

Weaving reading and drama to improve writing

We know that drama gives children something meaningful to write about. We have seen them put themselves in someone else's shoes; use vocabulary effectively; show empathy and emotion; and deal with tension. They can talk about the story they are co-constructing with the teacher, but for some reason this hasn't been transferring as we would hope into effective narrative writing. The jump has seemed too big somehow and there was a missing link.

Year 2 and Year 4 teachers worked with David Barclay on how to use "moments" from high quality texts to offer models of written sentences to the children. They have changed the way that they consider using reading to support writing and have seen that actually the reading has also enhanced the drama work. The interweaving of the three elements has had a huge impact on the outcomes from the children. The children are also beginning to think more deeply about what it means to be a writer.

What follows is a summary of some of the work and thinking and how this will be taken forward into our curriculum.

The first challenge to our thinking was to move away from choosing texts which match the context of the Mantle. Year 2 were working on a history based Mantle on the plague in Eyam and Year 4 were working on a science based Mantle in two orchards. Both teachers wanted to explore how to improve writing about a change in a setting.

Texts which might have worked were *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*; *Tom's Midnight Garden* or *Hansel and Gretel*. The text chosen by David and the teachers was *The Green Ship* by Quentin Blake. Picture books often don't provide a language rich text to draw on as the pictures do a lot of the work. However this worked well.

The teachers wanted the children to think what the storyteller was doing in the beginning of the text. They planned how to unpick the narrative in order to imitate the purpose the author was intending. To do this David talked them through how to use a "boxing up" frame from James Durran. This looks at the purpose of the text and moves out to the effect on the reader; the language toolkit and then examples from the text.

In Mantle, Year 2 had found a skeleton on a moor. Year 4 had moved through an orchard to a clearing. The teachers introduced the text extracts. They talked about how an author writes about what we have done in our drama work - going from a familiar to an unfamiliar place. The aim was to make the process the writer was going through in using words to build a picture, explicit to the children in the hope that they would not simply retell their drama work. They created a space for the children to think and dwell on the language.

The key question was, "How do authors write down what we are experiencing in the drama?" The thinking about the writing from the children was much deeper than it had been previously.

In both Mantle stories a sense of unease was being created and David and the teachers decided to use extracts from *Why the Whales Came* by Michael Morpurgo. Again this book was not connected to the context of either year group, but provided a written model of the atmosphere created by the children. After looking at the language features, the children were able to write about their drama effectively and were beginning to "show, not tell". A "flawed model" was used - a paragraph written by the teacher which the children could then improve upon.

Finally, both classes looked at how the reputation of a character can be built by an author. David pushed the teachers to consider, "What do you want the children to think about?" In Year 2, this was a character with a secret - locked up in guilt and blame. *Why the Whales Came* had perfect paragraphs to show how a storyteller can communicate this. The text is beyond the reading level of Year 2 children, but excerpts explored with the teacher had a massive impact on the drama and the writing. The whole story was not relevant to the children.

In Year 4, there was a queen who appeared to be intimidating. It was decided to use Miss Trunchball from *Matilda* and compare her with Sally Bones from *Varjak Paw*. Whilst Roald Dahl creates an almost comical character, S F Said creates a sinister character who is the opposite of how she appears. The children were able to take language features from the text which most matched the queen they had in their story. Again thinking creatively about which text to use with the children was key to the success of the writing.

So, David concluded his current input to the project by discussing episodic versus semantic memory and how this may have been effecting the children's writing about Mantle. The events and feelings of the drama are embedded in the children's minds. This is episodic memory. In looking at written texts, a thinking space is created which perhaps allows the memory to settle. The children discuss the words and language features in the text and how they relate to the drama and the Mantle story. The semantic memory created is then about the thinking involved in the talk about the texts. The purpose and toolkit of the author is made explicit by the teacher and this is then reflected in the children's writing. It sounds more like a story!

The success of this interweaving of drama, reading and writing approach lies in choosing texts carefully - they must have rich examples of language and structures which illustrate moments. This relies on teacher knowledge and therefore we need to find a way to harness and extend this!!

We will continue to work on this:

Choosing texts which may be pitched above the children's reading ability

Thinking of moments, not context

Holding the drama at bay to add in models of text and to create thinking space

Using frameworks (such as the boxed up criteria and flawed model) to make the thinking of the storyteller explicit

Many thanks to David Barclay. He has supported us to make the thinking of a writer more explicit to the children and we look forward to seeing how we have progressed when he returns later in the year.