

Small Worlds

by Matthew Hoecherl

Let me just start by saying that I feel that I have the best job in the world. I get to sing, dance, make up and read stories, play with toys, and laugh for a living. I go home at the end of the day exhausted, in a positive way that keeps me excited about doing it again the next day.

I spend most of my time with young children, aged one to four. It is amazing to watch a very young child absorb and incorporate new things into his or her life. Since at that age everything is new, I have the chance to see growth in one area or another literally daily. I'm sure that many of you

Children's worlds are usually vastly more interesting than the ones we choose to live in. So why would any children be interested in stepping out of their own technicolor spaces into our monochrome no-choice, fear-filled, regimented places? To tell the truth, until they have been conditioned by us adults to feel that they have no choice but to join us, they don't want to at all. I am lucky enough to be with children who still know only their own realities, not the "truths" that we will force onto them by the time they are seven or eight years old. They are interested in what



have had the experience of watching a child as realization dawns in his or her eyes. Or, even better, I feel, watching a child explain the answer to a question from another child before you even have the chance to explain yourself, showing that the students are growing and learning together, and that the message is getting through to them on their level. In their world.

I'd like to talk a bit about this world of theirs. We all create our own worlds to live in. As adults we often decide we have no choice but to incorporate some or all aspects of the "real world" into our world, and we do so and trudge along with varying degrees of happiness or misery. Ah, but children still remember that our reality, our world, is what we choose to make it, so, barring tampering from adults, they live in wonderful, fantastic, exciting, and safe worlds. Often we adults make the mistake of thinking that a child has more than a passing interest in our mundane world, and we somehow expect the child to want to come into our world, to learn what we want them to learn, how we want them to learn. But that's not how it works.

they are interested in, and they like what they like. It is my job and my pleasure to find out about their interests, and learn what is real and powerful and magical to them. When I'm doing my job right, I even get invitations from them to join them in their worlds, invitations that I would never dream of refusing, because inside the reality of a child is where real discovery, growth, and learning take place.

So, how do we get in? How do we get invited into these places? How do we gain the trust of these beings so that we can share our information with them? The answer is easy or difficult depending on how rigid your own world is. We get to become one of them. We were all children once, and now we get to remember who we originally were. This is the key.

When my son was five years old, we moved here to Japan, and he was suddenly faced with the situation of going to kindergarten with others who had been attending for up to two years already, in a school where he didn't really understand the language yet. Children being as brilliant and resilient as they are, he adjusted quite well and quickly.

However, when it came to reading and writing hirigana, he had no interest in it, so he didn't learn it. It didn't matter how it was presented at school, or how many of his new friends could already do it, he didn't care, so he wouldn't learn to read and write. Maybe this situation sounds familiar to English teachers. The students don't remember how to respond to "How are you?" from week to week, no matter how many times you go over it. They do, however, know every detail of the life cycle of a semi, or all of the names of the newest batch of Pocket Monsters. Why? Because semis and Pocket Monsters are things that are important to them in their world.

My son is no exception—he loves bugs and Pokemon. Realizing this, I made a set of hiragana flash cards with pictures of Pocket Monsters on one side, and a corresponding

child can relate to keep a young mind interested. Humor is essential, too. Finally, stories are a great way to invite children to experience something of your world in a way that still relates to their own. Children love stories. If the story is especially interesting to them, a child can enjoy hearing the same story dozens of times without tiring of it.

At first, I found stories that somewhat covered the subject that I wanted to present, adjusted the language to fit the level of a particular class, and read them. The response was very good, especially as I would read in an animated way. By the third reading of a story, the children were anticipating parts that they liked and saying key phrases with me. It was great! But, I had a couple of concerns. First, what if I couldn't find a story that fit what I wanted to say, and second, I was basically using and changing the painstaking



hiragana symbol on the back. He could read within three days, and could write fairly competently within a week. I had found a way to show him something from within his world, not from an outside place foreign to him. And it worked.

I grew up on "Sesame Street" and "Schoolhouse Rock." For those of you who may not be familiar with them, these were television programs that used music, toys, stories, games, and humor to educate children. Kids' educational programs come and go, but the staying power of a program like Sesame Street is: 1. Its ability to tap into the world of a child and extend that world to include ideas new and sometimes challenging to the child, and, 2. Its ability to treat the child like an adult, i.e. not to talk down to the child or treat the child as inferior to an adult. This respect and love for a child is the most important step toward creating a bridge between teacher and student.

Music is an important tool; it's not until sometime in elementary school that many children decide they can't or don't like to sing. Toys are important, tangible things that a

labor of love that some poor author had created. Who was I to change his or her work?

I decided to begin creating original stories to use in class. This was a very freeing concept, because it not only allowed my hurting conscience to rest, but it also allowed me to tailor-make a story to say exactly what I wanted to say.

One of the most important aspects of stories is of course artwork. The first thing that will catch the attention of a young student is the exciting or funny pictures that are chosen to be incorporated into a story. This can be a tough thing to handle if one has little or no ability to draw pictures. I fall into the "no ability" category myself, and have had to find other ways to decorate my stories. At first, I used clip art. Clip art is free to use, depending on the usage rights specified by the provider, and there is a lot of it available in many different styles. The trick is to find pictures that match what you are saying in your story, and this takes some creativity. Look around, and you will certainly find something that you can use.

Eventually I was lucky enough to come in contact with

an artist who draws wonderful pictures for me, so that the stories are now being “re-created” with new and original art. If you have the means to take this route, I would highly recommend it. A story with its own original artwork has a charm and warmth that can’t quite be captured with clip art. I tend to make my stories in the form of *kamishibai*, which means that I present the stories one panel at a time to the students rather than putting them into book form. I find that this is easier both for me to hold and also for the children to see. This also allows for notes on the back of each page assisting me to remember what to say, when necessary.

My first attempt was a story about colors. I decided to use penguins as the characters, each with a different color. The penguins meet and become friends in a very simple story that the children love. After every new penguin is

Second, respect the children as you would a fellow adult. Refrain from writing down to them or from writing stories that won’t keep their attention. If they are not convinced that this segment from your world is as cool as their own, they won’t listen a second time. Children are much more sophisticated than we give them credit for, and they are quite capable of following an interesting and slightly complex story.

Third, keep the language simple. This is easy to do, but remember the second rule of not writing down. To find the balance, watch children play for a while. Watch how they create characters in their own games, keeping them simple but not stupid. This will give you an idea of how dramatic and how mellow to be in your own storytelling.

Fourth, be careful about formulaic stories. If all of your stories seem the same except for character and setting



introduced, the phrase, “Let’s be friends!” is said by the penguins to keep some repetition and continuity in the story and also to give the children something to chant (by the third or fourth penguin, they are saying the phrase, and the amazing thing is that they get what it means!). At the end of the story, there are many colored penguins being happy together in their newfound friendship. The children have now practiced colors, counting, the phrase, “Let’s be friends!”, and have seen, if only subconsciously, that penguins (or people) of many different colors can all be friends.

Since then I have written quite a few other stories, about (on the surface), family names, nature, self-introduction, asking for things, and other subjects. On another level, though, these stories are about accepting oneself, accepting others, respecting the Earth, and having confidence.

If you wish to connect with small children, I would recommend stories as a good way to bridge your two worlds. There are some things to bear in mind. First, write a story that you enjoy. If you don’t like it, the kids won’t either. Make it exciting, funny, and give it a happy ending.

changes, they won’t keep a young mind occupied for as long as stories that vary in pattern will. Use travel themes, quest themes, daily routine themes, love and acceptance themes, overcoming hardship themes, etc., and make each of your stories unique.

Fifth, get out of your head. Your heart will create these stories, not your calculating head. Enjoy yourself. Think of specific children and how they will react to what you create as you come up with new story ideas. Entertain both them and yourself. Remember: Be one of them!

Good luck in your quest to enter the worlds of these young people. May you find them, as I have, familiar and inspiring and especially, fun. Love your work. Love the kids. Love yourself. It’s so much easier that way!

Matthew mainly teaches children aged 1-3. He has been working at Emile Kindergarten for the past few years, and was responsible for creating and developing the program for very young learners. He was also a local presenter at the Chugoku ELT Expo.