



Pick-A-Path Playhouse

Curriculum Unit 90.02.04
by Carol A. Wong

The design concepts of pattern and theme and variation have been basic to my work, both as an artist in the studio and a teacher in the TAG program, developing curriculum focused on creative and critical problem-solving.

It is with my teacher's hat on that I have developed "Pick-A-Path Playhouse," to introduce students, grades K-3, to the dramatization of children's literature with emphasis on the creation of new stories or thematic variations for play-acting from the original. It is easily adaptable for upper elementary grades. Similar in concept to the "Choose Your Own Adventure" series published by Bantam Books, this unit requires students to make choices to bring plot development and character action to a conclusive finish given changes in the original format of the story. The variations might come from a change in the characters, the setting, or the ending. How would this affect the development of plot, the interaction of characters, and the eventual outcome of events? With the teacher's guidance, students brainstorm the possibilities and consequences, select a new path for the story, structure the outcome, and enact the variation.

Designed to stimulate a more divergent way of looking at problem-solving for many interesting solutions as opposed to a single right or wrong answer, "Pick-A-Path Playhouse" seeks to foster a learning environment for students where day-dreaming or using your imagination is valued, where to act out and speak your voice in a focused way is encouraged, where playing at play-making is role-playing relationships, and where asking questions is primary to brainstorming and essential to building comprehension skills.

The objectives of this approach are multi-fold. First, it's a young child's experience with variables within a controlled make-believe setting of theater which allows her to safely explore "what if" possibilities. The playacting of "what if" situations speaks to the young child's need for understanding "Who am I? How ought I to deal with life's problems?" Bruno Bettelheim in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, elaborates on this and "the child's need for magic" for developmentally healthy children. Belief in and ownership of fantasy are strengthened in the re-telling and reenactment of a story. Play-acting a role gives the individual hands-on ownership of the make-believe experience in all its life-mirroring facets.

"What if" situations are basic to developing creative and critical thinking skills. While students are actively engaged in dramatizing the play variation, they are on another level physically internalizing this divergent expansion of possibilities. They are experiencing that structure is not rigid but can bend, shift, and expand with the flexibility of creative thinking.

Creativity resides in the imagination. Too often this world called imagination is misunderstood by teachers who fail to value and therefore nurture the joy of discovery, the enchantment of make-believe, the freedom to explore without fear of judgement. Possessing the keys to one's imagination is essential to becoming a capable problem-solver. A creative thinker works for originality of ideas, elaboration of details, fluency of thought, and flexibility in points of view.

Critical thinking skills ask the basic questions: Who? Where? What? Why? And what if? At the early primary level, encouraging children to think and question with curiosity lays the foundation for the higher level cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation according to Benjamin Bloom in his book, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*.² Questions taken from primary literature enhance the richness of the reading experience. Why did Humpty Dumpty fall down from the wall? How could that accident have been prevented? Why was he on the wall in the first place?

Integrating affective and cognitive learning in "Pick-A-Path Playhouse" is not a solo effort, but is dependent upon the social context and cooperation of students working and brain-storming together for a common effort. This unit could be a whole-class activity, for several smaller groups of five students each, or for a single pull-out TAG group. The teacher is the guide. It is the students who make the decisions and pick the path on which the play is to proceed.

The medium is the message. Here the medium is play-acting and the message is communication. Communication is of utmost importance between members of the group to effectively communicate the intent of the play to the audience. Developing a nonverbal vocabulary, an awareness of body language and facial expression, along with the dramatized voice is an invaluable lesson in concentration and focus for the individual in order to best convey her message. She is but a part of the greater whole ensemble who must pull the pieces together.

To experience the aesthetic satisfaction of taking an idea and giving it shape and content until it takes on a definition and vitality of its own and to share that feeling of pride with your team members is a rewarding experience socially, emotionally, aesthetically, and cognitively for any individual.

Encouraging students to stretch their range of experiences affectively in front of others is also encouraging risk-taking, to break free of confined safety to make new discoveries while also risking failure. Developing a sense of trust in oneself and trust in each other at an early age empowers the child with a sense of self-esteem.

And last but not the least of the objectives for "Pick-A-Path Playhouse" is to show students and teachers that learning can be FUN, for everyone. There are many paths to take up to that mountaintop called KNOWLEDGE. This is a roadmap to one such path.

"Pick-A-Path Playhouse" begins with the reading of a book by the teacher to her students. The theater for the first telling is the child's imagination. The story is experienced affectively within this make-believe world. Questions focused on this experience ask the student to find words to best describe feelings. What did you like best about this story? Who was your favorite character and why? Who was your least favorite character and why? What was the happiest part of the story, the saddest, the funniest? Did you like the ending? If not, how would you have changed it and why? These are open-ended questions asking students to personally give their own opinion.

I would re-read the book a second time prefacing it with a few questions about the cognitive content of the story for students to think about. Listen very carefully and see if you can discover: What is the story about? Who are the main characters? Was there a problem that had to be solved? Who helped to solve the problem? What did they do? Were there any other problems that happened? Where did the story take place? Describe the setting. I would tailor the questions to appropriate grade level.

On my second visit, I would introduce the concept of playacting. The different parts of a play, from the role call of characters, the setting, props and the plot development to the sequencing of events would be lifted from the book and discussed. Words alone to convey ideas are too abstract for young minds, so I would make visual storyboards to illustrate the parts of the play. They would serve as a concrete reminder of how these separate elements fit together.

Depending on the developmental level of the students, dramatizing a story can be a whole class effort, where everyone enacts every part as the story is narrated, and speaks each role in chorus, while standing by their desks. Or, some students can physically become the scenery, while the character parts are each shared by several students taking their turn during act changes.

It could be a simple call of hands to select parts. Or individual speaking and non-speaking roles could be assigned randomly from a deck of cards with the symbolic image of the character, object, or scenery on enough cards for each child. The variations for "trying" on different roles with a changing lineup of cast would not only be equitable but like a game of chance to the students.

The teaching benefits are immediate and democratic. Everyone takes an active part in the dramatization. This is a nonthreatening introduction to play-acting where everyone is equally "on" at the same time and benefiting from the experience. The shy, less secure students will feel more comfortable and the more extroverted natural actors will perform as models for their classmates, teaching by example.

For the more experienced classes, students can be divided into smaller group to rehearse a play under their own direction. Parts can be assigned by the teacher, picked out of a hat, or decided upon by the group itself. The latter suggestion can present the problem of the more dominating students taking over unless the teacher steps in to suggest the group find an equitable way of selecting parts.

"Pick-A-Path Playhouse" is introduced after the original story has been dramatized. Then the "what if" possibilities are explored. Given the different parts of the play as illustrated on the story boards, change a physical attribute: the nature of a character (e.g. rabbit to a mouse, bird to a cloud, animal to human etc.), the season of the year, the setting of the story. Change the problems encountered or the solutions rendered. How does changing one element alter the whole story line?

Begin by picking out a card from the deck of play symbols to begin the brainstorming. The variables to be changed might be a character, a problem, the solution, or the setting. If "X" is substituted for "Y", in what ways does this change the play? This pick-a-path concept should be modeled with the teacher guiding the questioning and giving examples. Older students can divide into smaller groups and choose a card to work on their own version of "Pick-A-Path Playhouse" from the same story. One person would write out the thematic changes. Roles would be chosen and contributions to the plot defined again in a brainstorming session. It is in these free-association idea sessions where creative thinking is best stimulated.

Performances of the play variations are the culminating goals of "Pick-A-Path Playhouse." Students have invested their own ideas in the re-designing of the original dramatized story and bring it to life in presentation.

They have worked through a problem, proposed solutions, enacted changes, and brought their project to a conclusive finish. The students have experienced the hands-on study of theme and variation in play-acting and play-writing from children's literature.

There are three books that I have used in TAG K-3 and will adapt for "Pick-A-Path Playhouse." The first is *Anansi the Spider*, by Gerald McDermott. A spider family consisting of six brothers: See Trouble, Road Builder, River Drinker, Game Skinner, Stone Thrower, and Cushion, sequentially contribute their strengths to rescuing their father, Anansi, from many problem situations. Reunited, they are happy once again until the prospect of a reward to the one spider who rescued Anansi divides the family with discord. There is no earthly spider solution so Nyame, "The God of All Things," objectively resolves the problem.

The second book is *Who's in Rabbit's House?* by Verna Aardema, illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. The pictures depict an African folktale as a play, with Masai actors wearing animal masks, staging a performance for fellow villagers. The perspective quickly focuses in on the main stage and the reader of the story becomes the immediate audience. One day Rabbit cannot enter her own house. A very "big, bad voice" shouts, "I am The Long One. I eat trees and trample on elephants. Go away! Or I will trample on you!"³ Frustrated, Rabbit rebukes Frog's offer of help but allows a series of animals' from the African grasslands, Jackal, Leopard, Elephant, and Rhinoceros, to help in their own short-sighted ways. Frog, watching the ineptitude, again offers her help to Rabbit, who accepts. With cunning and deception, Frog outwits The Long One with a threat scaring only a "long green caterpillar" out of Rabbit's house.

The third book, *The Mountain That Loved a Bird*, by Alice McLerran, stands apart from the other two books because there are only two main characters, the mountain and Joy, the bird. It tells of a special friendship that begins one day when Joy stops to rest on the barren mountain's ledge. It had never felt life before or heard such sweet singing and implores Joy to stay. She explains to the mountain that birds must have water and food to live, but that because no other mountain has ever cared before if she came or went, she would make a promise that every spring of her life, she would come to visit. And because birds do not live very long, she would name a daughter Joy who would visit and that daughter would also name a daughter Joy to visit the mountain and so on. This friendship lasts for hundreds of years and during this time the mountain experiences sorrow, which turns to streams which break the hard stone to dirt to accept seeds, and the eventual change of a barren mountain to a permanent fertile home for Joy.

I have used these books in the TAG K-3 program as a central theme to integrate curriculum areas such as math, social studies, science, and the visual and movement arts. Integrating curriculum around children's literature is an exciting creative process. Bringing it to life and fine tuning it in the classroom field is the challenge, to make the make-believe real for students, to speak "child-speak."

I rarely "jump" right into a book, but introduce it indirectly through another focus. For example, in *Anansi the Spider*, I have given each student a piece of string or "magic line" and after exploring the different imaging possibilities of line, had students as a class informally design a free-form web of string, laying down individual lengths of string one at a time. This has set the stage for the telling of Anansi. Would you like to hear a story about a spider who might have had an adventure on a web like this one?

Who's in Rabbit's House might be read after a visit with a live rabbit and a science lesson on rabbits as mammals and their habitats, noting that rabbits are found not just in Connecticut, but all over the world. Or simply ask if anyone knows of any stories about a rabbit. Answers might include: *Peter the Rabbit*, *The Tortoise and the Hare*, *Pat*, *The Bunny*, and possibly the Easter bunny. Follow-up comments might include

setting the stage for *Who's in Rabbit's House*, in the plains of Africa, and as a folktale being retold as a play by and for the Masai people.

The Mountain that loved a Bird followed the distribution of tiny stones for students to study, count, and chart basic attributes. I then held up a fist size rock and asked them what they would call a rock ten times as big as their school. What is East Rock and West Rock? What is a mountain made of? And then holding up a feather, where did this come from? What are the differences between this rock and feather? I have a story to share with you about a mountain and a bird.

An important point to mention here is the use of metaphoric objects which I can use to concretely symbolize the essence of the story or character, i.e. string for magic line which becomes webbing, stone for the mountain, and feather for the bird. This seemingly small and insignificant object is touched with magic in its presentation. It connects to the child's love of precious objects, touch, concrete ownership of the mystery of make-believe.

The who, where, when, why and then what of any story need to be charted visually for students to conceptually grasp where the story is (basic pattern structure) so that they then can begin to substitute the what if possibility and resulting consequences. This "Pick-a-Path" playwriting precedes the playacting.

For example, *Anansi the Spider* has a visual pattern like Monopoly game squares around a board. The story develops very sequentially in direct linear cause-and-effect fashion.

- #1. Anansi & family introduced
- (problem) #2. Anansi went far from home/fell into trouble
- (solution) #3. Son See Trouble saw trouble
- (solution) #4. Road Builder built road
- (problem) #5. Anansi inside fish/in river
- (solution) #6. River Drinker drinks river
- (solution) #7. Game Slayer cuts open fish/frees Anansi
- (problem) #8. Falcon flies away with Anansi
- (solution) #9. Stone Thrower throws stone/hits Falcon
- (problem) #10. Falcon drops Anansi in, air
- (solution) #11. Cushion cushions Anansi's fall
- #12. Spider family happy & together
- #13. Beautiful globe of light found
- (problem) #14. Who deserves this prize?
- (problem) #15. Spider family argues
- (solution) #16. God of All Things puts light in sky for all

What if Anansi was a fish? The necessary changes might be:

- #4. Bubble Blower blew bubble path
- #5. Sonar Detector locates Anansi
- #6. Anansi inside net
- #7. Scissors Teeth cuts open net
- #8. Pelican dives in/flies away with Anansi
- #9. Stone Thrower throws stone/hits pelican
- #10. Anansi dropped/falls thru air
- #11. Flying Fish breaks Anansi's fall
- #12. Fish family happy & together

What if the Spider family did not argue and resolved who deserved the prize? Possible solutions might be:

- #15. Let's pick a name out of a hat to see who gets to keep the prize.
- #16. The beautiful light is so bright, it keeps everyone up at night.
- #17. God of All Things accepts return of light; puts it in sky as everyone's nightlight.

OR

- #15. Unselfish sharing
- #16. Consult God of All Things to give light to everyone
- #17. Bounded up to sky, broke into millions of starlights for all

Who's in Rabbit's House? has one major problematic situation around which each attempted solution brings its own problems to compound the first. This story has a visual map like a sun with rays radiating out from the center. The center sun is Rabbit who can't get into his house because of the scary Long One.

(figure available in print form)

What if Rabbit lived in a New England forest? The change in the animals might include:

2. Raccoon—builds nest through roof/garbage everywhere
3. Porcupine—shoots quills around house/ sticks Rabbit too
4. Skunk—sprays odor/offends all
5. Deer—bucks the door down/tosses Rabbit into swamp

What if the animals came up with “smart” solutions, what would they be? Some possibilities are:

1. Be polite—Please please Long One, please leave my house soon
2. Bribe—If you leave my house, I’ll call you King of the Animals
3. Joke—You’ll laugh so hard, you’ll split your sides
4. Sympathy—My doctor says the stress is killing me

The Mountain That Loved a Bird is a story of growth and change because of friendship. The pattern should be one of concentric circles or transparent overlays, showing a cross-section of growth like tree trunk rings, and a time-line of sequential change. The mountain wanted the bird to stay; the bird needed food and water and had to leave. Their common bond of friendship eventually planted the seeds for mutual interdependence after hundreds and hundreds of years.

The center core would represent the mountain of stone, a patchwork of blues and grays. Each concentric circle would represent 10 year intervals, marking when the mountain’s heart broke after 100 years and streams of tears gushed forth, to when Joy planted the first seed which would grow into the tree Joy’s descendants would build a nest in and stay in, and all the small but significant events between.

What would happen to the mountain in the future, after man’s first arrival? Pick-a-path for the betterment of mankind and nature, learning from our mistakes, or pick-a-path to see what man has done with short-sighted vision and self-destruction. Pick-a-path of fantasy, of unicorns and Never-Never Land or pick-a-path to a mountain on the moon with a friendly orbiting and communicating satellite.

Given the visual schema of each story, “what if” possibilities can be brain-stormed and charted with clarity. *Anansi the Spider* and *Who’s in Rabbit’s House* depend on problem-solving solutions which of ten end up as part of the story line’s problem to be resolved. The action takes place in the immediate present. Playacting the pick-a-path changes can be done by the class collectively or by individuals randomly assigned roles with the “playing” cards. A class might be divided into several groups to playwright, organize, and stage their own

pick-a-path idea.

Time and change are the behind-the-scenes players in *The Mountain That Loved a Bird*. The staging of the mountain through its metamorphosis becomes an intriguing ensemble idea. The changing environment is one of the two main characters in this story. With visual props of cool colored geometric shapes followed by organic yellow green flowing forms, students can orchestrate change. Without props, the mountain is vast and strong and complex in presence. It changes from having felt only the touch of snow and rain to feeling the soft, warm, life of a bird, the sound of Joy's singing, to deep sorrow, to the energy of bountiful life as plants and animals make the mountain home. Joy can be played by a rotation of students as Joy symbolizes the rebirth of all life. The sounds of the mountain and Joy as explored by the players would add depth to the narration and mood.

A rehearsed informal production of "Pick-A-Path Playhouse" for parents or other classes would be a fitting closure for this adventure into problem-solving with play-acting. Not only would it impart a sense of pride and accomplishment to the participating students, entertain and inform parents of the values of the dramatic arts in teaching for cooperation, creativity and critical thinking skills, but it would also serve as a working model of this curriculum unit for teachers.

"Pick-A-Path Playhouse" emphasizes process and change. It's important that students have an understanding of the paths they've explored as variations from a central theme. Group discussions at appropriate intervals would help the older students to evaluate their direction and maintain their focus as they work in independent groups. A video diary could record the steps taken to arrive at the final production. Taped excerpts of this process would demonstrate the conceptual development of pick-a-path in action and serve as referential feedback for teacher and students. Final performances could also be video-taped for open-houses, learning fairs and for airing on a local cable television station.

In closing, here are several creative writing activities to challenge students to experience the role of playwright. Drawing upon their pick-a-path ideas, students would illustrate a pick-a-path cartoon strip. Dialogue would be written in the balloons, with teacher help if necessary. A pick-a-path story could be written and illustrated in storybook form. Older students would write the script for their improvised pick-a-path playlet. Translating prose from any story into written dialogue would not only be an excellent communications activity, but would also provide the basis for future "Pick-A-Path Playhouse" work.

LESSON PLANS

Anansi The Spider by Gerald McDermott

Who's in Rabbit's House by Verna Aardema

The Mountain That Loved a Bird by Alice McLerran

DAY 1. Read story to class (seated on floor)

- A. First reading followed by questions which focus in on students' feelings/reactions to story
 1. What did you like best about this story?
 2. Who was your favorite character and why?
 3. Who was your least favorite character and why?
 4. What was the happiest part of the story, the saddest, the funniest?

5. Did you like the ending?
 6. Would you like to change the ending? What would that be?
- B. Second reading followed by questions which focus on students' listening and comprehension skills
1. What is this story about?
 2. Who are the main characters?
 3. Where does this story take place?
 4. Was there a problem(s) that had to be solved?
 6. How was the problem(s) solved?
- C. Metaphoric connection to story
1. *Anansi The Spider*
 - a. Give each student 15" length string to symbolize a part of a spider's web
 - b. Make spiders by twisting 4-4" pipe cleaners together to make an 8-legged spider; tie on string for webbing
 2. *Who's in Rabbit's House*
 - a. Student picks animal not in book to make a mask (paper plate, oak tag)
 - b. Teacher charts choices/categories (farm, forest or mammal, reptile etc.)
 - c. How would this animal help Rabbit?
 - d. Save for play-acting
 3. *The Mountain That Loved a Bird*
 - a. Take class outside to find a special stone (about the size of a quarter)
 - b. Discuss attributes stone to mountain
 - c. Wrap pipe cleaner around stone like string around a package to make a pendant, twisting to make loop to thread yarn through for necklace

DAY 2. Story Re-telling/Play-acting (seated on floor)

- A. Review of story (with or without book)
 - 1. What is this story about? Quick review
 - 2. Teacher as narrator or guide, provides framework for students to recall, retell story from memory
 - a. encourage students improvise dialogue
 - b. ask questions to “flesh” out details
- B. Introduce concept of play-acting to story
 - 1. Identify parts of a play (setting, characters, plot, props)
 - 2. With words and drawings on storyboards, ask students to identify parts of the play
- C. Play-acting: *Anansi The Spider, Who’s in Rabbit’s House*
 - I. Whole class (K-1, Intro.for 2-3)
 - *a. Teacher narrates and class mimes action
 - b. Students assigned/volunteer for speaking/non-speaking roles (several for each part)—teacher narrates and parts acted/spoken
 - 2. Small groups (grades 2-3)
 - a. Class divided into 3-4 groups/roles picked out of hat/student narrator
 - b. Groups act out individual versions of story
- D. Play-acting: *The Mountain That Loved a Bird*
 - 1. Whole class (K-1, Intro. for 2-3)
 - *a. Exercise: become object (desk, chair, part of a mountain); become animal (horse, dog, bird)
 - b. Teacher narrates/half class becomes mountain/half bird
 - c. Voice for mountain and bird assigned to different students for each visit
 - 2. Small groups (grades 2-3)
 - a. Roles: several students mime mountain change/a student narrator/one bird
 - b. Props: colored fabric/paper shapes to show changes in mountain feelings/ growth; incorporate with movement of mountain to show change

DAY 3. Pick-A-Path—Playhouse Planning. Rehearsal

- A. Concept explained using storyboards
- B. Pick-A-Path cards
 - 1. Variables to be changed are illustrated on playing cards
 - 2. Cards shuffled, one randomly chosen as variable to be changed
- C. Brainstorm “what if” possibilities as detailed on page 8
 - 1. Change to character, setting, problem, solution
 - 2. Follow cause and effect of change with *one* variation at a time
 - 3. Chart on large mural paper
- D. Grades K-1
 - 1. Whole-class experience/work out changes together
 - 2. Write new story/new title as a “big book”
- E. Grades 2-3
 - 1. Class divided into small groups (5-6)
 - 2. Pick-A-Path card focuses change to be brain-stormed for consequences
 - 3. Student secretary records new sequencing
 - 4. Title/rehearse new play/use simple props

DAY 4. Pick-A-Path Playhouse Closure

- A. Performance of story variations
- B. Video record
- C. Class discussion—What did you enjoy and learn from this experience?

DAY 5. Pick-A-Path Playlets

- A. Grade 1-2 translate story into cartoon strip format
- B. Grade 3
 - 1. Write play in dialogue form.
 - 2. Write/illustrate play as storybook

Notes

- 1. Bruno Bettelheim , *The Uses of Enchantment*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p. 47.
- 2. Michael T. Bagley & Joyce Paster Foley, *Suppose the Wolf Were An Octopus*. (New York: Trillium Press, 1984), p. 6-7
- 3. Verna Aardema , *Who's in Rabbit's House?* (New York: Dial Press, 1969), p. 5.

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Close-up pictures with simple text and diagrams of spider spinning a web.

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