

NCTE Story Architects 2018

Title: “Story Architects: Using Design Thinking to Inspire Creative Writing and Build Empathy”

Schedule:

Date: Saturday, November 17, 2018

Time: 8:00 a.m.-9:15 a.m.

Location: 350 E

NCTE Catalogue Brief: Thinking like a designer can transform the way we approach creative writing. Using 5 principles of Design Thinking (discovery, interpretation, ideation, experimentation, evolution), a panel of authors with backgrounds in engineering, architecture & design will share innovative storytelling strategies to help empower student expression. Come prepared to try some engaging activities!

Panelists:

Shelley Johannes

Melanie Conklin

Varian Johnson

Rebecca Caprara

Format: Panel discussion with audience participation encouraged. Presentation should feel interactive, collaborative, and engaging. Sprinkle in a few activities throughout.

Author Intros: I’ll give a quick overview of the session, then have each panelist introduce themselves. Feel free to speak about your backgrounds in design and how this shapes your creative process, what led you to pursue writing, your path to publication, your books, etc. (See sample questions doc for more.)

Audience Intros:

Before we dive into design thinking, I’d like to engage the educators and ask them what obstacles they face when teaching writing with their students. I polled some teacher friends and these are some of the answers I’ve received so far:

- lack of confidence
- no good ideas
- getting stuck/writers’ block
- overwhelmed by the big picture
- hard to maintain focus on a project from week to week
- intimidated by grammar/spelling/technical nitty gritty
- limited classroom time to devote to creative writing

Our hope is that the session will help provide some solutions/strategies to address these challenges.

First, what is Design Thinking? And how can thinking like a designer help solve these challenges?

According to Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO:

“Design thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success.”

But for our purposes in this session, it's essentially all about *process*. The 5 steps we'll discuss provide a methodology for all kinds of complex problem solving and creative work—whether painting portrait, designing a toothbrush, constructing a building, or writing a novel.

Ask panelists to weigh in: What does **thinking like a designer** mean to you? How does this apply to the way you create books?

The bigger picture:

Design thinking is...

Driven by empathy

- Work to truly understand various points of view before making assumptions or decisions.
- Look at challenges from all angles. Become a careful observer and a 3D thinker.
- Think about others. Put yourself in their shoes. How might a decision or situation affect them? Does this change your perspective?

An immersive experience

- Develop deep connections with others
- Expand horizons and explore a variety outcomes
- Go all in! Brainstorm and ideate with abandon, then step back, evaluate, select the strongest parts, and focus on developing it further.
- Multi-media, multi-modal approaches can add depth to your ideation

Collaborative

- Forge relationships with others through shared research, interviews, experiments
- Explore the rich potential of cross-disciplinary thinking
- Learn to give and receive constructive feedback
- Great minds DON'T always think alike. Celebrate varied points of view.

Stamina-building

- Break the creative process into pieces, to make the full task less daunting. Learn to use restraints to your advantage.
- Compose bit by bit, testing and revising ideas frequently.
- Learn to fail and recover faster. Build confidence and resilience.
- Rigor and revision are key.

Iterative & innovative

- Revision isn't a single, isolated phase in a linear process.
- Embrace the ongoing cycle of tinkering and testing before choosing the most satisfying or successful approach.
- There is no right or wrong way.

Discuss briefly how the points above begin to respond to some of the challenges teachers noted at the beginning.

The 5 Steps:

This is an interpretation, inspired by IDEO, for classroom applications & specifically related to writing...

It's important to emphasize that this is a **flexible** framework, not a strict set of rules. Mistakes, divergences, departures (& FUN) are encouraged!

This process is a great way to initiate creative writing projects, from short stories to longer works. It can also be adapted for non-fiction, expository writing, etc.

For each step, we've identified an applicable creative writing activity that educators could incorporate into their classrooms.

Step 1: DISCOVERY (aka Empathize)

Develop deep understanding through immersion and observation

WHAT?

- Are you writing a short story? A novel? A picture book? A college essay?
- What genre? (ex: fantasy, sci fi, etc) & age group
- Familiarize yourself with mentor texts. Read! and read some more :)

WHO?

- Learn about your audience
 - Who are your readers? Age? Interests? Needs?
- Learn about your characters
 - Identify a protagonist, antagonist & supporting characters
 - Put yourself in their shoes
- Learn about yourself
 - Why do you want/need to tell this story?

WHERE?

- Where does the story take place?
- Do you know this place well? If not, what research could you do to enrich your understanding & writing

WHEN?

- Time period?
- What do you know about this period in history? What do you need to learn?

HOW do you begin to answer the above questions?

- Primary sources
- Interviews
- Observations

WHY is this step valuable?

- Create authentic, relatable stories
- Connect with others
- Deepen your understandings
- Expand your world view

Panelist questions: When you begin a new project, what is your first step? Does this vary from project to project? What role do you believe empathy plays in writing & reading?

Creative writing activity: Fill in an empathy map (sample will be provided) from the point of view of one of your characters.

Other notes/talking points:

- Empathy is the ability to reach outside of yourself and connect with others. Stories offer a perfect opportunity to explore situations from another perspective.
- To create a believable and authentic story, writers must develop an awareness about their readers and their characters.
- Start by stepping into your characters' shoes, working to understand their needs, wants, motivations, privileges, frustrations, hopes, biases, etc.
- Strong characters don't necessarily have to be sympathetic, but they need to be someone a reader feels emotionally invested in.

“Effective storytelling involves a deep understanding of human emotions, motivations, and psychology in order to truly move an audience. Luckily, storytelling is something we all do naturally, starting at a very young age.” - Brian G. Peters, *Medium*

Step 2: INTERPRETATION (aka Explore & Define)

Clearly articulate the challenge(s) you want to solve

- Define the major conflicts/goals
- What is your story about?
 - Basic concept (ex: a story about boy getting a new puppy)
 - Review classic plot structures as a starting point (ex. Freytag's pyramid)
- Now what is your story *really* about?
 - Are there deeper questions/themes you want to explore?

- What do your characters want/need more than anything? (Sometimes these are two different things)
- What happens if they don't succeed?
 - What is at stake?
 - Why should the reader care?
- What are your characters' strengths/weaknesses? What are their fears? Flaws?

Notes:

• A key step in design thinking is to define a primary question that you're trying to answer. In design, it could be the need for more accessible shelving at the library, a chair that folds flat for easier storage, a more comfortable running shoe, etc. For writers, the key problem typically relates to the protagonist—what the main character wants and/or needs more than anything. It's also helpful to ask the same questions from your antagonist's point of view. Whenever they intersect, you'll get good tension & conflict!

• Ask the hard questions—not just how a character might behave in a certain situation, but *why*? Why did he/she/they make a particular decision? Why is the situation unjust/confusing? Consider ingrained bias, preconceptions, misjudgments, etc.

Panelist Q's: Are you a plotter, a pantster, or a hybrid? Do you fill out character sheets, or plot outlines?

Activity: Fill in a character sheet (show examples)

Step 3: IDEATION (aka Brainstormia!)

Imagine a wide range of solutions

- In step 2, you identified some key questions and obstacles. Now consider HOW you/your characters will meet each challenge.
- Begin to construct an outline. Think of this as the structure around which you'll build more layers and systems.
- Come up with as many ideas/solutions as possible
- Cast wide for ideas before determining the ultimate ones to use. Diverge before converging.
- In creative writing, there are many tools to help with ideation, from storyboarding to the three act structure. Anything that works is fair game.
- Wild ideas encouraged!
- Try the improv technique of saying *Yes, and...*
- Imagine opposites. If you're stuck in a scene, try writing down all the things that *wouldn't* work. Now think of the opposites...sometimes this will lead you to a solution.

Panelist Q's: Tell us a little about your brainstorm process (feel free to share some images). Any special tips/tricks? Are you a visual thinker? How does this impact your work?

Activity: Fill in a plot diagram and/or create a mood board, aesthetics collage, etc. (show examples)

Step 4: EXPERIMENTATION (aka Rapid Prototype, aka Write!)

Generate a first draft

- Write! Draft! Get words on the page!
- Using your empathy sheets, mood board, character and plot diagrams, dive in!
- Don't overthink. Embrace the mess. See where the words and story take you.
- "I'm writing a first draft and reminding myself that I'm simply shoveling sand into a box so that later I can build castles." – Shannon Hale

Panelist Q's: How did you generate ideas/models/prototypes etc in your design life? How do you approach drafting as an author? Are the processes similar? Different? Do you prefer drafting or revising? Would you be willing to share any "epic failures" from either your design or writing life? What did you learn from this experience? How did it help you improve?

Activity: Word sprint – set a timer for 2 minutes, 5 minutes, or 10 minutes. See how much you can write without stopping. Even if it feels like "word vomit," practice fast drafting. Take a break and then read what you wrote.

Step 5: EVOLUTION (aka Critique & Revision)

Receive feedback and advance the work

- The final stage of design thinking is to define ways to test the prototype. For writers, this often means eliciting feedback from critique partners, beta readers or other sources.
- Discuss how to give and receive constructive criticism.
- Have students read each others' work (sometimes having someone else read your writing aloud lets you hear things you might otherwise miss).
- Share ideas and impressions.
- Make a plan for incorporating this feedback into your writing.

Panelist Q's: Discuss how you give & receive feedback. Do you have crit partners? in person group? online? What role does this step play in your process?

Activity: Point-of-view Switcheroo – take a paragraph or passage and have students re-write it from a different character's perspective, from 3rd person to 1st person, from present tense to past tense. How does this change the story? Is it an improvement? Why or why not?

Return to Step 1 and add new layers and depth to your work as you revisit the steps.