

# Spotlight on writing and drama

**Tracy Gaiteri**

Ponsbourne St Marys School, Hertfordshire, UK

---

## **Abstract**

Tracy Gaiteri is the Headteacher of a small primary school near Hatfield. In this article she discusses a whole school project in which she developed the use of drama to enable children to become enthusiastic and creative writers.

It was the summer term and the literacy theme for the week with my mixed Year 5/6 class was *Interviews*. We spent the week reading and analysing a range of reports of interviews. We discussed which interviews we enjoyed reading most and why and which were most informative and why. The genre for Guided Reading sessions was science fiction and the children were reading books about life in the future, space travel and encounters with aliens. The children were motivated and enjoyed the week's work. At the end of the week I asked the children to write a transcript of an interview with an alien. This, I hoped, would encompass all our learning throughout the week. There were two learning objectives: to portray an interesting and informative interview with an alien and to structure this in an appropriate style.

When I introduced the lesson to the children, there were a few sighs. Some children were very slow to start; some stopped after a few questions and answers and remarked they didn't know what else to write. I wondered what had happened to all their natural curiosity and motivation with this subject. When I read their interviews, I was really disappointed. The layout of their reports was in the correct style, their punctuation was generally accurate, they had used a few different types of questions but their accounts were simple, unimaginative, unoriginal and unappealing to the reader.

Giving this some consideration over the weekend, I decided to abandon the following week's plans and give the children more practical experience of interviews through drama activities. For four days we experienced interviews through drama. On the fifth day I asked the children to rewrite their interview reports. This time the

writing was exciting, lively, in-depth, rich in description and information and enjoyable to the reader. The children were motivated, on task, and writing for a full hour. An analysis of their work showed it to be of high quality.

At a following staff meeting, we discussed how we might improve the quality of all elements of children's writing and decided to make this a key priority of the School Improvement Plan. I talked of my recent experience with my Year 5/6 class and my conviction that all children should be given opportunities to read, reflect and discuss writing, to play with language, to act out fictional scenes and stories, to be involved in debate and discussion. They needed to experience and experiment with language; their thinking skills needed to be challenged and extended.

We considered ways in which we could enhance their writing and concluded that we needed to provide our pupils with meaningful contexts which would stimulate and motivate them to write. This would include experience on individual and collaborative levels, and an audience for their writing to make the experience purposeful. I suggested the use of drama as a teaching tool since it appeared to me that drama might be able to offer these experiences.

My reading of the literature at this point helped me in planning the next step. A number of key ideas about writing emerged. Firstly, it is essential that we have a developmental approach to writing based on our understanding of how children learn (Raison, 1994). This enables us to know what kind of support is needed at each stage and to provide children with time to experiment within each stage. Another key idea is the distinction between writing for 'knowledge telling' as opposed to writing for 'knowledge transformation' (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). Writing as knowledge transformation emphasises a constructive and creative process where a learner constructs meanings and transforms ideas. Writing for this purpose will surely be deeper, more meaningful and will develop the quality writing that we are striving for in our school. This is a process we can encourage and develop. I wondered how drama could help us to achieve this.

As a medium for learning, drama can have a tremendous effect on children's cognitive and affective development (Heathcote, 1991; Bolton, 1985). It seemed to me that writing and drama are both modes for learning which are dependent upon similar processes. I

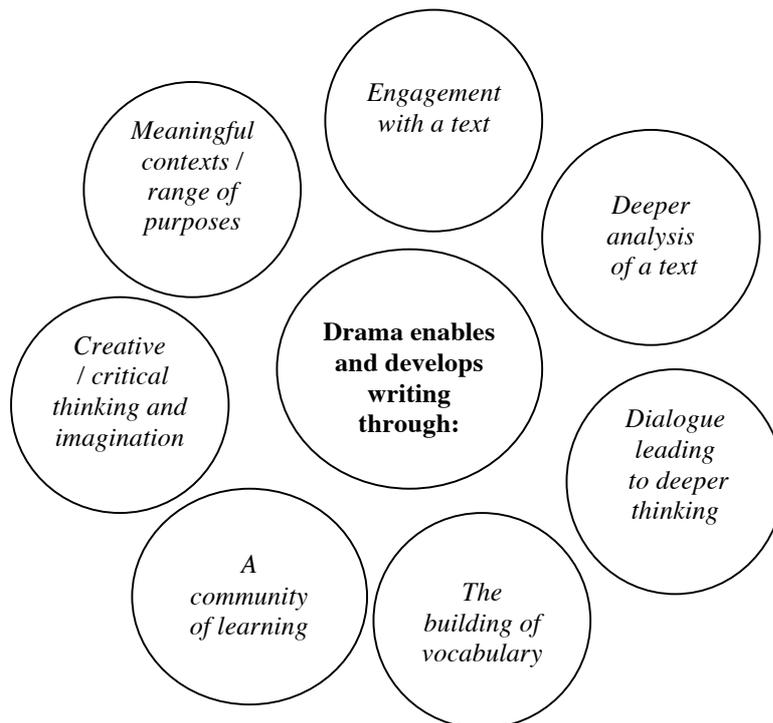
wanted to explore how the two could be developed alongside one another providing pupils with compatible experiences which would develop their thinking and learning by helping them to bridge the gap between using language to think and talk and using language in writing.

### **The intervention**

Our intention to use drama as a teaching strategy necessitated a re-think of the way in which we taught Literacy. I asked colleagues to plan their Literacy units of work over a three or four week cycle, depending upon the genre to be studied. I employed a drama teacher who has expertise in developing drama opportunities for children. He worked with each class for an hour a week alongside the class teachers. The teachers planned a literacy theme which spanned three / four weeks of work in Literacy. They explored aspects of this theme by reading and analysing texts with their pupils. The drama teacher would reflect the week's work in the drama session and in turn the teacher would pick up on the work in drama sessions back in the classroom. The aim was for the children to be able to draw upon their experiences in the drama sessions when they returned to literacy work in the classroom. In addition to this, the teachers planned to incorporate drama into their daily lessons. The children were then asked to undertake an extended piece of writing at the end of the period of study. Time on INSET days was used throughout the period of the intervention to review what we were learning, to support teacher development in the understanding and use of drama skills, and to plan collaboratively for the next step forward.

The intervention had lasted for two terms. Drama had been used to enhance the children's learning experience in numerous ways and it was immediately apparent that the quality of children's writing across age, ability and gender groups had improved. However, I wanted to analyse the evidence thoroughly to move our understanding on. Throughout the process I had gathered evidence through teacher and pupil interviews, classroom observations and teachers' journals. I also analysed the children's writing. This analysis was conducted in partnership with teachers who had been involved in the project. We grouped our observations into emerging themes. These themes are shown in the diagram below. The themes link and overlap with one another although they have been separated here for clarity.

Figure 1: Diagram of the 7 emerging themes



I now discuss each of these seven themes.

#### *Engagement with a text*

In my experience, reading can be a passive activity for some children. Some children read without searching for meaning from the text. If we use the reading of texts as an essential strategy for teaching children how to write, as recommended by the National Literacy Strategy, then we will need to ensure that children are engaging fully with the texts they read. Since drama takes them back into the text but without the presence of it, they revisit the writing in a very different way. A teacher is able to remind them of certain aspects of their reading and the children explore their interpretations of these aspects. This in turn develops their thinking and equips them with ideas for writing. In a research study, Barrs and Cork (2001) found that drama had played an important role in helping children to 'live through' fictions by involving them in enactment. It seemed from my research that it is the personal experience with a text which develops children's empathy and understanding that is crucial for developing writing.

*Deeper analysis of a text / how a writer writes*

In the same way that drama fosters a deeper interaction with a text, our experience in this project suggests that drama activities enabled children to analyse a text in more depth so as to determine a writer's intentions. The drama required teachers and pupils to break down a text in consideration of characterisation, setting, plot, identification of conflict and resolution of problems so that each could be explored independently. Children were also encouraged to think about their audience – Who am I writing for? What will they be interested in? Is this exciting? How should I write?

I considered how these processes impacted on children's writing. Bruner discusses the importance of plot, characters, setting and action (1986). It is the manner in which these interact which brings about unity within a traditional story structure: beginning, middle and end. The drama and writing process in which the children had been involved emphasised these constituents and therefore will have fostered a greater understanding of narrative writing.

Understanding of plot, character and structure is not enough to make 'good' narrative however. Ricoeur (1983) argues that narrative is built upon concern for the human condition. My experience suggested that the drama had fostered children's ability to empathise with the characters in the texts they had been studying and this in turn assisted the children in writing which engaged their readers' empathy. In addition, the language of discourse is critical (Vygotsky, 1978). I would suggest from my observations that children are developing a consciousness of language whilst practising it during drama activities and discussing its use during shared writing activities.

*Dialogue and deeper thinking*

A key observation from this project was the role of spoken discourse in enhancing pupil's ability to produce meaning from their engagement with a text through drama. Teacher-pupil talk is too often monological (Nystrand, 1997), with a high proportion of teacher-initiated closed questions; minimal elaboration of pupil's responses by the teacher; and pupils' attempts to introduce new topics discouraged or ignored by teachers. In contrast, I observed evidence of 'dialogic engagement' (Lyle, 1998) often throughout this project. It was witnessed between groups of children as they worked upon a drama activity and was characterised particularly through the "How.....?" question.

The 'dialogic engagement' continued in the classroom between teacher and pupils. This was also characterised by the "How.....?" question. The teacher would usually begin by asking a general question, "How did you explore .....in drama?" This type of activity often led to a 'cascading of ideas' where everyone's contributions were considered relevant and written up on the whiteboard. One of the teachers commented during interview that the children's confidence had increased as a result of the project and that 'they were no longer frightened of their own voice'. Another teacher remarked in a staff meeting how she had 'suspected that they all had an opinion and drama has helped them to throw off any embarrassment and inhibition and let it out!'

The teachers felt that there was improved quality of dialogue between and among teachers and pupils. They also felt that they were more in touch with pupils as writers. It seemed that pupils' metacognitive skills had improved. The Year 5/6 teacher acknowledged that, 'the children are becoming more articulate in discussing writing'.

During interviews with the children, they also expressed a preference for talking through their ideas in a group. More confident children were able to discuss their thoughts and opinions and less confident children were learning to do this. Once they verbalise their ideas it becomes less worrying to write those ideas down.

The discussions I was observing in drama and writing sessions relate to research carried out by theorists who have been interested in developing thinking skills (Adey and Shayer, 1994; de Bono, 1999; Lipman, 2003). They recognise that strategies which require pupils to work collaboratively, to be involved in discussion, to be challenged to explain their thinking, develops metacognition and children learn to become more thoughtful, better at speaking and listening to each other, better at asking questions and using the language of reasoning and more confident in posing creative ideas and judging their own and others' responses.

#### *The building of vocabulary*

This is a theme that came through the children's work. When my colleagues and I spent the morning assessing the children's writing, we discussed the quality of their vocabulary. In particular, the Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) remarked on the vocabulary that some of the children with special educational needs were using.

Teachers explained that this resulted from the plenary at the end of the drama session. Teachers would note down words and phrases that the children used during their drama or at the end during discussions. This resulted in a word / phrase bank which was used back in the classroom for a writing activity. More articulate children were modelling a good use of vocabulary which broadened the vocabulary of others in the class. This element of the drama and discussion work evolved through dialogic engagement and developed as a result of the community of learning.

#### *A community of learning*

What I have observed most remarkably is the development of a community of learning. Teachers have been learning about new strategies and techniques for learning and teaching and they have been learning from and teaching one another. Children have been learning from their teachers and each other. I find this very powerful. Wenger's (1998) discussion of the false assumption of the individuality of the learning process resonated with me here. I find that our education system is pre-occupied with testing pupils and children can receive a narrow education preparing them for these tests. I realised that we were developing into an example of Wenger's communities of learners, a community involving teachers, the drama specialist, children, parents, governors and myself. Together we considered ways in which we could develop our children's writing. Within school we were discussing teaching and learning strategies, outside of school parents and governors are receiving regular updates on how the project was progressing. Everyone connected with the school was asking questions about writing and the impact of learning.

#### *Creative / critical thinking and imagination*

We had concerns about the lack of creative thinking and imagination that children demonstrated in their writing. During my initial observations of children in drama sessions, I began to think that this might be a gender issue. A session in which the drama specialist asked the children to imagine they had entered a garden which contained anything that they wished for confirmed this. The girls' ideas were based mainly in fantasy, whilst the boys' were based mainly in reality. I looked for evidence in their writing to validate this observation. It appeared to be a similar situation in their creative writing. Recently, when I observed drama this gender difference has diminished. The boys' imagination has either been released or developed. In fact the boys' writing, particularly in Year 5/6, is

extremely imaginative, creative and often more original than the girls.

Critical thinking was another skill we wanted to develop in our pupils. Maine, (2007) asks whether critical and creative thinking are different. She argues that key thinking skills such as rationalising, reasoning and synthesising are used to solve problems and reach conclusions, which we consider critical thinking, however, other skills such as thinking of alternatives and making connections also help solve problems. I have observed how the process of writing develops critical thinking skills. In order to learn, we have to place new knowledge into a cognitive framework. Writing provides the process needed to relate new knowledge to prior experience. This knowledge is symbolically transformed via language. When children decide what to take from their experiences of drama into their writing, when they edit their work, they are necessarily involved in critical thinking.

*Meaningful contexts / a range of purposes*

This theme emerged particularly through interviews with Key Stage 2 pupils. They had thoroughly enjoyed the project, had felt motivated to write for a range of purposes and liked having choices in the style of writing they did. Here are some responses to the question: 'What types of writing did you do?'

*I chose to do a children's magazine for the visitor's centre. I knew what they'd like to do in a magazine, you know, word searches, spot the difference. I knew a mummy joke and I put that in.*

*I wrote like a talk. I wrote it about how the Egyptian's were mummified. I learnt most of it off by heart and I put loads of gory bits in it.*

*Me and ..... did loads of labels for the (Egyptian) necklaces and the hieroglyphics.*

Each of these responses refers to writing of a different kind but each shows the same enthusiasm for a writing activity. Button (2006) argues that to motivate children, teachers should work hard to absorb their pupils in tasks where they are almost unaware of the school context and its demands. I agree with this view. When I asked a group of children about what they thought of the work they do in drama, one child replied, 'We don't do any work in drama, we just have fun!' So much seems to depend upon the children seeing value

in their work. The motivation is that the context created is meaningful and real.

### **Building on the project**

At the conclusion of the project I felt confident that drama can improve and develop children's writing. Drama seemed to me to be thinking out loud. It is literacy beyond paper and pencil. It is metacognition in action. Trying to pinpoint exactly how drama is able to do so is more difficult, although I hope I have gone some way towards identifying some ways forward.

The project was productive in establishing the use of drama to support writing throughout the school and it had led to the clarification of our seven themes. However, reflecting back on the project, it occurs to me that this is probably the tip of the iceberg. As the project developed, and as we began to challenge and change our teaching and learning of writing, we began to challenge and change our teaching and learning in all aspects of school life. Using drama as a teaching strategy inspired us to look for similar innovative teaching strategies and we began to employ drama in many other curriculum subjects and areas of school life. As we witnessed the motivation of our pupils in drama and writing sessions, we began to ask how we could foster this in other areas of the curriculum. As we witnessed the dialogic engagement of pupils, and pupils and teachers, we asked how we might encourage this more generally.

As a staff, we experienced excitement and enthusiasm when initiating change for ourselves. We looked forward to professional development sessions where we could discuss new ideas, share achievements and ask for support with areas of concern. The dialogic engagement of staff had also been fostered and we became active promoters of professional development. As reflective practitioners, we experienced empowerment, achieving greater professional autonomy through professional development. The experience in school has given staff both 'ownership' and 'involvement', with many teachers now wanting to further our understanding by engaging in their own development projects. However, the overriding achievement is that our pupils had the experience of 'becoming writers' which was a worthwhile experience for everyone involved in the project. Many of our pupils now write for pleasure and I am sure that we will not look back.

## References

- Adey, P. & Shayer, M. (1994) *Really Raising Standards: Cognitive intervention and academic achievement*. London: Routledge.
- Barrs, M. & Cork, V. (2001) *The Reader in the Writer*. London: Centre for Language in Primary Education.
- Bereiter, C. & Scardamalia, M. (1987) *The Psychology of Written Communication*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bolton, G. (1985) *Drama as Education*. Essex: Longman.
- Bruner, J. (1986) *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Button, S. (2006) Drama and Language in the Classroom. *Forum (for promoting 3-19 Comprehensive Education)*, 48(1), 79-93.
- de Bono, E. (1999) *Six Thinking Hats*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Heathcote, D. (1991) *Collected writings on Education and Drama*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.
- Lipman, M. (2003) *Thinking in Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lyle, S. (1998) *Collaborative talk and meaning making in primary classrooms*, unpublished doctoral thesis. Reading: University of Reading.
- Maine, F. (2007) In pursuit of meaning. *Teaching Thinking & Creativity*, 8(1).
- Nystrand, M. with Gamoran, A., Kachur R., & Prendergast, C. (1997) *Opening dialogue: understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Raisan, G. (1994) *Writing Developmental Continuum*. Melbourne: Longman.
- Ricoeur, P. (1983) *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.