



## 'Ways in' to *Purapurawhetū* – weaving stories

The following seven classroom activities are offered as 'ways in' to the text of *Purapurawhetū*. They are called 'ways in', rather than 'starters' or 'warm-ups', because they are intended as specific theatrical processes that will engage students actively and creatively with the making of new texts that relate to the play text.

Briar Grace-Smith explains the connection between weaving and stories:

Part of the reason I wrote that play was because I was weaving [a] panel, and an auntie came and sat opposite me and worked on the side and told stories. She wasn't a tukutuku weaver. I was thinking 'wouldn't it be fantastic if they were weaving a panel and [the] story behind the panel – the concept – came to life on stage in another form of weaving. [from transcript of video interview with Briar Grace-Smith by Playmarket, 2002]

These activities are suggested as processes that might take place before a reading of *Purapurawhetū*. However, with adaptations, they could equally be used as follow-ups to the reading, or as ways of reflecting on the reading in progress.

The activities are not intended to be consecutive. Teachers might take any one of them and perhaps adapt it, depending on their intentions and the make-up of their class.

The activities draw on the following skills:

- storytelling;
- use of pre-text;
- physicalization;
- working with text.

It is expected that by years 12 and 13 the students will have met and worked with each of these processes.

## Activity 1: Sharing stories as we work

**Resources required:** For each pair of students, you will need:

- EITHER three lengths of twine (about 5m long), or four lengths if you want to make a 4-stranded plait, tied together with a knot in the middle;
- OR twice the number of strips of flax, tied together at one end.

1. The task starts in pairs. Each student makes a plait working away from the centre (or the beginning, if using flax).
2. As they work on the plait, the students take turns to offer a story of a time they felt let down (such as by a friend or an event).
1. The finished plaits are then woven or plaited together with those of other groups (e.g. to make a group of six), while the stories are shared with the other students.
2. To extend the activity further, each of these larger groups could offer an enactment – perhaps through still images or thumbnail scenes – of one of the stories as it was heard, or create an adaptation of one or more of the stories.

## Activity 2: Easing stories out of our skins

In a class that is confident with touch, Activity 1 could be done in pairs, massaging each other instead of weaving while telling their stories.

1. The students sit facing each other. Each tells their story while giving their partner a hand massage.
2. The students stand one behind the other, taking turns to massage their partner's shoulders while telling their stories.

Note and discuss the different ways we tell stories when we are facing each other compared to when we are not facing each other.

### Activity 3: Weaving stories with tukutuku

**Resources required:** *materials for making a tukutuku panel – a simple panel can be made using a sheet of pegboard and two colours of plastic thronging. To simplify the work, and to add texture to the finished product, the pattern could be blocked onto the panel, in paint or chalk, before the work begins.*

If a significant number of the students in the class already have some experience with tukutuku, or are also studying Māori language or arts, set up a tukutuku panel in the classroom. Then several pairs of students can work together along its length while telling each other stories.

The panel could be used as part of the stage set when working on rehearsing and performing *Purapurawhetū*.

## Activity 4: Weaving images into stories

**Resource requirements:** *This activity needs a large space to allow plenty of movement.*

1. To begin, each student works alone. Create a simple body movement (using the whole body and any of a range of spatial levels) that suggests 'home'. Practice it several times. Next create a simple body movement that suggests 'separation'. Practice that several times. Then create a simple body movement that suggests 'remembering', and practice.
2. Still working separately, blend the three movements together, in any order. Practice the new movement sequence. (If students have worked with video-editing, such as with "i-movie", an analogy can be made to that process – that is, of making cuts and creating stills.).
3. In pairs, students share each other's sequences, and then create a new one between them, feeling free to adapt the original material. (This activity could take place in one of two ways: either in complete silence, or through negotiation. In either case it is important that the contribution of each of the pair is honoured.)
4. Bringing two pairs together to create groups of four, repeat the process – creating one movement sequence between the four.
5. Depending on class dynamics, this process could be continued with a group of eight, and perhaps with even larger groups.

### Notes from workshop teacher:

1. While work-shopping this activity, I found that working in silence during the first exchange invited very close attention to the partner's movement, and brought a committed focus. "You can't stand around talking about it," my students said. Although talking was allowed in the next sharing with the larger group, the earlier experience of silence meant that talking was kept to a minimum.
2. Viewing the work: Often groups create movement that is concentric so that they can see each other work. The power of this shape of work can best be appreciated if the audience (or even a small group of them) sits in the centre of the circle.

## Activity 5: Weaving silent stories

**Resource requirements:** *This activity needs a large space to allow plenty of movement.*

1. Students walk at their own pace and in their own direction through the space, weaving their movement through the others. Whenever they meet another person they stop, look directly into the others eyes, and silently give a clear message (as prompted), before moving on.

The teacher prompts the messages, which could include:

- pleasure in meeting;
  - questioning;
  - accusation;
  - a silent gift of hope.
2. Each student chooses which message they give at the encounter, while trying not to hesitate and first see which message they are being offered.
  3. This activity can be further stylised by the teacher setting a rhythm for the encounters with a hand drum or a clap.
  4. The students could move along grid lines of a pattern – for example, the pattern of the Union Jack. The participants can move along any of the grid lines. Each time they meet, they stop and give the eye message, and then turn and walk in the opposite direction.

## Activity 6: The old suitcase – working with a pre-text

Both Diana Mason (Bruce Mason's wife) and Briar Grace-Smith comment on the way writers use pre-texts to develop their own stories.

**Resource required:** *An old, somewhat battered suitcase, which is locked.*

1. The teacher invites speculation about the suitcase. For example:
  - Who might own such a case?
  - How long have they had it?
  - Why is it locked?
  - When was it made?

2. The teacher then narrates the following story:

This suitcase belongs to Annie. Since she was old, she lived in a kaumatua flat/retirement village. Her room was neatly but very simply furnished, with no personal ornaments or pictures on the wall. Tucked in a corner, stood this old suitcase. As far as any one who visited her there could remember, the suitcase has always been there, always in the same corner.

One day Annie broke her hip and was taken to hospital. She refused to leave without the suitcase. At first the paramedics protested about cluttering up the ambulance, but when Annie got really upset, they gave in. In the hospital ward, she had it placed against the wall where she could see it from her bed, but never, it seemed, opened it or held it.

The students discuss the story, prompted by the following questions from the teacher:

- What made this suitcase so important to the old lady?
- Whose was it originally?
- What is in it?

3. In groups of 4–5 students, create a brief scene that shows how this suitcase became so significant.

**Note from workshop teacher:**

Sometimes students tend to get too wordy in improvisation, to the neglect of action and of silence. So it may be useful to set a word limit, such as no more than 20 words for the whole scene.

## Activity 7: Weaving fabric and stories

**Resources required:** an even number of lengths of fabric, each about 5 metres long – two lengths for each student.

1. Create a movement sequence in which the lengths of fabric are carried or tossed across and down the room to create a woven pattern.

3. While weaving the lengths of fabric, vocally weave some/all of the following lines into the sequence:

- "A place where there has been nothing but sadness for years."
- "Coldness bites at my fingertips and leaves my body numb."
- "I want you to see me, but they turned me invisible."
- "In the blackness of night, the peals of your laughter echo."
- "Broken hearts, broken promises."
- "The coldness, the deep silence of the sea."
- "The nameless, faceless, invisible dwellers of the street."
- "They watch over us, so the legend goes."
- "A wild tango across the night sky."