Early Education

Creative Liberty with Pre-K-1st grade

A series of experiments with dramatic arts in the early education classrooms

By: Chelsea LeValley, assisted by Zoe Wilson

What creative classroom structure is the most conducive to the imagination for a young student?

With the influx of STEM curriculum in early education, there is less and less time to cultivate creative liberty within the traditional classroom. As educators, the use of creativity with this age group is a necessary element of our work. Teaching this skill is essential, but there's so little time for it during the school day. If given the time to create, are students even able to exercise their creative liberty- making big, bold, unique choices in spaces both physical and imaginary?

Teaching artists, Meredith Berlin and Faith M. Howes with Kindergarten at Olympic Hills

Given the rigorous structure of a full school day, students lose out on the necessary time to get into a fully creative space. One of the kindergarten teachers we partner with at Olympic hills said "Research shows, students of this age group need forty-five minutes a day before they can really let go and begin to create, but we hardly ever get enough time in the day to really allow them to access that".

At Olympic Hills, teaching artists Meredith Berlin and Faith M. Howes co-taught classes focused around creative structure, allowing for free choice within the context of a defined boundary such as a character, a book, or a scene. Students were fully engaged and passionate about their creative work.

Another partner, Shoreline Children's center, works with foundry10 to run a 6-week story dramatization program with preschoolers. This curriculum is adaptable to each group and yet very structured and set. Often, it has been said, story drama lives on the brink of chaos and wonder. We believe operating within that balance is useful for the creative spark to ignite the collaboration among the students. This is a balance of both structure and creative liberty.

With Oak Heights, we explored the differences between story drama and creative drama practices. In this course, students were presented with creative drama as traditional exercises using dramatic arts practices. This includes taking turns and waiting to perform. It sometimes includes making up your own story. Story drama is structured around a specific story or book and yet the environment with the students is generally freer, less taking of turns to perform something you create and instead living in the dramatic play. Through a series of classes we experimented and studied the relative effectiveness of the two and their impact on this particular age group. The variables were widespread and included teaching artists, students, time of day, time of year, and a few others. A seasoned teaching artist with fourteen first grade students in April was our chosen setup. We found that a combination of both story drama and creative drama practices seemed to be the best way to go for these students. those who were more shy were more successfully and positively engaged in creative drama, as it has more opportunities for solo performance of a skill and requires taking turns to perform. Therefore, the outgoing or loud students couldn't overshadow the more reserved ones.

Story drama engaged the energetic and/or outgoing students by keeping the energy up and the movement constant. Students are asked to perform all at once with other students, and don't have to wait for their turn to perform, but rather take turns sharing ideas. This works well for the higher energy and keeps them engaged for longer periods of time. Our conclusion, preschool is better suited for story drama. For the Shoreline Children's Center, the story dramatization structure seemed best as the majority of the students needed the structure of the book and were less able to take turns as that's a primary skill they're still building. Creative drama using story drama elements or just creative drama, however, seems very useful for first grade through second grade.

Through an after school dramatic art residency program at hilltop elementary school, we explored this concept of structure verses creative space in a new way. With eighteen first graders in a classroom setting, we decided to try a more freeform version of the creative drama model to see what proved more effective.

Six and seven year olds spent the school day going from bell to bell and following a teacher and that curriculum. At an after school drama program, they are given the chance to be in charge of the rules that they follow, the choices that they make with their time and where they go within the confines of the class. We expected to see students collaborate to create an imaginative city that may only vaguely have resembled their own city. We expect the students to be able to make unique decisions about their city and generate diverse solutions to problems we face in the real world through this imaginary context.

The teaching artists quickly learned that students needed more structure to build these unique worlds. In fact, it often the teaching artists noticed that the students seemed afraid to be wrong when answering questions about what is needed in a city. Their choices are made for them at this age and they have little agency over what happens to them in their normal lives. Perhaps needing that first forty five minutes to get acquainted with their creative liberty is more essential than we even knew.

We thought students would immediately make more independent choices when prompted, but instead found that it took several class sessions for students to start to learn that their imaginary or seemingly impractical solutions to problems were totally acceptable in this dramatic arts class. Apparently, needing 45 minutes to get into a truly creative space is quite accurate! When our approaches were open ended, students would end up running around arguing with one another, or just lose interest and focus. For example, one day the teaching artist introduced that their town they had built was hit with a major storm and it was destroying the stores and homes they constructed. She sent them into small groups to try to rebuild the city by three pictures of their portion of the city. The students disagreed in their groups and couldn't decide what picture to make, generally being were bogged down in their decision rather than just making the picture or being responsible only for their individual contribution to the full-group picture. While prompting some level of conflict between students is not always a negative thing, this approach wound up being unsuccessful. Ultimately, the teaching artist decided we could rebuild the city with a dance and they together, with her guidance, chipped in on dance moves that would help restore the town. While each student was able to contribute a dance move, the broader ideas of the city repair story played a secondary role to the creative aspects of the course.

In contrast, one teaching artist brought in a much more structured curriculum where the students looked at masks of roles people play in a city that the teacher had brought in to share. Then, they played a game where they had to guess what role each person was playing. Students got to go and create their own mask that reflected who they wanted to be. Only one student copied one of the teacher's masks out of eighteen students while the rest made their own characters. These roles in the city included fairies, animals, the mayor, the president, an army guy, and finally a police officer who was also a fairy.

There was a need to create an environment where students are given the tools to be creative while providing enough structure for them to succeed. In order to have creative liberty at this age, they need to be taken step by step with examples and a clear path. In short, the teaching artists created structured curricular boundaries within which the students had the capability to create.

We often found ourselves asking: what's the difference between telling the students what to do and giving the approach we mentioned above? The approach required some subtle and incremental changes toward more free thought. Early on, for example, a teaching artist could say, "Make a picture of a solution to cleaning up the grass" versus "draw a picture of how you would mow the lawn". This simple rephrasing demonstrates something students are familiar with, yet they get a chance to do the mental leaps that are still significant for them at this age. As comfort grows, bigger leaps can be introduced and students pass the walls and boundaries that instinctively come up when considering performance.

Towards the latter half of the program the changes became apparent to us as we examined our video recordings of the class sessions. When structure was in place, students clearly worked together more cohesively and engaged in creative physical movement.

Another example began with the first session where the students were instructed to make a picture of their neighborhood, this activity was repeated on the final session. We noticed a change in the majority of the drawings of their neighborhoods. The last day drawings had more seemingly imaginary additions. For example, instead of just a house it was a house with a slide, fairies to inhabit it, and many other expressive pieces that were not included in the original. Another students' house resembled more of a giant factory by the last session. Yet another drew a house full of music notes at the end when the first day was, again, just a house. There are plenty of these examples.

When asked about things needed in a city their original answers were in line with reality. They said things such as buildings, cars, people, forests, water, oxygen, pets, animals, landmarks. The teaching artist, noticing the answers were less creative than anticipated, offered a new list entitled: “things a city COULD HAVE.” This provided necessary a bit of structure while still allowing the freedom to further imagine a city that didn’t resemble the city in which they currently reside. Of course this list included things like unicorns, fairies, floating/flying cars, princesses, TNT, and stuffed animals. The answers were much more diverse and demonstrated more out-of-the-box thinking and engaging discussion.

An example of creative structure we found successful for encouraging students to make clear, bold, and specific choices were told “create any kind of a store” and they created a grocery store with characters from Minecraft interacting with each other in the store, complete with a crying baby. Another group was told to “make something outside”. From a list, they chose the forest and, thematically, decided to add fairies. The third group was told to “figure out how we get our food,” so they build a bridge from a field to Fred Meyer. The last group was told to make a landmark, so they build a landmark of all the pets. Here we see students given some clear structure on what to make but with specific and creative choices around that.

Unfortunately, they could not come to an agreement on laws. Some unique discussions came from the talk about law:

> Law: Parents shouldn’t be allowed at parties.
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> Counter law: Parents keep us safe. They’re allowed.
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> Law: Clean up after yourself, don’t litter.
>
> Counter law: We will make robots to do all the cleaning.

Students need structure without directly receiving answers. They have such rich imaginations and are so used to structure that when given the opportunity to create their own world and characters, students thrive. Everyone enjoys the experience, and there’s a sense of play and agency over the classroom resulting in great engagement. Although students didn’t make as big of choices about society as the teaching artist thought, students still came up with their own unique way to run a city. We had lofty goals for possibly what their development level can handle. But they created very distinct locations, characters, and solutions to problems in their imaginary city, that, though mirrored their real world, had its own imaginary shape in its reflection.

We thought, if the kids get to make their own city then they’ll be creative. But we found that was only the case if the teacher gave them specific context within which to be creative. When given the opportunity to create their own city would students mirror their own reality or would they create their own solutions. With more open ended instructions, students did not make bold and creative choices. With more structure, we found students were able to make more creative and imaginative choices.

So how do we continue to use what we learned in both the dramatic arts and the traditional classroom? Our conclusion is that no matter what dramatic arts technique or classroom curriculum is being used, drama can give students structure without inhibiting creativity. Students in this age group need some scaffolding for all of their imaginations to be heard, but avoiding shutting down interesting and fun thoughts is also critical.

Our teaching artist, Zoe Wilson concluded with some encouraging thoughts, “I learned not to be afraid, to take a risk and maybe feel like it failed! Don’t be afraid to go big with a concept, but be ready to take students every step of the way with it. I was afraid to ask them to create a society, but learned that these students can rise to the challenge with the right support and guidance along the way. Tools like frozen pictures, character development, and dance form foundations of confidence and creative thought. My goal for this class was to enable creative liberty but, for a classroom teacher with more specific goals, that can seem like more of an add on. At the end of the year the students still have to take tests. So, how can we bring creative expression into your everyday classroom and still meet your academic goals? It can be done with drama techniques.”