

One BIG Story

Project outline

One Big Story took place through Off The Page Drama CIC across 10 primary schools in Durham City from September to November 2012 with nearly 300 children taking part. Year 5 and 6 classes from the schools enjoyed a one day workshop with a writer, illustrator and drama facilitator to explore their story ideas. Each school was responsible for one chapter and these have come together to make a book: *There's Something in the Water*. This was published in November and every child received their own copy of the book at a special celebration event at the local library. The children also received a goody bag and a One Big Story notebook in which they could write their own story ideas. The children were encouraged to visit their libraries in the future and given opportunity to become members.

The aims of One Big Story can be summarised as follows:

- Encourage the children to be excited about reading and writing.
- Give the children greater confidence in their ideas and creativity.
- Have a positive impact on the children's literacy.

Timescale

11 th September – 1 st October	Workshops in schools
1 st – 31 st October	Book written, illustrated and published
7 th – 9 th November	Celebration events in local libraries and project displays erected
9 th November	One Big Story Showcase (for invited guests)
29 th November	Library project displays taken down and final evaluations completed

One Big Story Team

The project was run through Off The Page Drama CIC with Christina Maiden (Project Coordinator and Drama Facilitator), Seymour Jacklin (Writer and Facilitator) and Robyn Trainer (Illustrator, Photographer and Facilitator). The book was published by Baby Mosquito Books and the short film was produced by Chris Morgan.

The schools participating in the project:

Framwellgate Moor Primary School
Bow, Durham School
St Godric's RCVA School
Belmont Cheveley Park Primary School
Blue Coat CE Junior School
Shincliffe C of E (Cont) Primary School
Durham Gilesgate Primary School
St Joseph's RCVA Primary School
Belmont C of E (Cont) Junior School
Neville's Cross Primary School

School workshops

As the workshop was intended to give as much creative freedom as possible to the children, it was crucial to have an extremely well structured and detailed workshop plan. This was achieved through extensive discussions in the planning stage of the project. The workshop structure did not change between schools; however the timings were different to fit in with individual school timetables. Also, the workshop was honed throughout the process as we saw what worked particularly well in the different activities. Below is a rough outline of the workshop plan used across the 10 schools:

Morning (pre-break)

- **Introduction** – explaining the One Big Story project and structure of the day’s workshop.
- **Warm up** – some drama activities to get the group moving, working together and thinking creatively.
- **Full group discussion** – about which stories they enjoy and why. This leading on to a focus on characters.
- **Characters** - working individually for 10-15minutes to design their own character. Feeding this back to the group and accompanying it with drama/storytelling activities (time-allowing)
- **Extracts** – into small groups (led by an adult) to read a story extract and answer questions. Groups present an image to match their extract. Showback and discussion.

Morning Break

Morning (post-break)

- **Gathering ideas** – suggestions for place, character and object as a whole group.
- **Developing ideas** – in small groups develop a specific idea and feed back to the group.
- **Developing the story** – tell the One Big Story plot so far and develop the narrative line for the chapter with whole group.

Lunchtime

Illustrator arrives. The team plan and decide on areas to focus on during the afternoon – how to plug the gaps in the narrative.

Afternoon

- **Reading a story** – story read aloud to the group. Discussion as to what they enjoyed (useful to focus group for afternoon activities).
- **Carousel** - focus areas: writing, illustration and drama. Groups visit each area to develop different aspects of their story. A showback after each slot to aid plot development.
- **Cliffhanger/chapter titles** – in small groups, decide on a chapter title and a cliffhanger to pass on to the next school. These are handed in and decided on by the team (crucial to have a helpful cliffhanger for the next school).
- **What else?** - each child given a sheet of paper and time on their own to draw/write anything they have not had chance to contribute.
- **Evaluation and goodbye** – children given opportunity to give their opinion of the day individually (written and verbal) and as a class (physically). A final ‘well done’ and goodbye.

Library visits

We worked closely with Helen Thompson, the Central Divisional Librarian, to plan the library involvement with One Big Story. Each class visited the library closest to their school: Clayport Library, Belmont Library or Newton Hall Library. The groups received a tour/talk/activity session led by library staff, they were given the opportunity to view the project display and then they heard their chapter read aloud by a member of the One Big Story team. The children were given their own copy of the book and a goody bag. The library visit lasted 2 hours.

Evaluation

As this is the first time One Big Story has taken place, evaluation and feedback have been crucial and have taken place in a variety of ways at every stage. This evaluation/feedback took various forms:

- The One Big Story team evaluated every session at the end of the school day during a 1hour meeting and altered the following workshops accordingly. Team members were also debriefed at the end of the project.
- Children were asked three questions at the beginning of their full day workshop and then, again, at the end of the day. These questions were:
 - Do you enjoy reading?
 - Do you enjoy writing?
 - Do you think your ideas would make an amazing story?

The children were also asked about their favourite part of the workshop/library visit and one on one conversations took place throughout the workshop.

- We spoke with teachers throughout the sessions and at the end of the school day to gain verbal feedback. Teachers were also given evaluation forms at the full day workshop and the library visit.
- The librarians/library staff involved in the visits were given evaluation forms and asked for verbal feedback.
- The library displays included a feedback box with slips to fill in.

Numerical data

Results from the children's evaluation forms:

- There was a **32% increase** in the number of children answering 'Yes' to the question: 'Do you enjoy reading stories?'
- There was a **76% increase** in the number of children answering 'Yes' to the question: 'Do you enjoy writing stories?'
- There was a **130%** increase in the number of children answering 'Yes' to the question: 'Do you think your ideas would make an amazing story?'

100% of teachers who completed an evaluation form agreed that One Big Story met its aims of:

- Getting children excited about reading and writing
- Giving the children greater confidence in their creativity
- Having a positive impact on their literacy skills

Comments/feedback

The feedback we have received has been extremely positive from teachers, children, library staff and members of the public. The project has achieved its aims and made a real difference to those who have taken part. A selection of comments from:

- (i) Children
- (ii) Teachers
- (iii) Library staff
- (iv) Other people

(i) Children

'I think the One Big Story book is absolutely amazing and I can't wait to share it with my family. It has made me want to write more'

'The best experience of my life'

(ii) Teachers

'Great confidence boost for the children – all could contribute regardless of ability and express ideas in different ways'
Caroline Davies (Teacher, Framwellgate Primary)

'All were thrilled to receive their copy of the book and during reading time many chose to start 'One Big Story' with one child finishing it that evening!'
Mary Tyers (Teacher, Bow School)

'Everything was of the highest quality.'
Fiona Westerman (Teacher, St Godric's Primary School)

'Children are more confident and enjoy the seemingly absurd – They are much more willing to explore their wacky and wonderful ideas... More willing to try, more willing to take a risk.'
Heather Prested (Teacher, Belmont Cheveley Park Primary)

'Children make references to the one big story event when planning creative stories. This discussion encourages engagement by all.'
Sheena Matthews (Teacher, Durham Gilesgate Primary)

'An altogether amazing day, enjoyable as well as educational'
Rachel Hockey (Teacher, St Joseph's Primary)

'Perfect way to promote writing and literacy skills.'
Miss Ewing (Teacher, Belmont CE Junior School)

(iii) Library staff

'Lots of the children dragged their parents/grandparents into the library to see the display, and many have since been back to borrow books.'
Helen Thompson (Divisional Librarian)

'This was an amazing and well executed project... It is a fantastic vision and a really inspiring project. The team are all fantastic.'
Librarian

'I took a copy of the book home for my 9 year old son to read-he thought it was great and of course the most important comment "I wish they could come to my school"'
Anita Thompson (Librarian)

(iv) Others

'One Big Story is one big imaginative feat...All participants must have been deeply impressed, as I was, that their work resulted in an actual, solid, page-turning, tangible book.'
David Leat (Professor of Curriculum Innovation, Newcastle University)

'Came to the library to check it out because my son (Year 5) was involved. He really enjoys it and loves reminding me which idea was his when we read the book at home.'
Parent

'Tremendous!!! What a truly inspiring project – to witness the children's enthusiasm has been heartwarming'
Library user

What was discovered...

Encouraging originality

Some of the children relied on ideas from television, films, other stories, computer games etc. rather than developing their own ideas. This not only limited the creative possibilities but also caused problems regarding copyright later in the process (e.g. we needed to rename certain characters/objects before the book went to print). Classes struggled with originality to varying degrees, for example, in one school, the children were continually worried about 'getting it wrong'. We addressed this by praising originality throughout the session and gently pushing for more creative ideas. We were careful not to ask leading questions and worked hard as a team to make comments which did not directly shape creative responses.

Aggression/inappropriate content

Knowing the extent to which some boys of this age enjoy quite violent computer games, we were aware of the potential for this to sneak into the story. We recognised the moral responsibility we have as facilitators and story compilers and that as much as the project seeks to empower the children creatively, it would not be acceptable to allow inappropriate content. We discussed at length how to discourage certain ideas without discouraging individual children. We tackled this by reminding the children that the book had to be enjoyed by both boys and girls and those with different interest (e.g. not a story all about princesses or all about blood sucking zombies). One group decided to create a walking, talking gun named 'Bullet'. We reminded them that not everyone likes guns and they decided to include a love interest for female readers – a pair of scissors called 'Shelley'. This soon became the class's favourite part of the chapter as the lovesick gun became a hilarious character. We also tackled the violence problem by raising the creative bar and suggested that guns and knives were perhaps not interesting. The groups' solution to this tended to involve large food items including a cabbage gun with exploding mints and a pizza gun.

Literary quality

All of the children wanted their chapter to be as good as it could be and so were ready to take our advice. At no point did we tell them the direction we thought their narrative should go in as their ideas were invariably more interesting than ours. Instead, we asked open questions and gave them information about other chapters as they needed it. We would highlight plot problems and inconsistencies if they arose, but this was always with an expectation that they would find the solutions to the problems with our help, not the other way round. We gave the classes as much responsibility as possible and maintained high expectations for them at every point.

Chance to shine

The variety of activities used to shape the plot enabled every member of the class to participate in different ways. The children who struggled with literacy could shine in drama and those who lacked confidence in performing could shine in illustration. We saw children who had never read their work in front of classmates proudly reciting the sentences they had created. The tone of the workshops and the collaborative creativity enabled every child to contribute in the way they felt most comfortable.

Team work

A real strength of the project is the way in which it requires collaboration. The children developed some ideas individually but the majority of the work was in small groups or as a whole class. The groups built on each other's ideas continually (e.g. the group who created a medieval city had to check with the 'pencil car' group if the car could fly before they started their drama) and this meant that there was both individual and whole class ownership of the chapter created. They were continually being asked to pay attention to their peers' work in order to keep up with the story unfolding before them. This exercised their speaking and listening skills and so, classes which struggled to work as a team found the process harder than those who didn't.

Some photographs...



Next time...

How many schools?

Following team discussions, it was agreed that ten schools should be the maximum for a One Big Story project. With the latter schools it was increasingly difficult to keep track of the different characters and their experiences. More than ten schools and the narrative would become unwieldy.

Another member of the team?

An on-going concern for the team was the way in which a handful of children chose to disengage during the workshops. Sometimes this was related to maturity (children either too immature to work with others or too 'grown up' to be willing to join in developing silly ideas), self-confidence, special needs (educational, physical or behavioural) and linguistic (2 schools had children who spoke no English). At the schools in which teachers and teaching assistants joined in with the workshop, those children were supported and enabled to participate; however, in other schools, this was not the case. In running One Big Story again, an extra member of the team whose sole responsibility is to focus on individuals struggling to participate fully would be beneficial. The workshop is fast paced and this can be difficult for certain children to cope with without adult help. In a large group, another team member who is comfortable enough with the creative content to adapt activities but whose main focus is working on a one to one basis to engage those struggling to participate for whatever reason would be a great asset.

Planning material to teachers earlier

A teacher suggested that getting preparatory/follow-up material to them before the workshop day would be beneficial as it could feed better into their lesson planning.

Altering workshop structure

The structure of the workshops (focusing on developing specific ideas in individual groups before telling the class about the previous chapters) certainly increased the zaniness of the narrative. As a team we are discussing the impact that altering the workshop structure would have on the plotline. This is something we will explore for the next One Big Story.

Timescale for book production

The book's turnaround was quite tight and although this did not negatively influence the finished story, in running One Big Story again, a longer lead in time would be beneficial for the team.

Supporters

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