

NARRATIVE POEM INTO PERFORMANCE (1)
AN INTRODUCTION TO PERFORMANCE SKILLS



ARTS
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Narrative Poem into Performance (1) - An Introduction to Performance Skills

The National Curriculum requires children to give and to evaluate performances as part of their drama work. But for some pupils - and teachers - performance is a daunting concept. In the first of three articles Alison Chaplin shows how the necessary skills can be developed gradually, with everyone enjoying the process.

The QCA document *Teaching speaking and listening in Key Stages 1 and 2* specifies that the range of drama activities for juniors should include: 'improvisation and working in role; scripting and performing plays and responding to performances'. Thus the range of drama methods required and their applications are clearly defined; but the concept of drama as 'performance' is one in which the possibilities are endless. At one end of the scale, drama 'performances' become 'theatre'; and the term 'theatre' has connotations of full-scale extravaganzas, with lights, costumes, make-up and full-scale stress! But, to meet the objectives, drama performances need not be major theatrical presentations. The QCA document states that, amongst the skills required for learning and progression in drama, '... pupils should be taught to: use character, action and narrative to convey story themes, emotions and ideas in devised and scripted plays;' and it is by concentrating on the word 'devised' that teachers can facilitate simple but effective drama performances, and can help less confident or able pupils to achieve in this area.

In these three articles, I shall illustrate how drama sessions and workshop-style rehearsals can be structured to create performances which meet both the requirements of the drama objectives and the needs of KS2 pupils. By building pupils' self-confidence, developing their skills in performing or presenting drama, encouraging them to assess their own and others' work throughout the rehearsal process, and selecting appropriate material which requires minimal line learning, teachers can encourage the creation of effective drama performance. I shall explore a route from simple games and activities, through creating and developing performance, to the teaching of specific performance skills; and I shall offer ideas on evaluating drama throughout the process. I have chosen to demonstrate these ideas using the poem 'Matilda' (who told lies and was burned to death) by Hilaire Belloc, which will be familiar to many teachers; but the techniques demonstrated can easily be used with a variety of other source materials. Unless otherwise specified, all sessions should take place in the school hall.

Many teachers assume that all pupils will enjoy performing. Children love to show off and play act, don't they? Well, some do, but not all. In a room of 30 adults, only a minority will feel confident in standing up in front of their peers and performing. The same applies to a room of 30 children, many of whom will be terror struck at the thought of 'exhibiting' themselves. Although performance requires many skills, including self-discipline, awareness of other performers and audience, spatial awareness and movement, and voice projection, the most important aspect of any presentation is self-confidence - and this needs to be nurtured. Before devising a performance or beginning structured rehearsals, teachers



should spend some sessions building confidence and encouraging children to express themselves verbally and physically in front of classmates. This can be achieved through simple games, role-playing activities and the presentation of short improvisations.

Starting in a 'safe' environment

Initially, games and drama activities should take place within a closed circle, as this provides a level of security and comfort - particularly useful for younger pupils and groups of children who are new to working together.

Prisoner

This requires an odd number of participants and a circle of chairs. The children form pairs, one child sitting on a chair, the other standing behind. One person (it can be the teacher) is left standing behind an empty chair. Sitting down are the 'prisoners'; standing behind them are their 'guards'. The guard with an empty prison must try to fill it by calling out the name of any of the prisoners sitting down. That prisoner then tries to escape their current prison by making a mad dash for the prison (chair) of the guard who has called their name. The guard behind the prisoner called has to try and stop their prisoner from escaping by reaching over the chair and tapping them lightly on the back or shoulders. If the guard taps before the prisoner has gone, the prisoner remains. If, however, the guard isn't concentrating and misses tapping their prisoner, then that prisoner can escape to the new guard and a different prison will be left empty - ready to be filled by its guard shouting out any prisoner's name. The game should move quickly. Guards must stand at arm's length behind their prisoners, with hands behind their backs. Prisoners must sit firmly on their chairs. After a while, guards and prisoners swap over.

Look down, look up

The group stands in a circle. The teacher instructs everyone to 'Look down' at the floor. On the next instruction, 'Look up!' everyone must look up and make direct eye contact with someone else standing in the circle. They are not allowed to change direction or glance ineffectually, or look up at the ceiling. If the person they make eye contact with is also looking at them, both players are out and have to sit down. This goes on until there is a winner or winners. The game can be played with any group size. As the numbers reduce, the remaining players should take a step inwards to form a smaller circle. All those who are out should remain seated and silent.

Wink murder

The group sits in a circle, on chairs or on the floor. The teacher chooses a detective, who must leave the room. The remaining participants close their eyes and bow their heads, so as not to see. The teacher then walks around the outside of the circle and taps one of the children on the back. This person becomes the 'murderer', but their identity must not be revealed to the other players. He or she must murder by winking silently at the other players, who should then die horribly and dramatically, collapsing off their chairs as they do so! The detective is re-introduced once the murderer has been chosen and, by standing in the centre of the circle as the murders take place, must try to guess who the murderer is. The detective is usually allowed three guesses. Other participants must try not to give away who the murderer is. If the detective doesn't guess in three goes, the murderer is revealed by asking him or her to stand up. Either way, a new detective and murderer are chosen and the game begins again. Those children who cannot wink can blink both their eyes instead. Two murderers can be chosen.

The skill of good listening

Good performers also need to be good listeners, to know where the drama 'boundaries' are, and to understand how to respond appropriately. Most drama games will develop these abilities in children and many, such as the two below, are targeted specifically at improving listening skills.

Fruitbowl

The children sit in a circle on chairs. Each is given the name of a fruit, in sequence, e.g. apple, pear, banana, apple, pear, banana, and so on around the circle, until each has a fruit name. One person is nominated to stand in the centre of the circle, and their chair is removed, so that there is now one chair less than there are participants. The person in the centre must shout out one of the fruit names given and everyone with that fruit name must dash out of their chairs to another seat. NB No-one should go back to their own chair on that turn or, with large groups, move to the next empty seat to theirs. As the 'fruits' are changing places, the person in the middle must also try to get a seat. When everyone has swapped seats, there will be one person left in the middle again. He or she calls out the name of a fruit and the whole process begins again. If the person in the middle shouts out 'Fruitbowl!' everyone must change places! Two fruit names can also be called at once.

Silly sausage

The children sit in a circle on the floor. A volunteer is selected to sit in the centre of the circle and is blindfolded, though care should be taken not to cover their ears. Once the blindfold is secured, the rest of the class is asked to get up - very carefully and slowly - and change places, so that they are seated in a different order. Now ask the blindfolded child to point in any direction and the child nearest to being pointed at should say 'Silly sausage!' in a funny or strange voice. The child who is blindfolded should try to guess who is speaking. They earn a round of applause if they are correct, and a loud 'Aaah!' if they are not. Allow the guesser three separate turns in the centre before selecting a new volunteer to be blindfolded and repeating the process.

Developing creativity in the circle ...

Some drama games are specifically designed to develop children's creative, imaginative or performance skills. These are ideal for inclusion in introductory sessions for both confidence-building and reducing inhibitions - which may affect later performance. Although the first game requires individuals to perform solo in front of the rest of the class, the fact that it is fun and is - again - played within the closed circle environment makes it less threatening.

What are you doing?

The children sit in a circle. A volunteer is selected to stand in the centre and instructed to think of, and perform, a simple mime. This could be an everyday task, for example, cleaning their teeth, or a more bizarre one, such as washing an elephant or walking on the moon. As the child performs the mime, he or she must also think of a different mime to pass on. The next child in the circle, moving in a clockwise direction, should then stand up and enquire of the performer 'What are you doing?' The performer must then reply with the new mime they have thought of. For example, the first child could perform the mime of baking a cake, then, when the next child in the circle stands and asks, 'What are you doing?' the first child could reply, 'I'm painting a picture'. After this exchange, the first child sits down and the second child performs a mime of someone painting a picture. After a few seconds, the third sitting child should stand and ask, 'What are you doing?', and be given a new mime thought up by the performer. The second child then sits down and the process continues. Children are thus being encouraged to think, perform and respond all at the same time. When the circle has been completed in a clockwise direction, the exercise can be repeated in the opposite direction, giving children an opportunity to 'return the favour' of passing on mimes!

(A word of warning: at least one child will bring toilet habits or something similarly objectionable into the mimes. A brief exclusion from the game usually has the desired effect!)



... and outside it

Once children have begun to relax, activities can be moved out of the circle, so as to build confidence further and begin to encourage a willingness to perform and - ultimately - present work to the rest of the class. These initial activities, whilst moving children into the open space of the hall, require no speaking or presentation, just strong listening and negotiating skills!

Freeze objects

The children are asked to stand in a space, then to walk around the room slowly and carefully, avoiding other people and looking for empty space to walk into. The teacher blows a whistle, claps their hands or bangs a drum and calls out a number, whereupon the children must form groups of that number as quickly as possible. (They should be told to form groups with those nearest to them and not to look for their friends.) They are then asked to work in their groups to create, with their bodies, an object specified by the teacher. On an instruction to 'freeze', they must hold their object shape and be completely still and silent. Once the children have been told what object to create, they should be allowed a few seconds before a slow countdown from 10 to 'freeze' is started. The teacher walks around the room, commenting positively on all attempts and praising those which best resemble the nominated object. If appropriate (and time allows), one or two good poses can be shown to the class, as the teacher asks, 'Why do I like this one?' Finally, the children are allowed to relax, before walking around the room again and repeating the process with a new group size and object. Suggested objects and group sizes are: piano (2/ 3), car (5), elephant (4), teapot (2), aeroplane (6), roller-coaster (8/10). For the last object, children should create the front two or three rows of people sitting in a roller-coaster, focussing on facial expressions, creative body language and interesting height levels.

Freeze emotions

This uses the same process as above - children walking around the room, then quickly forming groups of specified sizes; but in this case the teacher asks the groups to create freezes which represent emotions. The children should understand that their images can be either literal (realistic), or abstract (representative), and they should be encouraged not to go for the obvious, but to use their imaginations to create an image which is either visually interesting or which tells a story. Suggested emotions and group sizes are: happiness (2), fear (4), excitement (5), sadness (3), love (2), boredom (1), and anger (3). With this last emotion, there should be no physical contact! Again, the teacher should comment positively on all attempts and select strong images for presentation to the rest of the class, inviting observers to suggest why these have been chosen.



At last - dialogue!

The final warm-up activity given below introduces dialogue and movement skills, but there is still no threat of having to speak aloud in front of the group. It is a frantic, fun, exercise which will help to further reduce inhibitions; and it is an ideal springboard into role-playing and improvisation, although not good as a precursor to quiet, concentrated work!

Instant 'impro'

Children are asked to find a partner and a space in the hall. They are advised to note and remember who they are with and where they are, as this is important - these are person and place number one. The teacher asks the children to improvise a scene in which two people are arguing about where to go for a night out. This must be performed spontaneously, with no preparation time, and allowed to run for no longer than a minute. A whistle, clap or drum beat signals that the children should stop, and they are reminded that this was partner, place and performance number one. The teacher then asks the children to quickly find a new partner and place - number two - and enact performance number two, which is a mime of two people performing a juggling act. Again, this runs for a minute or so before the stop signal is given and the children are reminded to remember this as partner, place and performance number two. The children are then asked to find partner and place number three. The process is repeated up to (and including) partner, place and performance number five, using ideas for performances given below, or others devised by the teacher:

1. Improvise - two people having an argument about where to go for a night out.
2. Mime - two jugglers throwing clubs to each other.
3. Improvise - two people loudly supporting their sports team and cheering when they score.
4. Mime - sorting clothes for a jumble sale and reacting to what they are and their condition.
5. Sing and provide actions for 'The Grand Old Duke of York'.

When the children have worked with five different partners in five different places enacting five different performances, the teacher asks them to confirm what each performance was. This acts as a final reminder before the next stage. Now the teacher tells the children that, when they hear a number between one and five, they must go to the correct place with the correct partner and enact the correct performance. The teacher calls out the numbers randomly, allowing performances to last for anything from a few seconds to a couple of minutes, depending on how quickly the children remember the right partner, place and performance, and how frantic they want the activity to be. A whistle, clap or drum beat are essential for getting the children's attention before the next number is called out, as some of the performances can become very noisy! The whole activity should continue for no longer than ten minutes, or until the children are completely exhausted.



Presenting role plays and improvisations

Once pupils have become more confident in using the hall space, have worked in groups and with different partners, and have relaxed and lost some of their inhibitions, the teacher can begin to encourage them to present their work to each other through role-playing activities and simple improvisations which they can elect to show to the rest of the class. This next section of activities also introduces the contents and main theme of my chosen performance material, Belloc's 'Matilda', although not the material itself, which allows ease of access when the children are presented with the poem later.

The teacher should begin by nominating an area of the room as the performance area, and making sure this is defined clearly, for example using chairs or PE equipment.

Whole group role play

Together, the children establish a town street scene. Each child devises a character, with gender (not necessarily their own!), age and occupation and gives them a reason for walking down the street. Some children may form pairs and become family members, others may be shopkeepers, or people working on the street, such as sweepers, traffic wardens or police officers. Roles need to be appropriate, and so they should be checked with the teacher, who has the final decision. The street scene is built up slowly, with only two or three children being allowed to enter the street at a time. The teacher should encourage characters to have conversations with each other, and may wish to freeze the action to hear some of these and ensure that roles are clearly defined and executed. The children are advised that, at some point, the teacher will enter with an important piece of news, and that they will be required to freeze, in role, in reaction to that news. After the improvisation has developed for several minutes and all pupils have had the opportunity to perform their role, the teacher shouts, 'There's a house on fire!' and everyone freezes appropriately. After the freeze has been held for a few seconds, the teacher selects individual sections to show to the rest of the class. There is a discussion about how realistic and effective the freezes are, whether they are appropriate to the characters, the speed of response, and what changes could be made (if any) to make particular frozen responses more effective or realistic. If appropriate - and time allows - the whole exercise can be repeated after this discussion, to allow pupils to improve their responses.



Pair improvisation

The children are asked to find a partner and a space, and to label themselves A or B. They are then told that they are going to enact a spontaneous improvisation, with A leading the dialogue and asking B, 'Did you do that?' B should respond by lying and denying culpability. The content of the conversation should be determined instantly by each pair, with as little preparation as possible. The teacher allows these improvisations to run for a minute or two before asking for volunteers to show their work and selecting two or three of these. Then the Bs are asked to lead the improvisation, asking the As the same question. The scenario can be the same, or a new one can be devised, but this time A must reply with the truth, admitting their guilt. Again, the improvisations are allowed to run for a couple of minutes, and then selected volunteers show their work. The exercise is repeated two more times, with B telling the truth and - finally - A telling a lie and denying responsibility. Each time, pairs are invited to show their improvisations, which may result in everyone volunteering or no one! If the latter happens, the teacher will have to select pairs to perform their improvisation, and should choose those who will be least upset by the experience. Each performance should be assessed by the children being asked,

'How realistic was that?'

'Did you believe what the characters were saying?'

'Why? Why not?'

'Could we hear what was being said?'

'Did the characters' facial expressions and body language match what they were saying?'

'Was it an interesting piece of drama? Did it keep our attention?'

'What could they have done to make it more effective/ realistic?'

If time constraints allow for building on the class's evaluations, pupils can be given opportunity to develop and improve their improvisations. Each pair can be asked to devise a short conversation in which one person is accused of doing something, but lies and denies all responsibility. Children should bear in mind that the audience needs to be made aware that the character is lying, and also be made aware of the accuser's response to, and feelings about, this. Pupils can be reminded of their responses when assessing each other's work, and asked to take these into consideration when devising and preparing their performance. Only five minutes of preparation time should be allowed, as children have prior experience of the task, and then as many scenes as possible or appropriate should be viewed. (Some children will still be reluctant to present their work, but this is the point where they need to be 'encouraged' to do so.) The same series of questions as above can be used to assess how the children's performances have improved.

Small group improvisation

Finally, the children can be asked to form groups of five or six to devise, rehearse and - ultimately - perform a short improvised play based on the story of someone telling a lie. This can be a recreation of a story they have read, or an original creation. They should be advised that performances should last no longer than three minutes, and be allowed a maximum of 15 minutes for discussion and rehearsal. In the first five minutes, the teacher moves swiftly from group to group. 'Negotiating' storylines and roles wastes more rehearsal time than anything else, and the teacher should resolve such arguments before they get out of hand. The preparation time limit should be strictly adhered to, and pupils should be given regular updates on rehearsal time remaining. When time is up, each group in turn should be asked to perform their short play in the 'performance area', and this time the audience is invited to assess presentation skills as well as content, responding to questions such as:

'Could we hear what was being said?'

'Was the space used effectively? How/why not?'

'Was the action clear, or confusing? Why?'

'Could we see all of the performers?'

'Could we understand who each character was and how they were involved in the story?'

Again, if time permits, these evaluations can be used by the children to develop, improve and repeat their performances.

Moving on

After the above activities, pupils should feel

- more confident
- relaxed about the process of presenting their work
- able to assess strengths and weaknesses in their own and others' performances
- able to respond appropriately to instructions.

It is at this point that the teacher should introduce the chosen performance material. Whether this is a full script, a story, a poem or a short section of dialogue doesn't matter. Whatever the teacher decides on, the pupils should be ready and able to focus on the task of creating their play and will have the skills, abilities and confidence to do so.

In my **second article**, I shall introduce my own chosen performance material, Belloc's 'Matilda', and show how I lead children on to a performance based on this.

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Reference

QCA, *Teaching speaking and listening in Key stages 1 and 2*, DfEE, 1999

