

DRAMA AS A FRAMEWORK FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERACY

Taking a practical approach to the drama strand of the National Literacy Strategy is an effective way of teaching children how to read and understand plays in performance. Andy Kemppe argues that it may also have a significant contribution to make in helping children write purposefully and appreciate how language is always open to interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

One day last summer, I put aside my struggle with difficult concepts to do with drama and literacy to wander over the road for my son's infant school sports day. As I neared the school, a child's voice started falteringly to announce the next race through the PA system. The trouble this child was having with a particular word seemed to mirror my fumbling with big ideas, yet gave me a new insight into them. After three attempts to introduce something called 'an opstrickle race', I heard the head gently correct him: 'It's a tricky word that, isn't it?', she said, 'but try and say *obstacle*.' 'OK, miss', replied the child, still with microphone to his mouth, 'but don't worry, 'cos I think they know what I mean.'

In discussing the relationship between semiotics and language, John Fiske (1) asserts that:

In an icon the sign resembles its object in some way; it looks or sounds like it. In an index there is a direct link between a sign and its object...In a symbol there is no connection or resemblance between sign and object: a symbol communicates only because people agree that it shall stand for what it does. A photograph is an icon, smoke is an index of fire, and a word is a symbol.

It seems to me that our seven-year-old broadcaster had a clear idea about the nature of what Stanley Fish (2) would call 'an interpretative community'. He assumed, quite rightly, that his audience would indeed know what he meant, even though he had not been able to accurately turn the symbols on the page in front of him into sound in a wholly conventional way. His trust was that his audience's sense of context would compensate for his approximation of content and allow them to agree on what the sounds emanating from his mouth stood for!

My investigation into the links between drama and literacy has grown from a belief that *literacy* involves more than simply translating the marks on the page into sounds. To be literate involves considering the context in which words exist and interpreting them into coherent meanings, that is meanings which make sense in the situation. This process sometimes requires us to fill in some gaps and make a few speculations. The insight I gained from the incident described above is that we are aided in this interpretation by considering words as *icons* and *indexes*, as well as *symbols*. As a drama teacher these terms are already very familiar. My question is: how may an understanding of these concepts be employed in the teaching of literacy?

By way of illustration, I might say that the marks C A T, and the sounds we conventionally ascribe to those marks, bear no relation to the furry, purry quadruped that gets under my feet each morning. The marks may be said to operate in a purely symbolic way. However, obvious examples of onomatopoeic words, such as BANG, THUMP, CRASH, clearly work as icons, in that their combination of phonemes accurately represents the referent. Other words, such as HERE, THERE, ME, YOU, may be seen as indexes. Such words, when spoken aloud, are often unconsciously accompanied by a pointing gesture that readily illustrates their function of drawing attention to something or somewhere.

At first glance, the word OBSTACLE may appear to be a purely symbolic representation of something. But for the young announcer, articulating the three syllables involved a jarring and jumping of an inexperienced tongue that made the task of reading aloud akin to an iconic representation of the activity involved in an obstacle race. Given that, before the audience's eyes, other children were laying out hoops, ropes and beanbags across the running track, one may see how the context added a deictical element, so it was no big deal understanding what was meant!

Working in and responding to drama involves the manipulation and interpretation of a bewildering array of iconic, deictical and symbolic signs, some of which are visual and some of which are audible. The purpose of this article is to postulate how attending to the different ways in which words signal meaning in a drama context may be utilised in teaching children how to read, write and comprehend language.

THE MULTI-MODALITY OF LITERACY

Daphne Payne (3) notes that:

Drama is not speech, but action. It is a mode of expression which utilises a whole range of communication skills – words, certainly, but also facial expression, body language, mime, movement, dance – all those channels of communication of which the body is capable in order to convey meaning.

One might also add that dramatic literacy involves being receptive and able to interpret the use of colour, space and design. As Helen Nicholson (4) points out:

making, performing and responding to drama does not imply that different semiotic vocabularies are isolated from each other. Rather, dramatic literacy entails a recognition of how the various textual elements in dramatic practices are woven and integrated into a coherent whole.

Synthesising recent research on the development of literacy, based largely on theories of learning drawn from Vygotsky and Bruner, Eve Bearne (5) reminds us that reading and writing also involve dealing with several things at once. Reading, for example, involves relating the marks on the page to sounds representing words; attending to the semantic meaning of individual words; considering how that meaning may be altered or reinforced by the entire sentence structure; being aware of what audience the words are aimed at; and, in the case of beginning readers and writers, the physical aptitude for holding a book or pencil efficiently and comfortably.

Margaret Meek (6) notes that ‘reading’ pictures is a similarly complex and indeed related process. She offers a persuasive case for the part that illustrations play in learning to read language. Her observations about how children are drawn to comics, yet how it is virtually impossible to read a comic to someone aloud, are of particular interest in this discussion about drama’s contribution to the growth of literacy. As in a performed play, a number of different signs are communicating the narrative and sub-text in the comic book format. In one frame we may be given what characters are saying (dialogue), what they are thinking (soliloquy, direct address), a visual representation of the scene (*mise-en-scène*) and often some sort of narrative/contextual guidance in the form of a caption (stage direction). Much of the humour arises out of the juxtaposition of these signs and the way they appear to contradict one another (dramatic irony?). When parents and teachers are heard to glibly accept that reading comics is better than reading nothing at all, they may be missing the point about what a sophisticated activity reading a comic actually is. Although the vocabulary in itself may be fairly simple, the overall context in which it is being used requires the simultaneous deconstruction of a number of signifying images. This description by an eight-year-old of how she reads the cover of her comic neatly captures the complexity of process (7):

I take a guess at where it starts, then guess what’s going to happen next, and look at the picture that I think fits. If it does, I do the same thing again, and so on. If it doesn’t, well I go back to the beginning and have another try.

Literacy is multi-modal activity dependent on the development of both focused and circumspect thought. It is precisely for this reason, argues Bearne (5), that children need to be given the chance to read and write fluently so as not to stop their train of thought, even though they will make more spelling and grammatical errors in the first instance.

By way of providing an example of how using the multi-modality of literacy may help develop verbal literacy, I intend to draw on some work I recently did with Year 6 children in a number of schools in Berkshire. Each class participated in a two-hour workshop. One group focused on *The Tempest* and three others took part in workshops on *Hamlet*. Although some of the pupils knew of the play in question, and a very small number had seen some sort of performance of it, the majority had no prior knowledge. Each workshop was planned with direct reference to the DfEE’s *National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching* (8), the emphasis being on text-level work to develop comprehension and composition. Two other groups participated in a structured exploration of the story of Theseus and the Minotaur, with opportunities being taken here to learn something of the conventions of Greek theatre.

SOUND, SIGHT AND PHYSICALITY

One part of the *Hamlet* workshop involved the children adopting the role of the soldiers who had seen the ghost of Old Hamlet. Given Hamlet’s imminent arrival back at Elsinore, the soldiers planned what they might say to him and how best to say it. Following our own exploration of the scene, we read aloud together Horatio’s speech. I asked the pupils not to worry about the exact meanings of individual words, but encouraged them to listen to the cadence of the lines as a whole. I then asked them to repeat a number of lines several times, first using their index finger to trace the pattern of the words in front of themselves and then watching one another’s faces as they spoke the lines. Try it for yourself and you may notice, as the children did, how the first of these lines, when enunciated with feeling, makes the face lengthen to give an appearance of seriousness. By contrast, the second line appears to have the effect of making the eyes open wider as if they have indeed seen something shocking:

In the dead waste and middle of the night

By their oppressed and fear surprised eyes

Attending to the sounds of words and the way whole lines run together can help children make sense of them far more quickly than trying to give lengthy explanations of their semantic meaning. Drawing on their investigations into children’s reading problems, for example, Bryant and Bradley (9) similarly emphasise the need for children to develop an understanding of language ‘as it is heard, where the written word is put into context of a larger literary landscape’.

In another part of the *Hamlet* workshop, we read through the Ghost’s tale, playing with the sounds of the words and experimenting with gestures and expressions that seemed to match them and noticing how phrases such as ‘swift as quicksilver’ slip off the tongue, whereas ‘posset and curd, like eager droppings’ seems to send the whole face into a paroxysm;

the line doesn't sound or look very nice! After working on this speech, a ten-year-old boy answered my pathetically vague question: 'What's going on here, then?', with the immortal riposte, 'Well, I don't know what cursed hebona is, but it does horrible things to you and it does them very fast'.

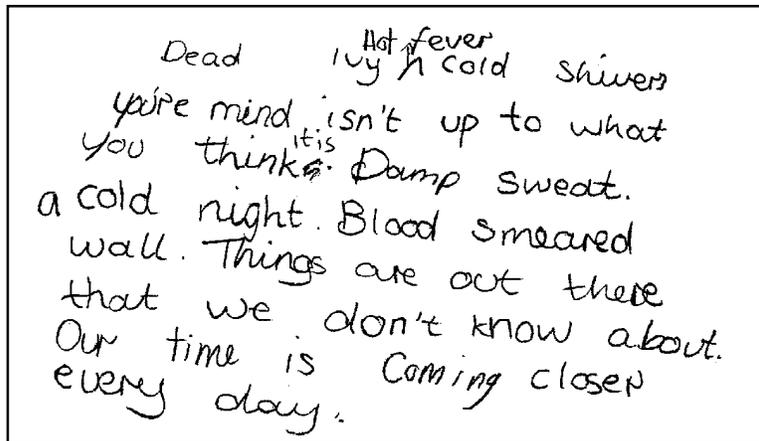
Simply encouraging children to do what they already do very well, that is voice words and play with the physicality of the sounds (consider how often you hear children repeating a newly learned word over and over in different ways), is more likely to help them comprehend their possible meaning than dictating one predetermined meaning.

REFLECTING THE INPUT

One of my specific interests in working with these primary-age children was to see whether, in addition to helping them comprehend the written word, I could use the same dynamic to stimulate their own dramatic writing. This demanded that writing tasks were introduced in a way that emphasised the

visual and auditory qualities of language, discussed above. So, for example, at the start of the *Hamlet* workshop atmosphere was built up by quietly playing some spooky music. The lights in the hall were turned off, leaving the room in gloom (just saying those last few words aloud provides another example of how the intrinsic cadences of word combinations work iconically to conjure an appropriate atmosphere). Using a soft narrative voice, I asked the children to find a space on their own and imagine they were soldiers on the battlements of Elsinore. I then proceeded to describe some of the 'strange things' that had been happening in previous nights, occasionally inviting individual pupils to tell me about something they had seen or heard while on patrol. Each child was quickly issued paper and asked to write a monologue that would help an audience understand how they were feeling. A maximum of five minutes to complete the task was allowed.

It is interesting to note how this writer moves from disjointed images of the situation into a character position and even captures a dramatic foreboding with her last line. Notice also how – within the time allowed for the task – she has managed to redraft, adding 'hot fever' to juxtapose, rather poetically, her initial thought of 'cold shivers'.

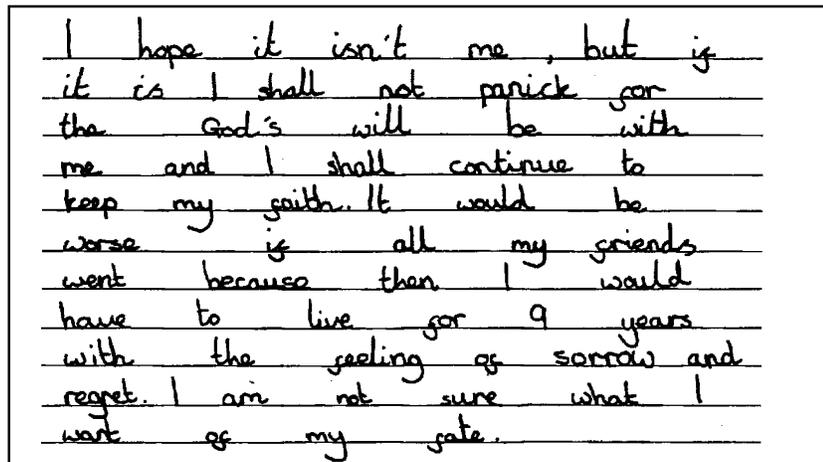


Dead ivy ^{hot fever} cold shivers
 you're mind isn't up to what
 you think ^{it is}. Damp sweat.
 a cold night. Blood smeared
 wall. Things are out there
 that we don't know about.
 Our time is coming closer
 every day.

*Dead ivy/hot fever cold shivers
 you're mind isn't up to what
 you think it is. Damp sweat.
 A cold night. Blood smeared
 wall. Things are out there
 that we don't know about.
 Our time is coming closer
 every day.*

The example below, written by a nine-year-old girl, is from the Theseus workshop. In this instance, a considerable amount of dramatic tension had been built by me carefully narrating how King Aegeus would choose who was to be sent to Crete to face the Minotaur. Speaking in a slow, sombre voice I described the scene and gradually enticed the pupils into the role of potential victims gathered together outside Aegeus' palace. Just when the tension was at its zenith, the fiction was suspended and each child was asked to write what they were thinking:

*I hope it isn't me, but if
 it is I shall not panic for
 the God's will be with
 me and I shall continue to
 keep my faith. It would be
 worse if all my friends
 went because then I would
 have to live for 9 years
 with the feeling of sorrow and
 regret. I am not sure what I
 want for my fate.*



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 want for my fate.

Thunderstorm and lightht
 Hailstone and rain
 Enter the gates of hell.
 Tommorw take Antoino
 Exausted I shall be after my victory
 Microwave the skies
 Put Antoniyo into the sea
 Endless slepp I have hade
 Sink the ship
 Torcher him till he's dead.

Thunderstorm and lightht
 Hailstone and rain
 Enter the gates of hell.
 Tommorow take Antoino
 Exausted I shall be after my victory
 Microwave the ~~stagg~~ skies
 Put Antoniyo into the sea
 Endless slepp I have hade
 Sink the ship
 Torcher him till he's ~~st~~ dead.

What is noticeable in the previous example is the way this pupil has mirrored my dramatic register in her own writing. Individual words seem carefully chosen to capture the weight of the situation and give a sense of a brave character operating within a strong moral code. The sentences are evenly balanced and reflect the dilemma of how to make such a selection fairly.

By contrast, above is a piece of work crafted by a group of Year 6 boys who, as part of a workshop on *The Tempest*, recreated the spell that Prospero may have used to conjure up the storm. The task was introduced by me donning a very showy golden cape and using a portentous voice to tell them who I was and what I was up to while drawing invisible patterns on the floor with a staff. Once again, their writing appears to draw not only on the vocabulary I employed in the stimulus, but on the rhythms and visual patterns of my 'performance'.

You will doubtless notice that there is another constraint at work here which, far from restricting the children's imagination and expression, seems to have helped them choose some powerful words and draw out a considerable sense of the dramatic – but more of this later! I asked the rest of this class what mental picture the line 'microwave the skies' conjured up for them and was delighted with one girl's answer that she saw clouds going around and around and occasionally sparking. Time to get a new microwave in that house obviously, but what the response illustrates is how meaning is ascribed to words not only through their sound and semantic meaning, but through the visual resonances they evoke.

WRITING FRAMES FOR DRAMA

Writing frames are templates consisting of starters, connectives and sentence modifiers which offer children a structure for communicating what they want to say. (10)

Drawing on extensive research in Australia, Lewis and Wray (10) have explored how the use of writing frames can help children develop the ability to communicate in six 'main genres', these being: recount, report, procedure, explanation, persuasion and discussion. Although there is no mention at all of practical drama in their work, I would contest that all of these genres may be introduced and taught through the use of a structured dramatic framework. Groups of children participating in the 'Theseus' workshop, for instance, devised and rehearsed how ambassadors from Athens might try to plead or reason with Minos in order to end the war. Their classmates recognised how the way the ambassadors entered Minos' throne-room, their carefully worded exposition of the situation as they saw it and their attempt to broker a deal, certainly matched the criteria Lewis and Wray set for their first five genres. The dramatic tension resided in Minos' being unwilling to discuss or negotiate.

It is not my intention here to suggest that introducing children to reading and writing through the use of practical drama is a universal panacea for literacy problems, or a guaranteed means of ensuring that every child becomes literate. However, it was

with the problem of capturing the dramatic in writing at the forefront of my mind that I read with interest Lewis and Wray's (10) assertion that:

When we talk, we tend to receive a great deal of feedback. Talk usually takes the form of dialogue: one person says something which prompts the other person to reply, and so on. Writers, on the other hand, have no such prompts.

There is much in this statement with which I would agree: however, my modest research into the use of practical drama in literacy development also leads me to question their statement. Examples gathered through the workshops suggest strongly that by working collaboratively as dramatists, children can produce interesting and sensitive written and oral work as a result of them 'prompting' one another. This concurs with Bearne's (5) judgement that children reading and writing together can make more progress than when they work as individuals. By the same token, one might call into question the notion that 'writers...have no such prompts'. Drawing on role play and improvisation, alongside the opportunity to collaborate with other children in pairs, small groups or indeed the whole class, children may very well be 'prompted' to notate both dialogue and stage directions regarding *how* their ideas might effectively be brought to life on stage.

At two points in each workshop, the children were asked to break off from practical activity to work on a piece of writing. One piece was written individually and related to a moment of intense personal engagement, for example, the soldier alone on the battlements of Elsinore or the Athenian youths waiting to hear if their name would be called to sacrifice themselves. The 'prompts' they drew on in this task (and illustrated in the samples above) included both their auditory and visual experience of my voice, the lighting in the room, background music and one another's ideas which all fed into the dramatic situation.

The other piece was written collaboratively. One of the 'prompts' here took the form of a tight constraint, in that the first letter of each line was predetermined. Negotiating this

problem put the pupils in the position of prompting one another. In the *Hamlet* workshop the task was to write a piece of dialogue between Hamlet and Gertrude in which Hamlet's aim was to try to establish whether or not his mother was complicit in the murder of his father. Before setting out to write the dialogue, the class briefly discussed what sort of visual and auditory signs Hamlet might be watching for in his mother's responses. Here's just one of many examples collected that illustrates how well the pupils understood that words alone do not tell the whole story; it was written by two ten-year-old boys of average ability:

- Hamlet: *Are you really in love with Claudius?*
 Gertrude: *But why are you concerned about my relationship with Claudius?*
 Hamlet: *Can you just tell me?*
 Gertrude: *Did I really love your father?*
 Hamlet: *Even when you were going through bad times?*
 Gertrude: *For goodness sake, Hamlet, what is this about?*
 Hamlet: *Go on, answer my questions.*
 Gertrude: *How was university?*
 Hamlet: *I don't think you need an answer to that right now.*

As outlined above, the task in *The Tempest* workshop was to recreate Prospero's spell using the title of the play as an acrostic in the tradition of the 'Prologue' in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. The task in the Theseus workshop followed a brief explanation of the Greek Messenger device in which events that would be difficult to stage are related to the audience, sometimes by a chorus. In this case, the children considered how much more effective it would be to describe the battle between Theseus and the Minotaur rather than showing it. Below is a nice example from two little girls whom their teacher described as quiet and usually reticent.

These examples may be seen as successful pieces in their own right and used as evidence of the power practical drama and collaboration may have to stimulate and shape expressive

T he Minotaur
 H ad big melon-shaped ~~teeth~~
 E yes and his
 M outh was dribbling with saliva
 I t was
 N oticably disgusting when Theseus
 O pened up his belly and
 T ore ^{at} his flesh and organs
 A nd ~~in the~~ ^{then} end he then he
 U sed his string and ~~escaped~~
 R ~~an~~ ~~out~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~labyrinth~~
 ipped off his head

T he Minotaur
 H ad big melon shaped
 E yes and his
 M outh was dribbling with saliva.
 I t was
 N oticably disgusting when Theseus
 O pened up his belly and
 T ore at his flesh and organs
 A nd then he
 U sed his string and
 R ipped off his head.

writing. It was interesting to note, however, how the majority of the written responses to the task directly reflected the way the frame had been set up by adopting words offered in the example and building on them. The observation would seem to support Lewis and Wray's (10) advice regarding the use of modelling and demonstration to provide a *starter*, as the following examples from the *Hamlet* workshops illustrate:

Group 1

*'Ah, mother, may I speak with you?
But of course, Hamlet.'*

*'Ah, mother!
But what is it, son?'*

*'Ah mother.
But of course my son. Come in.'*

Group 2

'Are you busy, mother?'

'Are you in here, mother?'

'Are you really in love with Claudius?'

'Are you alone?'

Group 3

'After father's death you married very quickly.'

'After the death of my father you married uncle Claudius so fast.'

'After my father died, why did you marry Claudius?'

Once started, however, pairs of pupils produced considerable variation in their choice of vocabulary, and from this apparently absurd constraint, dialogue was generated that caught the patterns of naturalistic speech, with its attendant jumps and twists and disrespect for the conventions of prosaic grammar. All three classes clearly enjoyed the challenge of using the template which, far from restricting their expression, seemed to help them select potential starters more rapidly and sometimes encouraged a refreshing subversion of the constraint; for example:

Hamlet: *Are you in shock about father's death?*

Gertrude: *Boy! Am I!*

Hamlet: *Can you tell me why you married Claudius?
Dad wouldn't have liked you to marry so soon.*

Gertrude: *Every day I remember your father yet I needed the comfort.*

Hamlet: *Father said that once you're married you should stay married to the same person.*

Gertrude: *Granny's coming today.*

Hamlet: *How can you change the subject like that!*

The efficacy of modelling language was also, to some extent, tested in another way. Some groups were simply given blank pieces of paper, approx. 15 x 10.5 cm (one-quarter of a sheet of A4), on which to write a response to a verbally issued task. Other groups were presented with a more explicit sort of writing frame. In effect, this was a whole A4 sheet with a boxed space of approx. 15 x 10.5 cm allocated for their written

responses. In addition to the verbal instruction, the A4 sheet presented a typed instruction of the task, followed by a stage direction which used the kind of stimulating, 'dramatic' language described above. As writing frames go, the sheets were quite rudimentary, using less prescription of structure than the example templates typically offered by Lewis and Wray (10). However, this was compensated for by the discussion, narration and atmosphere- setting that had preceded the tasks which had helped make their purpose and nature explicit.

Scrutiny of the responses by the class teachers themselves and an independent researcher revealed some very interesting differences. Classes that worked on the duplicated worksheets, although not considered to be any more literate than their peers, appeared to have written more, used a wider range of vocabulary and connected their ideas in more sophisticated ways.

IN CONCLUSION...

Lewis and Wray (11) open their booklet *Writing across the Curriculum* with this statement:

Most people agree that the hardest part of writing is getting started. Even experienced writers sometimes engage in 'delaying tactics' (sharpening pencils, making coffee, walking around the room) to put off the awful moment.

Writing this article was no exception! However, what I have tried to illustrate here may be summarised very simply:

- ◆ literacy involves a lot more than simply ascribing sounds to marks on a page;
- ◆ playing with the sounds ascribed to such marks helps in the comprehension of the words they refer to;
- ◆ paying attention to what words do to you *physically* deepens and clarifies their potential meaning;
- ◆ working cooperatively to explore the sights and sounds associated with words is intriguing, in that it reveals that their meaning is not closed to alternative interpretations;
- ◆ enacting words reinforces their relationship with context and underlines the fact that the marks on a page are incomplete notations of how humans communicate verbally;
- ◆ offering children structured constraints within which to work promotes imaginative work, rather than limits or prescribes outcomes;
- ◆ introducing writing tasks by use of modelling/ demonstration, verbal instruction and formatted frameworks appears to achieve better results than relying just on verbalising the task.

The act of writing alone may often be full of 'awful moments', and making children endure this just when we are trying to encourage them to become comfortable with the written word seems unforgivable. A major contribution that drama can play in the development of literacy is to provide a collaboration in which experiences and ideas are shared and different interpretations of the sensate power of words are celebrated.

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Meaning is ascribed to words not only through their sound and semantic meaning, but through the visual resonances they evoke.



Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.