

# Playing with Stories

“Storytelling is the great tree of civilization. Kevin Cordi has climbed all the branches of that tree. He is perfect for this book. I can’t wait to hold it in my hands.”

—**Jay O’Callahan**, storyteller, coach, author, and occasional NPR commentator

“Having participated in Kevin Cordi’s workshops as both a parent and a teacher, I can attest to his unique capabilities as a storyteller and the limitless possibilities that he opens up through play. He moves seamlessly from directing a dozen students in an ever-evolving fairy tale to helping teachers write—and enact—their own stories. This book reminds us that creativity, expression and listening are more important now, in this age of standards and testing, than ever before.”

—**Dr. Troy Hicks**, author of *Crafting Digital Writing: Composing Texts Across Media and Genres*

“Kevin Cordi is a master at playing with language through the power of storytelling. It is a great adventure to share his passion for using the imagination while crafting stories for all ages.”

—**Mary Jo Huff**, author, storyteller & puppeteer

“In *Playing with Stories*, every fifth word Kevin Cordi said got me laughing in ways I wasn’t expecting, and got me thinking about my story from a new perspective. While I was laughing my story was getting better and better. Kevin Cordi’s great passion for story, his great passion for teaching and his great passion for laughter all come together in *Playing with Stories*.”

—**Tony Toledo**, storyteller and former chair of the League for the Advancement of New England Storytelling

“The work of children is play! Kevin Cordi has incorporated this concept into his professional work to a fantastic degree. He integrates this tool of Story/Play into a seamless flow that teaches even adults to loosen up a bit when using the ancient art of storytelling in the 21st century.”

—**Bobby Norfolk**, Emmy Award-winning storyteller

“Kevin Cordi is the real deal. For decades, he’s worked and played with tellers young and old, challenging them and himself to mess with story as potters mess with clay. Let yourself play with Cordi’s imaginative prompting. Kevin Cordi knows the power of imagination, having coached the wonderfully messy work of shaping story with others for decades. If you let it, this book will lure you to new places as teacher and artist.”

—**Marni Gillard**, author storyteller, story teacher

“Kevin Cordi, a master in the field of story development, is famous for his work in improving storytelling in education and for encouraging youth troupes. I travelled halfway across the globe to hear his stories and seek his wisdom, all of which exceeded expectation.”

—**Terrie Howey**, England

“Kevin offered his Permission to Play workshop for our guild this past spring. We played and played and played, and afterwards, we were dumbfounded at how much work we’d gotten done!”

—**Mary Grace Ketner**, San Antonio Storytellers’ Association

“Kevin Cordi lives in the world of story and invites us all—teachers, students, writers—to enter that world with him. Through play, imagination, and his story box project, he leads us to the traditional world of story ... and beyond to the world of story we create. This book will help educators at many levels find his power to transfix, transport and transform us through story.”

—**Robin Holland**, author of *Deeper Writing*

“Kevin Cordi is one of the pioneers of storytelling in education. He’s one of our great encouragers, always inviting new voices into the circle of storytellers.”

—**Dan Yashinsky**, Canadian storyteller and author of *And Then They Heard Footsteps*

# Playing with Stories

Story-crafting for storytellers, writers, teachers  
and other imaginative thinkers

Kevin D. Cordi, Ph.D.



Parkhurst Brothers Publishers

MARION, MICHIGAN

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Summary: "An educator's manual for teachers, leaders and students of oral storytelling arts developed by a Ph.D. professor who has worked extensively with all ages K-16"— Provided by publisher.

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She reminds me that play is the greatest work that we can do.  
Most of all, she constantly reminds me that  
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# Contents

## Chapter 1

My World of Play—Giving Permission to Play 11

## Chapter 2

What is Story-Crafting? Exploring how Play can Make a Story 29

## Chapter 3

Word Dancing—Proven Playful Methods to Use Before Writing Down Stories 49

## Chapter 4

The Invisible Craft of Building a Story 75

## Chapter 5

Deep Listening—Working with a Partner 95

## Chapter 6

Mediation and Co-Creating Stories 107

## Chapter 7

Moving Play into Ensemble Storytelling 122

## Chapter 8

Establishing a Story-Crafting Community that Invites Play 144

Permission to Play Pledge 152

About the Author 153

Bibliography 154



*Whatever you can do,  
Or dream you can, begin it.  
Boldness has genius  
Power and magic in it.*  
—GOETH, GERMAN WRITER



# Chapter 1

## My World of Play—Giving Permission to Play

### Why We Should Use Play

I was raised on my West Virginian parents' Appalachia stories. My five brothers and sisters and I would gather on our dilapidated old couch to listen as my father and mother would regale us with stories. I would sit spellbound in my old chair listening to Grandpa tell how he killed an old black snake hiding out behind the barn or laugh out loud as my mother recalled the time my sister took a giant bite out of a solid hard block of chewing tobacco, thinking it was candy. Each night was entertaining and educational. We traveled to the days of yesterday and today. We really listened to the stories. As much I savored this experience, we didn't wrestle with making our own stories. We didn't create them together, but we listened deeply to what was said. This has helped me realize the value of deep listening to mediate and orchestrate play for and with others. Before play begins, a storyteller or writer must know how to listen for the story and later listen to where play would work to help accentuate it. In this book, I share methods to strengthen deep listening skills to build and focus the craft of storytelling.

It has not been easy to value play. Mainstream culture urges us to rush and finish what we are working on to quickly advance to the next task at hand. Too often we must punch our time clock forward without much consideration. As the minutes and hours move, we indirectly communicate both to ourselves and the world that no time remains to play. We must work. For in work, many

tasks get done. Parents rush to prepare young kids to “grow up” and act their age. Recess is eliminated as kids mature. Time is spent preparing young adults for college or to be a democratic participant in the country and hopefully, the world. More time is dedicated to reducing playtime in favor of the work involved to be successful.

Teachers train students to seek answers, but not how to answer questions naturally developed through play. We expect people to simply know how to relate to others because they have been taught or we modeled it. We do not use role or playful techniques to explore what would happen if somebody became angry or confused. Instead, by sheer osmosis we expect him or her to know what to do or how to behave in any situation. Some of us develop this ability. But if it does not happen, we don't engage in any rehearsal of the situation. We let things happen and rarely have time to reflect, let alone replay the action. Play provides a chance to review and even change our actions, but it is rarely used.

In many occupations even the thought of pausing our work to play with the ideas of yesterday before beginning the work of today would only invite laughter. We cannot ask for more time of our English teachers for an essay assignment because we are playing with the ideas. The clock ticks on and we feel forced to answer. Regardless, spending time playing with our ideas will help bring fruitful results. So we press forward. With play, time is dedicated to reconsider and redesign a work decision. Still the *modus operandi* is to move on without play.

We evaluate others based on the number of tasks they complete. Assignments are assigned. Work consists of tasks. In my creative life play is necessary, even though the world around me does not value play. In fact, I have discovered that play is the real work I do as an artist and teacher. As a storyteller, writer, teacher, and imaginative thinker, it is play that has produced the most desired results in my life, in my work, and especially in my creativity. Through play we experience who we are and begin to extend our choices. Play is not consciously prepared. It is discovered in the moment. It invites reflection. In fact, philosopher Plato once shared, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.”

### **Play as my Guide**

Play has been my guide for years, shaping my work and creating my

identity as a storyteller, writer, and teacher. Through play, I transform into an imaginative thinker.

### **The Importance of Play and Writing**

In high school, I read from the traditional “dead white writers” cannon and was required to memorize the details of their major works. I also remember when I asked what it meant to be a writer the teacher replied, “You will never make the mark of these writers, but the best preparation is to read as much as possible.” He told me not to try writing, but rather to read as much as I could. I did read, but I read so slowly. With each book, I felt more distance from becoming a writer myself.

Over the years, I did not value my skills. Sometimes, even now, I still fight to be encouraged by my writing. It is easy to think I can’t be a writer, but now I draw on the idea that writers should invite play with ideas in order to complete them. The first draft is not the last. The revision and reflection that occurs in play will improve the outcome of the work.

It is hard at times, to envision yourself as a writer. When this happens to me, I am reminded of the time I took a class in creative nonfiction by the science fiction author Geoffrey Landis. We traded our writing every week and without signing our names, shared feedback. I will never forget the stark words on my paper: “You call yourself a teacher of writing; I would never take your class.” I felt the sting of those words. There was no play in these comments.

When someone provides comments like this, there is no room for change. It is simply a declaration of someone who needs to say something; it has little to do with helping a person with his or her craft. It was important for this person to tell me—unsigned—that I did not meet her standards. When I confided this to Landis, I will never forget his response, “You know, it was in your mistakes that your writing came alive for me.” He praised the detail in my story about a homeless man called “The Gutter Fish.” He liked the mistakes in language choices because it enhanced the dialogue of the man. He said that awkward sentence construction was easy to fix—what I did have was a solid idea, and from this idea, finer details. He encouraged me to play with these ideas even if my first attempts were mistakes. He invited me to take risks. I know this contributed to the value I place on play. As I began to see myself as a playful writer, I ignored those people who felt they had to declare comments

about my writing, and instead work with others who helped me by providing permission for me to explore my writing and my choices. Listening to these advisors helped me believe I had something to say and that I would need to use play to refine the words.

Before, I believed reading the “widely read bookshelves” of a bookstore would make me a good writer. I worked to make this happen, but looking back, I spent more time knowing I was not a certain type of writer, so I didn’t try. Like so many, I was fearful to show my writing to someone until it was ready, which did not occur often. The English teacher said I should read as much as I could to become a writer. As a writer, I do more than read. As a writer, I observe, note, write, reflect, remember—and most of all, play. Reading is valuable but so is examining what we write. Trying it out and recasting in other ways can move the direction of the story.

For the last seven years, I have served as a co-director for the Columbus Area Writing Project at Ohio State University. Every summer, we head off to Kenyon College for a writing retreat with K-college teachers. Before the retreat we provide interviews to get to know the teachers and gauge why they elected to be involved in the writing institute. The expectation is that we involve those who are serious writers or at least serious about writing. This is not always the case. We often invite teachers who simply want to know more about writing and how they can provide better ways for their students to write. What we tell them—but they also soon discover and experience—is that we not only learn about writing, but we work together as writers. We provide time to play with the writing, so as to build a community of support. We partner with them as they write, rewrite, reflect, and revisit their own work.

When people are provided with this time, they are amazed at what happens. Too often the third grade teacher is awed from the response when she reads a poem about her old home and the impact it has on everyone that listens. A high school teacher is so taken by the story written the day before and immediately wants to share it with the larger writing group. We engage in quick writes and students experiment with styles and forms of their work. We create a community where voices are honored in the writing—and telling—process. They are invited to revisit and reposition their first drafts as we spend the next two weeks playing with our words.

Under the direction of my colleagues, David Bloome, Robin Holland,

George Newell, and Melissa Wilson, we form writing groups to bounce around our ideas and play with our choices. I have spent countless hours devouring rough drafts or working with Robin Holland, another co-director, and author of *Deeper Writing* (2013), as she demonstrated new ways to create writing that has a greater impact.

It is here I also learned what happens when someone supports you, without their own agenda, as you explore writing choices. Too often we don't learn from and with each other. This is a place where we orient our direction. This is important for anyone involved in the craft of writing and telling. Writers, tellers, and other imaginative thinkers need to have room to write, speak, and basically create without judgment. If a person is negatively evaluated on their work, especially in the early stages, the creativity can stop. Story-crafters need to be surrounded by caring communities seeking partners that honestly support their choices.

At the Columbus Area Writing Project, I found it to be a place where I realized how important it is to develop a playful environment when a person wants to be creative. After all, this is our goal if we write for publication, but does it develop us as creative artists? Too often, people gather for the sole purpose of getting into print, but is this the only reason for which we create? Do we always have to seek out publication to be valued? When we strip the ego out of the environment and work from the position that there is something in all of us that is creative, we begin to build creative work. Only in this environment can our words dance.

### **Play in Many Forms—Ways to Make the Words Dance**

As artist Pablo Picasso once said, "Painting is another way of keeping a diary." Picasso played with images, and so does the imaginative thinker when it comes to writing or telling stories. With language, we need to let the words dance. Words need to have freedom to be released from print. They need to soar, sprint and especially, dance. Now, as I write, there are times when I need to dance with the words. I feel the wonder that happens when I share my ideas with another person. I let the words rest while I tell the story of what I want to create. In play, I become a better writer because I don't merely write the words, I invite the words to live within other forms and dance before they meet the page.

In play, I can draw what I say. I can use drama to move the words and make better sense because of the choices I make. In play, I can invite others to listen and recall my choices. In play, not only do the words dance, but I also dance. I can use many forms to help me see my story unfold.

In this book, many exercises will be shared that have supported my *word dancing* over the years. I will share pedagogy of practice using play. Use them; let them change as you work with them. Word dancing happens when creating ideas and exploring choices. You, in a sense, move the words to the rhythm of your choices. Instead of immediately penning an idea, I will draw on many methods to see the words unfold. The dance is required to explore choices.

### **Deep Listening:**

Before the words can dance, we must develop deep listening skills. When there is deep listening everything goes away except the story and the connection between teller and listener. Remember those times when a teacher or a family member began talking and everything disappeared? You weighed in on each word. This can be established at a good poetry reading, story slam, or simply a telling of the day. However, as a teller, there are ways to establish deep listening invitations. This book shares ways to improve the telling skills to invite this type of listening. However, this is only one side of deep listening. There is also the type of coach or listener who invites personal and connected responses. This is the beginning point of reflection when the coach or another teller lets go of what is on his or her mind to help focus on the teller's story development. This can occur in quiet listening circles, but it can also be done with a group of tellers. Deep listening with a coach can help the teller find new directions.

I learned and developed this from listening to the best storytelling coaches in the country. I worked personally with dynamic storytelling coaches such as Doug Lipman, Marni Gillard, Chuck Larkin and countless others. Each coach had his or her own style—some vastly different than others—but all of them shared acute listening skills. The best coaches first listened to your needs and from what was said, used these ideas to engineer the coaching. I learned from these collections of coaches plus my own ways of deep listening to develop “Permission 2 Play”—[www.permission2play.com](http://www.permission2play.com). This employs



not only deep listening, but also a way to *mediate*, my term for coaching stories as works in progress. It is a practice that employs process drama and the story-making processes that I have studied and taught in my over twenty-eight years of working with story. It draws heavily upon my doctoral work at Ohio State University employing dramatic methods and inquiry in the story-making processes. What is valued most in this work is the simple but powerful understanding that the coach, whom I call the *mediator*, works to help the teller. The mediator is not there to show a fancy trick or clever word use; instead he or she is there to serve the teller. The mediator honors the teller's needs and abilities throughout the process. The models and exercises in this text serve the teller to improve his or her story craft.

### **Use of Play in the Classroom**

There should be more play in the classroom. Unfortunately, as a high school teacher for fourteen years, I was more schooled in the discipline of creating final products instead of what it meant to play with making the products work. In other words, we evaluate the end result, but what we really should consider perhaps even more, is the process of creation. The design or the craft of how something is achieved strengthens the way students will produce later. It also develops a deliberate mindset that the classroom is a place to practice as much as to produce work. What was accentuated was the performance. What was missing were the playful processes that were used not only to create performance, but also to learn. Our education system, driven by standards and mandates, is more concerned with outcomes than development. This was most felt in the nationwide and statewide efforts to standardize learning. I watched the creative vein drain from some of my colleagues as we pushed out creative methods for our students to learn.

Standardization of learning was the state and federal mandate. Students were feeling this pressure too. In fact, it was actually students who showed me the need and desire for play, especially when it came to working with story in the schools. Over the years, I have discovered that students who use play to exceed the state standards reconsider and rethink and even redo work so that is understood. Using play, learning becomes an active process of engagement. Research supports the fact that the more active students are in the learning process, the more reflective they become.

As a storyteller and storytelling teacher, stories were the way that I taught. Students organically understood the natural flow of narrative. They know story as the way in which they learn. From when they were little, they were immersed in a narrative environment. Why not use it for teaching? It was and is the most effective method to grab a student's attention, but also to invite investment in the material.

It was an early morning class and I was teaching at East Bakersfield High School in California when a young freshman, Jennifer Wooley, approached me and said, "Mr. Cordi, you tell stories in every class I have had with you." As I explained to her how much value stories have, she interrupted, "I want to do more with stories than tell them in class. Could we have a storytelling club after school?" She detected my confusion on how to start, but Jennifer said, "Don't worry Mr. Cordi, I have it handled."

One week later, she had our first meeting planned—telling ghost stories for thirty minutes in a dark, dank basement. Four and half hours later—of laughing and simply having fun telling and retelling stories—the next meetings were planned. From then on the students and I met on a weekly basis. We became a storytelling club: *Voices of Illusion*.

### **What about Listening to Students?**

For eleven years, I coached students for five to twenty hours a week after school. Later, when I taught storytelling classes during school, there was no set curriculum. I built our objectives based on what I knew about storytelling and what I had discovered after years of attending storytelling conferences, festivals, and events. At first, I was content to have the students prepare a story and then tell it. However, the students began to ask about adding rap lyrics, music and even dance. They did not have my prior experience with regard to how a story must be told. Instead, they wanted to use and include other arts to build a story. In my past, I had been taught that storytelling could not include dance or puppets.

I remember when the talented group Eth-Noh-Tec, Robert Kikuchi-Yngojo and Nancy Wang entered the national storytelling world. They combined Asian style dance into their story work. I remember some of my colleagues questioned if this was storytelling, while others accepted it. It did not look like what storytelling looked like then. Over time, this talented group

showed the value of being different. Although they used old art forms, including story and dance, they made it look new as they integrated it with story. They helped break new ground in storytelling. Today the rules are shifting. More and more fields are opening to the possibilities of storytelling. Again, it does not look the same, but is new. My students in my storytelling clubs and troupes over the years have taught me to value the arts alone and in connection with story. In our work they did not worry about the unspoken rules. They only wanted to play with making a story by fusing crafts from other disciplines.

We told stories in small groups, developed listening partners, and created ways to word dance with ideas. In other words, I created more playful choices in the developing phase of story. Over time, I learned there are numerous ways to create a story and we began to play with these choices. In our weekly meeting, students would share rap, use a flute to echo the sounds of a bird in a Cherokee myth, include drums, symbols, puppets, and even develop stories in groups of twenty-five or more.

My students work together. Although at the time adult storytellers would only tell alone—and many still tell only solo—I can still remember Andrew and Steven creating laugh riot routines when telling “No News” adapted by the Folktellers and expanding each line in a rapid rhythm reminiscent of “Who’s on first?” Groups of four, and later up to even twenty-five students began to create a story from a spark. They built story from improvised ideas and directions. In creating a full three-hour program on flight, we had over twenty-four students tell the story from the Wright brothers to future flights to Mars. Students added dance, popular news headlines, and ensemble work that was not common in storytelling circles.

As we played, the students’ listening grew. This was evidenced by how their language changed dramatically as we engaged in playful exercises. Student Chris told a story about a polar bear and instead of hearing, “It was good or he liked the sound of the bear,” other students offered to mirror the voices of other bears for him. Another student stood as tall as he could so that Chris could imagine the bear even more. My students were playing inside the story world. For Chris, instead of listening to him tell the story, they worked with him to make the story more real and alive. A conversation began. When Chris next told his story, he included some of these ideas. The story still stays with me because of its authenticity.

Another student, Jessica, a German exchange student, worked with the urban legend that outlined an unknown caller who asks, “Have you checked the children?” Later the story reveals that the call comes from inside the house. When we played with the story, a symphony of voices joined in her urban legend thundering even more the call of “Have you checked the children?” My teenagers turned into a dozen children running away. Jessica sounded stronger because of the voices behind her. As an ensemble, we worked to improve the story. We grew from there.

We created full length CDs through the process of play. We needed to spend time not only telling stories, but creating together. We had to play in order to truly see the storytelling experience come alive. My students began to play with their own versions of stories, recorded professional audio and videotapes, and toured throughout the state of California and beyond. It was when we played with our ideas as a group and learned from the direction of our play that my student youth storytelling clubs and troupes became models for youth storytelling.

Our reputation grew. I became and served, according to the National Storytelling Network, as “the first full-time high school storytelling teacher in the country.” In all my classes, I began to value not only the narrative I was telling, but also the narratives I created with and for my students. Our storytelling class became a model for others to follow for those using narrative structure in and out of the classroom. We always included play to shape our understanding of story. Realizing that storytelling is more than telling—it is about the storytelling experience—what makes up that experience is what a high school student Allison called “focused freedom” (Adler, 2009, 1) that occurs in the story-making process. This is where one allows many choices to be explored so he or she has freedom to explore choices with support to help focus the ideas. This is focused freedom to create with direction.

A storytelling experience is an experience that allows students to explore choices in the shaping and telling of a story. Students, instead of being directed on the right line or next cue, are free to explore. But they have a coach, guide or what I like to call a *story mediator* to help the shape of the work. This is what I have become. Vygotsky stated that when two or more students are involved in problem-based play, students would become a “head taller in their learning” (1978,102). This is accentuated when someone helps scaffold the

learning. This scaffolding develops when storytellers study the craft of story-making. However, in order to enhance the craft, one must do more than learn a story from a printed page and then tell it later for an audience.

### **The Value of the Story-Making Process**

In my classroom, instead of producing a show of creativity, we examined the craft and design involved in making someone creative. When I was teaching *The Odyssey*, instead of having the students create a traditional book report, I gave them focused freedom to choose how they would represent this. I did this by providing parameters for what they made. For example, they needed to retell the story, but I gave them freedom on how they represented it. I vividly remember my students making a film using Ninja Turtle action figures in the bathtub and watching Homer's tale unfold in the bathtub water current. The storm was created with a push in the water so we could see the perils of the journey. I provided the freedom for them to explore the work their way. They had the freedom to play and still learned the ideas.

When I was teaching Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, we created our own tales and composed characters like Chaucer, but ours wore cheerleading and band uniforms. We transformed our class into a modern Mead Hall. We collected ghost stories in our neighborhood of Hanford, California and told them around a campfire. It is from teaching storytelling that I realized story-making was just as important as storytelling. When I had to create daily storytelling lessons, I learned to explore and play with the way stories were used not only in performance, but for learning as well.

Unfortunately, at a time when we need to value story-making, we are turning again to standardization. As a university professor in the education division at Ohio Dominican University for the past seven years, I again see the need to introduce standards for learning instead of teaching pre-service teachers the value of flexible planning with play. As I travel around the country, teachers and administrators decry that they have no time for play when they have to build curriculum to meet local, state, and national mandates. Some educators and administrators have forgotten that working to find an answer is not as fruitful as working to discover how and why we need to be more critical in our learning. They have forgotten the value of play. This book serves as powerful reminder on how play can be reinstated in the classroom.

If you are teacher, you should read this book to rekindle the playful work in your classroom. The first step is to realize that you too, are an imaginative thinker.

### **Imaginative Thinking**

How often in our classrooms, workplaces, and even family life are we asked to be imaginative? It is sometimes hard to remember the last time we were asked to create something new from playing with choices. What would you do if your boss, a teacher, or even your father said, instead of filling out that report, writing that research paper or mowing the grass, “Let me give you the day to come up with a new idea for what you are doing. How about you taking some time to imagine your choices?” I know many of you are saying: “I have no time to use my imagination, I have work to do.” In this book, I argue that using your imagination is some of the most powerful work you will do, especially when it comes to creating stories. Instead of depending on the pen or computer, I want to demonstrate and share how dancing with your ideas will help you find not one choice, but many, to direct your stories.

With some basic guiding principles, a pedagogy of practice will be established that allows you to not only imagine as you solely create, but also to have the skills to help others deeply listen to your story, and allow you to become what I call a story mediator that helps you play with the story.

Drawing on educational socio-constructivist Lev Vygotsky (1978) who believes in problem-based play, this pedagogy will equip others to wrestle with the dramatic tensions (Heathcote, 1984) that are inherent in story. You will also be able to imagine perspectives and possible tensions that will strengthen the work of your story. Imagination drives the story.

If we didn’t make time for writing and telling stories, I would caution with what poet Sylvia Plath states, “What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination” (2000, 204). How can we create as writers, storytellers, and creative artists, if we don’t allocate time for play? After all, it is the imagination that allows us to create.

Imagination has brought mankind through the Dark Ages to its present state of civilization. Imagination led Columbus to discover America. Imagination led Franklin to discover electricity. Imagination has given us the steam engine, the

telephone, the talking-machine and the automobile; for these things had to be dreamed of before they became realities. So I believe that dreams - daydreams, you know, with your eyes wide open and your brain-machinery whizzing - are likely to lead to the betterment of the world. The imaginative child will become the imaginative man or woman most apt to create, to invent, and therefore to foster civilization. (Baum, *The Lost Princess of Oz*, 1990, 615)

### **How Does One Become an Imaginative Thinker?**

In order to imagine, we must first become imaginative thinkers, dedicating just as much time if not more to the *how* and *why* created not just the *what*. A writer that I recently met said to me, “I never share my writing out loud. If I say it out loud, I let it go and it is no longer mine. I don’t want to let it go.” This freezes the ideas and limits imaginative thinking. As my storytelling friend and colleague Rafe Martin once said, “Stories are trapped in books. It is the storyteller who sets them free”. When developing stories, let them dance, fly, and roam in unknown places because it is in the discovery and suspense that all stories must build. All stories hinge on suspense, something that makes the reader or listener curious to know more. By playing with tension, the suspense can be elevated or decreased. Canadian storyteller Dan Yashinsky speaks to the allure and magical power when he is telling his child a soft story to put him to sleep and just as he thinks he is resting, he bolts upright and declares, “And then they suddenly heard footsteps.” We want those footsteps to be heard in our story but we don’t provide enough spaces for suspense to happen. We need to express our work in so many ways so that even in the development we build anticipation, suspense and release.

Play creates spaces to release stories. There are endless possibilities to explore when writing and telling a story. Why be limited to saying it out loud or penning it to paper? I talked with middle school Newberry award-winning author Richard Peck and asked him about his process. He stated he always talks out his stories before he writes them down. He says that as he types, he imagines the scene. He takes time to see and hear his words before they are in print. In this book, we value talking out loud to explore shaping stories. We do more than imagine. We share exercises and proven skillful methods to move the story to experience it as though it is occurring now. We will use our imagination to

skillfully see the world of the story unfold and use play to make it real.

### **Value the Process of Play**

Writers and storytellers are more concerned how a finished story sounds and less with the methods used to create it. Once a story is written, only then do we release it to an audience. It is sent to a prospective publisher or told to a new listening audience. As a writer and teller, I first would spend endless hours over a computer or a piece of paper as I drafted and redrafted different versions of my story. I would slave over the right word, the best turn of a phrase or plot line that I could create and write—or type—on my paper. I prided myself on my method of learning a story. I had a pattern down and I thought it suited me. The question is, did this help me to become more of an imaginative thinker?

### **Stepping Inside the World of the Story**

My organized standard pattern of writing or telling a story was shaken when I enrolled in a story and drama class at Northwestern University where professor/storyteller Rives Collins was teaching. Without a formal announcement, we were immersed in story in a class designed around play. He immediately took on the role of a man looking for people to travel west with him. He dramatically announced we would earn money so we could settle the West. Without writing a single word or even having a discussion about plot or character, we became travelers trying to survive in the West. He became our eyes as he mediated us against talking with or combating against the Natives and demonstrating our choices of what we might choose when our wagon lost a wheel. With his dramatic directing, he helped us craft our story as to how we could survive eating a poison root, and later how we could start settling in this unknown land.

Rives mediated our story-based world. However, we could choose what we did in this world. We were free to suggest and even enact our choices. Together we decided what happens when one of our travelers ate poison or needed extra attention because they were injured in the journey. We were no longer observers in the drama. Everyone was involved playing, making our story world come alive. We used inquiry and imaginative design to reshape, rethink, and reactivate this world to be present within the room. In fact, the



room changed into that of the Old West and instead of being students, we were surviving the trials and tribulations that came from walking the trail.

Up until this time, I viewed storytelling as a something that occurred as people sat in a circle. But this was not the storytelling that occurred. This was a time when the story was made by the choice of an entire group. Introducing dramatic tension, we examined more choices in creating the story. The story was not written or memorized; it emerged out of our focused play. With the help of a mediator, the story changed, shifted, and unfolded through choices made by the entire group. This was a new way for me to see how story-making could be used to develop stories with my students.

Carl Sagan reminds us, “Imagination will often carry us to worlds that never were, but without it we go nowhere” (Cosmos, 1980). I encountered this type of process story-making world again when I decided to study this method of learning for my doctorate degree at Ohio State University. I worked with Dr. Brian Edmiston, author of *Transforming Teaching and Learning through Active Dramatic Approaches* (2013), about his work with kids, teens, and adults using story-based play.

I spent the next five years working with kids of all ages and adults to co-create and improvise problem-based story work. Edmiston shared models to move the story, using skillful dramatic and educational moves such as *tableaux* and *freeze-frame* to move the investment of the story. These are dramatic methods to illustrate the story in a way that enacts the drama. A tableau creates frozen still images that help the students revisit the story. freeze-frame holds still significant parts of the story so it can be explored more by students’ questions. These techniques help the investment in the narrative. Most of all, Edmiston modeled how process-based story work builds inquiry and investment not only in the story but also in the whole group as well.

Later I worked with the legendary Dorothy Heathcote (*Drama for Learning*, 1995) who created a pedagogy entitled *Mantle of the Expert*, a method that uses role to help adults and kids experience a world they create through the eyes of “perceived experts”. For example, when I worked with young elementary students in England we engaged in a real world drama of rescuing a wounded adult from a mountain. However, these young children took on the mantle of the expert lens of mountain rescue helpers. I learned the great strength that role has in promoting story development.

On one occasion, a group of fifth graders in Columbus, Ohio struggled with whether or not they should go up the beanstalk to steal the magic coin on top from the giant Jim to help cure their sick mother. I learned how to step into the fictional world with the students to make decisions and use roles such as playing the mother and not only saying I am sick but showing them with my frailty in talking and moving. This helped them become more empathic toward me as their mother.

What is important to know is that this is not a series of dramatic games, but instead, it is using drama and story to help establish framework in the fictional world. Each exercise and convention has been framed to support the world-building that occurs in an ensemble manner.

However I also learned how to have a class discussion outside of the fictional world so we could talk about what we should do and then go back into the fictional world together. These proven techniques can also be employed with writers and storytellers as they step in and out of the world they create.

Another time, using process drama, Edmiston demonstrated the unpredictable and even emotional delivery of suspense. Adults all, and not knowing, we were asked to build a fictional school that would maximize learning for all students. We took out large piece of butcher paper and began to create. Acting in the role of building planners, we carefully chose where to place the library, the classes, and debated issues such as whether or not we would have recess. There was a limitless budget. However, using our fictional power to slowly reveal we were not building an ideal school, but in fact were building a school to strip all Native Americans from their “injun” ways.

This was similar to the real school referred to as the Carlisle school. This school followed these instructions. They used inhumane methods to “naturalize” Native Americans. Our dramatic work mirrored this. Realizing what was occurring, our class had to decide whether to quit and let someone else build this terrible school, or continue to build and work to change it. In the fictional world, we did not know the next direction in building this story. In fact, Edmiston drew upon our compassion for building the best school as educators, and the anger from what was occurring, to determine our next story-based move. It was a dramatic way to shift the story that was being told. I learned how to use power and suspense to build a story. I remember being profoundly affected by this dramatic experience. I could not stop thinking

about it. When I wrote an e-mail to Edmiston that night, he responded that my unresolved thinking about the drama shows how powerful drama can be used to help us think or reconsider our actions after the drama. Creating story-based fictional worlds can help us consider what we do in actual time. Drama and story can be reflection tools for continual learning.

Another time, working with teens, we decided to study the causes for the sinking of the Titanic. Students served as reporters immediately after the Titanic sank, interviewing survivors. I used dramatic choices to move the story, but I did not know the outcome. Soon iceberg specialists testified, witnesses described the cold, and parents waited to see if their loved ones came back or suffered in the depths of the water.

In all these cases, I learned how to use play to promote learning. We used role, suspense, perspective, power, and dramatic tension to move in the story world.

This form of play challenged a new understanding of how, as a writer, storyteller, teacher, and imaginative thinker, I could use play. I was left wondering:

1. How could I write in nontraditional ways using play?
2. How would I create stories using play and find new direction for my story work?
3. How could I work with others using play in creating stories?
4. How could I teach differently using play and story?
5. In what way could I increase my imaginative thinking when concentrating on process over product?

In this book, you will discover new ways to work with your story craft and find new story direction using play. Indeed, play is a meaningful way to create and learn.

In both childhood and adult play, the imagination plays a central role in the meaning-making process. Although there are many types of play including school-based, recess, and sports, this work is rooted in play, inviting the writer, storyteller, or imaginative thinker to make choices as they work to create meaning in their work. This play creates a dramatic interface. We use dramatic conventions and world-building to help shape the story we are working on.

I will share how collaborative play can increase your choices when

making a story. You will find not only exercises to build your story-making and telling skills, but a pedagogy of practice to use when you are called to create story.

Before you can do any of this, you must first give yourself permission to play. In this world, we have people and places that serve to constrain your use of play. It is powerful when you are reminded daily of the power of play. I value this pledge because it is a strong statement to begin your day as you encounter others who are yet to realize the rich life choices that can be made with play. You can remember this by continuing to take the *Permission 2 Play Pledge*.

### **Permission 2 Play Pledge**

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I give myself permission

To have fun.  
To take risks.  
To make mistakes.  
To Play  
With my thinking  
my choices  
my direction and development

to suspend  
what I know  
so  
I know more

I give myself  
Permission  
To  
fail, succeed, and play again.

I have the right to shape  
My stories.

I am the crafter and creator.  
I am imaginative and supportive

I know through  
Play  
We understand our stories  
And our stories become  
alive.

I give myself  
Permission to Play.