In our last issue, Teresa Grainger discussed using drama and fiction together, and how this could benefit humanities work as well as literacy. Here, she considers using drama to help children understand and produce non-fiction texts.

Drama is a powerful and effective tool for enlivening the study of non-fiction texts in the literacy hour. In using drama to explore such texts, teachers can both support children’s comprehension of their content and develop an awareness of their purpose, audience and nature. Written composition by children of their own non-fiction texts may also be involved, with the opportunity to write in role, from within the lived experience of classroom drama, or to write alongside role, following the lived experience. Writing to prepare for a role may also be called for, as children produce autocue prompts or scripts for example.

In the literacy hour, drama can operate as a supportive scaffold for reading, writing, speaking and listening and observing the various features of non-fiction texts. These features can be contextualised in drama work, so the study of them arises naturally. Through providing an imaginary context, drama enables oral and written language to be generated for authentic and relevant purposes; and it helps to personalise such language.

However, the passing use of just a couple of drama conventions in the literacy hour does not make full use of the potential of classroom drama. Drama work deserves its own curriculum allocation; for in extended drama time, children can inhabit imaginary worlds more fully, and learn more from living inside such fictions. Extended drama experience offers more opportunities too for learning about skills and content that are relevant across the curriculum; and in this context of non-fiction writing opportunities can also be seized.

**Drama, role play & non-fiction writing**

As children voice their views in drama, they generate ideas and share these through interaction with one another. If their later writing is to be successful, then further chances to shape this talk, and a growing awareness of the features of non-fiction text types, will be needed. There is no easy path between drama and writing, but a myriad of connecting possibilities exists. The teacher needs to select the text focus, prepare the ground with examples, and confidently adapt drama conventions as the class move in and out of the imagined experience, discussing both the meanings conveyed and the writing produced.

Role-play areas can also be used to offer children planned opportunities to read and write non-fiction texts in response to need. Such imaginary places can be enriched through borrowing characters from the world of fiction, creating, for example, Miss Wobble the Waitress’ café or Percy the Park Keeper’s greenhouse. The introduction and use of particular text types can be integrated carefully into role play in these areas with the help of parents, teachers or classroom assistants working in role. For example, Percy may want to put up notices or make lists of animals seen in the park as part of his work. The storylines of fiction texts can also be used as a context for prompting non-fictional writing — for example, if letter writing is the focus,
characters from a text can write about events in the text to a problem page and receive replies. However, this article focuses on working with drama and non-fiction texts in literacy time.

**Texts from the children’s own world**

If teachers ask pupils to recommend some of the reading, radio, television and films that they enjoy, these recommendations will suggest resources from the children’s own world which contain the language of, for example, persuasion, instruction, explanation, or reporting. Such examples will be useful both for comparisons between the ways in which such media use this language and for drama work.

Extending the reading corner to include more examples of non-fiction from the real world can bring in recipe cards, magazine articles, instructional texts from comics and magazines, reviews of films and play-station games, and letters of various kinds. These can be laminated, creating colourful, relevant resources. The magazine *Young Writer*, which includes interviews with authors, letters, articles, stories and other kinds of children’s writing, is a valuable source of such material.

Use of radio, television and film resources in class enables comparisons to be made between oral and written non-fiction texts; and it also provides examples for non-narrative drama. Programmes such as *Blue Peter* and *Short Change*, even excerpts from the televised proceedings of *The House of Commons*, can all be valuable resources, as can football commentaries and cookery programmes. However, unlike the examples created by educational publishers, non-fiction texts in the real world are often hybrids, combining features of several text types. In these, audience, purpose and meaning take precedence; so drama work that seeks to imitate them will also need to adopt these priorities.

Good use of the school video camera or photographs of the children in role can enable later discussion of the verbal features of the drama. Such opportunities to construct and analyse media texts can help children understand the concepts of genre, point of view and audience.

**Drama and specialist vocabulary**

The vocabulary used to talk about information texts with children commonly includes words such as index, headings, sub-headings, layout, captions, chapters, glossary, and visuals; and some of these words can be exemplified through drama. For example, if the cover of *Behind the Scenes at the Zoo* is shown to the class, then possible titles for chapters in it can be suggested by the children — ‘Animal Surgery’, ‘The Zoo at Night’, ‘Feeding the Animals’, and so on — and freeze frames can be made to represent these. Alternatively, freeze frames of imaginary photographs for one of the real chapters in the book can be created, and these can lead to the writing of captions, sub-titles and brief paragraphs for the chapter which can then be compared to those in the published book. Drama can also be used to help children understand the function of a glossary, with groups of pupils preparing brief mimes to explicate key terms in the glossary for *Behind the Scenes at the Zoo* — for example ‘habitat’, ‘endangered’, or ‘incubator’ — and then producing written explanations for each word. The rest of the class can guess which word is being dramatised in each mime by using the glossary themselves.

The special vocabulary of alphabet books and various kinds of dictionary can also be brought to life through improvisation, mime, music and performance. In addition, different newspaper headlines of an event (fictional or otherwise) can be created as freeze frames in order to examine such words as ‘fact’, ‘opinion’ and ‘bias’. Alternatively, a single freeze frame of an event can be made and headlines and reports in various tabloids and broadsheets written, illuminating how one photograph of an incident can be used to support different viewpoints. Photographs taken of this freeze frame will also allow opportunities for the graphic design of newspaper pages.

**Drama and different text types**

A variety of drama conventions can be employed to work alongside non-fiction text types, and various possibilities are outlined below for teachers to adapt.

**INSTRUCTIONS**

The purpose of instructions is to tell how something should be done, so the aim is to produce a series of sequenced steps towards the intended goal. Examples include recipes, safety procedures, map directions and art and craft procedures. Examples can be found in print publications such as children’s magazines — *Art Attack*, *Tweeonties*, *Action Man*, *BBC Learning is Fun*, and so on — and in television programmes such as *Blue Peter*, *Art Attack*, *Ready Steady Cook* and *Delia’s How to Cook*.

Possibilities for drama and writing linked to instructions include:

- **Small group improvisations** in the style of a *Blue Peter* or *Art Attack* presentation. It may be helpful to watch at least a couple of examples with the class first, drawing connections to written instructions, discussing options and allowing preparation time. Groups can even use their own art and craft work for their improvisation. If each group’s activity is different, the rest of the class can then choose what to make, and follow the instructions for their chosen item. Class ‘dress rehearsals’ and a semi-formal television ‘viewing’ will prompt discussion and involvement in such improvisations.

- **The teacher in role** as Delia Smith, Gary Rhodes or another celebrity chef preparing a recipe which does not need cooking, e.g. icing a yuletide chocolate log or making fruit salad. The children can make notes and then write up the instructions for the recipe leaflet available from the BBC or on the website. This is a useful strategy to gauge what children already know about the structure, organisation and language features of procedural texts.

- **Creating freeze frames** which together form a set of instructions, showing the required materials, the series of
steps, and the final product. As freeze frames are still images, sequential freeze frames will reflect the order of events in the text. The class can produce a set of instructions between them which might include both freeze frames and miming significant movements, and they can then produce a written text that parallels their physical structures. The class presentation of their instructions — on how to cross the road safely, play rounders, grow a sunflower, or whatever — can be shown in assembly, accompanied by a poster sized version of the written process.

Possibilities for drama and writing linked to explanations include:

**Television or radio interviews** with scientists or professors whose role it is to explain particular phenomena to the public. The explanation can be orientated towards an adult or a children's audience, for example as a piece of information in a news broadcast or a study aid for schools. An interviewee on television can use flow charts or diagrams to exemplify the process he or she is describing. Such drama work can be undertaken in small groups and shown to other groups or classes as part of work in science or geography for example.

**Forum theatre** in which one of the television interviews described above is presented to the rest of the class, who are in role as television directors and experts in the field. As a ‘dress rehearsal’ of this improvisation is performed, ‘time out’ is called to enable the forum (viewing critics) to offer advice and suggestions to help improve the programme before it is broadcast live. Suggestions might focus on how accurate, informative and accessible the explanations are; what other questions the interviewer could ask to sharpen the programme or increase audience interest, and what extra visuals could add to the explanation. The improvisation is then revisited and developed with reference to the ideas offered, and after a couple more ‘time outs’ can be broadcast ‘live’ to the waiting audience.

Explanations account for the processes involved in natural or social phenomena. They tell how or why something happens, works or is produced. The text of an explanation usually has an opening statement to introduce the phenomenon, event or object and a series of logical steps explaining what leads up to this. Examples from print might include textbook treatments of how cows make milk, how the water cycle works, how the digestive system operates or why volcanoes happen. Examples from television include scientific documentaries, such as *Walking with Dinosaurs*, and items on children’s magazine programmes.

Possibilities for drama and writing linked to persuasive and discursive texts include:

**Decision alley**, with the class creating the conscience of an individual at a moment of decision making. This is excellent for representing arguments for and against a decision or about a particular subject. Two lines of children face one another and voice the character's thoughts, each side representing one viewpoint. The alley can also be adapted, with each side voicing the pros or cons of, for example, extending the school day, wearing school uniform, keeping
animals in zoos from the point of view of a variety of individuals rather than one. This helps highlight various individuals’ perspectives; for example, the headmaster’s, the parents’, the lollipop lady’s, the children’s, the teachers’, and the governors’ views about adding 15 minutes to the school day. These advantages and disadvantages can be summarised and used for discursive writing; or they can be written as speech bubbles for a display.

**Small group improvisation** of a radio or television advertisement, accompanied by the production of posters and handbills which are part of the same advertising campaign. Viewing or listening to advertisements and identifying their persuasive features will sharpen the productions, which may be mini-narratives, may encompass song, dance and/or music, or may include the recommendations of ‘experts’. The class can evaluate these advertisements together for their persuasive quality and decide whether anyone is tempted to buy the object, go and see the show or whatever.

**Formal meetings** between two ‘opposing’ parties can be created, either as whole class improvisations, with the teacher in role as the presiding officer, or in small groups. These could include press conferences, court scenes, council meetings, or any other focused and formal context. The imaginative context may be borrowed from a story or a poem, or a local issue can be explored with fictional residents meeting borough councillors to express their views. Follow-up letters can be written to reiterate the issues discussed and persuade the Council of the residents’ position.

**Non-chronological reports**

The purpose of non-chronological reports is to classify or describe the way things are. They are structured with an opening statement or classification and include facts about various aspects of the subject. Diagrams and photos may also be used. Examples of this kind of text include parts of topic books used in school and information guide books produced for museums or galleries. Other print examples would include articles in the newsletter *RSPCA Education*, parts of which are written for children. Children’s programmes such as *Eureka* provide good examples of non-print reports on topics such as animals, as do nature programmes such as those with David Attenborough.

Possibilities for drama and writing linked to non-chronological reports include:

**Small group improvisations** imitating the style of *Eureka*. After watching the programme, children can discuss the similarities and differences between oral and written reports and let groups create the autocue or floor scripts for parts of the programme. These episodes can then be presented with accompanying power point visuals.

**Creating a museum** focused on a topic, with each group in the class making a freeze frame of one of the displays. For example, the butterfly room in a museum of natural history could include examples of various species such as swallow-tails or adonis blue, displays of the life cycle of the butterfly, or of its predators. A museum of ancient Egypt might have rooms devoted to clothing, lifestyle, the Valley of the Kings, mummies etc. Having toured the displays and taken imaginary photographs, each group in a class can be invited to write the report placed with one of the displays. This work can be valuably extended into a fuller drama in which science and imagined experience are combined as the children prepare for the grand opening of the museum, producing publicity leaflets and so forth.

**Recounts**

Recounts serve to retell an event or a series of events. A setting or orientation is given, and then the parts of the event are described in chronological order. Examples include: historical accounts; diaries; journals; biographies; and autobiographies. Examples children may be familiar with include: sports reports in *Shoot* and other sporting magazines and on television; television programmes such as *This is Your Life*; and television news programmes such as *The Six O’clock News*. Such recounts often combine the commentator’s recount with key players offering their views of moments in the match or witnesses offering their views of an event on the news. Popular cultural magazines such as *Pop Girl* also contain brief recounts of events from the lives of famous individuals or groups.

Possibilities for drama and writing linked to recounts include:
A living timeline with freeze frames of significant events in a particular historical period. Initially, groups need to identify significant moments or events in the period they are studying, for example World War II, and then they should make freeze frames of them. Once subtitles have been added for each of these events, they can be ordered chronologically, perhaps with indications of where other events not shown would come, to ensure coverage of all the key events at home and abroad. This can be undertaken at the start of a humanities project to ascertain what the class already knows about, for example, events in the Victorian era; or it can reflect the class’s learning at the end of a period of study. Each group can write a brief paragraph recounting their event, which can then be joined to other recounts in shared writing.

A whole class improvisation of This is Your Life with the teacher as presenter, introducing friends, relatives and colleagues of the famous person. People whose lives come under the spotlight can include Florence Nightingale, Queen Elizabeth I, Henry VIII and so on. Each visitor is invited to retell a memory of time spent with the central character, and these recounts can be written up prior to or after the drama and added to the Red Book finally presented to the person.

Hot seating a key sports player or significant historical or fictional person. This will work best if both those on the hot seat and those asking the questions have clear roles and a purpose. For example, journalists could interview David Beckham for a newspaper article about a particular match; librarians could interview Michael Morpurgo, the Children’s Laureate, about his life, in order to publish a biographical article about him; or new boys at Hogwarts could interview Harry Potter for the school magazine. Notes can be made during the interview which can contribute to the final written recount.

Radio and television reports of sports events or of real historical events can be written and performed ‘live’, as part of news or sports coverage. Initially, these can be improvised, with all members of the class talking live ‘on air’ simultaneously. Then, pairs can work on producing one clear recount of a particular event. Listening to, or watching, Newsround will be helpful as preparation for these individual or paired improvisations. School netball and football reports for assembly can also be taped as radio reports or presented in a television style.

Conclusion

Teachers should widen their repertoire of possible drama activities and use these both in the literacy hour and in extended drama time when studying non-fiction, for such opportunities motivate young learners and develop their comprehension of, and ability to compose, a range of non-fiction texts. Through talking their way forward in improvised contexts, children will be imaginatively creating non-fiction texts and, in the process, widening their awareness of the structural features, vocabulary and purpose of such texts. The more formal register of non-fiction can come to life through the creative use of drama conventions and through improvisations which draw on the children’s own world experience. Such activities can build explicit bridges between the language of non-fiction studied in school and the language used at home, in the media and in the community.