



Casting a Spell with the National Curriculum

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Chris Powling on the magic of Talk.

Chris Powling on the magic of Talk

Once upon a time...

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Monday assembly in a small primary school in a provincial city. The children - from Reception to Year Six Leavers - have been told to expect 'a special visitor'. He enters the hall with the Headteacher who does her best to introduce him. Not easy, this... because the visitor is dressed so strikingly. A soldier's uniform is it? With cloak and sword? And why does he look so worried? 'Perhaps it's best if you explain the problem yourself,' says the Head. 'I know our children will help you if they possibly can.'

So he does.

And a strange tale he tells - of a Queen close to dying from a disease so rare her doctor even now is searching the earth for the only medicine that can cure her. But will she still be alive by the time he gets back with it? In the meantime *stories* are all that can keep her heart beating - funny stories, sad stories, true stories, made-up stories... maybe *magical* stories most of all. Alas, though, disaster has struck. *The Queen's courtiers have run out of stories*. That's why her Lord High Chamberlain - for that's who the visitor is - has come to the school. Can the children gather together as many stories as they can over the next few days? *Any* stories will do (maybe *magical* stories most of all) provided the children *can tell the stories themselves* to the Royal Story Collectors. After all, an old story that's freshly told can be just as good as a story that's altogether new.

'When will the Royal Story Collectors come?' ask the children.

'Next week,' says the Lord High Chamberlain. 'And I've got one more favour to ask. Could the Queen herself come, too? That way she can listen in to a few stories while they're being told - they'll keep her going till she can listen to them properly later.'

'Fine!' say the kids.

Luckily, the teachers are in favour, too. So, after a quick crash-course in Royal Etiquette - even in our democratic days Queens come across the more Queenly with a few formalities attached - the Lord High Chamberlain makes his exit.

The Plot Thickens

All week they thicken. Bookshelves are ransacked; texts are turned into talk; talk itself is tried out for size and shape and sharpness. By the following Monday, everyone's ready - the schoolkeeper earliest of all because, to the children's

surprise, the school hall has been converted into a court fit for a Queen. And what a Queen! Weary, yes - it's obvious how ill she is - but what robes! What a crown! And how grateful she is, surrounded by her Royal Story Collectors, for all the stories to follow!

Follow they do. There's a whole morning's-worth of them - each group of children, set roughly according to age, attended by a pair of Royal Story Collectors, who are ready with tales and talking-games should enthusiasm flag. Not that it does with most groups. There's an avalanche of stories on offer - funny stories, sad stories, true stories, made-up stories ... maybe *magical* stories most of all.

The climax comes just before lunch . In a special Audience with the Queen, the Royal Story Collectors report back on their sessions, with plenty of children happy to give the Queen a sneak preview of the tales they've passed on. Her Majesty looks better already! Then, to everyone's surprise (including the Royal Story Collectors), the Royal Doctor arrives - his mission has been a success. Here, brought from the other side of the world, is medicine for the Queen. She takes it... and is cured on the spot!

But what if she falls sick again?

No problem: every story that's been told that morning (funny stories, sad stories, true stories, made-up stories ... maybe *magical* stories most of all) will be stored in the Royal Archives *just in case*.

...so the Queen Lived Happily Ever After

ESSENTIAL MAGICAL INPUT

Source

'If you travel far to the south you'll come to the blue sea. It has not always been so; in earlier times the copper mountains stood there instead, so dazzling in the sunshine that you could not look at them. At the foot of the mountains there was an avenue, leading to the door of a castle full of copper corridors and rooms, and in the castle lived the old, old king Mansolain...'

It's the opening of Paul Biegel's **The King of the Copper Mountains** (Young Lions, 0 00 671653 9, £2.25) first published twenty-five years ago in Holland and recognised at once to be a children's classic. Old King Mansolain is kept alive by a hare, 'the only creature that still cared for him', and by the stories of a succession of animals sent back by the Wonder Doctor while he seeks a cure for the King's heart disease. Why shouldn't the King become a Queen, though, and children take the place of the animals -with a little help from some Royal Story Collectors? After all, an old(ish) story that's freshly told can be just as good as a story that's altogether new...

Visiting Personnel

In this case, forty B.Ed students and a couple of tutors from a local College of Higher Education. But equally effective - perhaps more effective - would be staff and students from the secondary school to which the children will go. Alternatively, what benefits might follow from involving that other under-employed primary school resource - *parents*?

Enthusiasm

The key ingredient, certainly. Without it no spell can be cast. A willingness to match, in advance, the response hoped for from the children is the best guarantee of success. This means risk-taking and trust. So it helps if you can cross your fingers . . . like the student who was worried that 'the children won't believe it'. By the end of the enterprise 'I was believing it, too,' she said. Another big help is a sense of humour. 'Is that the new National Curriculum Uniform?' asked one member of staff on encountering the Lord High Chamberlain for the first time. 'I suppose it comes with the next ring-binder.'

Justification

With or without uniform, the National Curriculum Attainment Targets say it all. Here's a web specifying those at which the event was aimed - along with the 'Reading' and 'Writing' targets covered as a bonus.

Who's Afraid of the National Curriculum?

It's more economical, in fact, to list the 'oracy' targets *not* covered.

5 ii Contribute to and respond constructively in discussion or debate, advocating and justifying a particular point of view

iii Use transactional language effectively in a straightforward situation, *eg an eye-witness account of an event or incident; reclaiming an article which has been lost.*

v Talk about variations in vocabulary between different regional or social group, *eg dialect vocabulary, specialist terms.*

6 i Contribute considered opinions or clear statements of personal feelings to group discussions and show an understanding of the contributions of others.

ii Understand and use transactional language effectively in a variety of relatively straightforward situations where the subject is familiar both to the pupil and to the audience or other participants.

iv Talk about some grammatical differences between spoken Standard English and a non-standard variety.

Couldn't most of these also be accounted for, as part of a follow-up project, with a little teacherly ingenuity?

Monitoring

How should such an enterprise be *recorded*? Even if convenient, and of optimum quality, does a Standard Assessment Task (SAT) - pitched at individual children - say it all? Worth considering are three further possibilities:

1. Mansolain the Movie

A videotape, perhaps made by the children themselves, is sure to be both fun *and* revealing - especially if due attention is paid to the soundtrack. See the adult-produced version illustrating this article.

2. Mansolain the File

How many schools keep a detailed account of their *corporate* endeavours? Mightn't this, at the very least, make it easier to organise the next one? not to mention 'selling' the last one to sceptics? If it's only individual attainment we record, what does this say about the value we place on co-operation and team-work?

3. Mansolain the Post-Mortem

...if that's the right term for an event that was very much alive. Of all activities Talk surely calls for *discussion* afterwards. The obvious questions here would seem to concern storytelling itself (process and product), the responses of different children, and adults, within the groups and the possible relationship between the 'frame' story and the stories offered within it. Care should be taken, in suggesting improvements, not to lose sight of what went well. Here, for instance, are three clinching comments on the credit-worthiness of the morning's work:

The Children: Can't you stay a bit longer?

The Students: Can't we stay a bit longer?

The Staff (being realists): When can you come back?

Summary

Isn't all this . . . well, *anecdotal*? Of course! And so it ought to be. Jerome Bruner in **Actual Minds, Possible Worlds** (Harvard University Press, 0 674 00365 9, £13.50; 0 674 00366 7, £7.50 pbk) points out that 'there are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another. Efforts to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of human thought.' He's referring to what he calls the Paradigmatic Mode and the Narrative Mode. The danger is not just that one mode may invade the other's space, but that it will judge the other in terms that are exclusive and inappropriate.

That's why, in order to promote the value of stories - funny stories, sad stories, true stories, made-up stories and maybe *magical* stories most of all - this piece has been cast, at least in part, in the form of

A Story

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