7 Essential Storytelling Techniques

Techniques to engage visitors, activate exhibits, and infuse narrative structure into programming.

1. Puppets
2. Educator in Role
3. Creative Movement and Sensory Imagining
4. Story Stones & Creation of Imaginary Worlds
5. Props
6. Mime
7. Child-led Improvisation

Developed by educators at the Children’s Museum & Theatre of Maine. 2019

Puppets
Manipulating an inanimate object and imbuing some human emotion or empathetic response. Making an inanimate object animate. A simple example of this is opening a book, turning it upside down, and flapping the pages as if it’s a bird.

Basic Skills of puppeteering:
- Lip sync (if the puppet speaks)
- Eye contact
- Puppet gesture
- Keeping the puppet alive

Educator in Role
When the Educator steps into the story as one of the characters. This technique serves a way to shape the dramatic retelling of a story inviting participants to assume a role as well. This is different than a mascot approach; typically the educator tells the story first, and adopts a simple costume piece to become a character.

Teacher in role can be done many different ways. You can read a story, and with a simple costume piece become a character in the story. A classic example: become Strega Nona with an apron and a spoon. Teacher in role can be more elaborate with a character staffing an exhibit, posing challenges or asking questions. To do Teacher in Role well one must commit, and be comfortable with improvisation.

Creative Movement & Sensory Imagining
Creative movement allows for participants to move through space and explore a story or concept with their whole bodies. Sensory imaging allows participants to explore a story or concept by imagining with all of their senses. Creative movement and sensory imaging go hand in hand for kinesthetic learners. Creative movement uses elements of dance or choreography, but is connected to process and narrative rather than any final product.

Ensure all participants have space to move. Spread out in the gallery and offer simple verbal cues to encourage exploration. Activate senses through the verbal cues and suggestions of sounds, smells, tastes, or textures.

**Imaginary Worlds**
Imaginary worlds are small worlds that create a miniature play scene, with small figures and objects. This is a creative way to think in metaphor and design, see the big picture and experience a beginning, middle and end of a story.

Imaginary worlds can easily be set up in a sensory table using kinetic sand, figurines, fabric, story stones, pom-poms, etc. Imaginary Worlds offer an intimate approach to storytelling, and empowers a child to collaborate with others, and control a small universe.

**Props**
Props are any objects used to aid in the telling of the story to focus the audience attention and engage the audience imagination. Multi-sensory stimuli can also be used as props. Smells, textures, sounds, tastes create a sense of place and re-focus the audience attention— for example, inviting participants to smell a balsam or pine sachet before telling a story about the woods.

Props can be pots, bowls, spoons, telescopes, fruit, scarves, silk flowers, umbrellas— really anything that has to do with the story. Props can transform into other things— A scarf could become a map, a baby, the earth or the sky, a curtain, a cloak, a bed, a place to hide.

**Miming Action**
Mime is an acting technique that suggests action or emotion by using gesture, expression and movement. Miming or pantomiming got its start in ancient Greece and was used extensively during the age of silent movies.

When I use mime in storytelling I tell the story with my whole body using gestures, expressions, movement. I use my voice, I just don’t use any props. Children will often mirror my actions as I’m telling the story, and are more likely to engage during interactive moments. When I tell the story *Where the Wild Things Are*, I act out all the parts with miming action, and the audience joins me.

**Child-led Improvisation**
The improvisation that occurs when children direct the story and make up the rules, boundaries, and construct the narrative. If invited in, the role of the adult is to follow the fundamental rules of improvisation to engage.

I like to use Tina Fey’s four fundamental rules\(^1\) of improv:

1. *Agree, Always Agree and Say Yes*
2. *Say Yes And*
3. *Make Statements*

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4. There Are No Mistakes, Only Opportunities