

Quality Text to Quality Writing

Plotting creative journeys for young writers

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In this article, Bob shares his techniques for using classic literature to challenge children in the classroom environment. The ideas he explores include cross-curricular study opportunities and encourage discussion and creative approaches to literary classics.

Learning Journeys

What kinds of journeys can we encourage our pupils to embark upon to enhance their enjoyment of quality texts and gain the satisfaction of inspired written outcomes? In many schools, there is now a growing recognition that exposure to challenging texts and engagement with famous writers from the past is of huge benefit to reading and written standards.

Quality, of course, is desirable in all resources, whether that takes the form of picture books, media texts, fascinating explorations of visual literacy or thinking skills conundrums; but using quality literature is also important to provide explorations of language, style and form which take invention in writing to improved levels.

Having worked with a number of schools in the UK to deepen approaches to this journey from quality text to quality writing, I have learnt that the first and foremost issue is often the supply of the texts themselves, particularly poems. Without the scope for challenge, questioning and new learning about style and technique, there may be too much of a ceiling put on progress. Deborah Eyre, in her report about the need for an excellence culture in schools, *Room at the Top* (2011), reminds us that challenge in the classroom is very much about making advanced cognitive performance available to as many as possible and central to this is that *'Individuals must develop a love of the subject and a desire to learn more'*.

Schools are supporting subject knowledge by helping pupils make progress beyond expectations in many ways including planning from the top, emphasising growth mindsets and embedding high level learning strategies to deepen the knowledge base.

It's a good starting point in English to use texts rich in meaning and possibility to develop such an excellence culture. For the more able, there should be opportunities for reading between the lines, for inference, for the understanding of stylistic variation and for reflection on

its impact; for all pupils though, literacy via literature is exciting and empowering, part of a rich heritage which can be developed further in the secondary phase. I have had particularly positive feedback from schools on the following texts:

'The Eagle' by Tennyson
'Great City' by Harold Monro
'The Pavilion on the Links' by R.L. Stevenson (short story)
'Fairy Tale' by Miroslav Holub
'First Men in the Moon' by H.G.Wells
'The Pied Piper' by Robert Browning

Other novels that work well include 'Great Expectations' by Charles Dickens and Charlotte Bronte's 'Jane Eyre'. Both books cover adult themes, but all primary pupils can be introduced to the exciting sections and some very able pupils may be ready to try the full text. Books of this nature will challenge the children in your class, whilst also allowing careful consideration of language and the opportunity to explore the historical period in which the books are set.

With 2016 marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, there is the perfect opportunity to share some classics of English literature with your class! Don't forget that some classics of British children's literature also offer opportunities: Kenneth Graham's 'The Wind in the Willows' is a beautifully written tale of pastoral life under threat from industrialisation.

And so, the hunt is on to find resources which may help teacher and pupil fall in love with English simultaneously! This is now supported by the big picture in education. The national curriculum requires greater depth and includes the use of literary heritage texts, as well as numerous references to the importance of poetry. Ofsted emphasises scholastic excellence and many schools are widening the range of texts which teachers are confident of using, as well as strategies for deeper engagement with meaning and comprehension.

This is, in fact, an opportunity to raise standards in ways which can be fun, creative and empowering.

Characters that we ourselves may have fond memories of our first encounters with, can also hold appeal for today's pupils. Alongside those with whom they will already be familiar, such as the Pied Piper, there are also opportunities to explore Jane Eyre's confused times at Thornfield Hall, and Miss Havisham's time-capsule existence at Satis House. The extent to which the doors of learning are opened may well depend upon how it's done: there are few more intriguing doors to open than those of Thornfield Hall! This presents an opportunity to 'own' the national curriculum and interpret the content laid down imaginatively.

Opening Doors

It's all a matter of planning for access and enjoyment, equity and excellence! With a creative approach, doors can be opened for all pupils with the right level of challenge achieved for all. The following examples demonstrate some approaches which I have found to be successful:

- 1) Engagement First. For example, in Jules Verne's 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth', ask pupils to decipher the code which introduces the journey down the Icelandic volcano. This can link with active feedback on a likely narrative and on codes in books generally.
- 2) Try offering an ending first. This will lead to greater understanding of a distinctive style and lead to some sophisticated attempts at writing a beginning.
- 3) Use a taster draft very quickly, inspired by a picture. The one included can be supported by question inventing using the white space around it. Pupils have come up with examples like:
 - Why are the shutters closed?
 - What kind of scene is it?
 - What does the balcony look out on?
 - What character would you invent to live there?



This can then be linked to short extracts from the text 'The Pavilion on the Links':

"The pavilion presented little signs of age ... and looked, with its shuttered windows, not like a house that had been deserted, but like one that had never been tenanted by man. The place had an air of solitude, that daunted even a solitary like myself; the wind cried in the chimneys with a strange and wailing note."

Taster drafts are short and here could be aimed at answering some of the questions. They develop engagement at an early stage, avoid the tedium of longer processes and provide superb feedback sessions where teachers' work using assessment for learning strategies then leads to improvement and further challenge. In one school, sustained writing after the AfL and exposure to longer extracts and the whole story led to writing which subtly linked character with setting.

The start of this narrative prediction by a Year 6 pupil from St. Francis CE Primary School in Winchester, gives an indication of what is possible:

'The Pavilion on the Links'

I sat there warming my hands on the growing flames that were greedily devouring every twig I could find, waiting for the ember to get hot enough to cook on. As I waited, I wondered, I wondered what had caused the sudden untimely death of my good friend Northmour's Uncle. I wondered how Northmour was taking the death, his Uncle was the only family he had left so actually all his uncle owned (including a VAST fortune) went to him. That thought triggered a wild accusation, perhaps Northmour had murdered his Uncle for money! It was true he was now living like a king so.... NO! "wild accusations will get you nowhere" I muttered to myself "besides the food is ready to be cooked!" How easy it is for a simple innocent wonder to turn into a serious accusation.

- 4) Get the pupils gripped by the theme! For example, 'The Pied Piper' by Robert Browning can be introduced by exploring the way the children are led into the mountain by the piper. I focussed with a group on the line 'horses born with eagles' wings' which was part of a fantasy land promised to the children if they followed the piper. This led initially to discussions about unusual images and the supposed interior of the mountain and then to the effect of rhyme, metre and language. The following example from another Year 6 pupil at St. Faith's C of E Primary School, Winchester demonstrates what is possible:

'Horses born with Eagles Wings'

Dancing along the grassy hill the children, in a musical haze, follow the piper through a swirling portal of red and yellow then a tunnel, long and as black as coal but still the double-edged music leads them on. Suddenly, as if devoured by darkness's choking mouth the children find themselves in a black tunnel, a blackness, a silent unending blackness. Then as the last of the piper's alluring notes fade into darkness, the children realise their folly. Stumbling onwards they travel, groping ahead of them with unseeing hands, until they come to an orange glow. Below them, a cavern stretches filled to the brim with walkways ones of wood, ones of rope and ones of hard stone. Everywhere amongst the confused twisting maelstrom of gravity defying walkways, torches let off that leading glow. Scurrying, clambering, racing and clawing over the sprawling structure where pale, hunched figures... Goblins!

These are just a few examples. Ideally, building a sizeable repertoire of access strategies, will help to ensure enjoyment and new learning: it's the quirky possibilities and depth of learning that make the journey exciting. Sometimes, including information about the authors' lives and broadening the study into a particular genre, for example gothic literature and the Brontes, can help to maximise the learning opportunities.

After accessing a challenging extract from 'Jane Eyre', where Jane is awoken by noises and fire in the night, my pupils were taking part in discussions about darkness, sleeplessness, fear and 'spooky' mansions. So great was their interest that my pupils were begging me to offer them some more Charlotte Bronte to read! That's because they had already 'owned' the gothic genre topic and we had explored images of gothic architecture together. Reading a challenging text was natural step, and led to the opportunity to question about new words and styles. Big philosophical questions certainly helped their learning process:

- * Why can we get scared in the dark?
- * Would you have responded the way Jane did?
- * Are all noises in the night threatening to you?

I have recently run my an inset day at Alverstoke Junior School in Gosport and, by including philosophical debate, staff there plan to deepen knowledge of technique and meaning further as access and engagement is noticeably boosted. It's a good example of the way deeper learning and deeper knowledge acquisition co-exist.

Beyond the Limit

Access for all must also include 'beyond the limit' expectations. The quality texts are more demanding, but also more stimulating in terms of creativity. There is a lot more to discover! So, teachers have been working on including beyond the limit expectations from the beginning for as many as possible.

Wider reading gets incorporated quickly with pupils reading, for example, the school library being resourced with adventure stories, old and new. Reading famous authors from the past should certainly stimulate the reading of modern favourites. So, exposure to *Jane Eyre* led also to an introduction to Neil Gaiman's 'The Graveyard Book' and 'Coraline'. Writing too should go deeper and broader for those who are ready. Why not compile an anthology of different ways of crafting poetry about eagles or other birds of prey after studying Tennyson's 'The Eagle'?

Using challenging texts certainly gives much more opportunity to include very able writers in their own learning journey as they will make more mistakes crafting different styles and be open to much more specific, high level advice. That can't happen if English work is regularly undemanding.

Interestingly though, I have also been delighted with feedback from teachers about the joy and confidence with which pupils who generally find literacy work challenging have revelled in the curiosity stimulated by strange pavilions or by Thornfield's gothic atmosphere or the Pied Piper's beguiling dance.

Much of the credit for this must go down to brilliant teachers finding the best kinds of access strategies to include interventions for special needs pupils as well as the very able. These principles need to be applied to the teaching of poetry too. A teacher from a school with many pupils for whom new language acquisition is challenging actually commented that they preferred a poem with strange words or unusual ideas as it captured their imagination and also made them think harder about spelling.

The poem quoted by a number of schools with whom I work is Charlotte Mew's 'The Call', as teachers ask them to debate philosophically about the meaning of the mysterious 'visitor'! Not only that, the resulting creative writing has been their best ever and written with more accuracy as a result of their engagement.

None of the work going beyond the limit should be bolt on. If whole school planning emphasises continuity and progression, wider reading and extended writing opportunities can be a 'norm'. That way, gifts and talents are being grown for all and the kinds of mastery levels being discussed at present can be achieved by a higher proportion of pupils. To quote Deborah Eyre, let's create 'more room at the top for more'. The implications for equal opportunities and inclusion are huge. With access to famous literature and literacy via quality texts, a rich heritage can be available to every pupil in the country.

References

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