Speech Bubbles : How play, joy, and storytelling open up expansive possibilities for language

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Abstract

This chapter describes the work of Speech Bubbles, an organisation offering in-school drama programmes in England to support children's confidence and communication. Approaching the question 'What is communication?' as theatre makers, Speech Bubbles focuses on how children and adults communicate with each other in a whole-bodied way, through movement, sounds, and words, and how this communication interacts with feelings of confidence, acceptance, belonging, and joy. With emphasis on creative storytelling activities, the chapter details practical strategies for working with children that centre on what the children bring to the session, positive child-adult interaction, and playfulness. It argues for the fundamental importance of cultivating a comfortable environment for communication, and the role of the listening 'adult ear' to make space and time for children to tell stories in their own ways. This involves thinking about language expansively, not overly focusing on vocabulary or grammar, and starting with the body and movement before asking how words could or should be involved. The positive impacts of the Speech Bubbles programme include benefits for children's confidence, self-esteem, and empathy, as well as their verbal and physical fluency.

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Introduction

How does communication affect how you feel?
How does how you feel affect how you communicate?

These questions lie at the heart of the work of Speech Bubbles, an organisation in England offering drama programmes in schools to support children's confidence and communication. Adam, the first author, is a theatre maker and the CEO of Speech Bubbles. In this chapter we examine the Speech Bubbles approach, which focuses on the interconnection between feelings – of confidence, acceptance, joy and belonging – and the ways that children and adults communicate with each other through movement, words, sounds, and bodies. The practice is grounded in the ethos that confidence and communication both depend on a positive environment for creativity. Starting with the environment, or how individuals feel and move in places, is the key to expansive communication possibilities.

At Speech Bubbles we approach the question of 'What is communication?' as theatre makers. In theatre, the emphasis is not on vocabulary nor even only on words, but on how we communicate with our bodies and with sounds. Words may be part of this but are not necessarily central or primary. Ultimately, we are interested in intelligibility – how do we understand each other best? Communication in theatre practice is also relational; rather than the onus being on an individual to make themselves intelligible, it relies on a collective effort to convey meaning. This leads us to a creative exploration of how children and adults can experiment and be open to expressing themselves and receiving information in many different ways. Children's capacities in relation to communication are not fixed – they depend on feelings, environment, and relationships. As adults, we see our job as providing the environment where children can experiment with communication in the most constructive way possible.

Developing the Speech Bubbles approach

Speech Bubbles started life as Speak Out, an Arts Council-funded research project in the London Borough of Lewisham in 2006, connecting primary schools and arts and theatre

companies, with the aim of creating classrooms of children with confident speaking skills. Seeing the effectiveness of the practice, the next step was to structure the approach and the thinking in a way that was replicable and shareable. It involved asking the question 'What is making a difference here?' and as a result, the approach was refined and Speech Bubbles came into being.

In the current Speech Bubbles approach, a drama practitioner and a teaching assistant work with a group of 10 children long-term across 24 sessions throughout the year. We work predominantly with children aged 5 to 7 years in mainstream schools. We also work in a range of education settings for children with additional learning needs, where we may well be working with children up to 11 years of age. The sessions draw on Vivian Gussin Paley's 'helicopter' technique (Cremin et al., 2017; Lee, 2016): children tell stories and adults scribe the stories, and then (bar safeguarding concerns or inappropriate content, which is rare) we act the stories out as a group. The stories are not collected or curated for future use – we celebrate them in the now. Over time and as the sessions progress, each group builds a storytelling culture of its own, and children tell stories they know their friends will love. In this way, the children create their stories for an audience. The audience they are creating for is their peers. There is a weekly flow of telling stories and acting them out, and the shared child-led development of the acting out, story themes, tropes, jokes, and relations, takes on great importance.

A whole-body approach to communication

As mentioned above, we approach communication as theatre makers and, in this sense, communication always involves more than words. Communication in theatre is largely embodied, concerned with physical and facial gesture, rhythm, sound, pause, and proximity. This whole-bodied approach to communication is nuanced and messy – why does one particular gesture work, or one specific facial expression cause the intelligibility of the whole piece to fall into place? Approaching communication as embodied is often a challenge for educators, because it rubs up against the increasingly narrow ways that communication is defined and described in curriculum documents, and is difficult to measure in a standardised way.

Starting with the body necessitates a focus on feelings.

How we feel affects how we move.
How we hold our body is shaped by how we feel.
And because we are concerned with whole-body communication it is also true to say that:
How we feel affects how we communicate.
How we communicate is shaped by how we feel.

One of the things we are interested in is the relationship between well-being, self-esteem, and communication. We worked with Dr Jonathan Barnes, Canterbury Christ Church University, to explore this and evaluate what it was in our approach that was leading to children's effective communication (Barnes, 2020). Jonathan looked at the Speech Bubbles programme through the lens of personal and social well-being and its connection with communication. As well as session visits, and interviews with children, school staff, and drama practitioners, he studied the outward signs of well-being in participating children using an adapted Leuven Well-Being scale[1]. Jonathan's findings showed positive impacts of the programme on children's confidence, self-esteem, and empathy, as well as vocabulary and verbal and physical fluency. He pointed to the playfulness, the positive child-adult interaction, and the sense of a shared creative community as leading to those benefits.

Whole-body communication does not only involve an appreciation of the full range of affordances of the body and how it can be disciplined or used for communicative purposes. It is also always about feelings, identity, safety, and how children are taking up or rejecting the ways a certain context is positioning or narrating them. Importantly, keeping this exploration within a story world creates a safe and playful space for children. Instead of expecting children to talk about their own feelings, we can talk about characters, how the characters feel, and how their feelings might change how they move and communicate.

Some examples of this in practice would include:

- Movement games, where we encourage the children to move around the space with intention. Here we are giving the children the right to take up the space, all the while remaining thoughtful and considerate of each other.
- Mirroring games, because these involve paying attention to bodily communication by watching and reflecting how someone else is moving.

[1] https://learningjournals.co.uk/what-is-the-leuven-scale-and-how-to-use-it/

- Name games, inviting children to play with voice and physicality whilst saying their name. In a simple activity where everyone throws their name into a pretend bucket, we might practise throwing our name in our ordinary voice, in a huge voice, in a tiny voice, and pairing that vocal quality with a matching physicality. To follow that up we would wonder with the children how else we might do this. The children are then free to come up with all their imaginative responses: Like a robot. In a squeaky voice. Silly. Posh. Angry. And a million more!
- Games about body literacy. Can your body become different people or different things? If your body were a box, a car, a mountain, the sea, the sky, what would that look like and how would you move? Working together to take on being something different, by making those things with our bodies, leads us to a sense of shared representation and collective communication.

It's important to appreciate that this method of creation is exploratory and there isn't a single correct way of doing any of these things – rather, there is a whole spectrum of creative, personal responses. We are moving away from judgements of right or wrong.

Wondering and affirming

One important part of Speech Bubbles sessions is adopting the *I wonder* mode. This is best exhibited physically, with a wondering expression and stance as a prompt that seeks to elicit multiple answers or responses. Whilst it is not quite true that there are never any wrong answers, we try to ask questions that encompass lots and lots of possible right answers. *I wonder* removes the idea that there is only one possible answer to a question. For example, in one session, I was preparing the children to act out a story that included the line "the racing car that went so fast the paint turned from black to orange". Now that isn't an easy thing to represent! We wondered together: *How can we communicate this as a physical, bodily representation? How can we tell this part of the story with our bodies?* The group tried lots of different things and eventually settled on a physical and vocal representation of the extraordinary event. As the description was read out, all the children put their hands down to the floor – their hands began to shake on "the car went so fast" and when the narrative got to "the paint turned from black to orange" they raised their hands into the air showing their palms, with a roaring sound.

In this way, the starting point for communication is the body moving, and the end point is stories. The racing car story, like all the stories in Speech Bubbles, was collected by an adult scribe listening to the child author. The adult notes the story verbatim and then reads it back to the child to make sure they have got it right. Children can tell whatever story they want! The range of stories we hear is extraordinary: original tales, reworkings of known stories, wonderful mash-ups, as well as "what I did at the weekend" are all part of the mix. These stories are in the oral tradition; they are made for telling, acting, embodying; and they are not bounded by the rules of writing, grammar, or literary work.

A space for feeling comfortable

The essence of our approach is to provide a space for children to feel comfortable to communicate. A place to tell stories and have fun. Often, we are working with children who seem to use few words or who are selectively mute. In this context, our focus remains on creating a welcoming space, a place to belong, not on aiming to get them to speak. We might be thinking about body language, turn taking, and asking ourselves: *Do the children look bright and engaged? Are their bodies open? What is their bodily communication saying?*

Often in school environments, we find children are withholding because there isn't a space where they feel listened to. For some children the pace of learning in the Key Stage 1 classroom (Years 1 and 2 in England), with the pressure on curriculum delivery, can impact on their capacity to contribute. A busy KS1 classroom is also a challenging environment for the class teacher to give time and space to each child, especially children with communication needs who may require extra time to process instructions or to formulate and express a verbal response.

Accepting what children are bringing

Creating comfortable spaces for wondering and affirming is as much about the adult as it is about what children are doing. Our emphasis is on accepting what the children are bringing. All schools are unique, but with the move towards a 'knowledge-rich' curriculum and increased testing of that knowledge, there is less space for child-led or free-choice exploration. We work hard to demonstrate that in Speech Bubbles sessions we genuinely do

want to hear what the children have to say, and we do not have a pre-intended, preferred response or answer.

Good questions to consider, as the adult facilitating a session, are:

- What is the relationship between the child's response and the question or provocation that I posed?
- How can my response, in return, accept and affirm whatever has been brought up?

For example, in one session, a group of children loved falling around on the floor. So, the practitioner Julie built the sessions around this, using activities that involved lots of falling on the floor, because that is how the children wanted to move and what they brought to the session. As the adult facilitating the session, it is important to look at how you work, as much as look at the children. Accepting what the children are bringing is really about the adult's mode. The freedom for the children comes from that.

The adult ear and the importance of listening to children

In education we often talk about children's voice, but it is also important to think about the 'adult ear'. We developed this emphasis on the adult ear after listening to Darren Chetty (2019) talk about his notion of the 'teacher ear'. He argues that the flip side of a focus on children's voices and engagement is that we also need to reflect on the role of the teacher ear. He asks us to think about to what extent teachers or other grown-ups are able to listen to the diversity of children's experiences – and whether having this listening teacher ear enables children to bring their whole selves into the classroom and into their stories. This is particularly important for white teachers working in diverse settings, and for teachers working with a canon of children's literature and publishing which continues to consist largely of white authors writing about white protagonists. Chetty (2019) asks "How do we, as teachers, listen to what children are bringing into the classroom, so as not to assume they have nothing to offer aside from what we give them?".

How do children feel listened to? Often, we need to work on training the adult ear more than we need to 'improve' the voice of the child, and sometimes this is a question of allowing enough time. We often find that children who appear to have communication needs actually require more time. They want to consider and arrange their response, and if we rush on too

quickly there is not enough time and space for listening to them. The Speech Bubbles sessions aim to create a group ethos that understands this principle, so that the group learns it is worth waiting. This can often be tricky, particularly for adults, and can involve a real shift to avoid the temptation to fill the silence or move things along. There can be an awkward phase or pause, but beyond that silence, if we wait, are new possibilities and ideas. We encourage adults to count silently in their heads. When you want to step in, to help, to move things along – give it another seven seconds. This strategy can be really helpful for an educator because it gives you something to do and provides an end-point to the waiting. It makes the wait purposeful.

Creating a space that is freeing

In the Speech Bubbles sessions, the drama practitioner and the educator (usually a teaching assistant) work together to deliver the programme over many weeks, building a professional working relationship. One of the things that we have had to consider is the fact that drama activity looks and feels different to many other things that happen in the classroom: it is physical, it takes up space, and it can at times be noisy. It asks children to behave in a different way than when they are at a desk. This is important because it frees the children up to move, make mistakes, make noises, experiment, and be playful. However, it can at times make school staff feel a little uncomfortable. One model we have found helpful for working with staff is Dan Hughes' (2017) PACE model (danielhughes.org). PACE is a framework of positive adult interaction which invites the adult to be:

Playful
Accepting
Curious
Empathic.

As a model for educators, PACE is useful both as a way of creating a shared approach and as a way of checking in with each other at the end of sessions. We can ask each other:

- Did we demonstrate these qualities (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, empathy) in our interaction with the children?
- Did we laugh during the session?

We don't teach vocabulary

Whilst we are aware that building children's vocabulary is increasingly high on the agenda for educational policymakers, as theatre makers we have a different relationship with words. As theatre makers, we love rich vocabulary and the power of words. However, in our work we start with what the children are offering in their stories, the physicality of what they offer, and then we consider how more words can get involved. For example, a child might tell a story of crossing a river as a dinosaur. We would start with the physicality of that, and then ask what does it look like, sound like, and finally, how does language get involved in that?

Vocabulary has climbed educational policy agendas in large part because of the popularity of the theory of a 'word gap'. Originating from the work of Hart and Risley (2003), a small and heavily critiqued study of home language practices, the word-gap theory used data from 42 families to claim that working-class children have less exposure to vocabulary in the early years, leading to negative impacts on their communication and learning. The popularity of this theory has contributed to the direct teaching of vocabulary and in some cases the banning and policing of 'Tier 1' words[2] or words outside the scope of an academic notion of standard English. As the introduction to this book has outlined, research supporting the word gap is increasingly being challenged (Adair et al., 2017; Cushing, 2023; Kuchirko, 2017) and leading academics are beginning to explore whether, in fact, the bigger issue is how children's speech is perceived, assessed, and categorised. Our experience working with a wide range of children to co-create rich stories that start with bodies, feelings, movement, and play, before asking how sound and words might get involved, supports a view of language as being more complex, relational, and expansive than the word-gap theory and its focus on vocabulary might suggest.

We don't correct grammar

An important aspect of Paley's 'helicopter' method is retelling the story as it is given by the children. Schools are under increasing pressure to correct language and grammar, but this is something we resist. We often find we have to be extremely proactive about this, emphasising in training and in sessions that we *really do* collect the story how it is told.

[2] 'Tier 1' words are vocabulary considered simple and frequent in everyday life. Sometimes teachers are encouraged to focus instead on 'tier 2' words, which are considered more sophisticated and are more frequent in written texts than in oral language.

There are important issues here about linguistic justice and the coloniality of schools being increasingly required to police and correct voice, to teach so-called standard English. This kind of policing is counter to the Speech Bubbles approach which, as we have described, is grounded in creating a comfortable and accepting environment for communication. There is an issue here of intelligibility and whether all parties are genuinely trying to understand each other: this is about the role of feelings of acceptance and belonging – for all voices – in positive communication and storytelling. As one of our advisory group, Warda Farah, says, "if the way I speak is accepted and valued, then I can belong. If you don't belong, why would you want to tell a story or contribute?".

In conclusion: "Tell me what you loved about it!"

In the Speech Bubbles induction session for participating school staff, we read out some children's stories and invite the adults to "tell me what you loved about it". This encourages a mode of being accepting and not critiquing. We also describe the children as artists. In this sense, it is not the job of the adults to improve children's stories. The adults' job is to engage with the story, value it, platform it, give it space. This mode of acceptance and engagement stands at odds with much pedagogical training which encourages educators to find the 'teachable moment' and 'scaffold' children towards ever bigger and better things (bigger and better according to an adult agenda).

We opened this chapter by wondering how communication affects how we feel, and how our feelings affect how and what we communicate. In our work, we trace how best to facilitate the kind of whole-body communication that supports creative storytelling in an atmosphere of belonging and acceptance. Much of this is due to the stance adults take and the kinds of spaces and atmospheres they make available to the children, rather than due to children's individual competencies or skills. For example, we have found great value in accepting and responding to what children bring, and fostering positive interactions, for their role in creating freeing spaces where children bring their whole selves. Reflecting on how (and if) we listen to children helps us make space and time for children to respond to the invitation to tell stories in their own ways and on their own terms. This involves thinking about language expansively, rather than over-focusing on vocabulary or grammar, and starting with the body and movement before asking how words could or should be involved. The success and

longevity of Speech Bubbles, coupled with the richness of the work the children on our programmes produce, is testament to how these kinds of approaches are not soft, fluffy, or optional niceties for working with children, language, and stories. They are the foundation from which the work emerges, starting with how bodies move and feel, and culminating in joyful and playful communication.

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