



CREATIVE SKILLS
ONLINE

The Creative Skills Podcast

Series 2, Episode 4: How do I...find space?

Transcript

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Transcript

Heather Armstrong (00:09):

Welcome to the Creative Skills podcast, I'm Heather Armstrong. In this series we want to focus on the challenges the early years practitioners face when we want to be more creative with wee ones. If we were in a room together, these are the conversations that might happen over a coffee, and as we talk about trying out new ideas in our settings. Each episode will take one topic and speak to different artists and folks who work in early years to find practical solutions to creative challenges.

This episode, we're looking at space, and in particular, when you feel that you don't have any. Lack of space is an issue that practitioners have mentioned to me a lot over the years. Sometimes it's about the design of the building they're in, sometimes they're in a school but can only access the hall a couple of times a week, and I've also worked with childminders who are working between a room in their house and their garden.

For every setting that has woodlands, beaches and accessible wild spaces on their doorsteps, there will be others who are surrounded by tarmac and crowded urban environments. Restrictions around COVID have meant a lot of settings creating bubbles and dividing areas, which obviously restricted the space available for each group of children and practitioners. And now, with the expansion of early learning in childcare in Scotland, more settings will be working to capacity.

In early years we can often find spaces a bit limited. The obvious answer is to use outdoor space, but what if your outdoor space is limited too? For this episode, I spoke to artists about how they adapt to small spaces both indoors and outdoors, as well as how to find inspiration and creativity in seemingly uninspiring surroundings. First up, I spoke to Hazel Darwin-Clements and Charlotte Allan, two theatre makers and drama artists who deliver sessions for our Creative Skills programme.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (01:56):

Hi, my name's Hazel Darwin Clements, and I'm an associate artist with Starcatchers. And for many years, I've worked in various childcare settings and spaces with the most fantastic collaborators as well - which are young people.

So, I suppose it's about thinking about the fact that although your physical space is limited, your imagination isn't. It can go wherever it likes. That, then, becomes really exciting and it's about creating an environment in which you say "yes" to ideas that come up. And you follow those through and you expand the picture in your imaginations by using sensory descriptions and thinking about the details of that space. So, in your mind you're taking out

and you're playing, and you can be anywhere you like. In terms of interacting with the space itself.

Heather Armstrong (02:52):

Yeah.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (02:53):

I think there's something about clearing it and using it as creatively as possible so that it can change on different days with different lighting, with different textures and you can clear the whole floor and cover it in stuff that you could paint or things that you, you might want to feel. Just keeping that space revolving indoors and outdoors - I mean, nature already does that for you, aren't you lucky? So, you get the season changes and you get to notice those things. When you do have a small space that you keep coming back to and there's also something important about making connections, for example, with one tree throughout different seasons. So having something in that space that does change itself with seasons, or that you can change by bringing in different things. We did a, a little video didn't we? About the noticing tiny details?¹

Heather Armstrong (03:52):

Yes!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (03:52):

Using them as stimulus for stories. So, if there is a tiny hole, a crack in the wall - children are amazing at this. We have an ivy bush on the way back from our nursery run and we're always looking in there to see the different changes, the sounds of it, the magic and, you know, the whole world is in a leaf [laughs].

Heather Armstrong (04:17):

Yeah. I think there's sometimes so much to gain from like getting down on your tummy with them or just getting down low and, and seeing some of those kinda tiny details. Isn't it?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (04:30):

Yeah. You're able to unlock your own imagination there.

[transition music]

Charlotte Allan (04:42):

My name's Charlotte Allan. I am a theatre maker with my theatre company, Ipdip Theatre. And I'm also a post-graduate researcher and particularly interested in the adult-child relationship in the context of performing arts.

Well, I think one of the opportunities is that a small space gives you is the, it, it makes it

¹ See the "Mini Worlds" video here: <http://www.starcatchers.org.uk/episode3>

easier to completely transform it. So, the less surface area you have to deal with the less you have to address. And you can approach that idea of like creating a [sings] “a whole new world!” - but not that song [laugh] in your nursery space which can be connected to something you’re working towards. So, you can sort of build up to it and then they know that something’s gonna be different. And then you come back [to the setting] and this week suddenly we’re all underwater or we are in the time of the dinosaurs or whatever. And if the space is small, you’ve got a greater opportunity then to like, whether it’s covering things or adding in decorations.

And even if it’s not the whole space I think transforming a doorway, so it’s like you have that moment of like a portal into another dimension. You can unwrap a doorway, you can burst through it, or you can have things that dangle down. Or – it’s kind of like Mr. Ben if that’s not too ancient to reference! But yeah, it’s going through into a new imaginative space. That can be an advantage of a smaller space because then you’ve got less space that you have to deal with to do that [laugh].

Heather Armstrong (06:30):

What a great way of looking at it, turn it into positive. So, is that an idea that could work for a small outdoor space as well?

Charlotte Allan (06:38):

Yeah, I don’t see why not. I think outdoor spaces naturally lend themselves to having imaginative layers put on them. I think more easily they’re somehow more neutral because they’re less contained. We can decide before we go what the outside is gonna be, and the imaginative environment that we want to pretend that we’re all in.

The great thing about pretending that we’re all in another space is you know, you can stay who you are. You don’t have to pretend to be somebody else - you’re still you, you’re just responding in a way to a new stimulus! That’s a shared imaginative stimulus. And there’s a lot of fun to be had in that, especially when you get to the stage of being able to talk about imagined things - it’s lovely.

Heather Armstrong (07:32):

That sounds like quite a gentle introduction to ideas around drama.

Charlotte Allan (07:41):

Yeah!

Heather Armstrong (07:42):

I know that some practitioners, and actually some wee ones as well, if you go straight into “We’re all gonna be bears!” some just aren’t comfortable. So that idea of changing environment but you can still be *you* within it, it’s actually really lovely.

Charlotte Allan (07:57):

Cause then the question is what would *you* do in this situation? Not what “would you do if

you were a princess” in this situation or whatever - you're still *you*. And in terms of experimenting with responses and whether it's showing big emotions or, say we're underwater, for example, or in the time of the dinosaurs, and then there's a dinosaur, do we all get to pretend to be frightened? There's a safety in it because it's not a real dinosaur and we all get to enjoy the kind of seeing what fear looks like or feels like and then we can put it on and take it off like a costume [laughs].

Heather Armstrong (08:38):

Yeah, and it's being able to explore emotions within that imaginative context. It's a really safe way to do it for wee ones isn't it?

Charlotte Allan (08:48):

Yeah! And I think, especially because especially when the adult they trust is, is there holding it, they know there's someone there who's got a handle on what's going on and can tell it's going too far and can really provide that safe structure for then experimentation in play. And I think that's where the trusted adult is really important actually in holding that, for them and allowing the learning to happen around it.

Heather Armstrong (09:25):

I love the way both Hazel and Charlotte talk about the positives of small spaces and how to get the most out of them. Whether you're sharing into tiny details, or transforming the space with a few materials and a lot of imagination. Creating shared imaginative spaces is fantastic for developing emotional literacy, empathy and problem-solving. And over the years I've known practitioners who have used these ideas to explore other areas of learning too, including expanding vocabulary.

But what happens if you're working in small spaces with young children who have a lot of energy to burn? How do we explore and develop those gross motor movements when we don't have the space to swing a proverbial cat? The good news is creative movement is still possible. I spoke with Skye Reynolds, a dance artist who's currently artist in residence at Scott's Corner Early Learning and Childcare Centre about what she has learned from delivering movements and rough and tumble sessions in small spaces.

Skye Reynolds (10:19):

I'm Skye Reynolds, and I'm a movement artist. And I work with Starcatchers Creative Skills programme. And I'm passionate about working with young people to explore creativity in movement.

A small space that springs to mind that I've been in recently is a cozy room in a nursery, which is quite a small space - it was designed for resting and sleeping. It has bookshelves and I've been in it when it's had a sofa in it and a little tent in the corner. And I've been in it when it's had in it, when it has nothing in it at all. And we've used that space for movement activities and reading and playing in different ways when it's had furniture in it and when it's been empty.

So, one of the activities that, that we used it for which I think was successful and really fun for the children was bringing in two soft mats. They were small soft mats and we put them on the floor and we were using this as an indicator of time for us to do a little bit of rough and tumble. So, we had a small number of children in there, and we used the mats to play low level, so close to the ground. And to keep the play, the quite active physical play quite contained. So, the size of the space was really helpful for doing that because we weren't in a huge hall where children might feel like they wanna run around and throw themselves on the mats if we had them in there, but we had them in the small space and exploring smaller movement, but in a very energized way.

So, I think it was really about how we set the room up for that. It didn't really matter that it was a small space. It also meant that the play could evolve safely and as I said in a contained way but it could also wind down and then become a much more relaxed experience where the children were able to then rest on the mats.

And of course, in a lot of the nurseries now a lot of experiences are child led. So the door is usually open and children can come and go and there were smaller children that come popped their head and watched. And in fact, one, one of the very smaller children who, who was having a little bit of trouble settling, wanted to come into the room and sit and watch this activity. So, I think the sort of the size of the space encouraged a kind of an intimacy of play with the children.

We've also used that room for moving with scarves. So, we put some music on the iPad, and we brought some scarves out just to see what the children would do if they wanted to use the scarves in different ways. And then helped to kind of facilitate a smaller movement journey. So that means generally a smaller number of children – as many as we could squeeze themselves into the room - but it meant that the size of the space is going to inform how much movement we can do with our arms and with the scarves. But it certainly wasn't inhibited by the space because I feel that the size of the room influenced how we were working.

It also meant that we could talk a little bit, we could pass some language around about what we were doing, because the children could hear us. The volume of the music was lower, we weren't having to project across a bigger room. And we could see each other more clearly. So, it felt that the language of the movement was perhaps a little bit softer in that moment.

And again, I at some point brought the soft mat in because I think the children prefer to come closer to the floor when there's a soft mat. And that ended up in a scarf pile up! So, different children lying on the mats, having little rests. And then we took turns covering each other with the scarves and then jumping up as if it was a big pile of leaves. I've also done this work in larger spaces and I think it's exactly the same work. It just means that we don't take up as much space, we don't locomote as much. So, the work is perhaps a little bit

more local it's less about roaming and more being more detailed and expressive on the spot or in a smaller space.

Heather Armstrong (14:42):

It's really interesting because I think a lot of people would be nervous about trying to do movement in a small space. And I'm assuming the fear would be that, you know, as you're trying to move your scarf you're moving your arm and kids are accidentally whacking each other! Or, I know always rough and tumble the fear is "what if someone takes it too far", but it sounds like in some ways the small room is helping with that rather than if they'd been in a big space. Is, is that right? Is that what happened?

Skye Reynolds (15:16):

Yeah, I think, I think you've hit the nail on the head there. I mean, also to just contextualize those two examples, when we were working with the scarves, I was following the lead of one of the practitioners and the children had requested some music. So, she put some music on in this room and the children started moving to the iPad.

They were actually following a video that they had there of movement. And I thought I'm gonna go and get the scarves because that would enable them to use a prop to move and involve more of their body and less watching of the screen and that was kind of my intention in doing that.

So, I layered the scarf into something they were already doing, and that's exactly what happened when the video ran out. In fact, the iPad ran out batteries and I was there ready with my speaker and I plugged it straight in and it became sort of transitioned from one of those sort of visual or watching moments where the body is a little bit landlocked frontally, because it's watching something and the children are copying. But it got them moving in a beautiful way.

And then myself and, and my colleague joined them with the scarves and actually we didn't have any concerns about the arms hitting anybody, partly because I think the children were already moving with a certain quality. So, the scarves sort of complimented and just added to what they were already doing.

And then, I think the nature of the scarf material, and the fabric is so delicate that it sort of influences a certain type of movement. For example, I have some ribbons on sticks and that's something I wouldn't have brought out in that small space. Cause I think you definitely could have ended up with a situation that wasn't as comfortable with the, with that prop! I think the other thing is I will often seek a more contained space if I'm wanting to do something like rough and tumble. So, I've set those mats up also in the garden and the garden has some small nooks and crannies and I took the soft mats out there and put them in that nook and cranny because I feel that the containment helps the focus of the activity and the focus for the children.

So, it's a slight of enclosed idea, which is which a small space offers. Because if you are

looking at something like rough and tumble or low level play or tumbling on mats, actually often the children are staying within the confine of the mats when they're doing that activity. So, it doesn't really matter how big the space is in fact a smaller more contained space is often easier because there's less distraction. What I think is important in a small space is to make sure it's clear and that there aren't shelves and other bits of furniture.

Heather Armstrong (18:11):

So, what other ideas could we be using in small spaces?

Skye Reynolds (18:18):

Well, I'm thinking about musical statues, where you freeze on different body parts. So you could move on the spot more or spin on the spot or stay quite close to each other in a small space. But when you freeze, you have to freeze on your tummy or you freeze on your knees or you freeze on one hand and one foot, and that's a way of creating physical variation and movement, but it's not based on running around and skipping and jumping and rolling.

And the other thing that I enjoy doing in small spaces is, is sharing a story with children. So, either from a book or something that I'm, I'm making up and encouraging them to physicalize the emotions or some of the actions, so they might be seated but instead of being static, they're being encouraged to move and express. And I think again, the container of a small space can be really helpful with that because rather than getting distracted in how they're responding, their interaction is between the book and them.

And I think one of my other favorite ideas is using the tape to create to create a space. So, giving children small roles of tape, masking tapes and asking them to attach it or, or stick it to different parts of furniture and, um, and changing, changing the space. So, when you create different entry points and portals and level in a small space, it's, it's not a small anymore because you have to interact with it in a different way.

I think there's some nice massage ideas we can do in, in small spaces when we could sit in, in a circle and I do one with an *Incy Wincy Spider* song. So you find a partner and you, you trace up, you sing *Incy Wincy Spider*, you're tracing your fingers up their spine and then the rain coming down the back and, and then swapping partners. And that's, that's an easy one to do in small spaces and actually good to do because it's quite a calming, um, sort of close contact idea.

Heather Armstrong (20:26):

There's no doubt that creative movement in a small space does need a bit of thought and planning. Cleaning the space and choosing props and creative provocations carefully. But it strikes me that when you're not constantly having to raise your voice to catch everyone's attention in a large echoey hall, there are more opportunities to be responsive, really tune into wee ones and to bring more nuance, to creative movement without compromising self-expression and that need to develop gross motor skills.

Of course, it's not just indoor spaces, it can be small. So, I spoke to Skye about what it's like to work outdoors and small spaces.

Skye Reynolds (21:07):

I've been taken on a bug hunt in a very small space in the garden by one of the children who really loves bugs. And he usually carries a book about bugs around with him and, you know, bugs are very small, and they take up a very small space. So, opportunities outside as well to explore the landscape, whether you are in your garden or if you're have a part close by the, the sensory world is, is about more than movement. It's about the listening and the seeing and the touching. So, it might be about lying down on the back and looking up and experiencing that view, or it might be about looking underneath - going under a tree and feeling the bark and exploring the details that are available in a smaller space.

Heather Armstrong (22:00):

Skye brought up a really interesting idea. What kind of spaces can you access outside your setting within your local community? Here I am talking to Hazel again.

Heather Armstrong (22:14):

I actually wondered if settings could maybe explore some of the area around them. I probably need to get some permissions and things in place, but I know some of the ideas you shared before was about that – wasn't it? Kind of going on a walk-

Hazel Darwin-Clements (22:26):

Absolutely! So, not being stuck in your small space. I mean, you can go anywhere and it's so important for you to find some green, outdoor safe place that children are able to run and explore. And freedom is such an important gift that you have to find a way of holding and facilitating.

And what is it that's making people afraid of using such and such a space? Are those barriers “overcome-able”, because, you know, sometimes it's possible to be using somewhere that's even perhaps a distance. Thinking about, okay, so the barrier is the distance. What can we do about that? Is there, is there a transport option that we haven't thought about? Is there help that we can ask for? Is there a way of weaving that in?

Heather Armstrong (23:23):

Yeah. Do you know, this has reminded me of the Playground Project that Starcatchers did, was it 2012-2013?² And one of the barriers to accessing more green space was ratios. They needed a greater number of adults there. But it was actually a really great way to improve parental engagement in the setting was to say “we want to go to this woodlands, but we need more pair of hands.”

² Find out more about The Playground here: <https://starcatchers.org.uk/work/the-playground/>

Hazel Darwin-Clements (23:50):

Well, what you're describing there as well is that you come up with a problem and in trying to find that solution, you have an unexpected outcome. That's also beneficial!

Heather Armstrong (24:00):

Yeah, yeah, exactly. It starts off as just being a spare pair of hands but then you see, the shared creativity is helping in terms of bonding and kind of relationships with the wee ones and the parents, but also the parents and the setting, which can be really important as well. So, if we've got settings that are listening to this podcast and they're thinking about what they want to do, what are some of the things that you'd suggest?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (24:27):

The first thing is just to go and be outdoors and to not put in too much of a structure and to see where the children go and follow their play, because you have loose parts outdoors, you have sensory stimulation. You don't need to distract people or put barriers between the children and the natural environment. You need to feel warm and safe and happy, and then you need to be in the moment and experience what happens.

But some things that I've really enjoyed with children in the natural environment led by them would be collecting and arranging tiny worlds, for example, building little houses. And, in fact, whole islands - sometimes if you get a piece of string, I used to do this at the Botanic, get a piece of string to make an island and then the children can collect their equipment for their islands.

I love looking at the lines on the palm of my hand as a map [laughs] and trying to perhaps find patterns like that in nature. So, if you look up in tree branches, quite often, you sort of can look at the criss-cross of them or you look at the map if someone's a bit unsure and you say, "right, what can you see on that map? Okay. So which direction is that?" And you follow it, or kind of listening for different sounds and doing mapping of that.

Or taking a story stick and passing that round or creating it into a character. There's just so many amazing things.

Heather Armstrong (26:26):

Yeah, what I love about all those ideas is that they're so simple. It doesn't involve like a lot of materials. It doesn't involve, you know, your endless amount of planning, just even just the string to make the island you're talking about is beautiful. Just that thing. And all you need is to introduce that concept of an island. And then I imagine their imaginations are they really fired and kind of go on to really explore. It's beautiful, absolutely beautiful!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (26:59):

Do you know the, the other thing that I've been surprised by is just the ability for children to sit outside for a little while breathing and having a mindful moment? You know, when someone first said, "oh, let's just sit for a few minutes, we'll see how long", and you know,

you sit down with a group and you, I can feel the moment when people start to wriggle and it's come to its end.

Heather Armstrong (27:28):

Yeah.

Hazel Darwin-Clements (27:28):

But, the ability for really young children just to absorb and look and be and for that to be something that's actually really, really valuable for all of us - for the adults in the group as well too, and further building of a group to do that collectively, to just sit and be, and not enforce that but suggest it.

Heather Armstrong (27:49):

Have you heard of forest bathing? [laughs] Have you heard of this, this concept?

Hazel Darwin-Clements (27:58):

I feel like I have, but I don't really know. Could you tell me about forest bathing, Heather? [laughs]

Heather Armstrong (28:01):

Yeah, well, it's basically exactly what you were describing. I'm Googling it right now because I want to get it right!

Apparently it's an ancient Japanese process of relaxation. And so, it's about going for a walk and amongst the trees and, and breathing and, and being part of that environment. So, there you go. You've basically just described the process of forest bathing, but for wee ones!

Hazel Darwin-Clements (28:30):

It's just, it's a lovely experience that I've had if the mood is right. And everybody wants to just take a mindful moment in a forest. That's a lovely thing. And it's a lovely way to start and to get yourself in the mood to be playing outside.

Heather Armstrong (28:48):

Many settings in urban areas struggle to access natural or green spaces, but they may also be the middle of streets that don't feel very exciting, whether that's because there ex-industrial have a lot of traffic or litter or just not a lot of greenery.

Last year during the first COVID-19 lockdown, Starcatchers supported artists to run remote projects with young people through a scheme called Big Inspirations. One of the artists was Rebecca Fraser, Parkhead's artist in residence. Rebecca ran a project called Move + Make, which gave local families prompts to motivate them to go outside for a walk together, to do something creative and engage with their community.

Rebecca's work highlights the barriers some communities face when it comes to engaging with the

outdoors. And while COVID restrictions have eased, many of the barriers remain the same. Whilst Rebecca was working directly with families, a lot of the ideas they explored could easily be adapted for ELC settings. Here's Rebecca speaking during one of our creative chats back in June 2020.

Rebecca Fraser (29:56):

I currently work in Parkhead in the east end of Glasgow. I'm a freelance artist, but I work very closely with the housing association in Parkhead. I also have two boys. One is two and one is five.

Maybe a month into lockdown, we were starting to hear stories that city children or urban families were not making of their daily walk. And if you are walking the same urban streets, there's not a lot of scope for imaginative play, everything. There's also lot of danger that you maybe wouldn't face if you were in a more rural area. It's very limiting and it can kind of cloud your inspiration as a mum taking your kid out because you're thinking "oh, watch there! Oh, watch there!" and even just environmentally, it can just be not very stimulating when you're just faced with the same streets and not a lot of exploration or adventure.

So, my project's called Move + Make, and the idea behind that is that it's to encourage movement through making. So, just little weekly packs, with a little activity - they don't have, they're not overwhelmed with lots of materials. And then they've got the whole week that they can go out and do their little intervention. And it's quite nice because it's motivating people to get out and do something creative, but then it's also building a little mini micro community within a community. It's like a little piece of mini public artwork that they can make.

Week one was called Friendship Fences, and the children were all given long paper streamers and a little brown paper bag and then they were to go out and on their daily walk find fence that they could weave the ribbons through. And in doing so, they sort of made a little friendship bracelet.

Week two, which is called Pottery Places, the families all got a pack of clay at the beginning of the week and they could make whatever they wanted and then they had to go out and hide it somewhere.

Week three was called Toddler Trails. And they were all given bags of confetti and as they walked, they were to drop their confetti behind them, and it would almost be like airplane trails in the sky except across the estate!

There's a nice quote here that says: "I felt a bit self-conscious at first, then I noticed the many pieces of rubbish that were around that other people had scattered and our colorful circles felt like such a contrast. It felt like we were spreading joy and beauty." and, and I think that's a nice little conclusion on how some public artwork can help you engage differently with your environment, especially if you're working in maybe a deprived community or community that's maybe urban or ex-industrial, and there isn't lots of places

of natural beauty.

A big part of this project was also about bringing this to places that did not have green space readily accessible to them. So, when you can't engage with environment or nature, which naturally brings magic and wonder, then you kinda have to make it yourself, don't you?

Heather Armstrong (33:52):

I couldn't have said it better myself, whatever kind of setting you're working in – urban, rural, bigger, small - creative responsive adults are the resource that's gonna make the biggest difference to the wee ones you work with.

I hope this episode has inspired you to find the magic and wonder around you. If you want to use some of the ideas Rebecca mentioned from moving make you can find links in the reflective practice worksheet that accompanies this podcast, where you can learn more about the project.

And, as ever, we've load of resources based on the ideas all the artists have shared on this episode, we'll be sharing them on social media and they can all be found on the Starcatcher's website.

Catherine Wilson (34:41):

Thank you so much for listening. The Creative Skills podcast was hosted by Heather Armstrong. Thank you to our guests, Hazel Darwin-Clements, Charlotte Allan, Skye Reynolds and Rebecca Fraser.

You could find links to their work in the show notes to find this podcast accompanying resources, including our top five tips for using a small space head to www.starcatchers.org.uk/episode-space

Music in this episode came from Starcatcher's productions Hop, Little Light, and Baby Chill. Full credits are in the show notes.

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