

The evolution of non-fiction

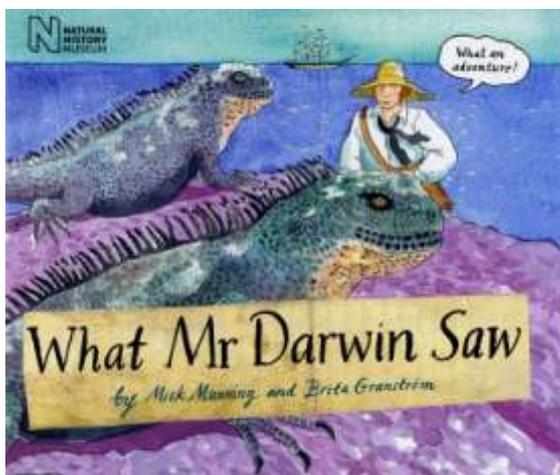
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In this article, Emma Rogers describes a teaching sequence taught by Year 5 and Year 6 teachers, Daisy Gladwin and Jo Winney from St Peter's Church of England Primary School in Barton-upon-Humber, which led to children writing for a range of purposes based on a non-fiction text.

When working as an English Advisor, I delivered a day's training course to demonstrate how a non-fiction text could be used as a stimulus for a number of meaningful opportunities for writing. As Mallet (2010) explains:

'Non-fiction texts may be playful, entertaining, innovative, involving, even lyrical but, by definition, they have an informational purpose at their centre and this is what distinguishes them from fiction.'

I wrote an example teaching sequence based on the high quality picture book, *What Mr Darwin Saw* by Mick Manning and Brita Granström, because it was both a fascinating look at Darwin's theory of Evolution and also presented the facts about his life in creative ways. The focus of this article is on the written work produced when two Year 5 and 6 teachers, Daisy Gladwin and Jo Winney from St Peter's Church of England Primary School in Barton-upon-Humber, taught the teaching sequence in their classrooms.



Familiarisation with the book

To establish what children already knew about Charles Darwin, Daisy and Jo started a KWL grid (What do I know, What do I want to know, What have I learnt). This chart was then referred to and updated regularly as the children's knowledge developed during the unit of work. The teachers introduced *What Mr Darwin Saw* and encouraged the children to discuss their first impressions, paying particular attention to the page layout, the different language forms and the writing styles on each page, using open questions:

- What are your first impressions?
- Is it like anything you have read before?
- What kind of text is this? What purpose does it serve?
- What do you notice about the layout of text and images on the page?

This activity was useful because the text is non-fiction, but has the appearance of a narrative. The teachers read the book in stages and facts were retrieved about Darwin's life and recorded on a timeline (see Figure 1). The children discussed Darwin's character and developed their inferential skills using a technique similar to role-on-the-wall (see Figure 2). Facts known to be true were written inside the character outline and opinions that were inferred were written outside. In pairs, the children were encouraged to speculate what kind of boy Darwin had been based on the evidence drawn from the text.

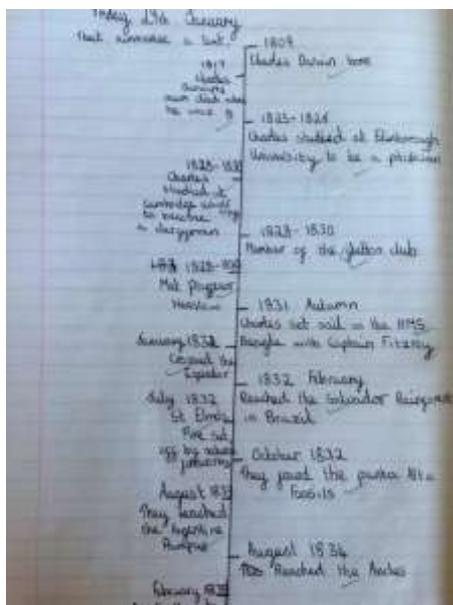


Figure 1: A timeline of Darwin's life

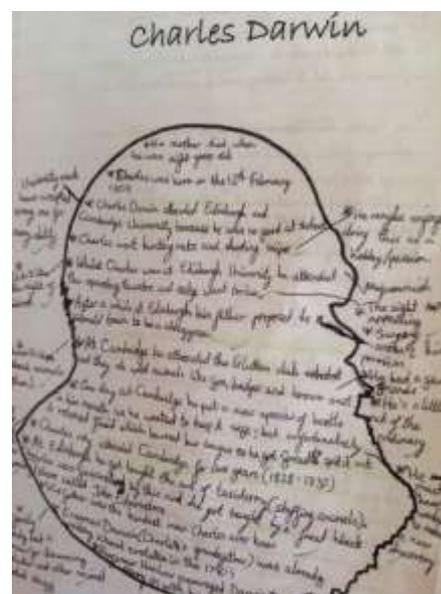
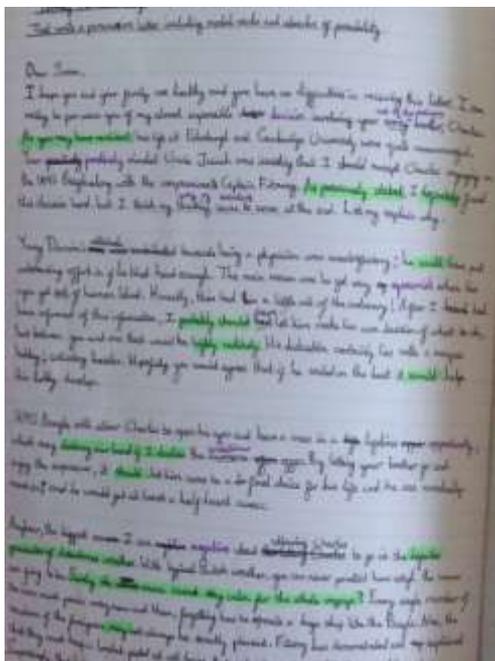


Figure 2: A role-on-the-wall portrayal of Darwin



Writing a letter in role

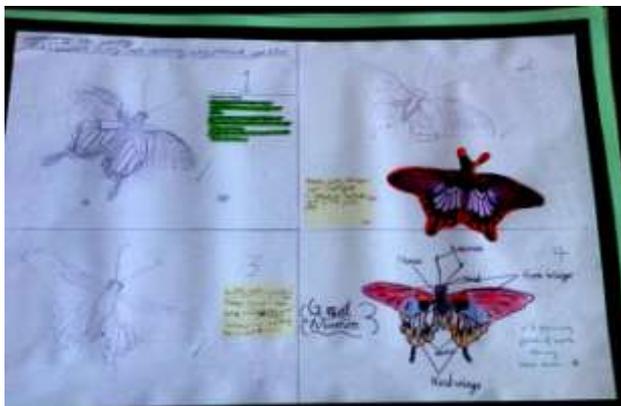
Because truth is often stranger than fiction, there were many opportunities for role-play and book-talk about the author's choice of language. Role-play was used to improvise the conversation between father and uncle about Charles' decision to set sail, where modal verbs and adverbs were used to discuss the possible outcomes of the decision, giving a purposeful reason for exploring grammar. The children applied these ideas when writing a letter in role to Charles' mother (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: A letter to Charles Darwin's mother

The class went on to explore Darwin's dilemma on receiving a letter from another British naturalist, Alfred Wallace, describing his different ideas on evolution. Conscience-corridor gave the children the opportunity to revisit modal verbs and orally rehearse their ideas in increasingly more formal contexts, using models of formal and informal language in the text. Phrases from the text were explored and re-written to change the level of formality, e.g.

Informal	Formal
<i>We ducks everyone that hasn't crossed the equator before</i>	All those who have not yet crossed the equator are ducked
Darwin really liked the leaf cutter ants	<i>Darwin marvelled at the leaf-cutter ants</i>

These activities helped the class orally rehearse and experiment with different language structures which allowed them to make more informed, confident choices in their own writing later in the sequence.



Writing a naturalist's notebook

The children took great delight in writing in role as Darwin – exploring the outdoor classroom to find insects and plants to draw and write about in their naturalist notebooks (see Figure 4). In art, they made observational sketches and worked in pairs to locate useful vocabulary and synonyms to avoid repetition and improve cohesion in their descriptive writing:

Figure 4: A naturalist's notebook

Useful language for the writing outcome	Synonyms
looked at	witnessed, marvelled at, saw, my attention was drawn to, observed
journey	trip, expedition, voyage, travels, adventure

Writing a diary entry

The teachers moved the teaching sequence on at this point to study the life of Alfred Russell Wallace in more detail. The class watched documentaries and identified similarities and differences between his life and Darwin's. A trip to the Natural History Museum also provided valuable insight into the scientists' work. The class used freeze-frame and thought-tracking techniques to improvise the action and dialogue at key events in Wallace's life e.g. the fire on board ship; leaving for his first journey to the Amazon; discussing plans with his colleague Bates. The teachers modelled, through whole class shared writing, how to bring these ideas together to create a diary entry for a key event from his life, modelling the choices a writer makes. The children re-drafted and edited their diary entries before publishing a final piece, considering the illustrations and additional information to be presented on each page as in the model text (see Figures 5 and 6).

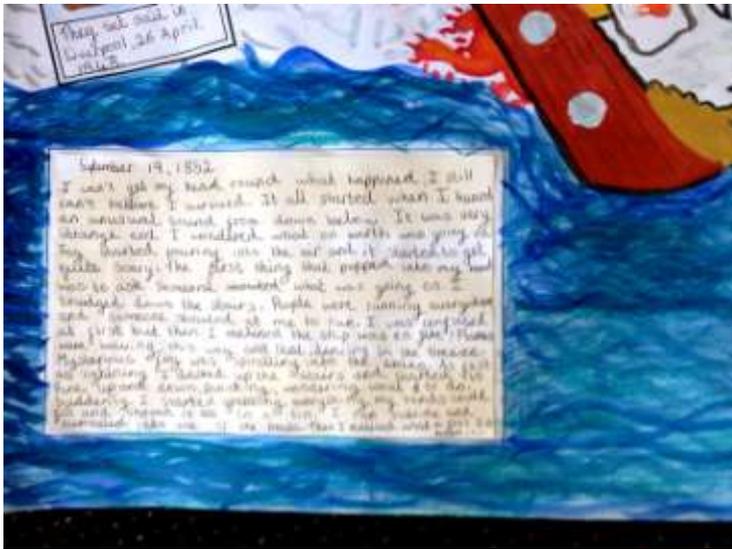


Figure 5: Writing a diary in role as Alfred Wallace

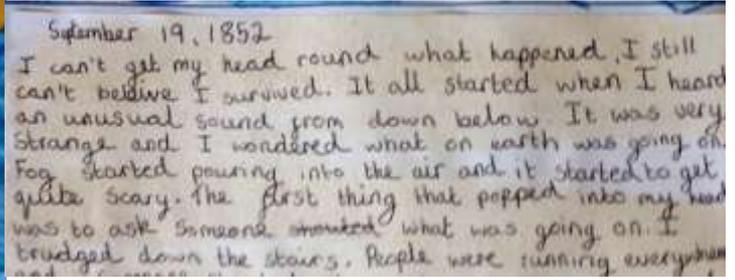


Figure 6: Writing a diary in role as Alfred Wallace – a close-up

Writing an argument

The unit culminated in a whole-class debate: 'Who is the most admirable character in the history of Science?' The children were given time to discuss and form opinions through the following questions:

- Is it Darwin's theory or Wallace's?
- Was Darwin right to publish the papers together or should he have given all the credit to Wallace?
- Was Wallace right to accept the situation or should he have claimed that Darwin stole his ideas?
- Should Darwin have been braver and published his ideas earlier or was it important to wait until he had others to support his theories?

An opinion-line was introduced by the teachers to organise informal discussions and allow children to share and listen to others' opinions. In this thinking skills' technique, the class positioned themselves along a line in the classroom, where 'strongly agree' was one end and 'strongly disagree' at the other. When asked, 'Should Darwin have published his paper?' the children organised themselves into a line and then explained why they were standing in their chosen position. They could move places after listening to other opinions if it made them rethink. The debate provided a lively opportunity to conclude the teaching sequence and for the children to demonstrate their understanding of evolution, as well as their skills in persuasive, spoken language.

When reflecting on their recent 'project', the children agreed they had enjoyed the work based on *What Mr Darwin Saw* 'even more' than recent fiction. Jo explained that using one good quality text as a stimulus 'meant that we were able to write a range of text types along a given theme. As the children all had a degree of prior knowledge, they were therefore more invested in the end result and their learning experienced deepened'. Both teachers felt the 'unit of work' had the added benefit of supporting learning across other curriculum areas.

Useful sources of information:

A film about Alfred Russell Wallace www.bbc.co.uk/science/0/24837130.

<http://famousscientists.org>.

http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/al/Alfred_Russel_Wallace.

The Alfred Russell Wallace website <http://wallacefund.info/content/biography-wallace>.

Acknowledgements

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Children's books

Manning, M. & Granström, B. (2009) *What Mr Darwin saw*. Frances Lincoln Children's Books. ISBN 9781845079703.

References

Mallet, M. (2010) *Choosing and Using Fiction and Non-fiction 3 – 11: A Comprehensive Guide for Teachers and Student Teachers*. David Fulton Books. ISBN 9781843123224.