

DRAMA AND LITERACY -
EXPLORING THE STORIES BEHIND THE NEWS HEADLINES



ARTS
on the move



Drama and Literacy - Exploring the Stories Behind the News Headlines

Alison Chaplin begins a series of drama workshops that will pay dividends both in pupil enjoyment and in objectives covered. Here: a workshop for Years 3 and 4.

In a world where primary teaching ceased some time ago to be topic-based, it is easy to become obsessed with following officially recommended lesson structures, and to forget that there are alternative methods which enable teachers to achieve the same objectives, but in more stimulating, wide-ranging contexts. In this series, I want to explore the cross-over between drama and literacy, and to offer detailed plans for lessons which will provide teachers with a framework for exciting work that will, nevertheless, enable them to 'tick several boxes' in one go.

In these articles, I shall show how, using a variety of text-based stimuli, teachers can combine simple drama methods with sequential literacy tasks to deliver lessons which are both fun and instructive. The activities and contexts covered in each article will provide a project that is suitable for a particular age group and range of pupil abilities, and that is suitable both for teachers who are new to drama work and those who are experienced in it. Activities and tasks, including suggested follow-on work, are designed to satisfy both statutory requirements and guideline recommendations for the teaching of speaking and listening - and some wider educational needs of pupils and teachers alike.

The first article provides a workshop that can be offered to pupils in Years 3 and 4, and which makes use of materials drawn from an everyday resource - newspapers.

Newspaper headlines as a stimulus

In searching for newspaper headlines to use as a basis for drama, I usually make a selection which includes some that have an obvious meaning and some that are ambiguous. My aim is to have something to meet the varying needs of pupils, according to their age, ability and how much drama experience they have had. All children want to 'get the answers right', and I like to ensure that even the most hesitant or reluctant can feel they are doing this.

The choice of headlines is also determined by how I want pupils to respond, and for other teachers it will be affected by how comfortable they feel about allowing the drama to take its own direction. Teachers who feel happier with a more controlled, structured, lesson should use headlines which are unambiguous. Also, if the teacher wants an exploration of a particular issue, for example fox hunting or the closure of a local service, then this will govern the choice of headline. However, if the teacher feels happy allowing pupils to devise their own stories and dictate the direction of the drama themselves, then a headline which is open to several interpretations will do the trick.



The three examples shown in these pages are all headlines from a local newspaper. I have used them both separately and in combination when delivering drama workshops, and they have worked well either way. However, the project offered in this article uses just the headline 'Tragic End' as its basis.

Objectives to be achieved: The aim of the lessons is to encourage pupils to create and develop their own stories by:

- investigating responses to the text (headline)
- presenting to each other ideas and performances stimulated by the text
- exploring the same incident from a range of perspectives.

As a result of this work, pupils should come to understand the concept of writing for a specific purpose, and - ultimately - be able to devise, write and perform a television news programme.



Introducing the text

I start by discussing with the children what the story behind 'Tragic End' might be, and I acknowledge all responses. I encourage pupils to think both literally and laterally: for example, the 'Tragic End' might not refer to a person, but to a business - or to England's contribution to Euro 2004! I may help pupils to consider their responses by asking 'leading' questions, for example:

- What has ended?*
- What does 'tragic' mean?*
- What makes an end tragic?*
- If it doesn't refer to a person, what else could this 'tragic end' refer to?*

The discussion can be developed by asking what characters might be involved in the story, both directly and on the fringes, and whether they are implicated in the 'tragic end', or just observers. Again, I acknowledge all responses. It is important for pupils to understand that, in a drama context, all of their suggestions are valid, and that they can't answer 'incorrectly'. Drama isn't maths!

Objectives achieved: These include:

- the generation of ideas relevant to a topic by brainstorming
- the prediction of newspaper stories from the evidence of headlines
- the interpretation of stimulus material.



Man dies after fall

Selecting an idea

For the next stage in the work, I ask children to form groups of five or six and to sit in a small circle with their group. The groups are asked to exchange their ideas on what they think the headline is about, what images it creates, and what story could be behind it. I allow up to five minutes for this, then ask them to select one idea for the story which the majority of people in their group like. I allow a further two or three minutes for this. When each group has agreed their story, I ask them to discuss what characters should be involved, either directly or peripherally, allowing an additional two or three minutes for this discussion.

Teacher tip: I have found that there are more arguments within friendship groups than within imposed groupings! It is a good idea to encourage groups to vote democratically for their idea, and to move from group to group to defuse arguments quickly. Discussing and negotiating ideas is an integral part of the drama process for children.

Objectives achieved: These are the same as for the initial class discussion, plus:

- listening to and responding to other children
- exploring situations that could be described in a factual document
- contributing to group work.

Pivotal moment freezes

The next stage is for the groups to create a freeze (or tableau) which shows the moment when the story happened, the crucial moment behind the headline. The groups are told that one of their number will freeze in the position of someone taking a photograph, whilst the rest freeze as characters involved with the story. The children should understand that their pictures, or photographs, should be completely still and silent. I allow children up to five minutes to plan and prepare their freezes.

Teacher tip: Some children prefer not to be directly involved in the drama, but are happy to observe. The role of 'photographer' is ideal for children who are less confident but still want to feel included.

Objectives achieved: This use of freeze frame highlights turning points in a story calls for the discussion and planning of ideas, and provides an opportunity for working in role.

Presentation of freezes

Each group in turn to shows their freeze to the rest of the class and the teacher leads a discussion on each one by asking questions, for example:

What is the story about?

What's happened?

How did it happen?

What characters are involved?

Is it clear who the characters are?

Do we know how the characters feel about the situation?

What do we like about this picture?

Teacher tip: Some groups will present exactly the same story. When this happens, I make it clear that it is not a case of 'copying', but simply something that does occur in drama. In these cases, and for all the tableaux, the teacher should insist that the 'audience' remain quiet whilst other children are 'performing', and encourage them to applaud each group.

Objectives achieved: Children learn to present a drama to an audience, and are stimulated to discuss the effectiveness of communication in their own and others' work, developing the vocabulary in which to do this.

Interviews

The next stage is for the children who were 'photographers' to interview those involved in the story to find out exactly what happened, how it happened, and how the characters involved felt about it.



The teacher should advise the children that they must answer the questions in a thoughtful and honest manner, and must listen carefully to the answers given by other characters to ensure that all details tally. The interviewer must find out as much as possible about the story behind the headline and the characters involved. Characters can be given names, ages and other personal details, but extra time needs to be allowed for this. N.B. For the purpose of this exercise, dead bodies can speak!

Teacher tip: The aim of this exercise is for the stories to be consolidated and confirmed. It is also a good confidence-builder for the 'photographers', who are now playing a greater part in the drama but are still involved in a non-threatening manner.

Objectives achieved: The interviewees learn to respond in role; and both interviewer and interviewees must evaluate and discuss ideas using language appropriate to the context.

Diary extracts

At this point in the workshop, there is the opportunity for some writing. The children, each with a pen and a slip of paper, find a space where they can work alone. The teacher then asks them to write down what their character might put in a diary at the end of the day on which the story happened.

Children are helped in their diary writing by the teacher asking them to consider questions such as:

How were you involved in the story? (What part did you play in it?)

How did you feel when it happened?

What impact did it have on you afterwards?

Children playing characters who have 'died' can either write about their death - particularly if it was intentional or suspicious - or can note events leading up to the moment when they died. Those children playing the role of photographers and interviewers can write in either role.

Children should write a minimum of three to four lines (without worrying too much about spelling and grammar), and it needs stressing that they are to write as their character - not as themselves. I allow up to 10 minutes for pupils to write their diary extracts, and I give them regular updates on time remaining.

Teacher tip: Pupils must work alone and should not be distracted. Some children will prefer to lie on the floor of the drama space to write their diary extracts, which is fine as long as they remain focused.

Objectives achieved: Writing a first person account; developing character through language; recounting events.

Presenting diary extracts

The children return to sit with their small groups, taking their pens and diary extracts with them. The teacher asks for volunteers to read their extracts aloud, selecting as many as the time allows. Volunteers should be thanked and positive comments made on their individual efforts, with particular reference to any strong emotional content or interesting use of language. Everyone must be quiet as each extract is read, and the class should be encouraged to applaud themselves - and each other - after the final reading.

At the end of the session, the teacher gathers in the slips of paper and puts them in a safe place.

Teacher tip: It may sound obvious, but teachers should encourage children who don't normally volunteer to read aloud. For some children, reading in role is less threatening, and they will respond positively to encouragement.

Objectives achieved: Reading aloud; working in role; listening to others.

Freeze sequences

Next, the children work in the same small groups to create a series of three freezes which represent the moment immediately before the incident behind their story, the moment itself (as previously), and the moment afterwards. The children who acted as photographers before can either reprise this role or become part of one of the freeze pictures. I allow up to five minutes for the children to plan and prepare their three freezes.

Teacher tip: Some pupils will want to use this as an opportunity to change their story, but they should be dissuaded from doing so. Instead, they can be encouraged to think of ways to make their original idea less linear and more interesting, for example by including more characters, by creating body language or distance between characters, and by working more effectively.

Objectives achieved: Considering key moments in dramatic stories; discussing and planning ideas; sequencing and developing events and characters.



Presentation of freeze sequences

Each group in turn presents their three freezes to the rest of the class. The teacher then leads a brief discussion about each sequence, focusing on such elements as: realism; positioning; effective use of facial expression and body language; impact and power. With the second freeze, which is a repetition of the pivotal moment freeze, the children observing should be asked to consider whether anything has changed from the original. Subtle differences - and some unsubtle ones - should be obvious, and children should be encouraged to spot these. The process continues until the three freezes for each group have been seen. All efforts should be applauded.

Teacher tip: The aim is to reinforce the story devised by each group, and to encourage the children to begin to consider the sequence of events - and consequences - of the incident. Some groups will have made no changes to their original 'pivotal moment freeze', and care needs to be taken not to make these children feel they have failed.

Objectives achieved: Considering non-verbal aspects of communication and their impact; developing cognitive skills; accepting the response and feedback of others.

Story outlines

Still working in the same groups, and once again with pens and slips of paper, the children are asked to write an outline of the complete story they have devised for the headline. This doesn't have to be laid out in continuous prose, but should be a series of bullet points or single sentences.

Questions that the teacher can suggest to encourage the children include:

When and how did the story start?

What characters were involved at the beginning?

What happened next?

How did events progress to the most important moment?

What characters were involved during the actual incident?

What - if anything - happened to those involved afterwards?

The story outline can be written on a large sheet of paper by a nominated child recording the group's suggestions, or by each group member working individually. I find it takes up to 20 minutes for children to complete this work effectively.



Teacher tip: The most difficult aspect of this exercise is for children to agree on when, and how, their story started. They need as much support as possible until that initial sentence has been written down.

Objectives achieved: Considering starting points, finishing points and key moments in dramatic stories; abbreviating ideas; describing and sequencing key incidents; following and responding to instructions.

Television news programme

Remaining in their groups, the children move on to create an item for a television news programme based on their story, to be presented to the rest of the class. This television news item must include the following:

- the story written up as an item for the news presenter to read
- outside broadcast interviews with at least two of the characters involved
- an interview in the studio with a 'specialist' who gives facts and figures relating to the incident, relevant statistics, or a professional viewpoint.

The television news programme as a whole can also include the following, which some or all of the children can work on in addition to their news item:

- an additional news item on a similar, or a non-related, theme
- sports news
- a weather report.

Children can make their news programmes as simple, or elaborate, as they wish, depending on their age and ability. Some groups will want to present their weather bulletin using maps, others will want to devise extensive sports reports, and care needs to be taken that these elements don't overshadow the main news stories.

The essential aspect of the 'broadcast' is that the news stories must be written in the third-person for the presenter to read, and that the interviews must be properly planned and prepared. Statistics from the 'specialist' can be fabricated, or fully researched, but the characters to be interviewed must be carefully selected. A minimum of 40 minutes preparation time is needed for this to work effectively.

Teacher tip: For this work, children need to have access to a full range of materials and equipment, including pens, paper, card, colouring pens, clipboards, microphones. Preparing these in advance avoids delaying the creative process.



Objectives achieved: Presenting drama for an audience; recounting the same event in a variety of ways, for example as a news report; writing for a known audience.

Presenting television news programmes

When the groups have all completed their preparations, or the time limit has expired, performances can take place in a designated 'studio' area. Children should be allowed chairs, tables, and any other appropriate furniture to create their studio 'sets'.

As each performance is given, the audience must remain silent until the time comes for them to applaud. A little time should be spent after each performance assessing and discussing it, led by questions such as:

How effective were the performers at conveying the story?

How realistically were the characters portrayed?

How imaginative was the news item?

Did the news item say more about the story than the original freeze frames?

How well did the presentation of the item cater for the audience?

In amongst the reactions to the item, there should be praise and thanks from the teacher.

Teacher tip: If it is possible to video the performances, this will give greater impetus to the presentations, improve concentration, and keep the children focused throughout the preparation time.

Objectives achieved: Using different strategies to engage an audience; considering how well characters are portrayed; developing vocabulary for discussing performance and providing feedback; comparing different groups' emphases and strengths; speaking confidently and clearly; using language appropriate to role and context; listening and responding to other people; working co-operatively.

Closing discussion

Once the excitement of the performances has abated, the class should come together again for a final discussion, beginning with the questions:

- What did you enjoy about this work?*
- What did you find difficult?*
- What did you feel particularly proud of?*

Following the responses to these questions, there can be a brief discussion of the context and content of the all the headline activities, led by the questions:

- What have we learnt from these activities?*
- What do we still want to know?*
- What other drama could we do about this?*
- What else could we do with the stories you've written?*
- Could you now write news items about any other stories?*
- What other stories would make interesting headlines?*

The discussion as a whole should end with the children being praised and thanked for their efforts.

Teacher tip: Making a mental, or a literal, note of the children's responses in this session will provide the teacher with ideas for future lessons.

Follow-on drama activities and literacy tasks:

- Children write up their diary extracts neatly and these are used to create a display
- A different headline is allocated to each group and the children go through the same process, but end up putting their stories together to form a newspaper.
- The stories are used as the basis for writing a playscript
- Hot-seating can be used to discover more about characters involved in the different freeze sequences
- The groups work on written descriptions of the story characters, discussing and selecting adjectives carefully
- Children write letters from one character to another: in apology; to express sympathy or concern; in protest, etc.
- The same process can be used for exploring moments from history, parables, fables, or other stories.

Finally, although the activities here form a coherent process, any of them can be used out of sequence; or the process can be worked through with some parts omitted. The main consideration, when working with drama, is to ensure that children feel confident and happy at all times. Using drama methods to initiate literacy tasks enables pupils to access an imaginative learning process which is productive and stimulating; it also encourages greater retention of information. Using literacy to generate drama promotes a greater love of words and their meanings, and encourages children to be more reflective and considered in their use of language; it takes the 'dryness' away from reading and comprehension. The two subjects complement each other well and, when combined, become an extremely effective teaching tool.

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