# Lis'nTell

***Speech and language therapist and storyteller Louise Coigley's work has gained her a national and international reputation. Michael Jones went to see her in action in a special school in East Sussex***

A wet and windy Friday afternoon in winter. A temporary classroom in a special school in Sussex. Enter a storyteller with two large bags. Mission: to transform the class, and transport six teenagers with a range of additional learning needs into a world of imagination and communication, involving a woman with no teeth, a Victoria sponge and a well of truth. Time to prepare: 15 minutes. Enter six students and three adults. What follows are 60 extraordinary minutes of total absorption, which leave the storyteller tired but fulfilled, and the teenagers and adults invigorated, inspired and better communicators.

Louise Coigley is a speech and language therapist (SLT) and professional storyteller. Her session took place at Grove Park Special School in Crowborough, East Sussex. Louise is internationally renowned for her work, and her training programme known as Lis'nTell, where she conveys the art of inclusive storytelling. She has developed her approach, **L**ive **i**nclusive **s**torytelling, over 20 years. It enhances and develops the communication of children and adults with additional learning needs, through rhythm and role, rhyme, repetition, gesture and ritual. But back to the action…

On the floor, in the middle of a circle of chairs, is a chiffon scarf, under which is a set of fairy lights. Beside this lies a large beautifully bound book with coloured pages of thick handmade paper. All of the pages are empty. Next to the book is an exquisite basket. We exchange greetings. All but one of the students has met Louise before, though not for about 18 months. Tony, who has autism, opts to sit out and share puzzles with a member of staff. Louise will involve him in some way, at the right moment. Graham, also with autism, says he is not going to join in because it is boring (though his body language indicates that he is anxious). He will become involved as well. As will Craig, who has severe and complex learning needs, and no functional verbal communication.

Louise starts a call-and-response chant, about a lady-eating shark. This is very funny, infectious, and memorable. Then the story begins. 'You haven't seen me for a long time, but can any of you remember the story about the old woman with no teeth?'

'Yes!'

'What did she eat?'

'A cake! A cake! A victorious sponge!'

'Right. Let's make a cake then. What shall we put in our cake?'

Suggestions are shouted and signed, and Louise includes each one. She mimes adding the ingredients, rhythmically chanting about them; the students copy her. That's what seems to be happening; but in actual fact *Louise* follows the students' mimes. Quickly, Louise gives over the telling of the story to the group, prompting and interpreting when needed.

Louise becomes the old woman. Immediately the students are involved in the drama of *The Well of Truth*. This story is based on an Egyptian tale that has been handed down through the generations. Louise heard the bare bones of it from storyteller Keith Park, who was given it by SLT Nevin Gouda. She was told it many times as a young child in Egypt. This version involves animals that all covet the delicious cake. One of them steals it, and when the old woman discovers it has been eaten, she questions the animals. They all deny involvement and are each tested by being made to jump into the well of truth. The guilty animal starts to drown, but is forgiven by the old woman, and saved by the others. 'Can I be the old woman?' asks Lucy, and wraps herself in the chiffon scarf. She now takes the lead in narrating. As the story unfolds, Louise asks for suggestions about what animals to include. From one of her bags she produces puppets and a grasshopper hat. Other artefacts are chosen and involved in the story, which by now has become completely improvised.

During the first story, Graham has been adopting a "Do I look bothered?" stance, and is being quietly encouraged to join in by his class teacher. Louise sees her chance, and

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reflects Graham's body language. She moves on seamlessly to another story, based on John Burningham's *Oi! Get off our Train*, but addresses it towards Graham. Graham can't resist. 'That's not what happens,' he shouts. 'Oh really?' says Louise, and without him realising it, Graham becomes the storyteller! For the next five minutes he directs the action, and then retakes his seat. He is no longer a passive observer. Later, he will become the storyteller again, when Louise produces a beautiful Chinese lion marionette.

Tony meanwhile has been sitting at a nearby table, seemingly absorbed in his train puzzle. Then it happens. Louise makes a train noise, and Tony echoes. Without Louise saying anything (though a nod and a wink are surreptitiously passed between adults) his class teacher, Colin Hartland, suggests that Tony might like to bring his puzzle onto the floor next to the other children. He does so, and his train is delicately woven into the action.

The adult sitting next to Craig expertly ensures that he maintains focus on the story. Craig is interested in the lights on the floor, and makes snorting noises. His sound is gently incorporated into the story: 'And the pig made a noise like this…' Our student who has not met Louise before, and not experienced a story session quite like this one, is at first cautious, but is soon drawn in, and begins to make choices about how she would like to be involved. Louise's wooden lyre particularly takes her interest, and she provides incidental music throughout the drama, whenever she chooses. The story comes to an end, and we finish with a quiet calming ritual to restore the classroom back into a working space, and to create calm within the youngsters before they move on to their next activity.

Louise made the session look easy, but admitted that afterwards she felt '*positively* exhausted'; such was her level of focus and awareness. The process never stops thrilling and surprising her. How had Louise's seemingly effortless technique developed, and can others learn it? Louise's own story gives pointers to how she has developed her storytelling style. After gaining a diploma in speech therapy at London's Central School of Speech and Drama, she worked as a speech therapist in East London. Then she made a life-changing decision, and moved for four years to Ringwood, Hampshire. There she lived and worked with children and young people with moderate, severe and profound learning needs, in The Sheiling, a Camphill Rudolf Steiner Community. She gained the Diploma in Curative Education, and describes her experience at Camphill as 'priceless'.

'I learned two very important things: about the rhythm of life, and how this rhythm heals children. Sharing meals together at the same time, for example, starting with a song or verse, and lighting a candle. These are not routines, but beautiful rituals that provide a mooring for children with very little understanding of the world. They help them *anticipate* and build a sense of time. I came to realise that this is the grounding for vocabulary development. Ann Locke, the educationalist, who I admire enormously, says that, "You need a sense of time to learn verbs". This has been my experience, working with children with many and varied learning disabilities and communication problems.' But rhythm is not to be confused with routine, though routine is important. 'Children will find meaning and security in things which happen again and again. This is the basis for language development, and has a hugely positive influence on behaviour.'

Several staff, including teacher Flick Pawson, Teaching Assistant Chrissie Walker and Music Therapist Lynfa John, got together after school to share their experiences of working with Louise. Their description of the creation of *The Enchanted Pig* gives an insight into the story sharing process and the lasting impact that Louise has had on the pupils, and the way that the adults work with them.

'We had a basic idea, but didn't know how it would develop. We met the children weekly, sharing songs and starting to tell the story. We collected and made props. We looked at children's behaviours and interests, to see how we could incorporate these into the story. Katie, for example, had a certain way of looking at her hands. We turned this into a song and whenever this appeared in the story her face lit up when she heard it.'

They introduced a sword and umbrella, and Robert seized on these and became involved in having a duel. This was judged to be inappropriate in the story, but Flick maintained Robert's interest and involvement by making him the king, who has to knight someone and say 'down' and 'up'. This gave him the chance to interact with his peers more appropriately, as well as inspiring him to speak some words. This enabled him to focus, anticipate, respond and be involved with children and adults in a positive way.

'We thought that Carrie, who has inner language but no verbal expression, was building up an understanding of when her part was coming. One afternoon the adult who was currently designated Keeper of the Objects was away. We discovered by chance that Carrie had accurate knowledge of which props were needed, and exactly when in the action they needed to be introduced. By this time we decided to include seven or eight props in the story each week. Carrie said, "Uh, uh, uh" whenever a new prop was needed. As we worked on the story week after week, Carrie became the Keeper of the Objects. When we did finally decide to share the story with an audience, Carrie was able to prompt and take an active role.

' We worked on *The Enchanted Pig* over two terms. In each session we developed a new aspect to the action and narrative. Music and song were important. We made up a song about colours, and Carrie turned the different coloured pages in Louise's large book to prompt us.

'Things don't always according to plan. We need to be prepared for children to do something completely different. Vicky, for example was dancing around in a less than cooperative way, during a story for Diwali. One of us, drama teacher Lynne Griffin, said, "Oh, you are doing an Indian dance!" Vicky was taken by surprise, and she reacted positively when this became an integral part of the story each week.'

The process of working together to create a story is as stimulating for the adults as it is for the students. Music Therapist Lynfa John feels that it offers new ways of exploring children's communication through music, while Flick Pawson sees it as an approach that crosses the curriculum in a totally imaginative way. Revisiting the stories with the children was described as being like, 'returning to a well-loved storybook. You come back to it and it will evoke memories and set off new ideas'.

Louise works in the UK and abroad, providing training opportunities for schools and health professionals. She runs residential training courses in Lis'nTell techniques. Her eclectic approach to developing communication also involves individual assessments and support at home, and work with schools and other settings. Louise is constantly building her portfolio of activities, for example travelling to Germany to work with teachers of English, and presenting at the 2007 Australian Conference of Speech Pathology. Many teachers and therapists describe how Lis'n Tell has radically changed their work, facilitating responses from previously passive or uncooperative students.

Louise sums up her work by saying, 'As a therapist my work is born out of responding to people, and becoming involved in their ideas. I start with a germ of an idea. I initially lead, but soon the adults' responsiveness encourages the children to become involved. Then it becomes their experience, and their story.' Senior Teacher Maureen Barton is more poetic, describing Louise's sessions as being 'like jazz, with deep structure interspersed with free improvisation'.

*Michael Jones is an educational consultant and writer*

***For more information about Louise's work, or to make contact, visit www.lisntell.com***

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