



RSC Associate Schools programme Case Study

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An enquiry into the impact of teaching Shakespeare using rehearsal room techniques on children's writing.

Springhead Primary school in North Staffordshire is a Lead Associate School who joined the Learning Performance Network in 2013 and so our current year 6 children, whose writing has been analysed for the purposes of this action research, have been involved in this work for most of their primary career.

Since commencing our work with the Royal Shakespeare Company, we have noticed lots of benefits: children's behaviour has undoubtedly improved along with their self-esteem, attendance, confidence and well-being. Children's skills as learners have improved: we've noticed a sharp increase in resilience and co-operation in particular, and the quality of children's writing – especially when they are writing as a direct result of using the rehearsal room techniques focussed on one of Shakespeare's plays – has improved enormously and enabled more children to achieve expected and beyond by the end of key stage two. This finding was reflected in our partner schools and through my work as a moderator of writing at year six.

As a school, we wanted to maximise the benefits we were noticing for children's writing across the curriculum so, in order to do this, I needed to know more about those benefits. I began by analysing exactly which elements of children's writing improved when they wrote as a result of exploring Shakespeare's plays using rehearsal room techniques and I then traced those improvements back to the work which the children had undertaken leading up to their writing in an attempt to discover why and how the approaches affected writing. I analysed around 300 pieces of year 6 writing, most of which were produced while the children were working on Macbeth, but I also included work around other Shakespearean plays which the children have studied. I found that there were five elements which were commonly improved for children of all abilities: cohesion, tone, vocabulary choices, characterisation and description of setting, and deliberate choices which affect the reader. In this small piece of action research I found that the work impacted in particular on children whose writing was borderline expected or borderline greater depth as it enabled them to show the required elements for each standard.

The first of these elements was the cohesion of the writing which I found to be improved both at sentence and whole text level. Strong cohesion requires a strong awareness of the reader to be apparent in the writing and I found that because the children had explored the text, plot, themes and characters actively and in a carefully structured way, they were able to ensure that the reader was aware of who the characters were, what the action was and why, where and when it was happening. This is certainly not always true of children's narrative writing where unrelated and random events and characters can destroy the cohesion.

I found that links between paragraphs were stronger, possibly because the children had such a strong grasp of what they were writing about. For example, a child writing in role as a soldier in Henry V's army recalling St Crispin's day ended one paragraph with: ...'only I am left to remember.' She began the next with: 'Thirty years ago...' providing strong cohesion by linking the paragraphs and managing the time slip skilfully.

The children also used synonyms very effectively to strengthen cohesion in their writing, for example, a child writing in role as Titania justifying her decision to keep the changeling boy in a letter to Oberon, referred to that boy as: 'the changeling boy, my pet, a henchman, my divine boy, my charge, my beautiful boy, a mortal babe and this fledgling,' instead of clumsily repeating the phrase, 'the changeling boy.' The children were skilled at doing this in their writing as they had actively explored these synonyms in their drama work with the text, made frozen images of them and internalised them.

The vocabulary choices which the children made in their Shakespeare inspired writing were far more ambitious, varied and specific. On many occasions, their choices were words and phrases which they had met in their exploration of Shakespeare's text and had then been able to use appropriately in a new context, for example, a child writing in role as Macbeth justifying his decision to murder Duncan, wrote: 'The golden round is rightfully mine as it was prophesised on the blasted heath.' He used three words and phrases from different parts of the text to express his ideas.

Some children used remembered words and phrases from plays which they had studied previously and used them in their writing about Macbeth, for example, one child referred to Macbeth and his wife as 'conspirators', a word which they learned during their study of Julius Caesar. Another child described '...rats instinctively quitting...' King Duncan's chamber as Macbeth climbed the stairs to murder him; a quote from The Tempest which they had studied during the previous year.

The beauty of Shakespeare's words and phrases and the way the children have been enabled to understand, internalise and memorise them through the rehearsal room exploration of the text has clearly impacted. Children also seemed to be more willing to take chances with

using adventurous vocabulary not met in Shakespeare's texts and his work seemed to encourage and give them permission to take these risks.

Characterisation and description of setting was another element which I found to be improved in this type of writing. Usually, children tend to chunk their description of characters and the setting of their narrative writing in a paragraph near the start. When the children have such a deeply embedded understanding of characters, when they have visualised them and the setting of the play in drama work, when they have internalised words and phrases describing those elements and particularly when they have written in role as one of the characters, the description of setting and character becomes far more subtle, embedded and integrated in the text. For example, writing in role as the Porter, imagining that he was an eye witness of Duncan's murder, a child wrote: 'The vile monster snatched away good King Duncan's life and stopped his breath; the wild howling of the wind around the castle's walls seemed to stop with it.' Contrast this to an opening paragraph where the child would typically describe Macbeth, King Duncan and the castle in a far clumsier way.

One of the markers of writing at greater depth is the writer's ability to make carefully considered, deliberate choices to affect the reader. I found that this was far more prevalent in writing inspired by Shakespeare's plays which children had explored using rehearsal room techniques than in other writing. One child, writing in role as Titania, justifying her decision to keep the changeling boy in a letter to Oberon, wrote: '...a mother who died with a wish on her lips. A wish that...' thus making a deliberate choice to gradually reveal the wish to the reader in a bid to increase their interest. She went on to write: 'You cannot, shall not and never will...' deliberately using patterning with modal verbs to show the reader how adamant Titania was about her decision.

Another child writing a pair of similar letters; one from Oberon asking for the child and a reply from Titania, signed off his first letter with 'Mighty Oberon' and began his reply from Titania with 'Mighty Oberon' in quotation marks as a deliberate way of suggesting sarcasm to the reader.

I believe that it is partly due to children's realisation that Shakespeare makes such carefully considered choices, which encourages them to do the same thing; when studying the iambic pentameter rhythms in parts of Macbeth some children commented on how much time and effort must have been needed to make those choices. However, I feel that their ability to make these choices with such careful consideration of the reader is due to their increased cognitive ability to do so because, by the time they come to write, they have already made decisions and internalised much of the writing process and so they can really focus on making those higher order decisions. So much of the information necessary for the writing process has been committed to the children's long-term memory through dramatic exploration that they have increased cognitive capacity for writing decisions.

The children also become very accustomed to constantly considering the effect on the reader when they use rehearsal room techniques to explore plays. We are effectively asking them to assess this whenever they do any drama work with text – making a frozen image of ‘a devilish fiend’ means that each child has to consider how that phrase affects their stance, expression and feelings before making that image and they then go on to see how the same phrase affected other children. They are then able to apply this skill in their writing. A further feature of writing at greater depth is the writer’s ability to convey a strong sense of purpose and audience; of course, this is reliant on the skill of the teacher in providing appropriate writing opportunities so that a child can show these elements but it is far easier for a skilled teacher to provide these opportunities in writing stemming from the use of rehearsal room techniques. A child who has explored the scene between Juliet and her parents as her father struggles to accept her rejection of his choice of groom for her using those techniques, has a very strong sense of the purpose of the letter she will then write to her father. Writing in role as Juliet, my class were able to articulate that the purpose of her letter would be: ‘to persuade, to explain, to make the reader feel pity and guilt, to demand, to threaten and to bribe’ and their sense of audience was strong as they had enjoyed a felt experience of Juliet’s relationship with her father. This deep understanding of audience and purpose for their writing leads to a far more sophisticated ability to write for effect on the reader.

*‘To my dearest father,
It is with the greatest sadness in my heart that I find myself, for the first time in my life,
unable to comply with your demands which I know you make with my best interests in
mind...’*

Finally, I noticed that the tone of the children’s writing vastly improved. They were not only able to write using all the markers of formality or informality, but they were able to maintain this tone consistently throughout their writing. Exploring courtly dialogue in Macbeth and using the original language enables them to absorb, internalise and memorise that formal tone. A child writing in role as Macbeth describing the battle at the start of the play in a letter to his wife, wrote: ‘To my dear wife, I have great news to impart to you. Not only did my troops fight valiantly but we suffered very few deaths.’ He effectively used a formal tone without forcing the markers of formality into his writing in a clumsy way. Additionally, the process of writing in role as a character having just explored text in role as that character, means that children can maintain the tone throughout their writing.

Having analysed the children’s writing so closely, I would argue that studying Shakespeare’s plays using rehearsal room pedagogies is the most effective way of improving children’s writing that I have used in thirty years of teaching. Our writing results gradually climbed during our work with the Royal Shakespeare Company until they matched the national average and are now surpassing that benchmark.