

Once upon a time...

Nick Wonham's artwork has become familiar to teachers of children with SEN through its use in the software series *Choose and Tell* and interactive stories available online. Special Children spoke to him about his varied career

This is the story of a class teacher in a special school in North London; how he came to design and produce imaginative interactive software that is used in many special schools throughout the UK, and is becoming increasingly popular in mainstream primaries. Parts of the story conform to the widely held view that art school graduates will inevitably suffer for their art and will invariably end up living in poverty. But while Nick Wonham's creative output features Cinderella, this is no rags-to-riches story. To the extent that there is a moral to the story it is that responding to the needs of students with learning disabilities can lead one to produce imaginative resources, and that one day these resources might appeal to students far beyond your own classroom or school.

Starting out in art

Nick Wonham's career started when he attained a degree in illustration from Camberwell School of Art. His original aim was to be an illustrator and have his work published, but first he chose to do a PGCE in secondary art teaching at Goldsmiths College. This proved to be a false start. As Nick readily admits, secondary school art teaching was not for him. Forced to find an alternative route he embarked on a mammoth project, illustrating an Aesop's fable using lino prints in a style reminiscent of medieval woodcuts. This was destined not to see the light of day until relatively recently.

Choice and engagement

This project kept Nick busy, and satisfied his creativity, but was not financially viable. So he made the fateful choice to work as a supply teacher at what was then Rosemary Special School in Islington. Like many supply teachers in similar situations, he became fascinated by the work, and eventually accepted a full-time position. Almost immediately he started making resources to stimulate the interests of the children in his class. The initial challenge was how to develop their responses to books. Books his pupils used either had little

interest, or were difficult to access because of the apparent level of cognitive ability the children needed to engage with them. The concept of 'engagement' is important here, because Nick came to realise that it was not the children's cognitive ability that was the issue, but how they could be helped to concentrate by becoming engaged in a story.

Out went the books and in came Nick's homemade resources. These consisted of large pictures, copious amounts of Velcro, and involved a key element that has remained Nick's watchword: 'choice'. The first choice that the children made was which picture of a mode of transport they wanted, in order to take them on an imaginary journey. Having made a choice between a plane or a boat, they could attach a photograph of themselves to a porthole, and then 'travel' around the room with it. Nick had also prepared various backgrounds for the stories, so the children could choose where they wanted to go on their journey.

Concentration was no longer so much of a challenge, as the children had become more engaged, and were encouraged to move around. The same level of cognitive challenge was involved, but the difference was that the class members were no longer focused on a big book about two metres away.

Using the NLS

Nick embraced the National Literacy Strategy wholeheartedly when it was first introduced. Through discussions with the school's speech and language therapist he chose to focus on exploring rhyme and rhythm. However he couldn't find any big books that met the aims he had set. So he made his own. He also wanted to find a way that children could show their understanding of language, and making interactive nursery rhyme books seemed a logical solution. This included pages with three blind mice, with a knife that children could use to 'cut off' their tails, and the Grand Old Duke of York's 10,000 men, who could be marched up and down the page. The book proved to be

a big success with the children; especially when they were encouraged to march around the classroom. In essence, Nick was working on a teaching concept that proved to be the foundation of his later highly successful work with ICT.

Nick continued working with cardboard and Velcro, illustrating his pictures with watercolours and ink. Each year he taught a different class group. New classes meant supporting different children with different needs, and the need for different solutions. The English Scheme of Work in itself required imaginative solutions, including the challenge of how to help children 'create and tell their own stories'. With his successful formula from previous years, Nick was able to develop what he called 'What happens next?' sessions. He spent a great deal of time at home illustrating a selection of characters, transport, destinations, treasures and monsters that the children could choose from. These were laminated at school and backed with magnetic strips so the story could be 'performed' on a large magnetic screen.

IT enters the picture

At this time Nick admits that he was 'a complete technophobe: who didn't know how to use computers, didn't want to know, and didn't think that he needed them'. Enter Sally Paveley, bringing New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training and PowerPoint. Sally at that time was involved in providing NOF training at The Bridge School (which was the new incarnation of the old Rosemary Special School). This coincided with Nick's concern that children in his class were not able to access suitable non-fiction books. Nick discussed his plans to take his class on a boat trip on the Thames. Sally saw this as a perfect opportunity to help Nick complete his training modules and make some fabulous resources at the same time. She taught Nick how to use a digital camera and convert his photos of the children on their trip into PowerPoint slides. Nick could now use a PowerPoint slideshow in the class as well as having the photos in book form.

Things then happened very rapidly. Sally invited Nick to present his work at a meeting of teachers working in ICT. Nick happened to be leaving the building with his portfolio, when he was introduced to a representative of the ICT company Inclusive Technology. This could have been his big break, but all Nick had to show were the PowerPoints and books he had made featuring photographs of the children in his class.

'What Happens Next?'

Although Inclusive Technology could not offer anything to Nick on that day, he left the encounter wondering what he could do that would interest them, and remembered 'What Happens Next?' Could that be made into a PowerPoint? In order to enable the children to make their choices, Sally first needed to teach Nick how to make hyperlinks.

The English Scheme of Work in itself required imaginative solutions

For five weeks after school he scanned his illustrations into PowerPoint, making detailed and complex hyperlinks between the pictures. He recorded sound effects and silly voices on the computer in the staff room, to bring the presentation to life. He admits that he had set himself a massive task, creating a root-like network with a picture of a consequence for every choice a child made in a story. The biggest PowerPoint Nick had made up until that point was 12 slides long. This one needed 156.

The project needed to be completed rapidly because Sally Paveley wanted to show the fruits of Nick's labour at a conference of NOF trainers. She knew that Inclusive Technology would be represented and wanted them to consider Nick's ideas for possible development. This was in May 2002, and a year later the first *Choose and Tell Nursery Rhymes* interactive software was published. It is now a best seller and a firm favourite in special schools and mainstream early years settings.

Following this success, Nick continues to work as a class teacher at The Bridge, and has published two further



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programs: *Choose and Tell Fairy Tales* and *Choose and Tell Legends*. Each program follows a similar format: the user chooses a character and takes him or her on a journey, with different outcomes depending on their choice. The illustrations have a characteristic style, described by one enthusiastic owner as 'warm, funny and friendly'. When the user has finished creating their story, they have the option of playing the story back, just as they made it, or going on to make another one. Their story can be printed off, as can individual illustrations for further use in the classroom.

Nick provides the voice for all of the stories, and this is another feature that seems to explain their appeal to children and older users. Six-year-old Nadia, whose younger brother has autism, enjoys helping him with the nursery rhymes program. Nick is particularly pleased with this type of positive response: 'I developed the programs with children with ASD in mind, as they particularly respond to IT, and can develop language and an understanding of the world through repetition and interacting with the software. I am often concerned that siblings who want to be involved with their brothers and sisters with special needs don't always have a way to do this. I am delighted to hear that they can also have fun, while at the same time helping their brother or sister to learn.'

At work in the classroom

Jennette Holden, ICT and alternative and augmentative communication coordinator at Tor View Special School in Haslingden, Lancashire echoes these sentiments. She is enthusiastic about the program's broad appeal for a wide age range of students. 'What the students particularly like is that there is no right or wrong choice. Everything is structured for the student to make choices, and it's an added bonus that they can show what they have created at the end.' Tor View caters for students from 3 to 19 years,

with a wide range of learning needs, from moderate to severe and profound difficulties. Jennette uses *Choose and Tell* in several ways, including printing off the illustrations, then recording the voices, music and sound effects onto a 'Big Mack' recorder. By doing this students can create, record and retell their stories, irrespective of their learning disabilities.

Jennette has also used *Choose and Tell* effectively with pre-school age children, with results such as: improved mouse skills, developing left-to-right visual scanning, as well as adding to their confidence in communication and language development. A group of children from Romania with early English skills were thoroughly entertained and learned a great deal as well.

A new version of *Choose and Tell Nursery Rhymes* will be published shortly, and Nick is embarking on his first collaborative project, with storyteller Keith Park. 'The plans are at an early stage, but Keith has a tremendous amount of experience, and will be the ideal person to support my new project, using call and response with myths and legends.'

Sally Paveley remains very supportive, and Nick's work can be found on 'The Plasma Screen and Whiteboard Room', a website providing free resources specifically designed for pupils with additional needs. This site, created by The Advisory Unit: Computers in Education, allows for the downloading and exchange of resources that teachers have created. Visitors to the site will find Nick's new illustrated story of Rama and Sita, where he experiments with Keith Park's ideas on interactive storytelling. Nick is currently working on another ambitious project called 'Choose and Cook' where students will be able to create their own recipes. Initial feedback from practitioners indicates that this could be particularly useful for older students involved in developing 'life skills', as well as adults with additional needs.

Nick sees 'a certain circularity' in his life so far. Shortly after his first success with *Choose and Tell* he found a publisher for his lino print book, and the limited edition is sold out. He continues to enjoy his work as a teacher, as well as finding additional creative fulfilment through his illustration. Perhaps the greatest reward, however, is seeing the children in his class and school respond to his ideas, and learn and grow as a result.

The *Choose and Tell* series is available from Inclusive Technology at www.inclusive.co.uk

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The Plasma Screen & Whiteboard Room
www.whiteboardroom.org.uk