

Planet Protecting Superheroes

Using story and arts-based activities to engage diverse learners in environmental education



DreamRider Productions

By **Vanessa LeBourdais**

DO YOU EVER FEEL LIKE you're competing with Minecraft for children's attention? That you have to be as funny as the Simpsons to engage your kids in learning? That your attention and time is being increasingly divided as your classroom composition gets more complex, and you have more children with learning issues every year? Have no fear, story-based creativity is near! Story- and arts-based activities engage the whole child in exploration and learning in a way that is fun, fresh, and exciting.

For almost two decades, I've been combining story and arts to help close to a million kids and counting learn about and engage with environmental issues through the charity I co-founded. DreamRider Productions produces live theatre and interactive digital classroom resources for teachers. The ideas at the core of our work are actually pretty simple, and I'm delighted to share some of them with you here. In addition I've got some fun story- and arts- based activities to try out from our digital resource, the Planet Protector Academy.

Two of our core concepts at the heart of this learning engagement are: (1) To bring students into a fun story world as active participants – as characters in the story. (2) Then to provide them with opportunities to express their learning

artistically. The result is a classroom full of students fully engaged and excited about learning.

When Michele Reid, grade 4-5 teacher and principal at Mary Hill Elementary in Port Coquitlam, BC, used the Planet Protector Academy she concurred that, "This is solving so many classroom management problems, you have no idea!"

How stories help kids learn

Stories help learning in so many ways, the effect is almost magical. Stories are one of the oldest ways that humans have passed learning from generation to generation. They create a container, a shared experience, in which learning can happen. Stories allow children to use their multiple intelligences¹ and different learning styles². They also help bring meaning and integration to the subject matter at hand. Stories help enable a child to answer the question: how does this learning relate to the real world, and to my life?

When playing pretend, a child is engaged not just with his mind, but also his heart, body and spirit. When we bring a child into a story world in order to teach them, we connect learning with the whole being of the child.

If we endow each student as being not just any old character in a story, but a self-created *superhero*, we not only add to the fun, but also empower the child. Because the truth is, every child has something unique and special about them. At DreamRider, we call this their superpower. Not

everyone knows what their superpower is, but we all have one; we just have to discover what it is. The magic of pretend can help a student feel the possibilities lying in wait inside them, and to begin to believe in that possibility.

Designing their own personal superhero character helps children envision a positive version of themselves. It empowers students to see their own strengths and possibilities, while also connecting them as unique individuals to the bigger picture.

My own superpower, I've discovered, is writing songs that stick in people's heads. Yours might be your sensitivity, or baking a great pecan pie. A child's might be thinking outside the box or drawing a really great cat. Or maybe it's something inside that they can only sense, but not yet articulate. The important thing is, to trust that it's there. Everyone has one. There are many stories of disabled superheroes, for example, whose disability or injury becomes the source of their strength.

Another useful approach is to tell children they are apprentice superheroes. As our beloved sidekick character Goober says, "Being an apprentice means you're learning something!" That means that not getting it right all the time is acceptable. In our plays and videos, Goober is always the favourite with kids: he's an apprentice and he is always messing up. He sets the bar very low – in a completely lovable way – but he's always trying his best.

Building a story world experience in the classroom doesn't have to be hard work. The activities below will take you through it. We all know that what defines a story is that there is a beginning, a middle and an end. In our program, the apprentices enter the Academy, they learn and do arts activities, and they get certificates of completion. The end. It's really that simple, and it works!

How arts based activities help kids learn

When a child uses creativity to express learning, they put a piece of their self – imagination – together with information, and make something new out of both. When children express their learning creatively through an arts activity, multiple areas of the brain are engaged. This is particularly important today as the number of diverse learners in classrooms increases.

Art accesses parts of a child (or anyone) that are not necessarily verbal, but kinesthetic (tactile), imaginative, musical or visual. When we approach learning from a full-brain or whole-child perspective, we thereby include kids who are less logical, have a hard time with language or writing, or who have difficulties in communication.

Children can express learning through the arts regardless of skill level. A lot can be expressed through a simple stick drawing! There are multiple creative modalities to choose from, which is also great for diverse learners: drawing, story writing, rap writing, use of clay, kinesthetic expression of learning, acting, etc. Giving children permission to experiment – try, fail, try again – is always helpful.

When a classroom of self-created superheroes play and learn through creative collaboration together, a whole new



kind of empowered child emerges! As grade 4-5 teacher Rand Hipwell from Abbotsford Elementary said, "My students felt that they owned this program, that they are actually real life planet protectors. The look on their faces when they completed the program was priceless."

We need citizens who can think differently than before – young people who can imagine futures and solutions, and who can cope with a rapidly changing world. Authors and creative facilitators Peggy Taylor and Charlie Murphy in their fantastic book full of creative learning activities, *Catch the Fire*³, outline the multiple powers of arts activities: eliciting joy, promoting health, building confidence, developing empathy, bringing learning alive, strengthening human connection, providing safe opportunities to take risks, and teaching 21st century leadership skills.

Here are some activities you can use from our Planet Protector Academy. Go ahead and get creative with them! (A number of downloadable resources are listed in the activities that can be found on our website. See the URL at the end of this article.)

Activity: Turn your classroom into a story world

Grades: 1-3

Objective: Engagement in learning.

- You, the teacher, create an identity for yourself as the Chief Secret Agent of the Planet Protector Academy.
 - Welcome the students to their first day in the Academy
 - Tell them that they are apprentices, and that they have real-life missions to undertake.
 - In acting, we say that you are endowing them with their identities.
 - This process would also work in a different story world, eg. Hobbiton, Gotham or Hogwarts.
 - Wearing a wig and/or having your ID on a sticker on your shirt will help differentiate your character from the teacher they know.
- Apprentices then create their own Superhero ID cards: Using business card sized paper, children draw a picture of themselves as superheroes and write their name.
- Apprentices can take a Superhero Pledge as a group.
 - Stand up, hand on heart, and say: "I vow to only use my superpowers for good!"
- Apprentices can learn and sing the chorus of the Planet Protector Theme song.

Activity: Turn your classroom into a story world

Grades: 4-6

Objective: Engagement in learning.

- Follow the above instructions for grades 1-3.
- Intermediate students can learn and sing the whole Planet Protector Theme song.
- Apprentices can also come up with a specific mission that they pledge to undertake: a personal behaviour change they want to commit to, or a change they want to encourage their families to make.

Extension Activity:

- Planet Protectors can also be empowered to help support environmental changes that your school wants to undertake as a whole, for example, making posters to remind other children to recycle or bring a litter free lunch, or sing the Planet Protector anthem at an assembly.

The other activities, below, take place within the “Academy” story world. Children are now Apprentice Planet Protectors – superheroes – who are doing the activities.

Activity: Drawing the Power Grid

Grade: 2-6

Objective: Engaging with and understanding how power gets from the power station to your house. Learning to draw collaboratively. Expressing learning visually.

- Explain how power gets from the power plant to your house. Or play our video that explains it with images.
 - The power is generated at a power plant. The power can come from wind, water, solar, coal, natural gas or nuclear energy.
 - The power travels through power lines.
 - The energy in the power lines is too strong for our house, so it needs to be lowered to the right level for our house so that our electronics don’t get fried. The place the power is lowered is called a step-down transformer.
- Children in teams draw a picture of how they think the power grid would work. They should include:
 - Power plant
 - The step down transformer
 - The house, with the electronics we plug into the wall outlets.
 - The power lines connecting them all.
- Go through the drawings with the whole class, and see what they included and what they may have forgotten, notice the differences in how things are expressed visually by the different groups
- It’s not about the best drawing, it’s about expressing your learning this way.
- It’s not about the end result, but the process of doing it. Failure is okay.

Activity: Write a rap about saving energy

Grade: 3-7 (best in intermediate grades)

Objective: Learn to rhyme, write a short couplet, and then perform publicly.

Most people think that songwriting is hard. It’s actually fairly simple if you don’t worry too much about it. We’ve had kids from kindergarten to grade eleven do this exercise successfully.

- This activity can be done individually or in small groups collaboratively.
- Start off by giving an example,
*Watch me now, going to turn off the lights
You see, I don’t need them when it’s night.*
- Explain that the rhyming word goes at the end of the line, as in the example.
- Give the children a list of possible rhyming words to use.
- Or you can help the children find words that rhyme that they can use:
 - Choose a word and ask for rhyme suggestions from the group.
 - You can go through the alphabet, like this: for the word “light” you put each letter of the alphabet in front of ‘ight’ and see if you can think of a word as a class, eg. alight, bite, cite (kite or sight), delight, fight, etc.
 - Or use an online rhyming dictionary.
- Depending on the capacity of your students, assign two or more rhyming couplets to be written by each child.
- You can play the included rap backtrack while they work.
- Ask for volunteers to perform their raps.
- Ask a child or children to beatbox (using their mouths to create percussion sounds). Generally kids know what this means and a child or two will self-identify as knowing how to do this. Often a child can beatbox who is otherwise frequently low performing in class, and this gives them a sense of agency.

Extension Activity:

- Create a music video of the children’s raps! See the included example that a grade 4-5 class made in Abbotsford, BC

Vanessa LeBourdais is the Executive Producer and Creative Director at DreamRider Productions. Over the past 17 years, this charity’s arts-based environmental education programs have reached over 850,000 elementary school children in 900+ schools in 20 school districts in British Columbia. An award-winning playwright, musician, designer, director and performer, Vanessa’s latest classroom resource, the *Planet Protector Academy* won a TELUS Innovation Award.

Notes

Gardner H. (1983) *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Fontana “Multiple intelligences include linguistic, visual-spatial, musical, kinesthetic, logical-deductive, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist.”

Read Carol (2008) *Scaffolding children’s learning through story and drama*. IATEFL Young Learner Publication. “Learning styles include visual, auditory and kinesthetic.”

Taylor Peggy and Murphy Charlie (2014) *Catch the Fire: An Art-Full Guide to Unleashing the Creative Power of Youth, Adults and Communities*. New Society Publishers.

DreamRider Productions’s website contains a number of downloadable resources that can be used in the above activities. You can find them all here: www.dreamriderproductions.com/green-teacher-magazine