

10 Steps to Collaborative Playbuilding

Compiled by Hannah Brown.

This resource is designed for educators as the starting point for developing more comprehensive lessons for this play. Hannah Brown is the Education Projects Officer for Sydney Theatre Company. You can contact Hannah on hbrown@sydneytheatre.com.au

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10 Steps to Collaborative Playbuilding

The purpose of this guide is for teachers and students alike to be able to follow the steps in order to create a play from scratch. It is important to note that this way of playbuilding is collaborative, where all students take on the roles of actors and directors and negotiate the creation of the piece. Throughout this process the teacher is to act as a facilitator.

Playbuilding and Collaboration

Playbuilding is the process of building an ensemble piece that is created by students from the needs or interests of the group. Playbuilding is a method of collaboratively creating a performance. Sometimes the process of creating the play is just as important as the product – the performance. This is because the skills gained by the ensemble members during the creating process are invaluable life skills: working in a group, giving and accepting constructive criticism, taking on a position of responsibility, building confidence, finishing a product and experiencing walking in someone else's shoes.

The process can also serve as a cathartic experience for an ensemble which is looking for rehabilitation or to manage a certain experience or event.

Production Schedule

As a class or within the devising group, it is a good idea to create a production schedule with checkpoints to work towards and designate someone to monitor this. Such checkpoints could

include when to have certain scenes finished, when to do work-in-progress showings and when to have lines down. To create an exact production schedule, mark down the performance date and work backwards.

Rehearsal Workbook

Students should each keep a rehearsal workbook where ideas, scripts and research can be documented. During or after each rehearsal, students can dot point what was achieved so that they can pick up where they left off in the next rehearsal.

STEP ONE

Creating an Ensemble

An ensemble that works together and listens to one another both on and off the stage is essential in playbuilding. A play ensemble is different to working in groups in class as the process is longer and more intense, so the need to create a sense of cohesion, knowledge about one another and awareness of each other's abilities is important. Ensemble skills can be gained through group drama games and trust exercises.

Examples of such exercises include:

Knife and Fork

Students walk in the space. The teacher calls out a number and an object. Students form groups of that number and create the object with their bodies. Repeat this process with different groups and different objects. For example, "groups of five" and "create a bicycle".

Human Map

The teacher designates the different points in the classroom which represent the North Pole, South Pole, East and West. The teacher asks students to go and stand on the map in different places. For example, "your favourite holiday destination," or "where you were born," or "the most boring place on earth." The teacher then goes around the room and asks students where they are and why. Repeat as many times as desired.

Circle of Knots

The group stands in a tight circle. They all join hands with one

another across the circle, sideways, over the top of one another. They must then untangle themselves without letting go of their hands. For an extra challenge this activity can be done in silence.

Blind Car

Pairs. One person has their eyes closed and is the car, the other person is the driver and stands behind them. The driver uses hand signals on the back of the person who is the car to 'drive' them around the room. The hand signals are: to go forward (pressing on their back), backwards (tapping on their back), stop (one tap), left (tap left shoulder) and right (tap right shoulder). This game is about trust so the car must keep their eyes closed and trust that the driver won't allow them to bump in to anything.

Sonic Shower

Pairs. This game is to be played with care and is to be done walking, not running. Person A has their eyes closed. Person B chooses a sound and demonstrates it to their partner. Person A must follow the sound of Person B as they move around the room.

The *In a Heart Beat* process:

“Genuine community engagement was at the core of the project, with an extensive consultation period. STC’s Education Manager and the Director travelled to Armidale to establish relationships and build an atmosphere of trust and excitement. The first week of the project this year was focused on in-school workshops, followed by consultations with community leaders, and an open after school workshop program in youth-friendly public venues in the afternoon.”

STEP TWO

A Way In

Prior to beginning the process, it is best to have a broad idea about a theme, concept or issue that will be explored. This can be initiated by the teacher or students and broadly investigated through research and exercises such as a ‘Walk Through Museum’ or ‘Gallery Wall’ in the classroom or ‘Shared Stories.’

Walk Through Museum

Scatter pictures, poems, objects, songs, newspaper articles and excerpts from plays about the topic around the classroom. Leave room for students to walk amongst the stimulus and stop and read. Choose a piece of evocative music to play as students explore the museum. From this ‘Walk Through Museum’ the central question or statement can be created.

Gallery Wall

Create a designated wall space in the classroom and pin up pictures, poems, objects, songs, newspaper articles and excerpts of plays about the topic. This wall can be added to as the devising process continues, creating a documentation wall. Choose a piece of emotive music to play as students peruse the gallery wall. From the ‘Gallery Wall’ the central question or statement can be created.

Shared Stories

Ask students to find a space in the classroom and lie down with their eyes closed. Ask students to think about a particular moment in their life as chosen by the teacher. This could be when they felt alone, scared or regretted a decision. Ask students to recall all the exact details – what they saw, what they heard, what they felt,

what was said and who they were with. Allow students time to really investigate these memories and play some evocative music to create a solemn and serious atmosphere in the classroom.

Divide students up into groups of five and ask them to each share their story. Students choose one story from each group that is then shared with the class. The class then chooses the most moving story which then acts as the stimulus for the central question or statement of intent explored in the play. The shared stories can be documented using the worksheet at the back of this booklet.

The *In a Heart Beat* process:

“Participant surveys were a major part of the community engagement process, where project participants provided information on their perceptions of Armidale and hopes for the project. STC also crowd-sourced artistic content, most obviously in the development of the play itself, but also through a call out for local artists to submit an image of Armidale to feature as the ‘hero image’ on all promotional materials such as posters and brochures.”

STEP THREE

Central Question or Statement of Intent

When trying to think of a question or statement, think about what the audience could feel, think and know at the end of a performance.

The central question or statement of intent is the specific idea the play is devised around. It is important that the central question or statement is specific. Statements like “Being a teenager is hard” are too broad and do not conjure enough imagination or stimulus for creating scenes. Questions and statements need to be contextualized and evocative, for example, “At 16 you don’t need sickness or death for tragedy.” This statement immediately conjures thoughts about the problems experienced by a teenager and how these problems compare to those in the wider community and the world. Links could also be made to classical tragedy texts such as the work of Shakespeare.

The *In a Heart Beat* process:

*“The brief for the project was to strenuously avoid an ‘issues based play’ that looked at a pre-determined topic such as teen pregnancy or peer pressure. Instead, the content that came from the workshops with young people was resolutely everyday, resulting in *In a Heart Beat* being a play about perspective - if things are too foreign, we feel discombobulated, if things are too familiar, we feel stifled.”*

STEP FOUR

Storyboard and Characters

4.1 Brainstorm

Before creating a storyboard, use a lesson to brainstorm on the whiteboard all thoughts, ideas, characters, places, objects etc. relating to the statement of intent or central question. Students can document this brainstorm in their workbooks.

4.2 Storyboard

Once the brainstorm is complete, draw ten boxes on the board, each box represents a scene. As a class work together to decide on what will happen in each scene and which characters will be present. If the class is big, it is a good idea to break the class in half and have one group perform the first half of the play and the other group perform the second half. Characters can be signified using costume so the audience is not confused by the change.

Once the storyboard has been created, think about playing with the story by considering:

Narrative structure

Narrative structure impacts on the audience's engagement with the play and the viewpoint from which the story is told.

Linear Narrative – The story is told sequentially, from beginning to end. There is a problem which is established, reaches its climax and is then resolved.

Non-Linear Narrative – Events are depicted out of chronological order. It is often used when the play is a memory and the different memories come together at the end to portray an event or feeling.

Cyclical Narrative – The story begins at the end and then works backwards to portray how the end came about. The story then ends with the same scene that opened the play.

Episodic Narrative – Each scene stands alone and acts as an episode. They can feature different characters in different times and places. Each episode is linked by a similar theme or event.

Viewpoint

From whose eyes is the story told? Is there one central character that the story follows or are there several characters that the story jumps between?

Style

What style/styles will be utilised in the play? Think about how style can complement the narrative and strengthen the meaning for the audience. Consider Realism, Contemporary Realism, Physical Theatre, Ritual, Magical Realism, Absurdism, Political Theatre, Shadow Work, Comedy (Parody or Farce), Collage Drama and Documentary.

Conventions

Consider how different conventions can be incorporated and strengthen the statement of intent for the audience. Such conventions include: direct address, narration, audience interaction, chorus, repetition, multiple role, fast forward/rewind, slow motion.

Symbol

Incorporating symbol strengthens Dramatic Meaning as they are representations of the statement of intent or central question. Symbols can be objects, movements, songs, media backdrops, set, props and costumes.

4.3 Techniques

Brainstorm some initial ideas about staging, lighting, sound/music and media. How can these techniques complement the world of the play, enhance the style and strengthen the meaning?

The *In a Heart Beat* process:

“We brainstormed the themes of home, isolation, leaving and returning, bullying, social media, dating from a number of different angles - either through verbal improvisation, writing scripts, physical responses, using music and choreography. All of the participants provided a favourite song which we used at different points during the week.”

STEP FIVE

Devise and Rehearse

5.1 Outer world of the play

Before beginning the devising process look at the storyboard and conduct any research that may need to be undertaken to inform the content of scenes. Research and document the findings in the devising scrapbook.

Consider:

- Where is the play set?
- What historical era is the play set in?
- What are the social and political conditions?
- Is there anything special about the characters that needs to be investigated such as medical issues or cultural background?

5.2 Begin the devising process

Begin the devising process by standing up and improvising the scenes. It is a good idea to start each scene with a freeze frame and corresponding caption that encapsulates what the scene is about. This gives the devising process some direction. Aim for each scene to be between three and four minutes in length.

5.3 Inner world of the play

The inner world of the play refers to the dramatic action and characters of the play. Once scenes have been devised, students should sit down with their workbooks and analyse and deconstruct the inner world of the play and their character. This will allow for them to have greater investment in the play and portray their characters truthfully. This can be documented in the workbook.

Consider:

- What is the character's objective in the different scenes?
- What is the character's super-objective for the entire play?
- What is the character's motivation in the scene?
- Are there any obstacles that are in the way of the character getting what they want?
- What voice and movement choices have been made in creating the characters? Can these be improved?
- What choices have been made in language that portrays the character and their motivation?
- How does movement in the space portray character motivation, relationships and tension?

Once scenes have been devised, think about different ways to obtain feedback and improve the scenes. Consider the following:

5.4 Director outside the action

Allocate one student who will watch the scene from beginning to end and stop the scene to fix and improve the dramatic action. The student in the role of director can take notes and should pay particular attention to characterisation (voice and movement), language, dialogue and transitions. Ultimately, they are looking to ensure that meaning and the story are clearly communicated and that the scene links directly to the statement of intent or question.

5.5 Work in progress showing

Designate a date in class where groups show one or more of the scenes they have been working on. The class is then invited to give constructive criticism and outline what they liked, what they think worked and what can be improved on. The devising process is collaborative and not competitive. It is not about whose scenes are better, but about the ensemble working together to

communicate the statement of intent or central question. It is best for students to be 'active viewers' and have elements they are looking to critique in the scenes. This could be characterisation or Elements of Drama such as mood, tension or place.

The *In a Heart Beat* process:

“During an intense devising period a small number of young people workshopped ideas to feed into the eventual script, with this group later invited to STC to provide feedback on the script following a two week creative development period with professional actors.”

STEP SIX

Design Decisions

Once the scenes have been devised, begin to incorporate music, props or essential pieces of costume that will be used in the scenes. Decide on the set and backdrop for the play and designate a member of the ensemble to create or source these design elements. Media could be used for a backdrop and help in the creation of place. Document the design decisions in the workbook.

It is best to keep design elements to a minimum. The focus should be on the creation of scenes and characters through the body in the space.

The *In a Heart Beat* process:

*“It as a challenge to bring the world of *In a Heart Beat* to life on stage. As scenes were written and rewritten, so were design sketches and ideas. We have 14 different settings and 24 characters to realise. The brief- be simple, imaginative, and use what we already have as much as possible. Renee and I have a shared love of anything old and theatrical, and since the action of the play now takes place in the lead up to the *Armidale* show, a carnivalesque quality runs through the design.”*

STEP SEVEN

Write the Script

Once the scenes have been created, it is time to write the script. Writing the script is best done at this point in the devising process, as if attempted earlier it can hinder the creative process and cause the ensemble to focus only on the words and not the dramatic action. What evolves out of the improvised devising process is always more fruitful, natural and seamless than first writing a script.

Writing the script can be done by the ensemble performing the play while one person sits out and types the script on a laptop or writes the script by hand, halting the action if time is needed to catch up. The script can also be written by videoing the performance and typing up the play while re-watching it.

The script can then be compiled and distributed to the ensemble. The script ultimately serves as documentation and a reference for the actors who by now should know their lines and cues.

The *In a Heart Beat* process:

“The director and writer workshopped the script in process at the Wharf for two weeks with professional actors Danielle McCormack, Alan Flower and Amber McMahon. At the end of the fortnight, four students from the devising week and four Armidale teachers travelled to STC to provide feedback on the script. 71.4% described the play reading as ‘Highly Valuable in stimulating discussion about themes and issues relevant to Armidale’.”

STEP EIGHT

Polish

Polishing the scenes involves tightening the dramatic action and occasionally tweaking and editing the dialogue to ensure the scenes are sleek and link directly to the statement of intent or question. The transitions from scene to scene should be short and sharp to ensure the dramatic tension is sustained, the mood is intensified and the rhythm of the piece flows.

8.1 Dress and technical rehearsals

During the polishing process technical rehearsals and dress rehearsals should take place. The dates for the dress and technical rehearsals should be designated in the production schedule.

8.2 Recording a run

It is a good idea to video a full run-through and watch it back as an ensemble. When watching, students can make notes on elements needing improvement. Students can then go back and polish anything that needs noticeable development.

The *In a Heart Beat* process:

“The play was pulled apart, put back together, thrown out with the bath water, resuscitated, reformed, renewed and reinvigorated over an intense period of time. Notes were taken and the play was redrafted six times. Characters were cut, new characters appeared, imaginary underworlds were mapped, and a talking kangaroo turned into a talking goat.”

STEP NINE

Present

The play is now ready to perform to an audience! Take a moment before going on stage to obtain focus and ensure all the hard work pays off!

The *In a Heart Beat* process:

“Opening night was a triumph. After the show finished, people stayed sitting in their seats, talking about the story they had just seen, the characters, the relationships. There was a sense that the community really saw themselves reflected in the play. They completely related to Jamie’s story, the bullying he went through, and Annabel’s story of trying to deal with a troubled teenager, and the guilt she felt about trying unsuccessfully to keep it all together.”

STEP TEN

Reflect

Reflecting on creating the play is essential as it reinforces the learning undertaken in the collaborative process. The reflection can be undertaken in many different forms such as group discussion, pair discussion or written journal reflection. Below are some questions to consider:

- What worked well in the devising process?
- What did not work well in the devising process?
- What discoveries did you make about yourself?
- What did the ensemble do together particularly well?
- What discoveries did you make about working with others?
- What new skills have you obtained?
- What would you do differently in the process next time?
- What was hard about the process? What was easy?
- What moments in the piece were particularly moving or strong and why?
- What characters were strong and why?
- Which characters could have been improved and how?
- How do you think the audience was impacted by the piece?
- Was the statement of intention or central question clear?
How could it have been clearer?

The *In a Heart Beat* process:

“One of the most rewarding parts of this process was watching how all of the cast and crew from Armidale really lifted and grew. Given the opportunity to contribute to the solutions, but also asked to work to high professional standards, they all developed and rose to that challenge in a really wonderful way.”

A Way In - Shared Stories

You need to be prepared to share this story with your group, your class and even the wider community if your story is selected as the stimulus for the collaborative process.

Think of a significant moment in your life.

- When you felt scared/alone/sad/disappointed
- When you were devastated by news
- When you achieved something

Read through the table first and then fill out each section.

Title of story	
Outline of story (one or two sentences)	
Setting of the story	
Details of the story What happened chronologically (this can be dot points)	

<p>What were you feeling at the time?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in the build up to the event • at the climax of the event • after the event 	
<p>How did you see yourself? (perception)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • before the event • after the event <p>What were you thinking?</p>	
<p>What do you remember seeing?</p>	
<p>What do you remember hearing?</p>	
<p>What do you recall saying to anyone?</p>	
<p>Who do you remember being there?</p>	

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