

## **Creating Prior Knowledge**

By Wolf Trap Master Teaching Artist Sue Trainor

As adults, we each connect our own lifetime of deep and diverse personal experiences to our reading of stories. Our knowledge, feelings and sensory associations illuminate the words on a page and create depth of understanding and engagement with the content of the text. We become collaborators with the author in telling the story - transforming the text into mental images, creating our own internal movie. We are transported; we turn pages; we may stay up too late, enjoying our absorption in the story.

In contrast, preschoolers have a very limited accumulation of life experience in their few years.

Educators, librarians, and parents can help nurture a deep love of reading and learning by including a strategy during reading time that creates prior knowledge about story content. When children experience the moment of association between what has become their own prior knowledge and the appearance of the idea in the story, we see the “Aha!” facial expression and hear their excited telling about the deeper connections they’ve made. It IS exciting; it’s a feeling of success, which fuels intrinsic motivation for reading and learning.

The video example of Mollie and Amelia:

Here’s my thought process in creating that example:

- I want to keep the experience short and simple, with only one key idea demonstrated - so I need two characters, one who has something and one who wants it. That’s the **drama element of role play**.
- I want all children actively participating, so I’ll use a **song or chant** so that children can sing and repeat the vocabulary and clap or pat the **beat** (to keep hands busy), so I can also cite a music standard, and I’ll use best practices for that art form as well.

### **The following is excerpted from the “Aha Reading” workshop**

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#### **Brainstorm an activity sequence for the chosen lesson experience**

Lesson Summary: I want to build on an ownership situation that is within the prior experience of my students. One example of that might involve a birthday present. However, I want to focus on the concept of ownership (not the conflict), so I’ll set up a role-play where one character takes the toy while the other character is out of the room; that way we can focus on “belongs to.” (It’s also the scenario in “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” – they aren’t at home when Goldilocks uses their belongings.) Children will discuss the problem and possible solutions; the song will reinforce vocabulary.

Model it: Because a key detail in the scenario is that something is being taken away, I want to be able to make the gift move in and out of sight. I'll use a container – at Wolf Trap, we call this “coffee can theater” – to do that. It's a very strong motivating device, and it's a great way to model or demonstrate a sequence before children are invited to take over implementing the sequence. Here's my script idea:

- Present the container; create some excitement about opening it. (Peek inside, or children might knock on it to wake it up; children might hold it /shake it and guess what's inside, etc.)
- Open the container and take out the first character. Give children an opportunity to greet the character. In support of the drama standard, we'll focus on character voice, making sure each character has a consistent and distinctive sounding voice.
- First character – call her Amelia – got a \_\_\_ for her birthday! (Take out toy prop)
- All sing (try the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” melody). In support of the music standards, we'll make sure we sing in children's singing range (adult “head voice”).

(Clap or tap through the song)

ALL SING: Amelia got a \_\_\_ for her birthday

ALL SING: Amelia got a \_\_\_ for her birthday

ALL CHANT: Is it hers to touch? Yes, yes (thumbs up)

ALL CHANT: Is it mine to touch? No, no! (thumbs down)

ALL SING: Amelia got a \_\_\_ for her birthday

ALL SING: Maybe she'll play with me!

- Ask intentional questions: How do you think Amelia feels about getting a \_\_\_ for her birthday? How will she play with it? (In her house? In her yard? At her friend's? With her mom? With her dad?)
- Create a moment when Amelia has to put the toy down and go elsewhere.
- Introduce character two – Mollie. Give children a moment to greet him/her.
- Mollie sees the toy and says that she likes it. She sings along with all of us.
- Repeat song.
- Mollie picks up the toy and carries it away, into the container.
- Ask intentional questions: How do you think Mollie feels? Why do you think he/she took the toy? What do you think Amelia will do?
- Amelia returns and sees the toy is gone, bursts into tears, and goes into the container.
- Inside the container, characters “see” each other and squeal; they jump up in surprise so children can see them and then not.
- Take the characters out of the box. Ask intentional questions:
  - What should Amelia say to Mollie?
    - Include vocabulary “mine” and “belongs”
  - What should Mollie say to Amelia? (Facilitate responses; say it.)
  - Amelia asks: Why did you take the toy?
  - Mollie says: I don't have one.
  - What could happen now?

- Close: Resolve the story per the facilitated conversation, say goodbye to the characters, put them back in the box and close the box with some fanfare.

How will I guide children to apply knowledge and practice skills, with support?

- After the initial modeling, invite children to manipulate the story props, with facilitation. Change the characters and the gift toy to keep it interesting.
- Multiple sets of containers and props could be used in small groups, where there is adult support for each group.