

# How I create creativity (1): Extra! Extra! Read all about it!

Keith Park on the genesis of an exciting approach to language and communication which, as it becomes embedded in the culture of schools or day centres, creates the conditions for ongoing learning and development.

READ THIS IF YOU WANT TO  
•TAP INTO POPULAR CULTURE  
•MOVE INTO COMMUNITY SETTINGS  
•DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT

I work in three schools for children with severe and profound learning disabilities, developing poetry, drama and storytelling workshops. I also do this on a part-time freelance basis. The emphasis in these workshops is increasingly on performances in community settings, which in the London area has included Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral, Middle Temple, The National Theatre, and – in May 2008 – The House of Commons.

Language and communication is integral to my work, and I often collaborate with speech and language therapists. My role is constantly evolving, perhaps following a chance remark that sets me thinking, or simply saying the right thing at the right time and taking advantage of opportunities and contacts. The most rewarding aspect is when the young people I work with take an idea and run with it in new and unanticipated directions, as this story exemplifies...

Two years ago at Charlton School in Greenwich (south-east London), a teacher was having a light-hearted grumble about Christmas. "Christmas again", she moaned, "same old donkey, same old manger, same old crib, why can't we do something different?" She then winced as we all heard one pupil swear at a teacher in the corridor, and she said "Listen to all that rabbit!" When I looked confused, she explained: "Cockney rhyming slang – 'rabbit' is short for 'rabbit and pork' which is short for 'talk.'" I was intrigued.

Cockney Rhyming Slang originated sometime in the 19th century as a way of confusing outsiders as to the topic of conversation among local East Londoners. It mainly consists of substituting one word with another that rhymes with it and is often paired with another word. For example, 'stairs' may be called 'apples and pears', 'phone' may be 'dog and bone', and 'road' may be 'frog and toad.' Sometimes, just to make things even more confusing, the rhyming substitute is dropped, so the verb 'to look', which can be re-phrased as 'butcher's hook', becomes just 'butcher's' (see [www.cockneyrhymingslang.co.uk](http://www.cockneyrhymingslang.co.uk)).

Many of the pupils and staff at the school are Londoners, and most are familiar with rhyming slang. By using a language form that is familiar to the school population, we came up with what we call an 'Eastenders' version of the Nativity, which, although it has nothing specifically to do with the long-running TV soap, does contain rhyming slang and gives us all the chance to try out an over-exaggerated Cockney accent. 'Currant bun' is rhyming slang for 'son' so the chorus, in the style of tabloid headlines, went:

*Extra! Extra!  
Read all about it!  
Mother Mary's  
Currant Bun!*

The aim was to make it sound like newspaper sellers calling out the headline news of the day. We all had a good laugh and thought that was more or less it.

A colleague then also tried it in a nearby special school and the staff and pupils all enjoyed it, but the week after (and this is going to sound straight out of 'The Vicar Of Dibley') the local vicar phoned the school and invited the pupils to perform it in the local church. So they all dressed up as newspaper sellers – which apparently means long coats, fingerless gloves, flat caps and a rolled up copy of one of the day's tabloids – and performed in front of about 250 people.

Pupils in the school I visit continued to ask for 'Extra Extra' until it became a running joke: "Can we do *Extra! Extra!*?" I would reply, "but it's May!" then they would say, "So can we do it again then?"

## Fresh, funny and familiar

It can sometimes be difficult trying to explain why people like the things they like. It was, and is, our understanding at school that the pupils enjoyed this particular story because a) the language is fresh and often very funny, and in many cases familiar to them as Londoners and b) it also refers to a television programme they know and like. Encouraged by their enjoyment,

I decided to use their interest and motivation to write a sequence of Bible stories in Cockney Rhyming slang. Because many of the pupils and staff are keen on football, it seemed logical to write the story of David and Goliath in the style of football chants and the first two lines quickly became established as favourites: '*We are the Philistines! Israelite losers!*' This particular story is usually referred to as 'that football one' and there is much good-natured banter when the final two lines (*Israelites: 1; Philistines: 0*) is followed by a football result from the weekend: *Chelsea: 3; West Ham 0* and then a resounding shout of "*Result!!*"

So the number of stories has grown and grown, each one trying to reflect some aspect of life that catches the interest of the pupils. One day I overheard three teenagers talking about the 'Carry On' films and so the story of 'Samson and Delilah' was turned into 'Carry On Samson' with, of course, Barbara Windsor as Delilah, all wide-eyed innocence and innuendo, asking Samson: "*How'd you get so Well endowed?*" This was followed by the story of Noah, done in short-wave radio conversations between God, Noah and his family, and then the story of Abraham and Isaac through email and text (Abraham asks Isaac to help him install a 'firewall' on his computer and is stopped by a text message from [angelofthelord.com](mailto:angelofthelord.com)).

Many of the pupils and staff are fans of the long-running BBC comedy 'Only Fools And Horses' so we tried the story of Adam and Eve in the style of Del-Boy. The chance to do some really over the top pretend Cockney proved so popular that we then went on to 'The Prodigal Son of Peckham Market' which contains some of the nonsensical phrases used by Del-Boy: '*Roast potatoes/Fatted calf/Mange Tout Rodney/Cor not 'arf!*'

It was at this point that a colleague asked me if any of the stories had caused offence. I had never thought of this, and of course there is no offence intended, but I thought I should find out, and so I sent a copy to the Archbishop of Canterbury. One of his staff replied with a very positive letter. Duly encouraged,

I then approached the clergy of the church of St Mary-le-Bow and asked if we could perform some of the stories in the church. They also were extremely supportive and welcoming, and we have been performing the stories there on a regular basis for two years. The church of St Mary-le-Bow houses the Great Bell of Bow and, by tradition, anyone born to the sound of the Bell is a Cockney. The clergy of the church then had the idea of inviting the Pearly King and Queen of Bow, who came and joined in the performance.

In tandem with the performances at St Mary-le-Bow, we were also developing pantomime scripts both in school and also for performance at The Churchill Theatre in Bromley. In January 2007 we did a series of workshops on 'Mother Goose' and the education officer for the theatre invited us back in January 2008 for some Peter Pan workshops. I suggested to one pupil, PJ, that he might like to try writing a script for us to use. Ten months later he asked me if we were going to do Peter Pan and, when I said that we were, he produced his script and said, "Can we do this? I wrote it." So in January 2008 PJ directed a series of workshops at The Churchill Theatre which were then transferred to Richmond Theatre at the invitation of its education officer.

I noticed that in PJ's script, each episode was accompanied by an illustration. These included sketches of Peter Pan, Captain Hook, and the Darling family children. This talent tied in nicely with another development.

Sometime in 2007 I had written to the staff and clergy at Westminster Abbey asking if we could perform the sequence of Bible Stories in Rhyiming Slang in the Abbey. They agreed, and so in February 2008 we performed them in the Nave of the Abbey, much to the enjoyment – we hope – of the many tourists who cheered us on our way. The performance was so successful that Abbey staff agreed that we could come back in July 2008 and repeat it in the Abbey gardens. This also took place and was a great success. When we had finished, I suggested to PJ that the 'Adam and Eve' story would look good with some of his illustrations. Little did I realise what would then happen.

PJ went home and, without any assistance or guidance from family or friends, produced a series of pictures to accompany the story of 'Adam and Eve' that we performed at Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral (figure 1).

## Extraordinary behaviour

PJ has now written several pantomime scripts and has directed his script of 'Peter Pan' at Richmond Theatre. His script of 'Pinocchio' has been published (2009), and he has told his parents that he wants to be a professional writer and director. PJ, like several of the others in the group, is autistic, and has started to do things that are very un-autistic. For example, Thomas (also autistic) asked to lead an episode. I said yes of course, but he then said he didn't know

the words. PJ suggested, "I can stand behind Thomas and whisper the words to him, he can call them out, and so he'll be the leader and everyone can copy him." This extraordinary behaviour has spread to several others in the group, who now help others to lead the activity.

Some of the pupils and staff at Charlton School call the activities I use 'drama'; others use the term 'interactive storytelling' or even 'call and response' – which is a strange school habit of describing an activity by its method, rather like saying 'tabletop' for when the group sits at the table and does either drawing, writing, or reading. As Liz Skilton has described (2008), I would regard this type of activity as one of language and communication.

The rhythmic exchange of a four beat line can quickly establish a powerful communicative atmosphere and provide language and communication opportunities for anyone with or without disabilities. More specifically, for teaches and therapists working with people with severe and profound learning disabilities, the skills areas are awareness, anticipation, turn-taking, showing self, seeking physical proximity, gaze alternation, and declarative pointing.

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So, when we perform Bible Stories in Cockney Rhyiming Slang at Westminster Abbey, the class teacher may describe the activity as 'Religious Education', the speech and language therapist as 'Language and Communication', the head of the English department as 'Drama' or 'Poetry' or even, as a visiting drama therapist once said, 'Applied Theatre.' It reminds me of a piece of dialogue from the film 'Pretty Woman', where the man (Richard Gere) meets a woman (Julia Roberts) on the street, and takes her back to his apartment. He says "What's your name?" She replies, "What would you like it to be?" At the risk of sounding obscure, my own preference is to call it 'creating creativity'. It may sound clumsy, but it's what seems to happen.

I would suggest that, once this type of activity has become embedded within a school or day centre culture, it can assume a life and momentum of its own. This means that it is owned by everybody, and is not seen as being the project that I work on in school. Best of all, it can be led by the pupils themselves. Last year, shortly before the group went to The House of Commons, they were invited to perform at Bafta (The British Academy of Film and Television Awards). Although I went with the group, I did not participate in the performance, but stood at the back as a spectator and watched while the eight teenagers did it all

themselves. They explained to the audience of 250 people that they too were part of the group and had to join in the response lines, which they did with great enthusiasm. The intensity of the standing ovation they received at the end of the performance is impossible to describe.

If any readers of *Speech and Language Therapy in Practice* would like to come and join one of the sessions, either in a school or in a community setting, please contact me at [keithpark1@onetel.com](mailto:keithpark1@onetel.com). On Wednesday 20th January 2010 we will be in Canterbury Cathedral for more of the rhyiming slang Bible stories – anyone is welcome but please contact me first.

In addition to the Bible Stories, various groups have already started Shakespeare (The Tempest), and new versions of stories by Hans Christian Andersen (including 'The Red Shoes' and 'The Princess And The Pea' re-set in contemporary London: 'If she couldn't kip/On one mushy pea/Then she's got to be/Royalty!')

'Bible Stories in Cockney Rhyiming Slang' (Park, 2009) is available from Jessica Kingsley Publishers at [www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com). There is also a short film about it on YouTube that you can find if you put the book title on the search panel of [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). Alternatively, adapt the Bible stories to your own regional dialect and have a go yourselves! SLTP

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## References

- Park, K. (2009) *Bible Stories in Cockney Rhyiming Slang*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Pilcher, P.J. (2009) 'Pinocchio by Carlo Collodi, adapted by PJ Pilcher', *SLD Experience* Summer 54, pp.13-18.
- Skilton, L. (2008) 'Joining in as never before', *Speech & Language Therapy in Practice* Summer, pp.26-28.

### REFLECTIONS

- DO I GIVE THOUGHT TO "ESTABLISHING A POWERFUL COMMUNICATIVE ATMOSPHERE"?
- DO I LABEL ACTIVITIES IN A WAY THAT ACKNOWLEDGES THE BREADTH OF THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE?
- DO I SOW SEEDS OF IDEAS WITH CLIENTS, THEN WATCH HOW THEY GROW THEM?

Do you wish to comment on the impact this article has had on you? Please see guidance for Speech & Language Therapy in Practice's Critical Friends at [www.speechmag.com/About/Friends](http://www.speechmag.com/About/Friends).

Figure 1 Adam and Eve (Genesis 2 & 3), illustrated by PJ



Adam and Eve  
Had it made  
Lovely garden  
Nice bit of shade  
Didn't need nothing  
No these and those [these and those = clothes]  
It was kushti! [great or fine]  
So it goes.....

25/07/08

Chorus:  
'Cos they didn't  
Adam and Eve it  
[believe it]  
When God said 'Oi!  
Apple - leave it!



The serpent

Hello sssweetheart!  
Sssunny day!  
Sssplendid orchard  
Ooooh I sssay!  
Ssscrummy apple!  
What a sssight!  
Go on darlin'  
Have a bite!

16/07/08

Adam

Ooh! An apple!  
Just for me  
I'm Hank Marvin! [starving]  
Time for tea!  
That's well tasty  
Arf a mo!  
[Arf a mo = half a moment = wait on]  
We're both starkers! [stark naked]  
Oh no!

25/07/08

Chorus

25/07/08

Chorus

16/07/08

God

'Big Barney Rubble! [trouble]  
What are you like?  
Garden of Eden?  
On yer bike!  
From now on  
You're Toblerone [all alone]  
You want grub  
You grow yer own!

25/07/08

Chorus



Epilogue

So they had to  
Scapa Flow  
[Scapa - pronounced 'scarper' - flow = go]  
Had teapot lids (That's kids, you know)  
Here's to Adam!  
'is fork and knife [fork and knife = wife]  
The first pot and pan  
[pot and pan = old man = father/husband]  
With 'is trouble and strife!  
[trouble and strife = wife]

25/07/08

Chorus

16/07/08

Amen - innit!