



Listening to the Educator

THE STORY TABLES – AN UPPER PRIMARY ENGLISH ADVENTURE

BY IAIN HAND
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INTRODUCTION

LISA BURMAN

I'm sure you will enjoy reading this 'writing adventure story' from Iain Hand, who writes with such a strong and personal voice himself that you will hear his wry sense of humour in many paragraphs! I was excited when Iain and I did some initial planning for this "Spotlight Study", because it offered a fresh way of providing a real (ie: not contrived or 'just for the teacher') purpose for children to BE writers. As an artist as well as an educator, it also offered a perfect way to bring Iain's talents and passions into Writing Workshop.

Re-reading this story of learning, I can imagine the journey with all its ups and downs, excitement and confusions. I value how Iain led the learning within this 'lovely messiness': listening carefully, nudging young writers out of their comfort zones and providing many opportunities to create understandings through 'reading like a writer', discussing, observing and reflecting. It was a brilliant idea to ensure the Story Table play was videoed so it could be used to revisit, reflect and evaluate learning.

I think this 'Story Table Adventure' reminds us how we can have an idea of the direction of a Spotlight Study – we can have a vision for where it could go or the big ideas to be explored – but that it's so very important to remain open to the unknown learning along the way. We can't be sure of every minute step in the learning journey when we follow *the children's* ideas, confusions and lines of inquiry.

If you planned a Story Table Spotlight Study for *your* group of learners, it would be different to the experience of Iain's writers. You might follow similar learning processes, but, because it takes an inquiry stance and values co-construction of learning, it will be your own experience.

And so it should be.

Lisa



“The teacher is the chief learner in the classroom.”

Donald Graves

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The task for my students seemed simple enough, write a story that could be told to 3 to 5 year olds and make items for the story that could go with a Story Table. The part where my class was really going to need convincing was that they were going to read the story as the younger children re-enacted the story with what they had made.

When introducing the task to my class it was interesting to watch the reactions. There was a buzz in the room, an actual air of excitement. My class is a hands-on group of students & constructing and making was right up their alley. Knowing they weren't making a children's book but writing a story that was being retold, was a new experience for many. "So...we're not making a book?" "Do we have to do illustrations as well?"

Once we had established what a Story Table was and connections were made, the common question amongst the group was "What kind of story do I write?" and "What should my story be about?" The students decided to go to the source and ask the children in our Kindy (known as 'The Nest') what kind of things they liked to read and what interests they had. My students created a simple survey and in small groups interviewed The Nest students and gathered the information they needed (dinosaurs, transformers, frogs & mermaids were popular).

My class now had the information they needed to write stories about things that may interest 3 to 5 year olds but.....How do you write a children's story?

"I have no idea!" seemed to be trending quite highly.

"We don't write children's stories, they're for kids!" (Which did make me laugh out loud at the time.)
"I haven't read a children's book for a long time."

"We have this place," I said, "Where we will find everything we need – It's called 'A Library!'" Our trip to the library bore much fruit and the students went about looking and discovering the world of children's picture books, some short, some long and everything in between. As a group we discussed what stories would be great for a Story Table and what made it so. Not too many characters or settings was the consensus, after all said one student "It's going to be difficult making lots of different characters and different places for them to be in. It would be better if different things happened to a few characters, in the same place." It was a good call and it made their task more achievable. What this decision also did was to narrow their focus.

Using the books they found as mentor texts, my class of story tellers discovered things about children's books that they had long forgotten.

My students came to me time after time to share with me a new discovery like they were the first explorer to find the lost city of El Dorado. When one student announced a finding, it sparked conversation amongst themselves as they were all discovering similar new things.

“The books have themes, like days of the week or seasons!” said one.

“I found that a lot of these books have patterns in them, like all the sentences on a new page start the same, or rhyme,” said another.

I decided to pull out ‘Rosie’s Walk’ by Pat Hutchins and as a class look at its simple but effective structure. (What better way to illustrate to the students the simple but complex nature of the children’s book and what skilled practitioners their authors are). “It is about a chicken going for a walk.”

“It’s simple. You have one character that meets other characters along the way.”

The surface look (of Rosie’s Walk) was complete but now it was time to look closer. One of the students remarked that it had kind of a pattern, but not like the other books where the same start to a sentence was used every time. I urged them to look closer at the words on the page and not necessarily what they said, but how many words.

“Oh My God! The first and last page have seven words and all the other pages have 5 words!”

“That can’t be an accident can it?”

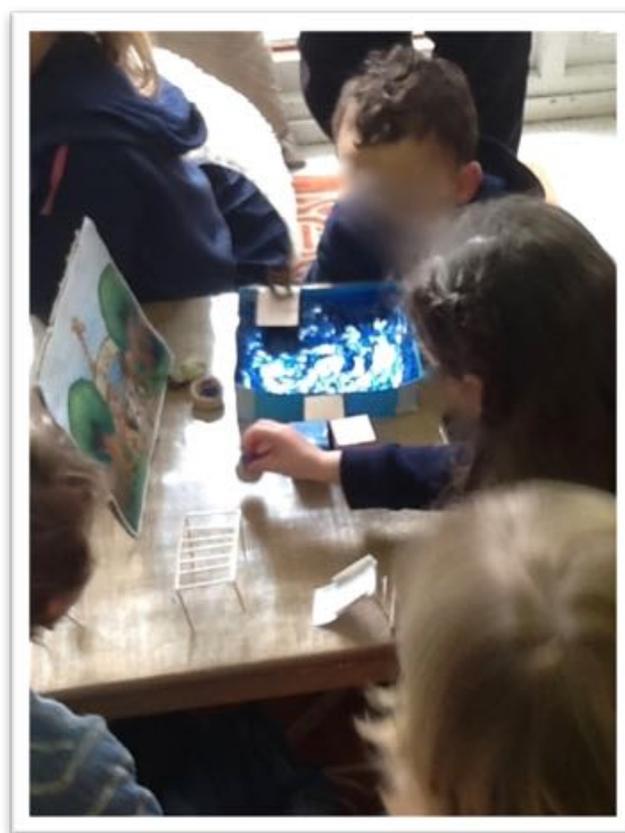
“That’s tricky!”

“By doing that it tells the reader that the story is over, it gives the reader a clue.”

“How many other books do that?”

All of a sudden, these books weren’t simple texts but texts written purposely by a very clever and skilful writer. Now it was time for my students to write a story cleverly and skilfully, on purpose.

What was exciting for me during the writing process, was seeing students who normally cringe and ask the question “Do we have to write?” engaged in their writing.



Nothing influences a child's attitude to writing more than the choice of topic. If the child has chosen it and if the teacher shows genuine interest in it, then there's often no limit to the effort the child will make. Young writers who are given this power become confident in choosing topics for themselves." Alan J. Wright

Students were using mentor texts to garner ideas and help them develop story patterns and I saw some amazing pieces of writing and storytelling. Stories about mermaids exploring the ocean on different days of the week, a boy who was swooped by a magpie everywhere he went, a dinosaur trying to play football in the park. The stories were written well and on purpose, taking into account their target audience and that they were going to be used for a Story Table. One student in particular wrote an incredible story about a snake that lived in rubbish bin in a park. Every day the snake would go out and do different things, meet different people. Each new page began with On Monday, On Tuesday etc. The story ended with "On Friday he went out into the park and met a rat.....Lunch!" The student told me it was a way to show the end of the story because it was different than the other endings on the other pages. He also used the ellipses, because "I saw them being used in some other books." The mentor texts work! He also was thinking about telling the story and how it would sound.

Once stories were written, the students went about the task of creating environments and items for the Story Tables. Mermaids, cat swings, bridges, rubbish bins, shop fronts and magpies all made by hand or found during many a library and Kindy treasure hunt. As I said, I have a very hands-on class and apart from the odd drama during the making process, it was an enjoyable experience for students.

During the making/finding process, an interesting thing happened with one of my students. His story took place in a dentist's office. His intention was to make a dentist's chair (that didn't go so well). Plan B was to find a dentist's chair (that didn't go so well). I knew something was up when I saw him making a dolphin and a beach. "I thought you were telling a story about a boy and his trip to the dentist?" I asked.

"Well, I couldn't find a dentist's chair, and you saw me trying to make one and what happened there!"

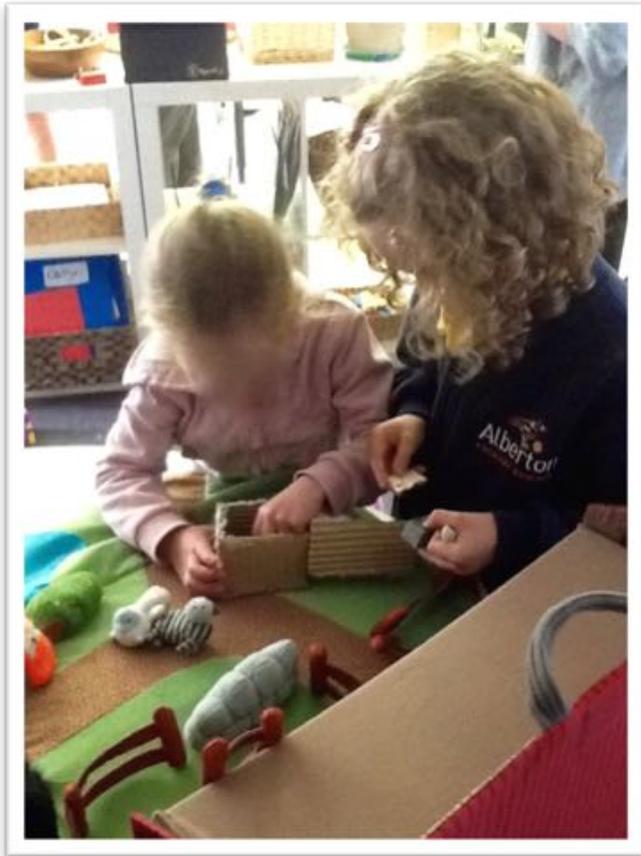
He had decided to change his story because he couldn't put together items for his Story Table to match. This made me very nervous (but I reminded myself that he had a plan) and in the end, I needn't have worried. Because his story structure was sound, he worked out that he could interchange environments and characters quite easily but the themes and ideas of the story would remain intact.

After what seemed to be 2 years of construction (approx. 6 lessons in the real world) my class of budding story tellers were ready to take their Story Tables and storytelling skills on the road. I had previously arranged a date and time with the 'The Nest' for my students to share their stories and we walked over with nothing but positive thoughts, but by the looks on some students' faces (the ones I had to drag over) it was like they were tasked with returning and destroying the 'one ring' in the fires of Mount Doom. Each student had a partner with an iPad and they filmed each other so they could look back at their experience and reflect on what had happened.

This part of the project was challenging for some of my students: the ones who don't like to share of themselves, don't answer questions in class and would die a thousand deaths if I asked them to read out loud. They say, 'What doesn't kill us makes us stronger' and I can assure you that none of my students died this day. In fact from the looks on their faces I would almost say they had a good time telling their stories and watching the younger students play with their story tables. I watched as some students, when finished with one group, went and rounded up more students to tell their story to.

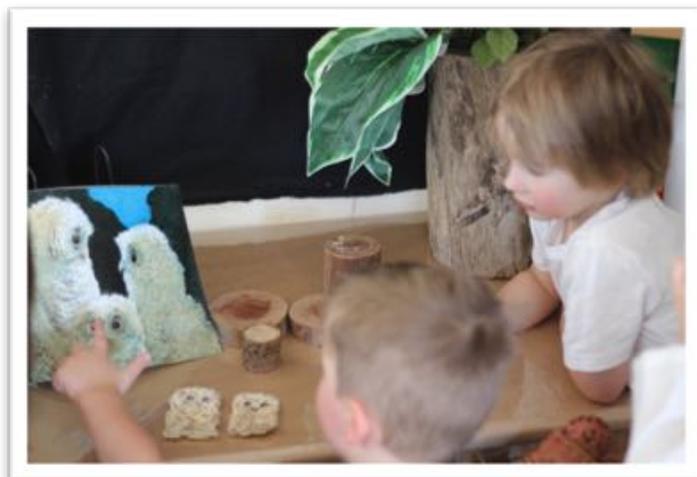
“Children...can’t do what they mean to be doing if they’re always doing what someone else tells them to do. They can’t live on purpose if they aren’t ever allowed to follow their purposes.”

Katie Wood Ray



This is my first year of using the pedagogy of Writer’s Notebook and for me everything is an adventure. The Story Tables project was hard and at times frustrating where I asked myself on more than a few occasions “What are you doing?!” Then you see it, the students start using the mentor texts, they are noticing (reading like writers) and they are writing and telling stories. Then they reflect and tell you what they did and how they felt and you are ready to go again.

Iain Hand



When my students were looking at the iPad footage afterwards, there was genuine laughter followed by times of silence as they listened and watched themselves intently on the small screen over and over, picking up things they had missed the first time – the reaction of The Nest students, who was playing with what. I heard comments like

“I read too quietly there.”

“I was too fast.”

“I should have made more things for the table.”

It was easy for the students to pick out all the things that were wrong and so it was important for me to debrief with them about the whole experience and all of the positives I saw e.g. how I watched them grow as students, story tellers and human beings. The way they interacted with the younger members of our school was priceless.

I would like to end with some quotes from my students about their experience,

“When it was time to go to the Kindy with my story and Story Table toys I was feeling great. I wasn’t nervous because they were just little kids and I knew my story and all my stuff was ready and it was fabulous. I read my story twice and it was good. The Kindy kids liked it. I knew this because they were playing with the Story Table while I was reading and they were happy and Charlotte (one of the kids) told Dianne she liked it.

Overall, I liked my Story Table project because I got it finished and it was good to write a story and then actually use it for something real.”

And

“I needed to explain to the kids why we were there. I read the story twice. I stuffed up the first time but the second time it was awesome. I had about four or five students the second time I told my story. This time I talked about what I was there for and what I had made. This made a difference because the kindy kids played with the things I made at the right parts of the story. Lots of kids played with the things I made even after I finished telling the story. I found that I wasn’t shy about reading my story to the kindy kids. Mr. Mara said that it was because it was my story and that I knew it very well. It was good for my confidence and it gave me a good feeling.”