

‘The Play’s the Thing’: Developing children’s writing through drama in a Primary School

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Abstract

Susan Thomas graduated from the Herts. MEd in Teaching and Learning in 2004. She has recently relocated to San Diego, California. In this article she provides an account of a teacher-led development project using drama techniques as a pre-writing activity within literacy lessons.

I wanted to help my primary school children improve their writing and so I planned a project in which I would use and evaluate some drama techniques as preparation for writing (Thomas, 2004). I wanted to see if this would help the children to explore character, motivation and viewpoint with the hope that they would be better able to develop the purpose, organisation and style of their writing. I was the English Coordinator for my school, so I wanted to see if I could help my colleagues throughout the school to learn to use drama techniques. Through this challenge I also gained insight into the challenge of leading change within a school.

‘The Play’s the Thing’¹

My interest in drama began several years ago in the autumn term when I was teaching a Year 3 class that was underachieving in writing. We had just begun our study of the play script genre. The children performed the scenes after each day’s reading. Comprehension of the story plot and the character’s motives were extraordinary for even the least able child. What made this event even more remarkable was that the text studied was not a familiar story; it was a child’s version of William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Burdett, 1997). The most striking

¹ from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III, i

change in performance, however, was the high level of writing produced by the children.

As English Coordinator, one of my responsibilities was the analysis of assessment data for end of Key Stage English tests. Year 2 children's reading results were consistently better than their writing results. By the time they reached the end of Year 6, this performance gap had nearly doubled. Development of writing content, referred to in the official documentation as 'Purpose, Organisation and Style', were found to be the main weaknesses in most of the children's writing. Weaknesses in writing seemed to be a national problem: in OFSTED annual reports and reviews (1998, 2002, and 2003) it had been observed that children were unable to produce sustained accurate writing; teachers had difficulty in linking text analysis with composition and oral language development within the classroom was neglected. It seemed to me that improvement in all of these areas could be achieved if drama techniques were used as a linked activity.

The drama-before-writing project

My project was conducted within Years 2, 3 and 4 for the autumn term planning cycle. I set out to gather the perceptions of children and their teachers through weekly diaries, notes from planning sessions, informal verbal feedback and interviews. Pieces of writing were then assessed to ascertain if these perceptions could be measured through writing outcomes. All learning intentions and outcomes during the project were linked to The National Literacy Strategy's (DfEE, 1998) autumn term objectives specific to the teacher's year group(s). The project was organised so that each unit of study included 'published' pieces of writing to give the children a strong purpose for writing. The same texts were used across all three year groups and were unfamiliar to the teachers and children. Barrs and Cork (2001) found that powerful texts, containing emotionally powerful experiences, 'moved children and led to valuable discussions about the human situations they dealt with' (p. 215). Therefore, the texts chosen included an historical diary about two characters called Lewis and Clark who had been sent into unexplored territory (Schanzer, 1997); a children's version of *Much Ado About Nothing* that dealt with deceit, lies, love and trickery (Burdett, 2002), and *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey*, a story that deals with the emotions of loss and loneliness (Wojciechowski, 1995).

To make my project manageable I decided to focus on a sample of children so I used the assessment data to divide the children into 3 categories based on their level of progression in writing. I selected two from each category giving me a total of 6 children. This would enable me to learn something about teachers' expectations in relation to the different ability levels.

Prior to the summer break, the whole staff participated in a hands-on drama technique session to introduce ways of incorporating drama into a unit of work. Initial support was then given to each participating teacher through one-to-one medium-term planning sessions for English during the summer break. The plans incorporated the use of a drama technique between each piece of text read and each writing task. The specific drama techniques used were chosen by the individual teachers according to their level of comfort, the nature of their class and appropriateness to the written outcomes. At the conclusion of each one-to-one planning session, every teacher independently requested assistance with weekly planning for continued support. It was through these continued planning sessions that individual dilemmas emerged, giving an insight as to why the change in lesson structure posed some difficulties.

The issues that we talked about during the weekly planning sessions were not what I had expected and were quite challenging. They included:

- How can we group the learning objectives to allow a longer, more in-depth study of a given text?
- How does breaking down a text into story plot components, recognising character development and identifying literary devices, contribute to the effectiveness of the story?
- Is verbal play with words and ideas an acceptable outcome for a given lesson even if it means there is no written work during the lesson?

Evaluating the lessons

Using data from interviews, I compared the views of each teacher with that of their pupils. I also explored the differences between the teachers involved and looked at how these views changed during the course of the project. The three stories that follow highlight some of the barriers we encountered along our journey of development and change.

The efficacy of drama

One colleague, (I shall call her Gert), had expressed scepticism when she first agreed to participate in this project. Her views and those of her class were diametrically opposed. During the first unit of study (making an emergency shelter and then writing instructions) Gert thought that the lesson did not progress the children's learning because the highest and lowest ability groups didn't finish the construction of their shelters. She didn't see how the physical act of making the shelter would contribute to remembering the order because the children kept changing their constructions. All in all, she said she would never repeat the lesson and that nothing had been learned by the children about instruction writing. During verbal feedback provided immediately after the lesson, she stressed that the lesson was too loud and involved a lot of arguing about construction methods.

Contrary to the teacher's view, the children of all the ability groupings reflected on how good and exciting the lesson was because they liked working with other children and it gave them more ideas. One child reflected on how drama had helped her learn because 'when work is hard it helps to get me into what we are doing.'

All of the children's instruction writing was at least two-thirds of a level above their assessed writing level for the end of the previous school year. As the children were only one month into the new school year, this signaled a significant trend of progression in writing content development as it was equivalent to a normal year's progression. I cannot attribute this success to the drama activity with any certainty of course; there may have been all sorts of contributory factors such as the amount and quality of support given when writing. The indicators of success were not strictly comparable either since the end of year assessments were collected under test conditions whereas this piece of writing was produced in a more relaxed class context. However, what was clearly evident was the way the writing referenced the physical actions of making the structures. One child with special educational needs included phrases such as:

Tied to stiks to geir put they in the Gound faces to geve. Put to Bould in the milulle of the stiks in gound.

(Tied two sticks together put them in the ground faces together. Put two boulders in the middle of the sticks in ground.)

The inclusion of instructions to make the sticks face each other and the placement of the boulders in the middle of the sticks represent an understanding based upon physically working with the structure.

Curiously, Gert chose to present the children's shelters and instruction writing for their October parent assembly. By the end of the project, she felt that participation in the research had taught her about drama techniques, how to use them in the curriculum and how enjoyment in the activities gave the children enthusiasm and motivation for written work.

Ability

References to ability groups had always dominated staff room conversations and the teachers' journal entries often focused on their perception that drama techniques benefited one particular ability group more than another. Another colleague (I shall call her Fiona) had begun using drama techniques at the end of the previous year as we were developing a two year cycle of planning for Years 3 and 4. At the beginning of the project, she commented that the children who normally performed below average benefited the most from drama. Over the course of the project, Fiona's perceptions of ability, performance and the use of drama techniques changed, thus enabling her to see a wider scope for drama within the curriculum. In the second week of the project, her journal reflections focused on how the lower performing children worked quickly and more successfully than some of the more able children. At the end of week three, Fiona felt that the drama techniques were having a big impact on the written work produced by the less able children. By the final week of the project, Fiona's reflections explained how the more able children really looked beyond the literal meaning of the text and the less able added adjectives to their writing easily. She also felt that the higher, middle and some lower performers were really thinking about why characters in the story had changed. Towards the end of the project I interviewed² Fiona: she told me that children performing below expectations sometimes floundered when doing writing under normal writing circumstances because they didn't have the language to express themselves. She said that the use of drama before writing allowed access to language not only through participation in performances, but by watching performances as well. She was able to report that when the children carried out the writing task of the 'diary recount as Lewis or Clark' the level of performance of five out

² These interviews were done by a research assistant

of six children in the sample group had improved by at least two-thirds of a level.

Comfort zone

During the project, another teacher (I shall call her Denise) appears to have been working on the fringe of her comfort zone in both literacy and drama. When I interviewed³ her towards the end of the project, she described her discomfort with being in front of others. She also explained her dislike of literacy as a child although she did express her enjoyment in using the books in this project and in the children's responses.

At the beginning of week five, Denise wrote in her diary that drama was encouraging the children's interpretation of the text. She explained that drama before writing helped the children get a feel for the characters. By week seven, she notes the children's ability to quote phrases and recall detail of the text during the drama sessions. In a week nine drama session, Denise found the children able to provide reasons for their feelings as a particular character. In her final journal entry, Denise noted again how drama techniques helped the children understand the feelings of a character and the story plot.

When I interviewed Denise six weeks after the end of the project she told me that, even though the drama enhanced the children's comprehension and made them look deeper into the story, she had not used drama since the end of the project. This was because she had to focus on preparing the children for SATs comprehension questions. Therefore, the class had been trying to 'catch-up' on written comprehension exercises. She explained that, although teaching should be more about developing the whole child rather than just pen and pencil work, it didn't happen unless a school was 'progressive'. It is paradoxical because the head teacher and board of governors are supporting the drama-before-writing development project. It seems that the pressure exerted by the national testing regime is pushing Denise away from what she believes to be good educational practice. She expresses the view that the problem lies with the nature of the school but the school's management had supported the drama-before-writing project. So it seems that the obstacle to change was her perception of the overriding demands of the SATs testing and school inspections. This seems to be a widespread phenomenon. In follow-up research twenty years after

³ These interviews were done by a research assistant

their initial ORACLE project, Galton and colleagues found that traditional teaching approaches based on direct instruction, teacher talk and pupil listening are still dominant (Galton *et al.*, 1999).

Learning through fun

As I began analysing the children's journals and interviews, I found myself surprised by the children's insight into their own learning. Their responses had common themes, irrespective of their age, gender, class teacher, measured ability, drama experience or drama technique described. The children's reflections on drama could be summed up in one word as it appeared in every child's journal – FUN! Although fun was the most frequently used term, other adjectives included: excellent, happy, fantastic and good. These references to pleasure could easily be dismissed and categorised as an extension of playtime, but as Vygotsky argued many years ago, play enables children to 'rise above their average behaviour' (Paley, 2004: 3). The high standard of writing by the children in my project makes me wonder if their 'above their average behaviour' in the drama sessions enables them to produce 'above their average writing?' These two journal entries are both from children who had previously been assessed as below average in writing achievement for their year group.

I thought it was fun because some people like Tom opened their heart out and it got us to know about the characters.

Drama relaxes me and so I can think better and more easily.

I was very pleased to see that the quality of their writing was as good as that from the children who normally performed better in assessments.

Language and thinking

The project highlighted for me the essential inter-relatedness of language and thought. In 1990 an influential government report on quality educational experience for 3 and 4 year olds discussed the importance of play, pleasure, social context, experimentation and activity in learning experiences was discussed (Rumbold, 1990). Talk was considered central to the learning process. Vygotsky suggested that a small child's running monologue during their play develops into the basic structures of their thinking. In the USA one teacher reported that when the children in her class were asked to dictate their stories and then act them out onstage, the connections

between play and analytical thinking became clear (Paley, 2004).

The children's comments collected during this project seem to support these ideas because not only do the children talk about images in their head after drama activities and reference drama as a source of ideas, but several journal entries refer to pictures created. Here are a few illustrative examples:

I like drama before writing because I can get a picture of who or what I'm writing about.

...Also it helped me to write out my stage directions because I could see what it was going to look like.

I think writing was easy and fantastic because we had done all the actions for it.

...because once I've done the acting its there for me to help me write.

So by including drama in the reading/writing cycle, were the children returning to the structures through which their thinking has been developing? Certainly, a journal entry by a Year 4 boy, assessed as below average in writing with diagnosed specific learning needs, led me to think so. He wrote that drama helped him to think and it put his ideas together.

Conclusion

Although clarity of purpose was sometimes clouded during the hours of juggling teaching, marking, support and data collection, the outcomes from the project established a positive trend in writing outcomes when drama was used as a linking tool. The process of change made a real difference to everyone involved. The school benefited not only from the project itself, but also from a more open school development dialogue that encourages participation from all teachers. This was most evident as I prepared to leave for the USA. Colleagues verbally acknowledged their commitment to continuing future development through discussion, debate and support among all staff members.

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