Hopscotch

Story Teller

Classroom Guide

Ages
7–12

The central aim of **Story Teller** is to give pupils a space in which they can be spontaneously creative. While it's great when pupils using **Story Teller** come up with really wonderful stories, that's not its prime purpose: **Story Teller** aims to help pupils come up with quick-fire ideas, to practice just letting ideas out without notions of what's good, bad, clever or silly – this is sometimes called creative 'flow'. The lesson we want them to learn is that, when you take the brakes off your imagination and just let the ideas flow, in amongst the (often very entertaining) junk will be some creative gems – and a lot more than you might have guessed. So, the main focus of **Story Teller** is the creative process, not the outcome. An interesting aside here is that, while we were developing **Story Teller** in schools, we found pupils weren't all that bothered about listening to their own stories once they'd told them, though they loved listening to each others.

Organisation
Story Teller is, by nature, a pretty loud thing to have going on – it certainly isn't the kind of thing to use during silent reading. We also found problems running several groups in the same room, e.g. your ICT suite, because of the noise generated. However don't completely discount it – it creates quite an energetic atmosphere as children hear snatches of each others' stories. The practical problem is that the resulting sound files tend to be pretty garbled. In most schools we tested **Story Teller** in spaces isolated from the classroom where children could be reasonably loud without disturbing others, and if you have laptops it would be easy to send pupils off to find a separate space.

Individuals
Story Teller will work quite well with an individual child if you feel you have children who benefit from working alone, or who do badly in groups – especially those that tend to get pushed to the back by more assertive children. What they will be missing out on is the amount of chat that goes on between the stages of the story – i.e. while choosing a new picture. However, this is an ideal way to get recorded evidence of a particular child's speaking ability. One possible scenario is to use a sequenced set of pictures at the start of an intervention and the same or similar sequence at various points during the intervention to get an idea of progress.

Groups
This seemed far and away the most universally successful way of using **Story Teller**. Groups of from two to six all worked really well, with the caveat that there will the same problems with group dynamics that you'd get with any such work. In many cases there was just as much interesting language and creative thinking going on between the story stages as the group decided which picture to choose next as there was in the actual story telling.

Whole class
Story Teller will work just fine on a whiteboard and microphones will pick up pretty much all the noise children can make in a classroom, so there's no technical reason why you can't make this a whole class activity. Managing the thing, though, can be quite a challenge and it's really down to how much you want to control what goes on. It is a good way of introducing the software and giving the children an idea of how to use it and maybe not worrying too much if the story falls apart before it gets to the end. You'll find a story called 'demo-class funny' in the **Listen to a story** screen, this is an example of a reasonably successful class story.

Prompting
It's always really hard watching someone do something when you feel you just know what they should do next – you really want to tell them. In general we found that prompting the story tellers really cut across the process, you end up with your story not theirs. For some of us it can be quite a stretch to walk away and let them just get on with it, but if you keep in mind that you're interested in the process, not the outcome, you'll find that easier. On the other hand, using questions to move things along can be very successful, especially if you are working one to one with a child who is working through problems with verbal skills. 'Swan tales' in **Listen to a story** is an example of this kind of approach.

Preparing to use *Story Teller*
There are some respects in which **Story Teller** cuts across the main thrust of teaching and learning as it's currently seen. Generally we introduce children to the idea that there is always one best answer, one best way of doing things – it is convergent – and, once they have learned that and can demonstrate that they have learned it, we move on. When using **Story Teller**, there is no right, or even best, answer; it is divergent – whatever children come up with is 'right'. It's really

important that they don't feel they have to produce something clever or impressive as this will stifle the flow of ideas – in this respect, *Story Teller* is closely related to brainstorming. So, any activities that encourage children to think quickly and uncritically will kick things off nicely. Here's a couple of ideas to get you going:

Circle games

Lots of circle games help here: simple word association, telling a story one word at a time or one sentence at a time – any of these can be played moving round in order or by giving the children a ball which they pass to each other (whether they wanted it or not) across the circle. It doesn't have to be done with language alone – tag mime (feel free to use language as well) has two versions. In the first version children pass an imaginary object around the circle, each child uses the object in a way that (probably) makes it clear what it is, they pass it to the next child who first uses it as the previous child did (to show they understood what it was – or not) then they transform it into a new object. In the second version, two children start acting out a scene, when they are making an interesting shape (or when they've had enough) just clap and they freeze. One child sits back down in the circle and another gets up and starts a different scene based simply on the shape the frozen child is making – i.e. same shape, different story.

50 things to do with …

… a shoe, a tin can, whatever. The trick with this activity is to see which child/group can get up to 50 ideas first – each has to be possible, but none have to be useful. This is a really good one to show how you can just think of ideas without censoring them – it's those children who censor least who will come out ahead. It's also important that everyone shares their ideas so that those who were censoring themselves can get some notion of what it is just to let ideas flow.

Where *Story Teller* fits with the story writing process

The main thrust of the English National Curriculum, and many others, in this age range is rather formal; it's to do with the planning and structure of narrative, and often about the categorisation of stories into genres. *Story Teller* clearly does something quite different – there is no planning or structure, no rules about the form a story should take, so it might seem difficult to use it as part of the same process. What we found in testing was that there is much to be said for keeping the *Story Teller* approach separate from structured writing. If you work that way, you might expect in time to see a more adventurous approach at the planning stage of formal writing.

We found that running a few class-based *Story Teller* sessions before a more formal story or poetry writing activity seemed to help children range more widely in their choices of and/or approaches to the formal subject.

However, you can merge *Story Teller* more closely into the formal process by using it as a source of story elements. To do this we first asked groups of children to produce a story using *Story Teller*. We then asked them to use elements like characters and situations from that story as the basis for formal work. This really did seem to produce a very successful balance between creative flow and the formal approach. A variation was to use the **Type a story** screen to transcribe the most interesting bits of the story and re-work that into a formal story. The advantage of this latter approach is that it not only makes a very good exercise in using a word processor for non-sequential writing, but it helps children see the planning process from another angle.

Using sequenced picture sets

You can take quite a different approach to using *Story Teller* by using it's sequencing option. On the **Options** screen you see a box to tick which makes *Story Teller* present pictures in file name order rather than randomly. To show how this might work we've included two versions of Jack and the Beanstalk where the pictures tell the story in order – including a 'The End' picture. You could use this in a number of ways to focus pupils on particular areas of the process without the scary 'quick think of an idea, now, now, now' part. Using a familiar story could support children with the idea of narrative and sequence – the closer in the sequence the pictures are the easier this is; compare the two versions of Jack. You could use pictures of activities within your own class to help children talk about their feelings about events and other children. On a more basic level, you could use this to gather evidence of levels of spoken English.

Creating your own sequences sets is easy from the **Organise pictures** screen; create a new picture set with the *New picture set* button then, in the order you want them to appear, drag your pictures onto the screen, click *Save picture* and accept the suggested file name which numbers the pictures in order.

More ideas…

We've made this a digital document because people are always coming up with new ideas which we add to this guide. If you have an idea or a comment about *Story Teller*, why not share it on our discussion page. You'll find it at **www. marshal.co.uk/storyteller** where you'll also find the latest version of this guide.