effort to get back into potentially. I think it's really worth it for the grown-up, as well as whatever, you know, in terms of meeting the child on their level and supporting their learning and that kind of scaffolding stuff that can happen. I just think it's really good for us to let ourselves actually share in something, you know, that we're not in total control of. I mean, what I love in terms of this idea of theatre or creation, is that just how powerful and beautiful, tiny little passing moments can be.

And, you know, we have a model of art as being this virtuoso finished thing that we put on a great pedestal and pay our precious money to observe and be part of or wherever. But I think there's also another kind of beautiful art, which is potentially seconds long and only ever happens once. And only the people who were actually there ever got to experience it. I think that I'd like to make space to celebrate that because I think those kinds of moments happen all the time in settings and in homes with little children. I think that that living in the moment of that, and actually being there and feeling it - and sometimes it isn't words that you can describe. It's just like a "wow" moment with your kid.

Heather Armstrong (08:13):

It's so funny. Just you talking about that I remember really clearly having a really stressful shopping trip when my daughter was wee and we all went to go for lunch and we sat down and I was just completely wiped out and my aunt turned a napkin into an inchworm. It was just using the napkin as an inch worm to like go around the table. And it just, it transformed the day! It transformed what was a really stressful difficult day into this really lovely, funny moment, and my daughter was engaged and we were all engaged and all of a sudden we became really invested in this inchworm napkin. Those little moments are what make life worthwhile I think, genuinely. Just whenever you can find them.

Charlotte Allan (9:01):

Yeah. And we can all do it, that's the thing! It's not like it's some special class of people that have access to this. And what excites me is that everybody's version of that is different. Again, like with me learning more about research and stuff, it's like how to make the specific as important as it is. And when it comes to something like sharing your own personal creative spark - bring Pixar in why not? It is yours, and it's not about learning the "correct" or the "best" way. It's accessing your own creativity in a way that invites somebody else to access theirs. There's genuinely as many ways of doing it as there are human beings. And that is part of the power.

Heather Armstrong (09:50):

I've always been really clear when it came to Creative Skills. That it's not about artists coming in and telling early years practitioners what to do. Yes, it's about sharing ideas, but it has to be about inspiration to help people find their own creativity.

Charlotte Allan (10:05):

Or like the phrase you use in the Wee Inspirations of "over to you wee one." Over to you - that, you know, that's the, that's the offer.

Heather Armstrong (10:15):

Yes! Yes!

So, you use puppets a lot don't you?

Charlotte Allan (10:17):

Yes - and! *[laughs]*

Heather Armstrong (10:21):

It would be so funny if you just went "no". "No, I don't Heather". It'd be like "oh well, the interview's over".

Charlotte Allan (10:26):

Yes, I do. I do use puppets and I think they're a great way of realising a shared imaginative space in the real world. So, you know, if we're creating something with somebody together they need a tangible thing that they can see moving through time and space to hang that story onto. Because that thing of imagining a story and keeping it going your head is really a quite sophisticated skill that doesn't kick in for a bit. And puppets, well, they have a number of amazing qualities, but that's one of them - you can get into transitional objects sort of territory in terms of - they're kind of part of you, but not you. So, they offer this sort of safe place to play with potentially difficult [ideas] or playing at the edge of your learning with them because they can be deactivated at a moment's notice.

And they're so simple - they only are what they are, they're not a complete, complicated, difficult human being that they're a puppet, you know? So, they're great vehicles for exploring communication.

And something that comes out of sessions a lot is how valuable practitioners find them with children with whom, you know, something like direct eye contact might be too strong, but you can communicate through a puppet. So, they become this like middle person as well. I think particularly for early learning practitioners looking to support children's social learning and their learning of the physical properties of the physical world and how the puppet can sort of sit in between those two things and both be an interesting physical object, but also a social object with intention and emotion and reactions.

Heather Armstrong (12:28):

And they can be quite a safe way to explore quite difficult emotions. Can't they?

Charlotte Allan (12:32):

Yeah. So, like an angry puppet or a mean puppet or something challenging. You know, you - as an adult - if you were to act certain emotions that might actually be quite scary for children because you've changed and you're being strange, or that voice is horrid or whatever, but you know, you put it into a puppet and it's somebody else.

Heather Armstrong (12:57):

And it's somebody else who only exists by that shared consent, isn't it? That shared sustained thinking.

Charlotte Allan (13:04):

And you can kill them like-

Heather Armstrong (13:06):

Oh god! [*laughs*]

Charlotte Allan (13:10):

[*laughs*] Do you know what I mean? Talk about difficult things and dark places. And again, I mean, that's something where the responsibility of the adult [comes in] - you know your children, you know what's appropriate and what's safe. And, you know, they're in that place of needing to explore things like life and death and like this really scary monster can be annihilated if it's an object that doesn't really have feelings.

And the example that I would have with my own children [was when] I was using all the toys to hand to re-enact The Lion King, because we'd watched it, we'd enjoyed the music. And I thought "Hey, let's watch the film" and turned out to be somewhat more emotional experience than I expected.

Heather Armstrong (13:53):

There's some trauma in there!

Charlotte Allan (13:57):

Hamlet, who knew? They wanted to hear the story over and over and over. And so, to help them with that to spatially put it out [we were] getting toys and saying, this is so-and-so and this is [and so on] we did that a couple of times. And then like later on, maybe that day, I can't quite remember, one of my kids had a cushion on the floor and was like jumping on it or like trampling on it. And I asked what was going on and they were like, big smile on the face, "That Simba's daddy and I'm the wildebeest."

Heather Armstrong (14:31):

[*laughs*] Oh my goodness!

Charlotte Allan (14:24):

And at first I was like [*nervous voice*] "Whoa!" But then I was like, well, actually what you've done there is you've managed to turn that story into something that you can understand in a context that feels safe. You know, it's a cushion, but all intents and purposes, it was a puppet, has helped you understand and replay that in such a way that - and they're starting to comprehend notions of, you know, something as big as death - in a way that is tolerable.

Heather Armstrong (15:07):

It shows as well that importance of the repetition, isn't it? So, by revisiting and allowing children to revisit what was initially quite a big impact on them emotionally, and perhaps brought up some difficult ideas that they had to process, until it becomes something you can play with.

Charlotte Allan (15:24):

Yeah. We want to be able to tolerate what life throws at us and not let these things

overwhelm us.

Heather Armstrong (15:31):

It's something I find really interesting because obviously there are art therapists and drama therapists and play therapists that do absolutely fantastic job, but I think it's good to remember as well that just, we all have that access to - and I don't think it's about necessarily using play with a specific [attitude] like "I'm going to fix that child mentality" - but just recognising that with play and with the arts there's inherently a therapeutic effect.

I think a lot of it is about just literally being able to process your emotions - to visit them, to explore them and to process them, particularly for wee ones. And particularly when you're talking about like, nonverbal or pre-verbal children, if you don't have the language to explore them, then it becomes even more important that you've got physical ways to do that.

Charlotte Allan (16:20):

Yeah. It's offering [alternative] languages, isn't it? It's offering alternative modes of communication. I think from what you're saying there one of the ways I feel like... to look at what the arts can do in quite a broad sense is especially in these sort of therapeutic notions, is thinking about the arts, not just as a medicine, but as like a healthy diet. So, it's not just thinking about, like you say, this notion of fixing problems, but also just like maintenance.

Heather Armstrong (16:54):

Wellbeing, I suppose, would be another word for it.

Charlotte Allan (16:57):

Yeah. Keeping that conversation open.

Heather Armstrong (17:00):

I should clarify, actually, when you're talking about puppets, I know when we say puppets, people might think of a kind of traditional kind of like Kermit the frog type puppet, the one that you have to buy and it's going to quite expensive, but you mean puppets and in a much broader sense, don't you?

Charlotte Allan (15:56):

Yeah. I think, I mean literally any object that you imbue with personhood, I think might be a description. So, it's your inchworm made of a napkin. That's a beautiful example of a puppet. Or the cushion that was Simba's dad, or an orange that you draw eyes on, or an object that you give it googly eyes and a voice and a character and an internal life.

I like using soft toys as puppets. That's something I've used in my performances. That's

partly as an example of going look, guys, you've got these at home, why not make it a puppet? But also, I think you can, depending on how hard the stuff, you can actually manipulate them in quite a lifelike way sometimes. Which can be a lot of fun! The wee video I made in lockdown was about picking up the toys that lying around. And then, you know, if you wanted to push your theatricality of it a little bit, what kind of tips and tricks from the world of puppet theatre could sort of support that in making your play just that little bit more.

Heather Armstrong (18:33):

A bit more engaging, I think. And it is that difference between an adult just kind shaking the teddy in front of the child and doesn't really understand why they're not getting a reaction - or that the reaction is a kind of slightly bemused or scared child - versus being able to just use a little bit of thought and, like you say, that kind of manipulation.

I'm going to share that video because I love it. It's a favorite of mine. You break it down so well. And it is just taking just everyday objects and just saying "Well, actually, if you just think about these certain things" then yeah, then it really does kind of bring this object to life in a really engaging way that I think, if you don't put the same effort and thought in, I don't think children engage in the same way.

Charlotte Allan (19:24):

And that's partly because if you put the effort and thought in and you're enjoying it, that's a huge draw because you're bringing your own fun there. You know, we're back to the kind of engaging your own creativity stuff. Like it's a great joy. So, you just made me think there, in the last podcast, Brian mentioned an experience he had with a little girl and a rabbit? And she took a photograph of the rabbit's-

Heather Armstrong (19:51):

Yes! Rabbit's Eye View.

Charlotte Allan (19:52):

And that thing of bringing your imagination into what the toy can see. That's a huge part of bringing it to life.

Heather Armstrong (20:00):

Did I tell you about the crisp packet puppet that the practitioner made?

Charlotte Allan (20:05):

I think I have heard this story!

Heather Armstrong (20:07):

Yeah, so for those of you that haven't heard me talk about this before, after one of our

puppetry sessions, back when Creative Skills was a live programme where people used to meet in rooms together - can you imagine?

A practitioner had been through this kind of process of exploring puppets - and puppets in a broad sense, bringing everyday objects to life. And she worked with a wee boy who they were really struggling to engage, I think he had sensory issues. And she ended up under the table with him talking to him for 45 minutes through the medium of a crisp packet. So, the crisp packet was the mouth. And I remember her sharing this story with us and she was just - she was so excited that such a simple thing could bring such a major breakthrough to get from nothing, no engagement to this really rich, meaningful connection and conversation. And then once that happened once then that connection was made, and they could start to build on that together. It goes back to what you're saying about those magical moments in the everyday and just really being able to recognise them and appreciate them when they happen.

Charlotte Allan (21:14):

I mean that practitioner was able to tune into that child in a way that they were then - they found the mode of communication that was going to work. And that comes about from that sensitivity on the part of the practitioner, doesn't it? And really seeing where that child needs that reaching out.

And you know, cause some children just will not accept an object being brought to life! It's like "No, that's a spoon. What are you doing?" So, I think it's also about always not being too precious about our own ideas as well. Like, you know, a lot of our ideas don't land. And that's okay. It's like they're not precious human babies. They're more like frog spawn. You just churn them out and some of them turn into frogs!

Heather Armstrong (22:10):

And that's why we use that word offer. It has to be an offer. Not a "I am subtly telling you that you have to do this". It has to be a genuine offer and that's why I'm always so keen to talk to so many artists and so many practitioners and share so many examples because there's not a one size fits all. It's not going to be that, you know, every boy with sensory issues is going to instantly start engaging because you've used a crisp packet. I mean, if that was the case, I could have made a lot of money a long time ago!

But it's almost just about having this bank of ideas and this bank of inspiration so that you've got loads of things that when you're in a challenging situation, being able to go: maybe this or maybe that. We're not here to tell you there's this whole new world that you've never realised existed before. It's about going: "Oh, amazing. Yes. I used to do that" or that bit that you're already doing - its already amazing!

Charlotte Allan (23:11):

It's that letting yourself lean towards what draws you in not to feel like: "Oh, I must like Mozart because I'm supposed to, and it's good for brains" or something, you know? It's like, well, if you like Mozart, awesome and introduce it to your child! But if it bores you rigid, it's not going to be a fun thing to share. It's about that real heart.

And I'm really loving how much and how willing so much research and pedagogy stuff is open to talking about love and children's spiritual needs, you know, these big concepts that sometimes our rational world gets kind of afraid of. Once we crack that open, we have to start talking about the adult's hearts and their love and what they love, and the fact that you love your children, you love the children you work with and you know, that's powerful.

Heather Armstrong (24:10):

It just really makes me think about the role of the early years practitioner and how much of a human being you still have to be. Does that make sense? And that thing of like, if you don't look after yourself, if you don't look after your own creativity and your own spark, and your own joy really, it's really difficult. It's really difficult to go in and create joyful, engaging, happy experiences if you don't get the opportunity to feel that yourself, you know?

Charlotte Allan (24:42):

Yeah. Yeah.

Heather Armstrong (24:44):

We spoke before about this kind of sense of awe didn't we? About the importance of that. In other kind of documents and things, it talks about "a sense of wonder" being an important part of the learning experience, but that's something you're really interested in, isn't it?

Charlotte Allan (25:02):

Yeah. I'm interested in, I think... coming from an arts context and how art can provide that in terms of an offer that I'd like to suggest is to share a "wow" experience with your child in a deliberate way, from the perspective of something that you are excited by as the adult. So, it's not so much kind of like- I'm going to plan this sensory activity because I think it's a good idea. It's more like, I want to find a sensory activity that I want to sense and actually go through the senses and list them and think what do I... What kind of touch, or like, what do I want to feel? What sounds? Something that I can just be like: "Oh yeah, this makes me feel alive! This experience makes me know that I'm alive." And then the thing is, how do I bring my child to this experience or the child I'm working with? How do I let them in on that, that little wow?

And I think in terms of listing senses as well, to add on the sense of bodily body in space.

So, this sort of – “proprioception” is the name - because I think that idea of jumping up and down or being on a swing or dancing to slow music, those feel different to each other and are a sensory experience in themselves. And it's something again that we can share a certain way of moving. So just to add a sixth sense. So thinking about the senses in that way.

I am quite excited by the idea that we can share something with somebody so radically different to us in other ways, someone that maybe doesn't even talk and sees the world quite differently and has very different life experiences - but we can connect on a level that's either deeper or higher, depending on what metaphor you want to go for, but it's something that we, you know... those moments that we can share in. And you know, music does it very beautifully. There's loads of different ways you can have these beautiful moments of connection that... where you're like: "Here we are, two humans."

Heather Armstrong (26:20):

There's a few things happening when you share those experiences together, isn't there? I think first, and particularly if you're talking about babies and very young children, if it's a brand-new experience, almost the first thing that they're going to do is they're going to look to their adult to say well is this okay? And, you know, babies are very good tuning into our reactions. So, if we're faking it, they're going to know, you know? If we're going: [*strained voice*] "Oh great."

Charlotte Allan (27:51):

If you don't like the slime!

Heather Armstrong (27:52):

Yeah! If it's like: [*strained voice*] "Oh great... slime... I'm so happy... Let's have a shared experience here." If you can choose a genuine wow moment for you where you have a fair idea that "I'm really going to enjoy this as a sensory experience", or at least be open to that idea, then very young children will pick up on that genuine excitement.

The visual art example is always putting the big bit of paper on the floor, but then you get down on your tummy and you start drawing, you know? And it works across all art forms. It works across just about anything to be honest, if an adult they care about is excited. Then the chances are they're going to be excited and engaged as well.

Charlotte Allan (28:35):

And even if they're not, you've still got to do something you like to do.

Heather Armstrong (28:39):

That's true! You still get five minutes playing with water beads until you go "All right,

they're really not digging this". And that's okay! At least I got five minutes of playing with water beads.

Charlotte Allan (28:50):

Yeah, yeah!

Heather Armstrong (28:51):

[jokingly] Which is really important.

Charlotte Allan (27:34):

I mean, why not? Like, you know, you make an offer why not make it one that you'd be happy to stick with?

Heather Armstrong (29:03):

I remember a few years ago I set up a very kind of informal conference and we hired - it was for adults. We wanted children to be there but in a kind of logistical point of view, it was never going to happen. And I hired a soft play and we set up a sandbox and a ball pool and it was beautiful. Oh, we had little go carts as well, that was the other thing that came.

And just walking around the room. It was amazing seeing the connection and some very silly things happening, which is great and really important. As adults, we need silliness and we need to burn off that energy sometimes as well. We need to remember what it's like to be children, but also, I remember these two, I think it was two lecturers - two early years lecturers - sitting in the sandpit and playing with the sand as they spoke about something really quite deep. And they were talking about policy development and I was like isn't it great that they're able to have this sensory experience at the same time? You could see, they were able to kind of slow down and use the sand as a way to kind of be in the moment and just really connect. And I just think if we can do that with the ones all the time, then, you know, it's fantastic. It's such an important way of learning.

Charlotte Allan (30:28):

Yeah, yeah. With your whole self and all the languages and all that.

Heather Armstrong (30:33):

Yeah. Something that kinda struck me way back at the start of our conversation when you were saying that repetition is the important thing, so how does this one moment of wonder come into that? But actually it's both. I used to really struggle with that as well - I was like "Oh, babies learn through repetition... but they also need lots of experiences! So, what is it? Which one is it?" But it's both, isn't it? They need that wow moment. They need that sense of wonder, but then they also need to be able to explore those experiences again and again and again.

Charlotte Allan (31:04):

And they turn to their trusted adult within that moment, you know, what is repeated is or what is constant is that relationship. That goes beyond that moment and it is strengthened and carries that wow forward.

Heather Armstrong (31:26):

A really great example of that wow moment, I remember talking to practitioner in Aberdeen and it was around about autumn time and we were talking about outdoors and the wonder of outdoors, which is, you know, a massive thing - and that's mentioned in *Realising the Ambition* a lot. But what she did was that they - in the kind of foyer, the entrance of their setting - they actually brought in loads and loads of autumn leaves. And for a week they had these kind of dry, crunchy autumn leaves all over the floor. As soon as I heard that I was - I had a wow moment just hearing about it.

Charlotte Allan (32:03):

It an art installation, isn't it? Imagine that in Turbine Hall!

Heather Armstrong (32:07):

I know, right? And it was beautiful. We were talking about it and, I mean, first of all, just as an awesome idea, you know, like awesome in it's that it's genuinely inspiring awe. And I can imagine if you were a wee one that was maybe struggling with transition and struggling to come into that nursery - to take that transition space, and instead of being a stressful space, to be like somewhere of awe. To be like "Oh my goodness, look at this, this is bonkers, but this is amazing!"

So we spoke about that. And we also spoke about there were some parents that were complaining, you know, "Oh the mess" and dah, dah, dah, and we were talking about relationships with parents and how to help them understand. I was saying it's completely understandable - we are very much in this bubble of kind of early years and arts and early years development where we understand awe and wonder and magic are actually like really important. That doesn't mean that people in the street think that, you know? If you're your average person, you may well be thinking "But I need them to learn to count and write their name before they go to school, stop mucking about with leaves!"

And my whole thing was like, so if you talk about it as a vehicle for learning, talk about this moment of awe or wonder as a vehicle for learning the kind of more traditional things, [for example] how are you going to learn to count to ten? What's going to be more inspiring? Is it going to be crunching up and down going one, two, three, four, five, six in these leaves and this amazing experience. Are you going to remember that more? Or are you going to remember sitting at a table with some laminated pictures of plastic ducks?

I'm really interested in that awe and wonder and magic just in its own right and I think it's really important to protect, but I also think we need to get really good at talking about it in really like concrete terms as well. To say, well actually, this *is* helping language development because children are more likely to talk and increase their vocabulary if they have something like genuinely exciting and wonderful to talk about and process. Or, you know, numeracy or whatever. So, it's being able to talk about it and protect it.

Charlotte Allan (34:40):

Yeah. And I think you mentioned this earlier, but the huge value in who you're learning with. So, the relationship with the teacher/practitioner/parent - the adult who is supporting your learning, is hugely, hugely important. Relationships are hard. They don't always come easy and sometimes they take effort.

Creating the conditions - this is something we've not mentioned yet - I'm big into that idea of like, again, it's this idea of an offer, isn't it? It's not so much about saying "I'm going to do this so this will happen." It's like, what do I do to create the conditions that enable the emergence of that to be most likely? So, it's not such a direct cause and effect it's about putting those, like, like you say, the hall of the leaves - that's creating conditions. That's a huge offer for all kinds of things that would happen.

And I love the idea of making offers where you have a few thoughts of like "Oh, maybe the children will do this, or maybe they'll react like that." But you're also just like "I'm excited to find out what learning occurs, because I don't know yet what it's going to be. I just know something will". And creativity supports relationships, it supports trust which is huge. Like you say about they're turning to that trusted adult. It's community. We're creating awesome communities.

Heather Armstrong (35:56):

Yeah. And I think it's important to remember as well, it's about quality rather than quantity, isn't it? It's about finding that idea that really excites you.

Charlotte Allan (36:05):

What you already do, like you said, we do so much of this, and we should congratulate ourselves for our existing wonderfulness.

Heather Armstrong (36:16):

So. Here's the thing, right. And here's when my own biases come in. Until I started working with you, I always thought sock puppets were a bit rubbish in that I had come across a lot of sock puppets, and they just didn't excite me because it was like a sock...

Charlotte Allan (36:38):

With something in it?

Heather Armstrong (36:39):

It was a sock with a hand in it and maybe like a couple of eyes, but they were just kinda baggy mouthed and didn't really have any character. And I was always just like "eugh". And I think I probably brought that through as well. So if the adult with the sock on it is like "eugh" then obviously the wee one you're trying to engage is going to be a bit "eugh" as well. But your sock puppets are amazing! Could you talk me through how it works? I think it was the one with the disc as the mouth.

Charlotte Allan (37:12):

The judgmental guy.

Heather Armstrong (37:14):

Yeah! [*laughs*] Talk us through what you did to make him so judgmental, but so full of character. And then we'll try and get a little video or something to help people see what we're talking about.

Charlotte Allan (37:26):

Basically. I said - imagine I'm somebody with very little time and resources - can I make a sock puppet without too much effort? Because I wanted to share it in a doable way.

And I also wanted to, again, this idea of exploring dark-ish things, I wanted to make potentially "bad" characters. One of them turned into a snake who ended up looking really kind of cute and has never - it just doesn't have an evil bone in his body so the evilness failed, but it's still quite a cute snake. And then the other one was this - I think he's like this dark force that hovers sometimes in Creative Skills workshops where you feel like "Oh, I can't be too silly. My colleagues will think less of me" And so he kind of like became that kind of oppressive thing.

And he is made out of a sock. If there's one thing that makes a big difference, it's his mouth. So, it was just a circle of cardboard that is glue gunned on and then folds in half to be a flappy disc. And having a mouth that you can control helps you give it voice. And it helps again, that floppiness-

Heather Armstrong (38:48):

Helps define the mouth, doesn't it?

Charlotte Allan (38:51):

Yeah. And the other thing about him is the mouth isn't at the end of the sock it's like say it's about where the heel is. In fact it might be actually on the heel - and that actually helps with the mouth shape.

Heather Armstrong (38:01):

Ah okay! Top tip.

Charlotte Allan (39:05):

But then if you think about beyond the heel is the whole foot area and you stuff that, so you put something in it to keep it have form. Then it's like a rounded thing that you can put eyes on. And he's got like, again, glue gunned googly eyes. And then that kind of foam stuff that you can cut with scissors - that thin foam - in bright colors to cut out like nose and evil eyebrows, in his case, judgmental eyebrows. I think he's stuffed with stuffing.

So, if you're going to make soft toys or puppets or whatever and you need stuffing go to Ikea and buy a pillow that costs £2 - do not go to the craft shop. It's still going to meet your fire safety requirements, but it's a lot cheaper.

But [another] way you can do that is you can just use the other sock. And if you're going to be playing with children that are going to be turning it inside out and, and whatnot, then loose stuffing, isn't going to work [for] that long.

Heather Armstrong (40:11):

You're not going to be surprised to know that I'm absolutely not a fan of step-by-step craft things for very young children, particularly when they're not age appropriate. But I can absolutely imagine and I know there are times when actually it is useful for children to be able to each make their own puppet - whether it's with a sock or whether it's with, I don't know if you've seen them, you can make a puppet with like a little triangle from a-

Charlotte Allan (40:40):

Like the yoghurt corners?

Heather Armstrong (40:42):

Yeah - are you thinking of a tip of yoghurt?

Charlotte Allan (40:46):

No, I'm thinking of the ones where they're like a corner bit and you can... they can become a mouth.

Heather Armstrong (40:50):

Ah, yes! No, sorry, from an egg carton. You can cut like three egg sections together and then it becomes like a nose and two eyes. So you can use that really easily. I can imagine that actually there will be times when it's really useful for early years practitioners to have ideas and say "Well actually, how can children make their own puppet if they want?"

Charlotte Allan (41:10):

Oh yes. So, if you're doing it with children. They [will] want to choose where they put their eyes and the mouth and the eyebrows and all that kind of thing. Hair is great, floppy bits of wool, that brings that kind of Muppet life to stuff. It's great to have a bit of extra flop. So, they will want to choose where they put them. And so, you need some kind of sticky thing that works temporarily and then you take it away and you glue gun it.

Heather Armstrong (41:34):

Genius!

Charlotte Allan (41:35):

So it's like a two-step process because - such things may exist, but I have not yet discovered a non-hot, but effective way of sticking something to fabric in that moment. There's probably some super expensive fabric glue that I haven't tried. But, in terms of what we've done in workshops, that that has been the process.

Heather Armstrong (41:55):

This is what I love about working with you. You bring the proper philosophical ethos and you also bring the hot tips. So, it's like - use the double-sided tape or whatever so that the children have a genuine say in how it's made, but then afterwards, you come back and do a bit hot glue gunning to make it actually secure, so it's usable.

Listen, it's been so lovely talking to you. My face is actually hurting from smiling so much!

Charlotte Allan (42:22):

Aww!

Heather Armstrong (42:23):

It's been fantastic. You're going to be running some Zoom sessions for us in a few weeks as well, aren't you? So, people will get to meet your sock puppets, maybe?

Charlotte Allan (42:35):

Yeah! Puppets online is a whole new world.

Heather Armstrong (42:38):

By the time this is released, I don't know whether we will still be in lockdown. I suspect we probably will.

Charlotte Allan (44:45):

Maybe we'll be on the streets, hugging each other!

Heather Armstrong (44:47):

Aw licking. Licking and hugging. It's going to be amazing. If, in the unlikely event there are practitioners who are having to put online content on from home - puppets are a really great way to do that. Isn't it?

Charlotte Allan (43:01):

Yeah. Cause you can frame it in a way that in real life we [have to] do all these things to try and, you know, bring the, uh, to help support the magic and make the puppets seem really real. Whereas in a Zoom call, you can just duck out of shot and like put the puppet in and we buy it, you know what I mean? Suddenly we're just watching the puppet and we'll listen to whatever they have to say. So, there's been some fun times with whole Zoom calls entirely made of everybody just like ducking out of their view and putting the puppet in and a huge conversation. Or like we've had like little arguments going on - all between staplers with eyes glued on and all kinds of stuff like that.

Heather Armstrong (43:50):

Yes, I'm really excited to be able to explore that live with people. And just to say if we are still in lockdown, which I suspect we will be, and you're looking to make simple videos that are going to help with encouraging play and learning for the wee ones that are stuck at home - then come and join me in Charlotte on Zoom. And we are going to be having lots of fun with yogurt pots and all sorts.

So, thank you so much for today and I look forward to working with you again soon Charlotte!

Charlotte Allan (44:18):

Thank you. Thank you very much. This has been lovely.

Heather Armstrong (44:20):

Bye!

Charlotte Allan (44:21):

I'll see you soon. Bye!

Catherine Wilson (44:26):

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Our intro music is "Road Building" composed by Abigail Sinar and performed by the RSNO for "Hup" in 2014.

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