

Sustainable development of literacy workshops in a group of museums

Institutions: ERA – Educational Resources Association (museum educators from 16 Cheshire museums)

Renaissance North West lead: Literacy Network co-ordinator (Neil Dymond-Green)

Summary:

ERA is a group of Cheshire museum educators who are committed to developing their practice and supporting each other. This project has roots which predate the Literacy Network co-ordinator role, as the group worked with the co-ordinator in a previous role, where they were beginning to explore ways to use simple drama activities to bring artworks and objects to life.

This project developed an informal support system, whereby all members of the group received training in the basics of literacy in schools and a range of simple, easy-to-implement activities which could add speaking, listening, group discussion, questioning and drama to current workshops. A smaller group of more confident educators, with some experience of using these techniques were given additional training and support to develop a fiction-based workshop in their venue. Those who felt already confident in doing this were supported through further training and one-to-one planning meetings to develop a non-fiction based workshop.

The decision to create an informal hierarchy increased the future likelihood of the group supporting those with less experience and helping themselves to develop their practice in this area further.

Background:

The Education Resources Association (ERA) has existed for some time and is an excellent example of collaboration and support between cultural venues. They meet regularly to discuss issues affecting them, support each other in attending (and sometime affording to attend) training and act as a support network.

ERA members involved in this project were:

Catalyst Science Centre, Cheshire Record Office, **Cheshire Military Museum, Chester Cathedral, Congleton Museum, Cheshire Education Library Service, Englesea Brook Museum, Grosvenor Museum**, Nantwich Museum, Norton Priory Museum, Port Sunlight Museum, Quarry Bank Mill, **Weaver Hall Museum and Workhouse (formerly Salt Museum, Northwich)**, Tatton Park, Warrington Museum And Art Gallery, **Williamson Art Gallery And Museum, Wirral Museum Service, Wrexham Museum**

The venues in bold took part in additional training and support to develop fiction or non-fiction workshops, although in some cases (e.g. Chester Cathedral) were unable, due to circumstances beyond their control to progress these beyond the planning stage.

Challenges

Given the significant relationships already existing within ERA and their commitment to this project, there were few challenges to overcome.

- Some venues had additional pressures placed upon them internally which meant they were either not able to participate as fully as they had hoped or that their plans were altered at a higher level within the organisation
- The co-ordinator was ill for the non-fiction training day. The group coped admirably with the short notice of this, but it did affect some timescales for projects.
- Due to the size of this project, some collection of evidence from schools or venues proved difficult.

Approach

After initial discussions with the convenor and treasurer of ERA, the following approach was adopted:

- Three training days were held:
 - Day 1 – the full ERA group were introduced to the literacy framework (primary) and English framework (lower secondary) used to develop planning and teaching in schools. They spent the majority of the day exploring simple-to-implement activities and strategies for incorporating and improving speaking, listening, questioning, group discussion and drama within current or new workshops
 - Day 2 – a sub-group spent time exploring how story creation is taught in schools and how collections can be used in creating parts of stories, building on the work of day 1, followed by planning initial ideas for fiction-based workshops with each other and with the co-ordinator
 - Day 3 – followed a similar pattern for non-fiction, although the co-ordinator was ill and unable to be present. Chris Trevor, a literacy consultant, had also been approached to be part of this day and was able to support the group
- In addition to this, the co-ordinator provided planning support to each of the venues which requested this (Englesea Brook, Congleton Museum, Cheshire Military Museum, Grosvenor Museum, Chester Cathedral, Weaver Hall Museum)
- Within each venue's project, the organisation paired up with two or three schools. Teachers at the school were made aware of the planned content of workshops. They were asked to provide examples of work from six children (two whose writing is about average for the age group, two above average and two below) both before and after the project.
- Each venue also requested evaluation feedback from the schools of future development.
- It was agreed as important to embed the project in the programme, training staff, passing on best practice and models of working

The individual projects:

Grosvenor Museum and Art Gallery (Fiction)

The Grosvenor wanted to use their art gallery space which was not always as well used as other parts of the organisation. In the pilot phase, museum staff supported the teachers and classes, with the ultimate aim of this becoming a self-led resource in future.

The workshop was based around the scenario that a painting had gone missing from the room and that characters from the other artworks in the space were witnesses, with different viewing angles and different perceptions of what had happened. The pupils would become investigators, interviewing and putting clues together, leading to writing a newspaper article (a non-fiction genre – recount – based on the fictional occurrence).

See Appendix Page A1

Weaver Hall Museum and Workhouse (Non-Fiction)

Weaver Hall has recently rebranded from being the ‘Salt Museum’ and this was a good jumping off point for their project.

Using a wide range of speaking, listening, group discussion and drama activities, the pupils were to adopt the role of advertising consultants. Through close encounters with objects, displays and the history of the museum, they were led to gather ideas for a leaflet to advertise the ‘new’ museum (persuasive writing).

See Appendix Page A4

Congleton Museum (Fiction)

The project started from a tableau showing how the English Civil War could set families against each other depending on their allegiance to the Royal or Parliamentary cause. Using a variety of speaking, listening, group and drama techniques, coupled with relevant historical information, the pupils developed their own ideas about possible fictional conversations between the two brothers. The real world context for the script was that these would be recorded and could then be played back by other visitors to the museum.

See Appendix Page A11

Cheshire Military Museum (Fiction)

The workshop here was devised to use bring some difficult spaces to life through creation of stories relating to one of the military heroes displayed in the space, but putting him into a fictional situation.

Englesea Brook Museum (Non-Fiction)

This small museum celebrates the founding of Primitive Methodism by Hugh Bourne. In a varied and exciting day-long workshop, pupils would take part in a Victorian Sunday School lesson, use objects from the museum’s collection to inspire debate and discussion, take part in some Victorian science and become involved in an emotional debate on the hypothetical situation of the museum having to sell some of its collection and keep only ‘key’ items. All these elements gave the children the basis for a range of non-fiction writing (e.g. persuasion, recount, non-chronological report)

Williamson Art Gallery & Museum (Non-Fiction)

Over 5 days nearly 300 year 7 pupils from two local high schools visited the gallery to take part in The Great Art Debate. The project was developed to challenge year 7 pupils and develop listening, speaking, comprehension and interpretation skills. The writing outcomes involved development of persuasive language and balanced arguments. The pupils took part in a carousel of activities which explored different ideas of the monetary and historical value of art and the ethics of selling art from public collections, leading to a formal debate on the hypothetical selling of works of art from the Williamson's collection. *See Appendix Page A9*

Cheshire Education Library Services (Non-Fiction)

The library services are not a delivery-based service, but were keen to employ new activities and strategies within the resources they supply to teachers for working with boxes of historical artefacts they loan out. Through the devised resources, pupils were supported to use effective questioning, the enquiry approach, the diamond ranking grid and 'think-pair-share'. On the whole, these activities support non-fiction writing of different genres.

Intended outcomes

- Partnership between Renaissance North West and ERA
- Partnership working between schools and individual ERA organisations
- All ERA education officers trained in literacy framework and activities and strategies for incorporating and improving speaking, listening, questioning, group discussion and drama within current or new workshops
- A subset of the group to explore how fiction is taught in schools and how their collection could be used to create a workshop including elements of story creation
- A separate subset of the full group to explore how non-fiction is taught in schools and how their collection could be used to create a workshop including some non-fiction writing
- Each of these venues to have a workshop which has been piloted with two or three schools (60-90 pupils)

Intended outputs

- ERA educators confident in using speaking, listening, questioning, group discussion and drama approaches in their venues
- Some ERA educators confident in planning and delivering workshops which use collections to support story creation.
- Some ERA educators confident in planning and delivering workshops which use collections to support non-fiction writing.
- Both groups of educators will also be able to train and support ERA colleagues in the future
- Fiction or non-fiction workshops which could be used again in the future and/or adapted
- Evidence of impact of the project on children's attainment and attitude
- Evaluations from teachers suggesting successes of workshops and possible steps forward

Evaluation

Venues collected feedback from teachers and colleagues involved in developing the workshop/resource. In addition, where possible, venues collected examples of writing in the elected genre from the school partners. These were ‘before and after’ examples – two from those of average writing ability, two below average and two above.

Due to a variety of circumstances, not all venues were able to supply full evaluation and feedback to the coordinator.

Key points from evaluation included here. Full evaluations (where available) in Appendix B.

Museum staff/volunteers:

<p><i>Grosvenor Museum</i></p>	<p>“The recording at the beginning set the scene and allowed the children to start to think about what these characters in the painting might be saying. Maybe listen to it, discuss what was said, listen to it again and then see if children agree with their first observations.”</p> <p>“Practising hot seating and thought tracking back in class is key as some children struggled with what thought tracking was. Maybe taking more time at the beginning to explain and practice this.”</p> <p>“Having time to talk to each other and write ideas down before returning to school worked really well although some of the more reserved children didn’t always get a chance to voice what they thought so possible time for individual work too. One teacher had one big piece of paper between the group and this worked well as they could all write things down.”</p>
<p><i>Weaver Hall Museum and Workhouse</i></p>	<p>“Even though we had been told in the training that they would likely exceed the adults’ expectations of them, I was still amazed by how much further they seemed to go than I would think was the level of Year 4 pupils and the teachers seemed similarly impressed.”</p> <p>“This literacy project has provided a completely different lens through which to view the Museum and its collections. ... This project has highlighted the possibilities of creative, cross-curricular sessions in museums and the potential objects have to enthuse and encourage children in literacy work.”</p>
<p><i>Williamson Art Gallery & Museum</i></p>	<p>“It’s so good to see the children using the gallery. They are the future of the galleries and they light the building up. Long may this continue.”</p> <p>“[There is a need for] more interactive reading/writing activities or ‘storytelling’ by the children. Possibly linked in to our collection.”</p> <p>“Britain has the highest levels of illiteracy in Europe and much of the third world. Activities such as these are imperative to the country’s future.”</p>
<p><i>Congleton Museum</i></p>	<p>“The initial warm-up exercises gave opportunities for the children to get over-excited. Two of the schools had good discipline, allowing the children to fully participate fully without getting out of control. However, one of the schools lacked the necessary control and unfortunately the session suffered as a result. A solution may be to go into school and introduce the project to the children as well as the teachers, so they are better prepared for the session.”</p> <p>“The return session went well when they returned to record the men’s argument, but the end result very much reflected the commitment of the teacher to the project. For the future, suggest returning to school and work with children or make it a longer session and do it over a whole day.”</p>

Evaluation (continued)

Teachers and adult helpers:

<p>Grosvenor Museum</p>	<p>“A fabulously wonderful experience and very worthwhile! The children and staff thoroughly enjoyed themselves. The adventure had a massive impact on their quality of writing so thank you!”</p> <p>“Adult helpers needed more guidance as some of them felt a little lost, particularly as they were unfamiliar with thought tracking and hot seating.”</p> <p>Positives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity for children to work using their own imagination and for it not to be ‘wrong’ • Writing opportunity IN the gallery-some of my children responded really well to this and wrote far more than they would have done in class. <p>“My group responded really well to all the activities and kept their attention the whole time. The children had lots of fun using their imagination as well as learning new information.”</p>
<p>Weaver Hall Museum and Workhouse</p>	<p>“We know these children and how lively they are, so you have surprised us in keeping them engaged all day and following the activities. They have enjoyed taking part and have kept focussed with the variety and regular changing of activities.”</p>
<p>Williamson Art Gallery & Museum</p>	<p>“The ‘envoy’ system. A good opportunity to take notes and teach new skills.”</p> <p>“Analysing the picture at the beginning, pupils really enjoyed this.”</p> <p>“Enthusiasm of leader was great for pupils to learn from.”</p> <p>“Talk was a little too long. Need to give the students some actual ways/techniques on how to make notes.”</p> <p>“Perhaps give out cards with key information. Pupils found it very hard to extract information from the talk.”</p>
<p>Cheshire East Education Library Services</p>	<p>“Pupils worked remarkably well in group debate situations, placing the artefacts and their predictions in the diamond sorting grid. The higher ability were able to suggest further questions, related to the artefacts, to debate and investigate.”</p> <p>“Students with limited understanding of Who.....?, What.....?, Where.....?, Why.....?, When.....? questions may need visual reinforcement to understand these words”</p>
<p>Englesea Brook</p>	<p>“Redowan loved seeing this unusual side to British history and was fascinated by the traditions, rules and practices. It inspired him to include all his new learning in subsequent writing. It allowed to him improve his writing style as the knowledge was there and he could draw it out and write better.”</p> <p>“Alisha was enthralled by the experience. It inspired her and the content of her work was excellent. She was able to recall the events of the day clearly and used it to improve her writing.”</p> <p>“Jordan is a rather quiet boy, but he was able to communicate his knowledge very well after the visit. He felt encouraged to join in, even though he sometimes feels awkward.”</p> <p>“Charlie has ADHD and sometimes finds it hard to keep calm. His work made a lot more sense – he could use his working knowledge of the activities and those he saw from the others in his work.”</p> <p>“Marta coame from Poland 3 years ago and it was an eye opener for her. She was able to ‘feel’ the lives of the Victorian children. It put things in context for her – very important for a child whose first language is not English.”</p> <p>“Shania gained a great deal from the day, feeling valued and appreciated. Due to the ‘real’ experience she was able to put her new found knowledge into her work – she retained much of her experiences, which she usually forgets.”</p>

Evaluation (continued)

Evidence of impact on pupils:

The following venues were able to provide the co-ordinator with examples of writing:

- Grosvenor Museum
- Englesea Brook Museum
- Wirral Art Gallery and Museum
- Congleton Museum

In addition, Cheshire Education Library Services were able to supply examples of the 'diamond ranking grids' which pupils has used as part of their resource and which show a high level of engagement with the objects and a great deal of thought going into their thinking about them.

Grosvenor Museum (Key Stage 2 pupils)

Christleton School submitted 'before' and 'after' recount texts – the first on the life of one of Henry VIII's wives, the second a recount of the theft of the artwork, written from the point of view of one of the characters in other artworks.

What immediately strikes the reader is that, where the selected pupils had reported only some basic facts about the life of the relevant queen, the writing of the second piece showed a great deal more engagement with the subject matter. In addition, the pupils moved from short sentences with the bare facts to longer sentences, with connectives and a great range of vocabulary. Furthermore, all the pupils wrote at least twice as much as they had in their first piece of work.

It is a little difficult to directly report on progress made by the selected pupils from Guilden Sutton in their writing, as the 'before' writing was a short story and the 'after' piece was a newspaper article (a recount text). Recount texts have similarities with some fiction, as they detail something that happened in the past (and, of course, the recount of the 'missing art' was based on a fictional scenario). What is clear from the examples of writing is that:

- The pupils wrote more after the visit than in their initial writing
- There is a great range of vocabulary and imaginative response in the recount writing, clearly inspired by the content of their work at the museum

Englesea Brook (Year 5 pupils)

Cranberry Primary School chose recount texts. Their pre-visit piece of writing was a biography of Queen Victoria, their piece written after the visit was part of a diary of a Victorian child.

For the first piece of writing, the range varied from below average writers who wrote numbered lists of facts and short sentences with one fact per sentence to more able pupils who produced reasonably detailed writing. For the second piece of writing, the effects of the visit were especially noticeable on the average and below average writers who wrote a greater amount. Their content was clearly based on their high level of engagement with the museum visit. While quantity changed less for the more able writers, they showed a great deal of empathy with the character they were writing about, along with a good recall of things they had discovered at the museum and increasingly complex language.

Edleston Road School provided useful background on the six pupils whose writing was supplied. A direct

comparison of 'before' and 'after' writing is slightly difficult as all six wrote stories focusing on dialogue before the visit, whereas their second piece was a non-chronological report (facts about Victorian children) for the average and more able pupils and a recount (the life of a Victorian child) for the less able two.

That said, there is clear evidence that all the children in the sample wrote more in their second pieces of writing and that their writing showed real engagement with learning from their museum visit and an increasing awareness and use of the languages and features of the genres they wrote in.

Wirral Art Gallery and Museum (Year 7 pupils)

One of the schools involved provided a sample of four pupils work before and after the visit. Both were discussion texts (also known as 'balanced arguments') which can be a difficult text type for pupils to master, even at year 7. This was demonstrated by three of the pupils' initial pieces ('should we have school uniform?') actually only presenting one side of the argument, whereas all but one of the pupils presented arguments from both sides for the second piece ('should we sell the artworks?').

All four post-visit pieces of writing show a good range of arguments, clearly influenced by the content of the debate in the workshop. There is more emotive language to express the varied opinions, as well as more complex sentences. Each pupil has written more for their second piece, which suggests that they were highly engaged by the whole process of the workshop leading to the Great Art Debate.

Congleton Museum (Year 3 and 4 pupils)

One school supplied examples of 'before' and 'after' writing (six samples: two average, two above, two below). The initial writing had the focus of creating dialogue between two characters from a Greek object. The later writing was individual ideas of the conversation between the 'blood brothers'.

It is very noticeable for the initial writing that all the pupils selected had very little idea of context and so the conversation was very general, although one of the higher ability pupils exhibited some evidence of humour. The lower ability pupils, in particular produced very little writing.

The later pieces of writing all showed that they had internalised their learning from the museum visit and had a good understanding of the context for the writing, showing both more of a 'real' conversation and distinction between the characters. All the pupils in the sample group wrote a greater quantity of writing and it seems a reasonable conclusion that they were enthused by the museum workshop.

Summary

The samples are from a small number of pupils and not from all organisations which took part in the ERA project. However, there are clear trends within the writing:

- Enthusiasm and engagement with the content of the workshops translated into longer pieces of writing after the visit
- Language used during the workshops (both by educators and by pupils themselves) has transferred into their writing
- Sentences within their post-visit writing are generally more complex and have a greater range of vocabulary and connectives

Obstacles and issues

Given the nature, size and diverse membership of the project, there were surprisingly few issues. The two main ones were that some organisations were unable to proceed beyond the planning stage, due to other pressures and that collection of evidence was not completed for all venues. This was mainly due to the difficulties involved in getting hold of teachers.

Actual outcomes

- ERA already had a good relationship with the Early Years and Family strand of Renaissance North West learning work and they embraced the opportunity to build capacity and skills in their offer for other pupils
- The ERA members worked with a mixture of schools – those they had a long-standing relationship with, those they had occasionally had visits from and those they had never had serious contact with
- All ERA education officers have been trained in literacy framework and activities and strategies for incorporating and improving speaking, listening, questioning, group discussion and drama within current or new workshops
- Both the fiction and non-fiction sub-groups produced high-quality, engaging workshops or resources
- Each of these venues piloted a workshop with two primary schools (approx 60 pupils each), apart from Cheshire Library Service, who trialled their resource with 36 pupils (30 mainstream Year 5 and 6 from a special school) and the Williamson Art Gallery, who worked with approximately 300 Year 7 pupils. This means the combined projects worked with approximately 636 pupils.

Actual outputs

- ERA educators report that they are confident in using speaking, listening, questioning, group discussion and drama approaches in their venues
- A group of ERA educators have demonstrated their confidence in planning and delivering workshops/resources which use collections to support story creation.
- A group of ERA educators have demonstrated their confidence in planning and delivering workshops/resources which use collections to support non-fiction writing.
- There is a healthy expectation that the ethos and nature of the ERA group means that colleagues will support and train each other in extending their knowledge and skills in future
- ERA members report that these workshops and resources will become part of their regular offer
- There is clear evidence that the engagement of pupils with the subject matter through their contact with artworks and objects and through the use of activities to stimulate their speaking, listening, group discussion and drama skills has translated into improvements in both quantity and quality of writing related to their experiences

Lessons learned

This has been an ambitious project, with a great deal of success due to the hard work and commitment of the members of ERA. This commitment has included their willingness to adapt and develop their own practice by using an enhanced range of strategies and activities to engage pupils in speaking, listening, questioning, group discussion and drama.

- All members of the group have recognised that activities and strategies to support literacy can be easily embedded within new and existing workshops, with little or no cost
- In a time of political and financial uncertainties, workshops with clearly signposted links to literacy, in teachers' language will appeal and succeed, especially as literacy will probably not stop being an issue in the UK
- Even if the literacy and English frameworks are removed by the current administration, good teachers will recognise the worth of embedding speaking and listening skills within their work and will see the benefit of it in an 'outside the classroom' learning situation
- It is key to communicate with teachers in advance about the content and approaches of such workshops – it is important to move beyond simply identifying the session as being a 'literacy' session and moving into using the same sort of language as teachers do in terms of curriculum and planning, without simply listing elements of the curriculum
- Where possible, it is equally important to provide support (perhaps through a brief talk at the start or through some sort of written materials) to parent helpers and other support staff, so they can fully engage and support pupils they are working with during the visit

Next steps

- ERA will hopefully continue to share within the group:
 - The example projects/workshops/resources listed here
 - Offering mutual support for venues who were not part of the fiction or non-fiction phase, but who may feel able at a later date to try this with their space and collection
- A concerted effort (perhaps jointly) to inform teachers of the new literacy-related workshops and resources, using references to speaking, listening, questioning, group discussion and drama and the language of the literacy/English frameworks (or whatever English curriculum eventually succeeds them).
- Exploring how teachers who have already worked with ERA venues can become advocates for their work.
- Exploring any links with Children's Services in Cheshire East and West and with headteachers, which may help promote this fantastic work.