

# ONCE UPON A TIME

Storytelling connects people. In spite of technology the unadorned voice, encased in human form, can capture our interest and engage our imagination. As educators we encourage parents and carers to read stories to children. As children we loved it when big people made up stories and shared them with us. That was then, and it still is now.

Something inexplicable happens when someone opens their imagination and immerses you in its contents. It's an intimate and meaningful gift. And whether the story is good, bad or indifferent is less important than knowing what you are hearing is unique to the storyteller. It is their fingerprint pressed on the receptors of your brain.

Telling stories and listening to stories one-on-one and in small groups helps students understand each other without trying to do so. More than the story passes between the participants. Insights are gained, observations are made and a sense of the other lingers and informs well past the last word uttered.

Are we losing the skill of oral storytelling? Is the digital age rapidly convincing us that the best stories are pixelated? Will the parents of tomorrow be able to sit with children on their laps, make eye contact and enthrall them with an oral display of imagination and creativity? Maybe, but the chances will be substantially greater if today's children have ample opportunity to share their imaginations and creativity through face-to face storytelling.

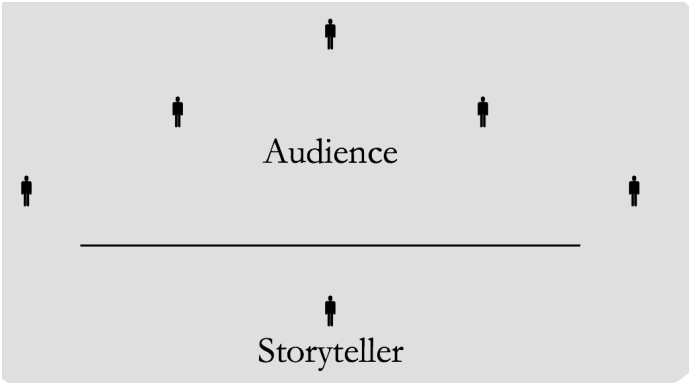
Watch and listen carefully when you facilitate this activity. Hopefully, you will see children excitedly grasping the opportunity to liberate their imaginations and enjoying their growing sense of empathy.

<b>BEST VENUE</b>	Indoors.
<b>NUMBER OF PLAYERS</b>	Minimum of 6.
<b>EQUIPMENT</b>	None.
<b>SUGGESTED AGES</b>	7 – 12+
<b>OBJECTIVE</b>	<p>To create an original children's story or add to an original group story that never ends.</p> <p>Students take it in turn to create an original children's story. A partner listens and repeats the story as accurately as possible and then takes it further.</p>
<b>SET UP</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are seated and working in pairs that are distributed throughout the room in whatever way allows partners to hear each other clearly.</li> <li>• Break the class into pairs with one person being, <b>A</b> and the other, <b>B</b>.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A</b> and <b>B</b> sit facing each other at a comfortable conversational distance. <b>A</b>, is the storyteller and <b>B</b>, the listener.</li> </ul>
TO PLAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When asked to start, <b>A</b> tells <b>B</b> a children’s story. It must be <b>original</b> and start with the line, ONCE UPON A TIME.....</li> </ul> <p>As <b>B</b>’s will have to repeat the story they must listen closely.</p> <p><i><b>NOTE 1:</b> It can be quite demanding to create an original children’s story and it’s not unusual for <b>A</b> to struggle with much stopping and starting as they try to do so. No matter how difficult <b>A</b> finds the task and no matter how many uncomfortable pauses there may be, <b>B</b> cannot help with the story. They are welcome to smile and offer words of comfort, but they cannot add or assist with the story in any way.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>A</b> must be given enough time to create a story with identifiable characters and a plot line. 1 to 2 minutes is usually enough time. However, don’t be hesitant about giving more or less time to <b>A</b> if you feel it would help.</li> <li>• When the time is right (trial and error is necessary) call, “<b>STOP.</b>”</li> <li>• Ask all the <b>A</b>’s to stand up and move to a different <b>B</b>. Make sure everyone is listening and following this instruction. If <b>B</b> also moves, things get messy. The only people to move are the <b>A</b>’s. The <b>B</b>’s sit and wait for an <b>A</b> to arrive.</li> <li>• Once the move has taken place, <b>B</b>’s become the storytellers and <b>A</b>’s the listeners.</li> <li>• It’s the <b>B</b>’s job to re-tell, as accurately as possible, the story they have just heard.</li> <li>• Give the <b>B</b>’s longer to re-tell the story than the <b>A</b>’s had to create it.</li> <li>• When the <b>B</b>’s reach the end of what they were given they must continue to add to the story, thereby making it longer than the original. Give the <b>B</b>’s as much time for the extension as <b>A</b>’s were given for the original. The <b>A</b>’s are hopefully listening to a much-improved version of the story.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>NOTE 2:</b> Retelling the story takes less time, as whoever is retelling it didn’t have to struggle with its creation. Extending the story requires working imaginatively with the given material. Some students will take the original story and develop it in a similar vein. Others will drive the story in an alternative direction. There is no right or wrong here, but it can prove interesting to see which students do what and see how closely that aligns with your perception of their ability to collaborate and cooperate.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When the time is right call, “<b>STOP.</b>”</li> <li>• Ask all the <b>B</b>’s to stand up and move to a different <b>A</b>. The <b>A</b>’s stay seated and wait for a <b>B</b> to arrive.</li> <li>• Once the move has taken place the <b>A</b>’s become the storytellers and the <b>B</b>’s the listeners.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's the <b>A's</b> job to re-tell the story they just heard.</li> </ul> <p><i><b>NOTE 3:</b> By now, the original story has been expanded considerably and the activity warrants a class discussion. Let students share their thoughts and discharge the emotional tension. Guide the discussion into ways and techniques to embellish the original stories and their extensions. Hopefully, students will mention using character voices and sound effects. If not, suggest that they try these techniques.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• After this initial discussion, continue the process of repeating the story a couple of more times</li> <li>• To finish the activity, ask 2 or 3 students to stand and share the story they have just heard with the class.</li> <li>• Ask the class if anyone can identify the story as having grown from the one they originally created and what they do and don't like about the final version</li> </ul> <p><i><b>NOTE 4:</b> Some excellent stories can be created through this process and the idea is very scalable. Students can go on to create comic strips of their favourite part of a story or squeeze a community message from a story and create a poster or write the back story of a character or write a letter from one character to another, etc. Teachers can invariably find a host of ways to harness the ongoing value of this activity.</i></p> <p><i>Be ready for some students to create stories that are disturbingly dark, quite violent, filled with shooting, murder, gore and mayhem. This is perhaps a reflection of their entertainment diet or something more sinister. If this happens, I recommend stopping the process and helping the class to come to a common definition of a children's story that negates such content.</i></p> <p><i>If necessary, make the rule that guns, bombs, mass destruction and gore are not permissible in the stories. I have found that children who gravitate to the dark side can be tempted out of its grip by this activity and the stipulations of a children's story.</i></p>
<b>RULES</b>	The student creating the story must do so alone.
<b>USEFUL TIPS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walk around and join pairs for a few seconds at a time. Sometimes stand on the side of the listener and at other times on the side of the storyteller. When on the side of the listener, model active and engaged listening. When on the side of the storyteller be conspicuously observing the listener. This will imply you are looking for something and invariably improves the active listening behaviour of the listener. You can do this in variations one and two as well.</li> <li>• When walking around and observing or while joining a pair for a few seconds, try to say little or nothing. Especially don't express value judgements of the stories you are hearing. It can be very easy for reflexive praise to pop out. Keep your reactions minimal but real. Rather than laugh if you hear something funny, just smile instead. The idea is for</li> </ul>

	<p>students to be aware of you but not playing to you. For pairs to create a strong connection they have to <i>give</i> to the other. One <i>gives</i> the story and the other <i>gives</i> his or her interest and attention. Having a third party to consider at this early stage in the activity upsets the one-on-one dynamics.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using titles can stir the imagination of participants. Call out a title, countdown from 10 to give a little time to formulate an idea and then call “<b>PLAY.</b>” Titles can vary from the abstract to the more concrete.</li> </ul> <p>Examples: “A dog in my soup.” “Christmas Chaos.”</p>
<p><b>SUGGESTED QUESTIONS</b> (In no particular order)</p>	<p><i>These questions can be rephrased to suit the age and capabilities of the students in your care and guidance. Questions can be asked before, during or after games sessions. Selecting the right and best moment can make a substantial difference to the depth of the answers and the quality of the student driven discussions.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Which role did you prefer, being the one to start a story or being the one to repeat and add to it? Share your reasons please.</li> <li>Were you able to relax and enjoy the story being created for you? If not, why?</li> <li>Discuss the pressures that a story creator might experience. What creates these pressures?</li> <li>Discuss the pressures that a listener might experience. What creates these pressures?</li> <li>Were you able to enjoy being a story creator? What did you enjoy about that role?</li> <li>Did you really dislike being a story creator? Can you explain why?</li> <li>What does being creative mean?</li> <li>What do you think it says about a person if they are seen as creative and imaginative? Explore this question carefully.</li> <li>How creative and imaginative are you and what gives you this opinion?</li> <li>Do you think your addition to a story made the story more or less interesting? Do you think the listener would agree with your assessment?</li> <li>Did you find it easier to share a story in front of some people more than others? Are there reasons for this?</li> <li>What are some of the things that can limit or get in the way of creativity and imagination?</li> <li>If someone is very creative, were they likely born that way or are there other reasons why they might be so?</li> <li>Can a person who is not very creative and/or imaginative learn to get better at both?</li> <li>What does being sensitive mean? Is it a good thing to be? Why?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are creative people more or less likely to be sensitive? Therefore, are sensitive people more or less likely to be creative?</li> <li>• When you were creating the story or repeating the story, did the time pass slowly, quickly or at different speeds for each role?</li> <li>• Have you heard of the term “active listening?” What do you think it means?</li> <li>• Is it possible to show you are actively listening? If so, what does active listening look like?</li> <li>• Is active listening silent or can it have sounds? If it can have sounds what would those sounds be?</li> <li>• How important is gesture in the telling of a story? Is it always necessary?</li> <li>• Is it important to make eye contact when telling a story one-on-one?</li> </ul>
<p><b>VARIATIONS</b></p>	<p><b>VARIATION ONE</b></p> <p>The activity is played in teams and students learn to accept, and work with the contribution of various others. They also learn to be stimulated by ideas they did not expect and to be adaptable and flexible in the pursuit of a story the team can own and enjoy. Learning not to be possessive and discovering that creativity and imagination play a significant part in working successfully with others are the substantial benefits of this variation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Break the class into teams of 4 to 6 with chairs. (The activity can be played with students sitting on the ground but sitting in chairs usually improves listening and responsiveness.) Every team should separate from the others and try to create a sense of their own space within the playing area.</li> <li>• That done, the students should sit in a small semi-circle with about a person’s width between each of them. A semi-circle works best as it allows everyone to be aware of each other’s responses. Keeping teams reasonably separate from each other makes it easier for players to hear the storyteller.</li> </ul> <p><b>EXAMPLE:</b></p>  <p>The diagram illustrates the seating arrangement for the activity. It features a light gray rectangular background. At the bottom center, there is a small black silhouette of a person labeled 'Storyteller'. Above the storyteller, a horizontal line spans across the width of the diagram. Above this line, five small black silhouettes of people are arranged in a semi-circle, facing the storyteller. The word 'Audience' is written in the center of this semi-circle.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The first storyteller (player 1) takes up a position of 1 to 2 metres in front of the team. The seated players number off from 2 upwards starting from either side of the semi-circle.</li> <li>• Player 1 starts a children’s story starting with the line, “ONCE UPON A TIME...” It should be original and can be as imaginative as they would like. Having played the one-on-one version of this activity the students will generally feel more relaxed about initiating a story.</li> <li>• Each time the teacher calls, “CHANGE” the next player in number order jumps up to take over the story, carrying on from where the last player left off. They can take the story in any direction they want. They can add or subtract characters and add whatever twists they want to the plot line.</li> </ul> <p>As each player jumps up, the player preceding him or her returns to a vacant seat.</p> <p><i><b>NOTE 5:</b> Players can be left as the storyteller for as long as the teacher wants. However, it should be noted, that it takes some skill and experience to deliver an original story for 30 seconds or more especially when being watched by a group. So, in the first few attempts of this variation be observant and swap storytellers while their ideas are flowing.</i></p> <p><i>The idea is for everyone to hold the attention of their audience by keeping the stories filled with action, atmosphere, surprises and interesting character voices, sound effects and dialogue.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vary the length of time storytellers are given. Give some a short burst of 10 or 20 seconds and others 20 or 30 seconds. This keeps up the excitement and energy. It also encourages players to add something substantial to the story from the moment they stand up and not just padding. Being observant will help you to create an engaging “change rhythm.”</li> <li>• All the teams are story telling at the same time. This makes the whole activity noisy and forces teams to listen closely and story tellers to be animated, exuberant and energetic. The closer together teams are, the harder it is for players to concentrate and listen. This can be done deliberately or avoided to make things easier.</li> <li>• When changes are called, players should swap as quickly as possible to keep the story going. Any delay in the next player getting up diminishes the momentum of the story.</li> <li>• Keep the changes going for as long as you like. Players can have several turns. Having multiple chances at story telling is fun and gives everyone the chance to talk for different lengths of time.</li> <li>• It’s best to finish with a run of very short bursts (5 seconds). It can be exciting to give storytellers only a few seconds to add one sentence before calling out, “CHANGE.” Finishing in a flurry of short bursts forces everyone to dive headlong into the activity and be spontaneous. It also lifts the energy and excitement.</li> <li>• Allow the group some time at the end to discharge their excitement and tension through talking and laughing.</li> </ul>
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- If there is enough time, invite a few teams to share their stories with the class. A good way to do this is to ask a student to start and every time you call change the next student takes over.
- It's also fun to ask one or two players from each group to rotate to another group and share their team's story. This also helps to change the teams for the next round if there is time.

As in the first activity, this variation has a life beyond the activity itself.

**NOTE 6:** *As the activity can get noisy it may help to use a whistle instead of calling out change.*

*When change is called the storytellers tend to finish their sentence and the next players pick up the story by repeating that sentence and continuing. Once students have tried VARIATION ONE a few times you can increase the difficulty by asking the storytellers to cease speaking as soon as you call change. This means they will most likely be stopping mid-sentence. The next storytellers must carry on the story immediately from the last word spoken. This calls for careful listening, greater creativity and the greater likelihood of a pregnant pause or something absurd being said...which could lead to much laughter.*

*First storyteller: Fred was very itchy and ran up (CHANGE)*

*Second storyteller: side down for miles scratching with his feet.*

#### SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR VARIATION ONE:

- Which did you prefer, telling a story one-on-one or to a group? Please share your reasons.
- Would you have preferred to tell the story sitting down? Please share your reasons.
- How is the experience different between standing up or sitting down?
- What does a storyteller need to do to hold the attention of the group? Is this different in any way to what is needed to hold the attention of just one person?
- How do you use eye contact when you are talking to a group?
- Were there some people who looked away when you looked at them? Why do you think they did this?
- Did you think some people in the group showed more interest in your contribution than others? What gave you that idea?
- Did you think the behaviour of your group increased or decreased the pressure you felt as a storyteller? Please give reasons for your answer.
- After getting up for the first time in your group were you eager to get up again or did you wish you didn't have to? Can you say why?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How comfortable were you with speaking up so your team could hear you?</li> <li>• What is the difference between going with the story and going against it? Did you mainly go with or against the story? Can you say why?</li> <li>• How tempted were you to move closer to your team when telling the story?</li> <li>• Did you think more about the team liking you as you told the story or did you think more about the team liking the story?</li> <li>• Do you think we listen more closely to people we like?</li> <li>• Can we enjoy a story from a person we don't like?</li> <li>• Were you really listening as you waited your turn or were you busy thinking of what you could say?</li> <li>• Was there anything you found surprising about the activity?</li> <li>• Did you try using character voices and sound effects? Did you find this easy or difficult?</li> <li>• When someone created a character voice did you try to talk in the same way?</li> <li>• In what ways did this activity take you out of your comfort zone?</li> <li>• Did you think someone in your team was an effective storyteller? What made them so?</li> <li>• Did you have a moment when you went blank? Can you explain what that felt like? It can be scary to go blank, why? What do you think is the best way to handle a moment like this? Can you think of other situations in life where you might go blank?</li> <li>• Were you generally pleased with the story your team/s created or do you feel you could have created a better one by yourself?</li> <li>• What does the expression "Many heads are better than one" mean and do you agree or disagree with it?</li> <li>• What do the expressions "Too many cooks spoil the broth" and "Too many chiefs and not enough Indians" mean and does that meaning hold true most of the time?</li> </ul> <p><b>VARIATION TWO</b></p> <p>As for variation one with the only change being players do not jump up to contribute in a set order but as and when they feel like it. Some players will find it hard to jump up, some will never jump up and some will take over.</p> <p>Players are still required to remain the storyteller until called to change.</p>
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	<p><b>NOTE 7:</b> <i>This variation is the most challenging. Those who have found the activity difficult can now sit out and those who thrive on it can unleash their creativity as much as they want. In some instances, the freedom to participate when creativity strikes can liberate imagination. It is important to keep a close eye on this variation.</i></p> <p><i>If it has taken forever for a student to find the courage or creative impetus to contribute, it may be important to give them sufficient time in front of the team to build their confidence and find enjoyment in the experience. On the other hand, you may have to call change quickly to prevent the student running dry, losing confidence and regretting their decision to participate. That’s a judgement call that only you can make based on your instinct and experience. Not at all easy when you are watching multiple teams, but you will discover that your instinct makes you more aware and ready to respond to the needs of particular students.</i></p> <p><b>SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR VARIATION TWO:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did you participate fully in this variation? If so, what did you enjoy about it? If not, can you say why?</li> <li>• Did you at any time just pop up to have a go without really knowing what you were going to say? What made you take this risk? In life and learning we are encouraged to take risks. Why? How do we decide if a risk is too great? What do we mean when we say someone was “foolhardy?”</li> </ul>
<p><b>ISSUES &amp; OBSERVATIONS</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not unusual for storytellers to run out of story or to have a mental blank. You will remember that earlier I advised to be ready for this and call a change to spare the players from this discomfort. However, when students have progressed to the variations it is important that they face this discomfort and learn to get through it.</li> <li>• When a student hits this mental blank, avoid rescuing her. (<i>It could just as easily be a him.</i>) Leave her in the discomfort and wait. While waiting, stand behind her team and look at her with a relaxed face and warm smile. If she can’t find anything to say after a few seconds say something like, “Just give me a couple of words and I’ll call a change.” As soon as she says one or more words call change...even if those words are “I can’t.”</li> </ul> <p>Getting through this freeze point is a skill worth mastering and knowing that you can survive certainly adds to self-confidence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A student might commandeer a story by not using the last word or sentence. Instead, he (it could just as easily be a she) starts with whatever sentence he wants in the attempt to create a story of his own choosing. If this happens select his team to demonstrate the activity.</li> </ul> <p>If the commandeering student repeats the behaviour it will be obvious to the class and inviting the student to share with his peers the motives for his actions and then listen to their feedback usually facilitates a change in behaviour. (Blue poster: Have reasons for the things you say and do.)</p>

	<p>If the student does not repeat the behaviour, he has likely accepted its inappropriateness and will avoid it in future. Simply discuss general issues and return the class to the activity. Hopefully, he does what is right and best. If not, ask his team to describe the behaviour and invite him to share with everyone his motives for doing so. He should also explain why he behaved differently when his team was demonstrating the activity to the whole class.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Standing in front of a group and talking can be daunting for some people irrespective of their age. In being so, it will call for considerable courage from some. The task is made easier if genuine safety exists and storytellers believe the team is with them and not against them. A frank discussion, about the ways in which a team can show its support of storytellers and help them to feel safe, maybe necessary before, during or after the activity...depending on the group.</li><li>• Some students will talk too quietly even if they know they are safe. Granted, not all students have a loud voice but rarely have I come across a student who had a vocal complication that prevented him or her from talking loudly enough to be heard in this activity.</li><li>• The set-up diagram shows the storyteller standing behind an imaginary line that stretches from the first seat on one side of the semi-circle to the last seat on the other side. This position means the storyteller will need to speak up if they are to be heard. This not only calls for confidence, it also calls for the storyteller to put the need of the team (to hear) above his or her own needs and fears.</li></ul> <p>Often storytellers will step closer to the team rather than speak up. Encourage them to stay behind the imaginary line and speak up. Learning to speak up and over the surrounding noise has ramifications beyond this activity. Equally often, the group will pull their chairs closer to the speaker or sit right at the front of their chair and lean as far forward as possible to hear. Ask the team to stay in their semi-circle and trust that the storyteller will make the effort to reach them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• On many occasions, respecting the needs of others calls for effort on our part and the bravery to step out of our comfort zone, so it is in this activity. The storyteller must <i>give</i> the story and give of themselves if the team are to get the information necessary to continue the process. The voice along with the body plays a significant part in projecting confidence and assertiveness. This activity can help students find their voice and the body to match.</li><li>• It can help to draw a line or place a mat on which the storyteller stands.</li></ul>
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