Contemporary approaches to classic text - Beowulf

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In this final article in the ‘Contemporary Approaches to Classic Text’ series, Gill Robins explores the Anglo-Saxon epic ‘Beowulf’ with a class of Year 5 children. Describing how exploratory talk lays the foundation of the project, she goes on to evaluate the children’s multi-media responses to a timeless tale of good and evil. The article concludes with a reflection on the quality and value of the learning which these projects have prompted.

Why Beowulf?
With War of the Worlds projects and annual Shakespeare-in-a-Day productions now fully embedded in our creative curriculum (Robins 2009a pp. 6-11 & 2009b pp. 3-8), I decided to develop a rather different post-QCA challenge for our Year 5 children. I have wanted to explore this epic narrative with children for some time, so I was excited, on starting to research possible angles, to discover that the first written version of Beowulf exists in West Saxon, a dialect only spoken in Wessex and, in particular, around Winchester Cathedral. As our school is just a few miles from Winchester, this had the potential to provoke immediate interest.

Further investigation showed that Alresford, the small market town in which our school is situated, is listed in the Domesday Book. I chose this as my route into the narrative.

The hook
During the course of the year, I had been involved in researching the use of Exploratory Talk in my classroom, based on the work of Neil Mercer (www.thinkingtogether.educ.cam.ac.uk). I was investigating different types of ‘talk for learning’ and found that children seem to distinguish between ‘teacher talk’ (asking probing questions and challenging thinking) and ‘pupil talk’ (mostly cumulative or disputational). They found the idea of challenging another person’s thinking impolite, unless you were an adult. I had already spent considerable time developing their range of talk skills to include Exploratory Talk, so the hook served two purposes, one to introduce the children to the topic of Anglo-Saxons and the other to evaluate the effectiveness of my year’s research.

I printed a series of pictures of Anglo-Saxon artefacts and images, (the images section of www.teachitprimary.co.uk and Google images are ideal for this) divided the class into five groups and gave each group a set of related images, loosely classified into work, materials, homes, leisure and lifestyle. They had to answer one question: ‘What can we learn about these people from the images?’ Although they had no formal knowledge of Anglo-Saxon history, they have become increasingly skilled in reading images in detail. Comments like: ‘Why do you think that metal is bronze?’ and, ‘Where do think they got all this stuff from?’ also demonstrated that they were becoming skilled in asking higher order, probing questions in order to stretch each other’s thinking. Ideas were noted on sugar paper. After fifteen minutes of shared discussion, one person from each group collected the pictures and became an envoy to the other groups, taking not just the pictures, but also a summary of their group’s thinking. They spent about five minutes with each of the other groups, during which time they outlined their ideas and accepted challenges and additional thoughts. Finally, we compiled an overall list of comments – no easy feat, as by this time the children’s thoughts and questions were tumbling over each other as they talked themselves towards a conclusion. We summarised our findings as follows:

- Wood workers (made boats and houses)
- Boat makers (probably sailors)
- Sheep farmers
- Weavers (they had looms)
- Fighters – they had weapons. Were they fighting to defend themselves or to attack others?
Materials:
+ iron (used for weapons)
+ wool (woven into clothes)
+ gold (where did this come from? There’s some gold in Wales)
+ silver (have we ever mined silver in Britain?)
+ tools (made from iron)
+ bronze (they knew how to make bronze, so later than Bronze Age)
+ where did they get all these materials from? How did they find them? Were they traders? Could they have used their boats to travel to other places? Did they travel from one country to another collecting materials? How did they learn to make things?

Homes:
+ thatched houses built of wood (so earlier than Tudors)
+ nice homes (silver bowls)
+ ate meat and drank milk (if they had wool from their sheep, then they must have eaten lamb)
+ some people were important (gold jewellery and gold armour)
+ lived in communities (they built villages to live together in groups. Did they grow grain as well as farm sheep?)

Leisure:
+ liked making things from wood
+ ornamentation (they were patient, skilled and had time to make beautiful things; probably not warriors)
+ were their boats for leisure or to fish from?

Lifestyle:
+ killers or fighters (they had weapons)
+ very religious (Celtic crosses suggested Christianity, a statue suggested Christ. All were beautifully decorated, suggesting religious belief was important to them. One lantern looked Eastern)
+ skilled craftsmen (boats, weapons, looms, tools, houses).

Whilst discussing their conclusions, that some of these people were wealthy, others were farmers, builders and sailors and they were probably all religious, one child used the helmet from Sutton Hoo to suggest that they were Vikings. This was immediately countered from another group with: ‘But they couldn’t have been Vikings, because Vikings weren’t farmers. These people could fight, but they were mostly farmers. Were they Anglo-Saxons?’ This brought the hook to a neat conclusion.

Setting the scene
In the next session, I worked in role as an Anglo-Saxon chief. In a darkened room, the children were told that they were a group of people who had travelled from Europe, probably Denmark, in their boats, in search of good land to farm, somewhere between 700 and 1066. They were a peaceful people, but they could fight if they needed to defend themselves. Using evidence from the hook, we discussed what our lives were like and the roles that we would all fulfil in our community; using Domesday Book evidence we talked about what our names were and our language. We also located ourselves on an Anglo-Saxon map (www.anglo-saxons.net contains maps from 450 – 1066 AD). I introduced the role of the scop (storyteller) into our community life and talked about how important stories were to us, told in the Great Hall for everyone to enjoy. Then I led into a shared discussion about a major problem which our community was facing. The land was rich, with a river nearby, and the Bishop had given us a piece of our own land. But we didn’t have enough people to build a sustainable settlement – what could we do? The ensuing discussion was lively and involved a variety of solutions, including returning home (opposed by the more adventurous children), integrating with the local community (this led to a very heated debate about immigration and current attitudes to integration), carrying on and hoping for the best (opposed as too dangerous if the locals were aggressive) and finding someone else to join us. We closed the session by reading a letter which was to be sent home, inviting other members of our clan to join our enterprise.

Engaging with the text
I read the children Julia Green’s translation Beowulf the Brave (Green 2008), a text which was accessible to everyone. I also made Rosemary Sutcliff’s Beowulf: Dragon Slayer (Sutcliff 2001) and Michael Morpurgo’s Beowulf (Morpurgo 2006) available. Michael Foreman’s rich illustrations of the latter version fascinated all of us. After a brief discussion to ensure that the main characterisation and setting were understood, we looked at the three part structure of the plot – the killing of Grendel, the revenge of Grendel’s mother, and the dragon. Children chose one of the scenes of the story and produced a graphic story version of it.
Finally, we watched the animated DVD (Kulakov 2007) with voiceovers by Derek Jacobi and Joseph Fiennes. We finished the session by discussing the appeal of this type of narrative today and the media in which it is presented – it wasn’t long before similarities with Dr Who were noticed, with discussion about how we enjoy being frightened by monsters as long as we are in a safe place whilst being scared.

Creating monsters

Before starting on detailed language work, we listened to some recordings of Beowulf being read in its original dialect. Any of the following websites are useful for this:

www.webenglishteacher.com/beowulf.html
www.abdn.ac.uk/english/beowulf/contents.htm
www.faculty.virginia.edu/OldEnglish/Beowulf.Readings/Grendel.html

This last website also contains a transcript of part of the text, so I challenged the children to try and find any words which are similar to those we use today.

The next session started with a brainstorm question: ‘What do we know about kennings?’ This turned out to be quite a lot, as they had written some kennings in Year 3. We established that they were nouns, made description more powerful and exciting, used two words to describe one word, featured in Anglo-Saxon stories (spotted by a couple of careful listeners who were quick to make the link) and probably always ended in –er (a hypothesis which we later established to be generally accurate for our kennings, but by no means accurate for Anglo-Saxon ones). Each table was then given two kennings from the 1,000 contained in the original text, with a challenge to decide what they meant. Most of them were worked out after a great deal of discussion, including seal bath, fish home and whale road for the sea, world candle for the sun, and battle light for sword (this definition emerged from a discussion about the sun glinting off of swords in a battle). Some more elusive kennings included bone house – children suggested a torture house or a place where people were crunched (it actually means ‘body’), word fisher, meaning storyteller (they suggested teacher, dictionary and book), and sea garment, which means boat sails, but which was eloquently translated by the children as an oyster shell around pearls or sand on the shore.

Creating monsters

Next, each child wrote a kenning for a friend, which we compiled into the following class poem:

Peace maker
Star runner
Talk maker
Devil skier
Thought former
Calm creator
Friend carer
Heart smiler.

In addition to trying to guess which kenning fitted which person, the children gained a sense of the rhythm, imagery and feel of the poetry through reading aloud. Then we considered the main protagonist and antagonist in the story, in preparation for a response to the text. Working in pairs, each with a picture of Grendel and a picture of Beowulf, they were asked to write Role on the Wall kennings around the pictures. Their creative ideas included peace taker, stone heart, death friend, death constructor, strong strider, devil mirror and death beam for Grendel, and huge heart, hope bringer, determined seeker, strong heart and life saver for Beowulf. Trying to categorise their words into ‘outside’ (physical attributes) and ‘inside’ (personality attributes), proved much harder than usual, as they discovered that their kennings largely described abstract concepts.

Armed with these words, we were ready for the final stage of the project.

Responding to the text

The next task was for the children to create their own narrative, starting with the creation of a hero and a monster. The final outcome of the project was a 15 or 20 second stop frame animation sequence, so they needed to design characters which they could actually manufacture. I suggested that they could also use their kennings from the previous session to ensure that they created genuinely contrasting characters. Lego and plasticine were chosen as the most suitable media for posing and the design session began.
Some children also wrote brief descriptions:

‘As strong as 30 men, as fast as a cheetah and muscles as big as footballs, he is the ultimate fighting machine of the 31st millennium. His huge shield is harder than a fortress and his sword can cut through anything.’

‘He is as fast as a leopard so if anyone is in trouble, he is there as soon as possible. He has special running shoes which allow him to not trip up when he is running amazingly fast. He is really strong so he can pick up monsters and twist them over the top of his head with one finger. You can definitely see his big muscles from miles away.’

After reviewing the need to structure their animations, each group storyboarded their scene before completing and sharing their animations. Of the whole project, this was the aspect which was the most anticipated and enjoyed.

In preparation for the animation a storyboard was made

So what did we learn?

It was definitely fun for the children, who worked on various aspects of their design and construction willingly during their own time. The use of ICT, which was outlined near the beginning of the project, was an immediate winner, especially for those children who struggle with extended writing, or finding words to describe the images in their heads. Analysing and writing kennings was a popular activity, both because it involved a great deal of interaction, and also because the outcome was easy to see from the beginning of the lesson – creativity with words rather than writing stamina was required. A lot of discussion, paired and group work was involved; the children demonstrated increasing maturity in the way they approached this and their engagement in the hook showed how their control of exploratory talk had grown during the year.

In common with previous Contemporary Approaches to Classic Text projects, there was no assessable writing outcome. What also can’t be quantified is each child’s language development as they talked, listened and engaged with the life issues presented in classic narratives. They explored the roots of the English language, heard its sounds and looked at its notation. They imagined the unimaginable in the safety of the classroom and then understood, through practical experience, the value of shared stories within our community. And I hope they got a glimpse of the timeless goodness versus evil stories, whatever medium the storyteller deploys. So how do you evaluate something which you can’t sublevel? The final word should rest with a child: ‘It’s like we’re all scops, really.’ And that, to me, seems to be the best sort of learning experience.

References


Children’s books


DVD


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