

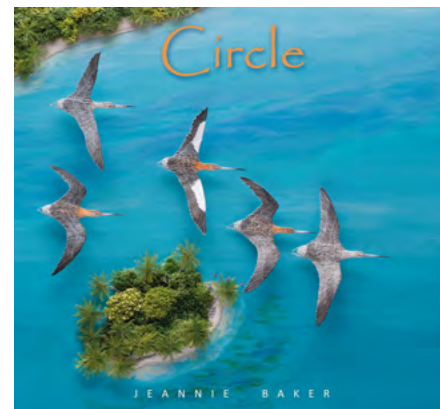
‘I wish I could Fly’: A process drama based on ‘Circle’ by Jeannie Baker

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This article describes a workshop that has been designed to utilise process drama as a valuable tool for deepening meaning and the experience of picture books for Primary and Middle Years. ‘Circle’, a recent book by Jeannie Baker, will be used as an exemplar for this approach. This book deals with the fragile existence of godwits, small wading birds that migrate across the world and back again each year. The birds fly from Australia and New Zealand all the way to Alaska. This book would be a very useful stimulus for delving into the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#), of ‘Life on Land’, ‘Climate Action’ and ‘Sustainable Cities and Communities’ and in the Australian Curriculum Cross-Curriculum Priority area of Sustainability.



Cover of ‘Circle’ Image:
<https://classroom.walkerbooks.com.au/circle/>

Drama in more recent years is being seen as having a valuable contribution to play in STEAM, as Drama provides a learning medium where the learners ‘walk in someone else’s shoes’ or ‘fly in another’s wings’ in a science or environmental context. As we know, when we empathise with a particular situation, we are more likely to be sympathetic, which may lead to social action. Also, when the work is embodied, there is an immediate connection which is felt. When learning is felt then it is lasting learning.

These notions are corroborated in the description of Canada's 'Evergreen Theatre' which is devoted to performing Science and Environmental issues for schools and communities. Everett (2015) describes the work and writes:

Drama can be gainfully employed for teaching both the conceptual and social contexts of science. Drama, by its very nature, necessarily contextualises the content of science education. Through simulation of people and processes, students are able to 'get inside' the ideas and the feelings around scientific investigation, and to critically explore the relationship between humans and the natural world. (p. 46)

In 'Circle', there are two intertwined stories: one of a boy who appears physically limited and one of the birds and their migration. The book also tackles how the boy is able to transcend his seeming limitations. A wide variety of strategies from process drama will inform the exploration, suggesting ways that every child or participant is able to be part of the experience.

In my approach to exploring picture books through drama, there is a deep investment in exploring the themes and context physically before the book is read. With each strategy/convention, the skills are scaffolded which is essential to effective teaching.

This work is also designed to highlight the process drama strategy of 'Role on the Wall'. This strategy is very useful to track knowledge and understandings of a particular topic or character. If it is created at the beginning of the class, then it provides a way of recording the understanding of the class before the work begins and it provides a great way to keep adding to the knowledge as the work progresses.

In the next section I provide a description of the practical drama workshop.

'I wish I could Fly': A process drama

Workshop Resources

- Picture storybook: 'Circle' by Jeannie Baker
- Butcher paper and pens for 'Role on the Wall'
- Short video clip/s of godwits flying

Preparation for the Text – Building the Context

Role on the Wall – In groups of 4 or 5, participants draw a boy with wings. Inside the wings, they write their knowledge of birds and on the outside write any emotions, feelings, or socio-cultural understanding of birds. Around the edge of the page, participants write what 'flying' means to them.

In the same groups, students create an image of 'flying' using their bodies, inspired by the words around the border. The words may be incorporated into the image through use of voice.

Warm-Up and Preparatory Exercises

- **Drama Game: Crows and Cranes**

Purpose: This is for energy and focus and to start the group thinking about birds. This game is also known as 'Chalk and Cheese'.

The group is divided into two equal groups and line up in two lines down the space. One line is designated the 'Crows' and the other 'Cranes'. When their name is called the line runs to the edge of the room. The other line tries to catch them. If you are caught, then you join the other line. The facilitator or teacher calls 'Crrrr' and then 'Crow' or 'Crane'. The aim is for the facilitator to build suspense and keep the group focused. The aim for each line is to catch as many as they can.

- **Physical Preparation**

The work begins in the body with a number of short exercises as part of the preparation of understanding the story of the godwits that is to come. The work starts with simple physical movements and is developed into physicalised image making.

- **Walking the Space**

As one of the recurring images from the book is 'following an ancient invisible pathway', participants are encouraged to individually walk the space of the room, as if 'following an ancient invisible pathway'.

Participants are asked to find a partner. They repeat the walk, with the partner following the leader, then reverse, so each has a turn in leading and following.

- **Flying Warm-Up**

The group spreads out through the space, and each finds their own space to be still. The group explores what it is like to have wings and to fly, focusing on where the movement begins and ends and exploring movement qualities of tempo and flow.

- **Flocks of Birds**

Participants form groups of 5/6. Each group nominates someone to be the leader and rest make a clump or a V-shape depending on the size of the room and the number of groups. The group walks around the space with energy.

In nature, birds take it in turns to lead the group, to share the burden of creating the slipstream for the others, this phenomenon is reflected in this exercise. The leader sets the pace and ensures everyone is able to keep up. As soon as the leader has

established their leadership, another 'bird' seamlessly takes over the leadership. Most or all participants should have a turn at leading.

- **Image Making: 10 Second Constructions**

The participants walk around the room and then a number is called. Quickly, participants get into groups of that number and create the object that is called out.

Binoculars – Group of 2 or 4

Wheelchair – Group of 6

Plastic rubbish on a beach – Groups of 8 - 10

A map of the world, with all the countries that surround the Pacific Ocean – A challenge for the whole class to create together.

- **Picture Postcards**

A picture postcard is a development of the '10 Second Constructions' exercise, where each person chooses a 'role' to create an element in the picture.

The group creates a summer beach scene then with 10 counts transforms into a high-rise city. A short discussion follows about what has happened to the environment and how we express that through bodies in space.

Show a short video clip of godwits

Example videos:

Saving the Bar-Tailed Godwit – <https://youtu.be/oADB0kV7nRk>

Flying Godwits – <https://youtu.be/MyhAQ6T6Vs>



Bar-tailed Godwit – *Limosa lapponica*

Photo by Joshua J. Cotton on Unsplash

The Text

The book 'Circle' has few words, but very detailed pictures created through amazing collages by Jeannie Baker. Read the book with the group, interrogating the pictures, finding the details and collaboratively telling the story.

The first page shows an adult with a boy in a wheelchair gazing out across the sand to the sea while a flock of godwits takes flight. Explore the image and talk about what it makes them wonder about the story.

Read the text on the second double page spread showing the large flock of godwits.

a godwit with white wing patches flies up with his flock.
the moment is right for the long journey north.

The third double page spread shows an arc of land and water with the godwits flying high. The text reads:

The flock fly high
above the clouds,
chattering at times
to help stay close together.
Each bird takes a turn
to lead the way.

They follow an ancient,
invisible pathway
for six nights
and six days,
until they know they need to stop.

Readers' Theatre

Using the text from the second and third pages, divide the participating group into groups of five to develop a vocal interpretation of the text. Each group works out a way of presenting this text, exploring, pitch, tempo, volume and pausing and emphasising words. Other techniques that could be used are echo of words or sounds. The group also need to decide who speaks which words and whether they will use single or multiple voices.

The City: A double-page spread shows the high-rise buildings of a city along a developed waterfront. Show this picture.

Group Chorus

Create a group chorus of what the birds would be thinking, feeling, seeing, hearing as the birds come to where they expect to see their feeding grounds, but they have disappeared under buildings and development. Each person speaks a line as though perhaps they are reading a poem. This technique contributes to building empathy for the birds' situation.

The Mudflats: Show the page where women and birds are shown gathering food from the mudflats.

Picture Postcard – Food Gathering by People and Birds

In two groups, create an image of the birds feeding and an image of the women gathering, most likely shellfish, that live in the mud flats.

Overheard Conversation

This strategy is about imagining overhearing conversations. The participants represent the women and children gathering shellfish in small groups to imagine what they would be talking about. Do they notice the birds? What do they think about the birds? How do they react to the birds?

Participants then imagine what a documentary maker or news reporter would comment on in this scene. In small groups, decide how this scene is to be represented as if a scene from a news report or documentary, and discuss the position and views of the commentator. Then groups present the reporter's commentary with the scene in the background.

Hold a short discussion about what has been revealed about the people and their relationship to the birds and their environment.

Read the next few pages, stopping at the page where the fox takes the chicks.

Marking the Moment

Experiment with a couple of ways of interpreting that moment through positioning of bodies in space, show that there is no definitive way of showing these moments. Each interpretation is valid. Meaning can be made with shape and how close or far away the participants are from each other and from the audience.

Read on until stopping at the second last page where the image shows the boy trying to hold back a dog. Discuss the changes to the landscape from the first picture of the beach. In groups of five, they will improvise this moment with the possibility of including a narrator. The role of the narrator can have a big influence on how the story is told and received.

Two different narrative techniques:

1. Improvise the scene from the book bringing the picture to life.
2. Improvise with the role of a narrator who can be an impersonal observer or narrator who has a point of view to the scene or relationship with the scene, such as the boy, the boy's mother, a bird lover, even the dog, etc.

The Boy's Story

The boy's story is suggested but has little detail. In Drama, we are able to develop these stories further. Look at the very first page before the story begins, with the boy lying on his bed, thinking 'Ahhh- I wish I could fly', the first page with the boy on the beach looking at godwits, the second last page with the boy trying to hold the dog, and the last page of the boy imagining he was with the godwits.

In groups of five, participants create three freeze frames that tell his story. The Freeze Frames are presented with the class as audience, closing their eyes in between the transitions and seeing only the images. They ask and imagine:

- How did he come to be in a wheelchair?
- How did he become interested in the birds?
- What happened after the book when he is a few years older?

Hold a short discussion of how the images are communicated through line, shape and space and what are the stories of the boy.

Bring one scene to life and share it as a short rehearsed improvisation.

Hold a brief discussion on what made effective improvisations. What more was revealed about the boy's life?

The original groups go back to their 'Role on the Wall' and add to the drawing of the boy. On the outside of the drawing of the boy participants write what is suggested from the book, and on the inside, what the drama has suggested about him.

To conclude the work based on the book, make an interactive sculpture or art piece that sums up the theme 'I wish I could Fly' and/or expresses a message about the godwits. Each sculpture needs a title.

At the end of this experience, there should be time for reflection on the workshop experience. What aspect of the work resonated and why?

This story has the potential to be the stimulus, or the beginning point, for an environmental study of wetlands and their importance to many species, not just birds. However, wetlands are increasingly coming under threat across the world.

Some questions to help you consider more about wetlands. Where is your nearest wetland? It may be a coastal or inland wetland. Is it under threat or is it being protected? Who are the First Nations custodians of that country? Is there a group that works to protect the area? What is the historical, cultural and biological significance?

The following are some possibilities that could be explored to understand and lobby for a wetland preservation in class.

Documentary

Students could research another bird or animal in a wetland environment and through film or live drama or a combination of both, show the life or life cycle of a particular animal/bird.

Town Meeting

This is a drama strategy to present various stakeholders' points of view on a contentious topic or theme. For example, with a particular wetland, the stakeholders may be Land Developers, First Home Buyers, Environmental Lobby Group, Environmental Scientists, Tourist Operators who bring Bird Lovers to a particular area, a First Nations Land Council, Local Inhabitants, etc.

With research and assistance, the students in small groups create a short presentation to a local Councillor/State or Federal Parliamentarian representing the various stakeholders. Costume elements may also be added. The teacher or students may fill the roles of Council members and a MC for the meeting.

This may involve creating visual images and speaking for their stand on this issue. Students may take a creative approach and capture sound, write a poem, choreograph a dance, speak a monologue representing a bird or animal or the land.

The drama activities suggested here could be selected for a single workshop, a sequence of lessons or even a unit of work conducted over a term.

About the author

Helen Sandercoe has been a Drama/Theatre teacher for much of her life. Central to her practice is how to best develop expressive skills and create an aesthetic experience. Recently, she has been teaching the essentials of Drama for primary and secondary pre-service teachers. There is nothing more exciting for Helen than when a whole class is involved in the creative process.

This workshop was originally developed and presented for the 2019 Drama Victoria State Conference. This article has expanded the original structure and activities.

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