

The Collaborative Development of OutoftheBox as a New Form of Deep Talk

OutoftheBox



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OutoftheBox is a form of Deep Talk which was originally designed for schools but which is now being used in many contexts. The developments have included creating new story materials, stories, and expanding the ways in which people can respond to the stories. This has been made possible by collaboration through an international development team, a pilot programme, and a not-for-profit organisation to support a community of practitioners. This paper describes the developments in OutoftheBox and the structures that have enabled the co-creative process.

Introduction

Tuula Valkonen created Deep Talk and offered it in a spirit of openness and collaboration. By letting go of control she encouraged it to grow organically and as a result Deep Talk is taking on different forms, one of which is OutoftheBox. In early 2021 the authors, Kate Caroe and Kathryn Lord, began developing ideas about how Deep Talk could be adapted to support the emotional wellbeing of children in schools. Over a two year period new storytelling materials and 49 new stories were developed as well as new ways of presenting and working with OutoftheBox which are used in many different contexts. This paper first describes the developments in OutoftheBox and then the structures that enabled collaboration between storytellers across the world for the developments to take place.

1. The Developments

OutoftheBox has developed new story materials, new stories and genres of stories, new ways of responding to the stories and new rituals.

1.1 New Story Materials

Materials that can be used both on sand and on a newly designed cloth underlay were developed, recognising that using the sandbag in schools is sometimes not practical. Twenty five wooden people and animal figures stand on wooden discs when on cloth, which also serve to mark out the journeys, in place of the footprints in the sand. There are 144 shapes of coloured felt and a variety of natural, tactile and wooden objects. The objects are kept inside a round box with a lid to make it easy for storage, as well as to create a sense of anticipation and curiosity at the beginning of a story session.

Whilst these materials are offered as suggestions it is recognised that OutoftheBox can be shared anywhere using anything, for example in a Forest School the stories can be told on a woodland floor using natural materials like sticks, stones and leaves. Storytellers are

encouraged to make their own resources or to use whatever they have available to them, including natural materials found outdoors.



The resources in the OutoftheBox basket

1.2 New Stories and Genres

The initial aim was to create stories to help improve the emotional wellbeing of children, so the first stories to be developed were the Wisdom stories, that encourage thought and dialogue about values and character. They have been adapted from various sources including children's literature, traditional tales or religious stories. See 'Starfish' and 'Hidden Heart'.¹ However the intention was also to create stories that could link to subjects in the curriculum. As a home educator, Kate was influenced by Charlotte Mason's ideas of 'living books' in which information and ideas are presented through emotionally engaging stories to give a sense of connection with the personalities involved.² For this reason five other genres are in development specifically for schools to enrich curriculum subjects:³ History⁴, Arts, Nature, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) and Religions.

¹ To watch Hidden Heart please go to https://youtu.be/hPPN9GrL_Pi

² See online article at <https://www.outoftheboxtraining.org/users>

³ Caroe, C., Caroe, K., Lord K., and Fytche, J. (2021) *OutoftheBox Links to the National Curriculum, Ofsted and SIAMS Inspection Frameworks*, paper available from <https://www.outoftheboxtraining.org/users>

⁴ The OutoftheBox team worked with Lord Alf Dubs to develop the story of his fleeing Nazi-occupied Prague at the start of World War II. *The Children's Train* can be found at <https://www.outoftheboxtraining.org/about>

It was recognised from the start that the stories and materials would be suitable for contexts other than schools. For example, Kathryn had lead a three year project to adapt a storytelling method called Godly Play⁵ for older people living with dementia,⁶ and had imagined how Deep Talk could be adapted for care homes. Kathryn and Kate had used Godly Play and could see how Deep Talk might be adapted for faith nurture. The Faith genre is currently being developed as a means to explore Christianity. It is hoped that other religions will follow as the storytelling community becomes more diverse.

49 Wisdom stories have been developed as the main genre of OutoftheBox. Twelve of these have been adapted from original Deep Talk stories created by Tuula Valkonen. The intention in OutoftheBox scripts is to allow the characters to be presented free of any labels suggesting gender, age, faith or ethnicity which might direct or limit interpretation. The pronoun "they" rather than he or she is always used. Characters are never described as 'wise' to encourage the participants to trust their inner wisdom and to listen to the wisdom of the group. The scripts recognise where the inspiration has come from but they do not claim to represent the original stories. For example, in the original Deep Talk story of the Donkey, which was inspired by a Jewish story, the people fetch the 'wise rabbi' to tell them what to do.⁷ In the OutoftheBox story the people say 'Let's ask our leader' who is therefore neither identified as wise nor a person from a particular religion. The design of the wooden people in similar shades of brown (without any light coloured wood) hints at differences between people, without imposing particular ethnic contexts.

OutoftheBox stories are published online as scripts with the words and actions for telling the story on both cloth and sand. Videos are available for each story to help storytellers learn the words and get a feel for the presentation style. Publishing the stories online rather than in print means that as feedback is gathered the scripts can be refined and improved and allowed to develop organically.

1.3 New Ways of Responding to the Story

The variety of loose parts and the visual stimuli offered by the OutoftheBox materials opens up the potential for play and has given rise to some new ways of playing. After the story has been packed away children in schools like the opportunity to create their own stories and express themselves by playing with the materials.⁸ The materials can even be used without a

⁵ The foundational literature for Godly play can be found at <https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/research/foundational-literature>

⁶ Lord, K. 'The Spiritual Care of Older People in Care Settings - Experience and Reflections on the Use of Godly Play' in Steinhäuser, M. and Øystese, R. (eds.) (2018) *Godly Play - European Perspectives on Practice and Research*, Munster NY, Waxmann, pp. 345-354.

⁷ The story can be viewed on Youtube and the script downloaded at <https://www.outoftheboxtraining.org/about>

⁸ To listen to an interview with a teacher about how the children are using the materials https://youtu.be/Lo_460j_HDw

story, for example a chaplain in a care home for people living with dementia laid out the objects on the cloth, as a stimulus to enable the people to express themselves.⁹

Having the same items used across different stories allows people to make connections between the stories when the items represent the same thing. This is the intention of Deep Talk in which a community builds up a number of 'codes' for their meaning making, e.g. the donkey may represent an obstacle. However, in OutoftheBox each object can also represent different things, depending on the story and the imagination of the participants. So in one story the gold rope is used to tie an animal to a post whilst in another story it can represent a precious bracelet. This means that the objects themselves help to support flexible and paradoxical ways of thinking.

In the original Deep Talk process the 'Wondering' is followed by putting the story away and inviting the participants to change places so that their new physical space enables them to come into a different psychological space of the 'Community Play.' In OutoftheBox the 'Wondering' is often supported using the loose parts which may flow naturally into the 'Community Play' without first putting the story away. Other ways of responding to the story are also encouraged in OutoftheBox. Sometimes this is an individual, silent, creative response, such as painting, writing, drawing, journalling, crafting or time to connect with nature by going for a walk or playing in the woods or on a beach. A group in Cambridge, UK, called Mind Body Connections holds a yoga session after an OutoftheBox story.



The play that took place by older people living with dementia



Children in a school playing with the materials

1.4 New Rituals

The name OutoftheBox was chosen because the objects come out of a box and it is an approach that challenges the status quo with a sense of fun and lightheartedness.

⁹ To read the blog go to <https://www.outoftheboxtraining.org/blog/allowing-the-materials-to-spark-interest>

We wished to make the purpose of OutoftheBox more explicit. A logo was designed through which the approach could be described. The inspiration for the logo came from Theory U by C. Otto Scharmer.¹⁰ The dots remind us of the discs that are used when telling OutoftheBox stories on cloth to represent a pathway or a journey, and the shape of the curve shows us that the journey is one of descent and re-emergence.

The descent down the left side of the curve symbolises brave trust: a letting go of control and settling down into being present to our interior conditions through breathing, trusting, listening and feeling (the first four dots from violet to green). The journey back up the other side represents the

transformation and new awareness that emerges through the creative process of wondering and play (yellow and orange). The gap before the last red dot represents the risk that we take as we learn to love, as well as the freedom, creativity and momentum that can come when escaping expected structures and instead thinking ‘out of the box’.



The logo is used as the basis for a ritual in getting the materials out of the box to help people prepare for the story. The baskets and bags of objects are taken out of the box, and the box is turned upside down with the words, “Let’s turn this upside down,” to help prepare people to see things in new ways for the transformation of individual lives and communities (and also perhaps for turning our systems and institutions upside down).

The values, which function as a group agreement, are physically laid down by placing seven coloured circles in an arc as these words are spoken:

*“Now we have time to breathe. In a circle of trust we listen and explore feelings.
There’s space to wonder and play, in love.”*

The cloth is then rolled out (or the sandbag is spread out) over the circles as a symbol that these values are grounding the session. Before the story is shared the words “Your story, my story, our story. Let’s be curious about this story” help to affirm that we come with our stories and that the story about to be shared has the potential to impact our own narratives - the stories we tell ourselves.

2. The structures that have enabled Collaboration

The development of OutoftheBox has been supported through online courses, an international Development Team, a pilot programme and a not-for-profit organisation to support a community of practitioners.

2.1 Online courses

¹⁰ Scharmer, C. O. (2018) *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

During lockdown Kathryn Lord worked with Tuula Valkonen to offer the first online Deep Talk course. This led to Kathryn working with different trainers to offer six online courses in Deep Talk to a total of 58 participants between September 2020 till July 2021. Kathryn wanted to facilitate training based on peer learning and was inspired by Brené Brown's work on brave leadership.¹¹ Brown defines a leader as "anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes and has the courage to develop that potential." Kathryn wanted the Deep Talk practitioners to be leaders with the courage to find the potential in Deep Talk and to develop it for their own contexts.

Each online course took place over two or three months which meant there was time for participants to try it out in their own settings. The mantra was 'do what works' and participants were encouraged to make adaptations to serve the needs of the groups they were serving. A number of participants created new stories and told stories in media other than sand, e.g. using leaves and sticks whilst sitting on a park bench with a friend.

2.2 An international Development Team

A number of the storytellers who attended the online Deep Talk training were interested in joining a Development Team to adapt Deep Talk. Kate and Kathryn were able to meet in person, but collaboration with the team to create the new stories took place through a private Facebook group and Zoom meetings. A team of three in Australia were also able to meet in person to develop stories.¹² The team grew and over 40 storytellers contributed to the development of OutoftheBox stories between June 2021 and June 2023. These storytellers came from the UK, Isle of Man, Ireland, Belgium, South Africa, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. Collaboration online was very much embraced, partly thanks to people's experiences of coming together and building community on Zoom during Covid. Having a large Development Team which includes perspectives from different countries as well as people with different life experiences was vital in creating stories that are as open and inclusive as possible.

2.3 Pilot Programme

In June 2021 OutoftheBox was ready to go to the pilot stage with 19 storytellers in UK schools and 17 storytellers in diverse settings such as hospitals, community drop-in sessions, churches, care homes, and wellbeing support groups in the UK, South Africa and the US.¹³

¹¹ <https://brenebrown.com/hubs/dare-to-lead/>

¹² The collaborative creative process in the development of the Creation story by the team in Australia can be read here <https://www.outoftheboxtraining.org/blog/the-collaborative-creative-process-in-the-development-of-the-creation-story>

¹³ the diverse contexts included care homes for older people, intergenerational family groups in the home, one to one mentoring or spiritual accompaniment, a community drop in for homeless people, church meetings, a Lent group, Sunday school, a toddler group, hospital chaplaincy, a support group in sheltered housing, an after school club, with the uniformed groups of Rainbows and air squadron cadets, peer support group for

The purpose of the pilot was both to enable reflective practice for the storytellers and to inform the development of OutoftheBox. The storytellers attended a 90 minute online session, which gave basic training in how to share OutoftheBox stories and lead wondering. Some of the participants also chose to attend a 'Going Further with OutoftheBox' 90 minute training session on Zoom to enhance their skills. There was no training in Community Play, although some storytellers had already been trained in Deep Talk and included this tool in their sessions. All but four of the 36 storytellers were already trained in Godly Play and so were experienced in a related storytelling approach.

Participants were asked to submit feedback through a questionnaire using Google forms. There were nine open questions, with an additional question on educational impact for the schools.¹⁴ Over 12 months, feedback was gathered from 52 feedback forms and from seven recorded interviews from people working in schools¹⁵ and from 103 feedback forms and three recorded interviews from people working in other contexts.¹⁶

The pilot gave valuable information about the effect that OutoftheBox was having on wellbeing in schools and other contexts and the adaptations people were making and also formed the core of a network of storytellers. All but two of the storytellers that were involved in the pilot continued to use OutoftheBox and the majority of them joined the Development Team and helped to develop new stories.

2.4 Not-for-Profit Organisation to support a community of practitioners

OutoftheBox quickly developed as a network of storytellers around the world. Kate and Kathryn wanted to consolidate this activity and provide a solid foundation for growth. In August 2021 they created a not-for-profit organisation to support the OutoftheBox movement. They were influenced by the radical management book of Frederick Laloux¹⁷ called Reinventing Organizations which describes how to create 'teal' organisations, which are characterised by self-management, an emphasis on wholeness, peer relationships and on evolutionary purpose within the organisation.

OutoftheBox now has a Membership scheme and for a low one-off fee the members can access the scripts and videos of the 49 Wisdom stories as well as the self-led training resources. A Member can then choose if and when to attend the mentor-led courses. In this way storytellers can develop in the art of OutoftheBox through self-led, peer-led and

volunteers and well being sessions for people experiencing homelessness, housing issues and associated problems with addiction and mental health.

¹⁴ See Appendix A for the Feedback questions.

¹⁵ Six of these interviews can be watched by going to

<https://www.outoftheboxtraining.org/blog/interviews-with-people-using-outofthebox-in-schools>

¹⁶ The three interviews can be watched by going to

<https://www.outoftheboxtraining.org/blog/dementia-and-wellbeing>

¹⁷ Laloux F. <https://www.reinventingorganizations.com/>

mentor-led learning as well as learning through experiencing OutoftheBox for themselves.¹⁸ The organisation also sees its role as training mentors and equipping and empowering storytellers to support and mentor colleagues in their communities and places of work, such as a lead teacher in a school.

There are now ten mentors in OutoftheBox whose key role is to uphold the Deep Talk values of dialogue in the organisation itself; so that trust, vulnerability, the sharing of power and an openness to change are also central to the community of storytellers. The Mentors meet monthly to ensure that the evolution of OutoftheBox continues in a spirit of collaboration.

There are currently over 360 Members and different expressions of community in OutoftheBox: the small training cohorts either online over three months or face to face over two days; bi-monthly Members' chats on Zoom; the Story Development meetings on Zoom as well as meeting together in person for retreats (including story writing retreats).

In May 2022 a new online community using the Circle.so¹⁹ platform replaced the private Facebook group so that all members can be part of the peer learning community. Interest groups on Circle currently include Body and Movement (e.g. combining yoga with OutoftheBox), Dementia Care, Early years, Festivals, Health care settings, Outdoors, Parenting, Body and movement, Retreats and Spiritual Accompaniment, Schools, Therapeutic settings and Processing Trauma, and Workplaces. In this way people can share their experiences, expertise, ideas and questions to create an approach which is continually evolving and adapting to new situations.

This community contributes in creating the OutoftheBox stories and there is no longer the need for a Development team; any member can help with the development of a new story and the adaptation of the approach. OutoftheBox has been set up as a movement of storytellers who are trying things out on the ground in their different contexts, and talking to each other about what they have done and what they have discovered. They can connect with each other through the online community and reflect on their practice and get support and encouragement. OutoftheBox storytellers know that we are all making the road by walking and that their observations all contribute to a growing understanding of the work, and that our stories and methods are improving all the time as people feed back their thoughts and discoveries. Anyone can start the ball rolling for a new story and everyone is welcome to the regular Story Development Zooms where new stories are experienced and analysed.

¹⁸ The story of how a participant in an OutoftheBox group became a storyteller can be read here <https://www.outoftheboxtraining.org/blog/an-outofthebox-journey-from-participation-to-storytelling>

¹⁹ <https://outoftheboxstories.circle.so/home>

Conclusion

Recognising that organisations can inadvertently stifle innovation, OutoftheBox has been set up to empower a supportive network of practitioners in which the creative process is encouraged and supported. Through participation, collaboration and reflective practice, and with the benefits of being able to meet on Zoom as well as share ideas in an online community, this new form of Deep Talk has developed quickly and is taking on different forms. There are challenges in this process and the mentors see one of their roles as keeping the principles of holding a safe and a brave space for dialogue both in the OutoftheBox approach and the means by which it develops. The question might be asked as to when an approach that has started as Deep Talk is no longer recognisable as Deep Talk. As OutoftheBox evolves at what point do some of the adaptations no longer fit within the Deep Talk box? Perhaps this raises the question - what is Deep Talk?

Appendix A

The questions on the OutoftheBox feedback form

The participants of the pilot were asked the following questions in the feedback form.

1. Context (eg care home, family group, community event). Please give relevant details.
2. Your job title in this context (eg activity co-ordinator, volunteer, chaplain)
3. Date of session
4. Your role in the session (storyteller, observer, helper)
5. Number of people in group
6. Other adults observing or present to the group
7. Story shared
8. Length of session
9. Context of Session
10. How did it go? Tell us about your experience. Your observations are invaluable to the development of OutOfTheBox. It might be something that happened, something that was said, something that was sensed in the atmosphere, even a hunch or a gut reaction you had as you led the session.

11. What went well?
12. What didn't go well?
13. What might you do differently next time?
14. Reflecting on people's responses - what did you notice? Quotes from the participants or short vignettes are helpful. Also observations from onlookers.
15. Reflecting on the impact in terms of wellbeing that this session had - what did you notice? Quotes from the participants or short vignettes are helpful. Also observations from onlookers.
16. Reflecting on the impact in terms of education that this session had - what did you notice? Quotes from the children or short vignettes are helpful. Also observations from onlookers. (Schools only)
17. What do you think about the story materials?
18. Please provide your feedback on the particular story you shared.
19. Any other comments?
20. Name (optional)