

SCHOOL REVIEW: The Story Spinner

A London-based primary school used the Story Spinner DVD set as part of its activities for National Storytelling Week in February.

Here, literacy co-ordinator Sian Rickett explains how the resource was used to support their teaching practices and to promote discussion and story telling activities among the pupils.



What is the Story Spinner?

The Story Spinner set of seven DVDs is a compilation of carefully chosen stories drawn from around the world and enchantingly told by the storyteller, Phil McDermott. They are told without pictures and the experience is very much like having a virtual storyteller in your classroom that you can pause, rewind and have projected on an interactive whiteboard. The series is suitable for Reception to Year 6/7 and offers a model for how to tell stories in ways that can evoke emotions and captivate imaginations.

How did you use the resource?

Our primary school used the Story spinner DVDs to support a focus on oracy alongside a week of other activities to celebrate National Storytelling Week in February. We decided to devote a week to oracy for many reasons, but foremost was the particular needs of our children.

Like many inner city schools, ours has a diverse and ethnically mixed intake: 33 different languages are spoken and the number of children who speak English as an additional language is increasing. Over a third of children enter nursery speaking little or no English and our Communication, Language and Literacy results are well below national averages. Although these scores right themselves by year 6, the children need more opportunities than most to listen to, rehearse and play with language.

The new literacy framework places greater emphasis on speaking and listening and this increased our confidence in devoting an entire week to it. Our main aim was to encourage staff and children alike to set aside pencil and paper and pursue talk and telling as a goal in itself.

A range of workshops, activities and parent and author visits had been arranged for the week but the Story Spinner resources formed the back bone of the work that would be done in class. Each class worked with at least one story from the DVDs, from nursery right the way through to year 6.

How were staff introduced to the Story Spinner resources?

Teachers were given a twilight session a week before the storytelling event to introduce the Story Spinner resource and to support their planning. The staff's initial reaction to the DVD was very positive - they were impressed with the quality of the stories, the standard of their telling and the ease with which the resource could be used.

The only concern was that, in spite of it's focus on speaking and listening, children with special educational needs and English as an additional language would find it harder to understand because of the lack of visuals (the stories being just simply a head and shoulder shot of storyteller Phil McDermott, much as if a live storyteller came in to tell a story).

Teachers were given ideas about how they could adapt and develop the stories using drama and questioning techniques. As a consequence, many teachers planned to use the DVD much like you would a written text, developing activities around it and using it as a launchpad for further games and role play.

This turned out to be a very successful. Although you could use each story in a standalone way (and some teachers did just this), classes got more mileage out of the stories where the teachers supplemented them and structured them around planned activities.

How was the Story Spinner used during your Storytelling week?

During the actual week, each teacher worked with the DVD differently (a testament to the flexibility of the resource). Some treated it in much the same way a live story teller would be used in a class room. Some focused on drama and retelling, others found the stories lent themselves to art work and then as a path to writing. Others used them specifically to work on sequencing, vocabulary and comprehension. Lots of teachers chose to use one story in depth, which showed how much could be developed from just one of the tales (each DVD has five or six to choose from). Although they didn't have to, many teachers chose stories that fitted in with the unit plans they'd already been following – this showed that the DVD was good for everyday use (not just a 'storytelling project') as it dovetailed neatly with the new framework. This also made the teachers more comfortable with what they were doing and the children too. as it made links with prior and future learning objectives. Teachers also found a wealth of cross curricular links through the stories, PHSCE, DT and art to name but a few.

There were a great number of positive things about Storyspinning but the greatest positive of all was the enthusiasm and drive of the children for the tales, which gave the teaching a momentum of its own.



Year 3 children are 'transfixed' by the story of Odysseus on Story Spinner

Staff were taken aback at how focused the children were ('transfixed' as one put it) whilst listening to the stories. This was a huge surprise for everyone, especially those teachers who work with special educational needs and EAL children who had felt the lack of visuals would be prohibitive. As one teacher put it, 'I was surprised at how well they could summarise the story, it was as though they were watching an actual movie'.

In most cases, teachers found that all children were engaged no matter what their ability, and one teacher commented that it was amazing how much enjoyment the children just got from listening. Some teachers in lower key stages chose to supplement the storytelling to make some of the language and plot turns more accessible. Some also chose to use stories from lower year groups.

Because the storyspinning resource is in DVD format, these teachers found it incredibly helpful to pause the story at certain points, discuss/draw to check for comprehension and then continue. All teachers were pleased with the way the resource could be viewed again and again, giving the children huge opportunities to immerse themselves in the patterns of storytelling language.



The multiple viewing opportunities of the DVD was one of its greatest assets. Many teachers felt that, if given the choice between the Story Spinner resource and a session with a live storyteller, they would choose Story Spinner because of the greater opportunity to maximise the children's exposure to story language and increase their understanding (and of course the quality of the story telling was second to none).

In spite of this, most teachers felt that its price tag of £400 was a high price for the Story Spinners boxed set, even when compared to the cost of a live story teller (which was about the same), given that it was not supported by additional teaching resources. Some teachers suggested that resource books could accompany the stories with examples of planning. Others suggested an activity bank, background to the story and a version of it in writing.

It was certainly the case that the more the DVD was resourced and structured by the teachers, the more the children benefited and the higher the standard of children's work. The school's focus on an oracy week gave the staff legitimacy and ample time and space to explore this resource to its fullest. The willingness of staff to supplement and adapt the DVDs, the enthusiasm of the children and of course the excellent quality of the stories, meant that the Story Spinner was a resounding success in our school. However, I can see that more resources and guidance (or a lower price) would make this boxed set a more attractive option for everyday use. For our purposes though, it was just perfect.



For more information about the Story Spinner resources, visit www.thestoryspinner.co.uk

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