

### **Case study: Talk for Writing (non-fiction) in museums and galleries**

**Institutions:** Manchester Art Gallery, St Chrysotom's Primary School, National Literacy Trust

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

#### **Summary:**

The National Literacy Trust has developed and championed the use of the Talk for Writing approach, which many primary schools use. Talk for Writing (TfW) is a combination of a variety of activities and strategies to encourage pupils to discuss and understand how writing is created. One part of TfW is the 'imitate, innovate, invent' approach which supports pupils to learn the language and structure of stories, through the use of words, actions and 'story maps', first working with an already-written story, then adapting it and then creating a new story with similar language or structures. This approach addresses a range of learning styles and has been shown to have a very positive impact on the writing of primary pupils.

'Imitate, innovate, invent' has been used in some of the workshops of the Preston Museums and Schools in Partnership project, as well as Manchester Museum (using 'The Gruffalo' and the animals and birds galleries with Year 2 pupils, and starting from the myth of 'Odysseus and the Cyclops' and developing it through the animals and Mediterranean Archaeology galleries).

In discussion with Judy Clark, Talk for Writing consultant for the National Literacy Trust, it was decided to consider how TfW might support non-fiction outcomes in museums and galleries. Key to this project was the involvement of teachers right the way through the process, so that the work would be embedded in longer-term curriculum planning and learning.

#### **Background:**

Bolton Museum and Art Gallery were originally involved in this project, looking for additional resources to support and develop their Dinosaur workshops both onsite and in schools. Due to financial cutbacks and staff changes, they were only able to take part in Phase 1 of this project, but hope to use the training to develop their educational workshops in 2011.

Manchester Art Gallery have a very successful 'Victorians' workshop, based around Ford Madox-Brown's painting 'Work'. The workshop immerses pupils in one of four roles (navvy, urchin, gentleman reformer, lady temperance campaigner) and explores themes of change, population movement and housing conditions in Manchester in the 1850s. It is also supported by an interactive website based around characters from 'Work' coming to life (<http://www.manchestergalleries.org/ford-madox-brown/>).

The Gallery were keen to explore how the emotional connection pupils make with the lives of their counterparts and their understanding of life in Victorian Manchester could be enhanced through using Talk for Writing 'imitate, innovate, invent' approaches.

## Challenges

- Lack of knowledge by museum educators of the various parts of Talk for Writing, in particular ‘imitate, innovate, invent’
- Finding schools who use Talk for Writing strategies (although rolled out as a national training programme, it is unevenly used in schools)
- Overcoming the perception that a very active, immersive engagement with text, such as through using the ‘imitate, innovate, invent’ approach is:
  - Much more than simply learning a story by rote
  - Appropriate for pupils across the primary age range (and not just Key stage 1 and the beginning of Key Stage 2 as was believed by one of the Bolton teachers initially involved)
- ‘imitate, innovate, invent’ as an approach is relatively time-consuming, especially within the context of a visit to a museum or gallery

## Approach

After initial planning with Judy Clark from the National Literacy Trust, the following approach was decided upon:

- Half a day’s training in the basics of the Talk for Writing approaches, especially ‘imitate, innovate, invent’ (N.B. Teachers will often undertake several days training to achieve an appropriate level of understanding, but budgetary restrictions meant that this time needed to be shortened). This training involved both teachers and museum educators, with the co-ordinator there to support Judy
- A second half day in the two groups (Bolton Museum and two teachers from the town were still involved at this point), where Judy, the co-ordinator, the museum education officer and the teachers would plan together how to incorporate the ideas. Bolton teachers considered report writing with their Year 5 pupils. The Manchester teachers (Lisa Perry and Caroline Woods) decided to approach discussion (‘balanced argument’) texts with their Year 5 and 6 pupils – typically the hardest of the six non-fiction genres covered at that age to teach.
- The pupils involved would write a text in the chosen non-fiction genre before and after the workshop and six examples of each would be selected (two average ability, two above and two below) to assess what impacts the workshop had on:
  - Quantity of writing / enthusiasm for writing
  - Use of language and structures appropriate to that genre
- During the workshop themselves, the pupils would learn a non-fiction text through the ‘imitate’ part of ‘imitate, innovate, invent’ – using the words, gestures and a ‘text map’ (with symbols to help reinforce key language and structure of the text) and would begin to innovate through creating their own text map for a similar text on the same topic.
- In school, the teachers would then develop the project’s aims, using the ‘Work’ interactive and the continuation of the ‘imitate, innovate, invent’ approach

### Intended outcomes

- Partnership between Renaissance North West and the National Literacy Trust
- Partnership working between schools and Manchester Art Gallery
- Partnership working between schools and Bolton Museum
- 4 teachers trained in Talk for Writing in the context of museums/galleries and in terms of non-fiction writing
- 2 education officers trained in Talk for Writing in the context of museums/galleries and in terms of non-fiction writing
- 4 workshops or workshop elements (2 in each venue) to have taken place to develop how this works in practice
- 4 classes of approx 25-30 year 5 or 6 pupils (aged 9-11) taking part in a workshop

### Intended outputs

- Teachers and museum educators confident in using 'Talk for Writing' approaches in their venues
- Evidence that the 'imitate, innovate, invent' element of Talk for Writing can be used:
  - In the context of non-fiction writing
  - In a museum/gallery environment as an integral part of the learning there
- Workshops or workshop elements which could be used again in the future and/or adapted
- Evidence of impact of the project on children's attainment and attitude

### Evaluation

Responses from teachers:

- "With writing being a main focus for our school this year and a major part of our School Improvement Plan, visits and projects such as this are a vital tool for us to use to get the children inspired and writing. Work produced after an educational visit is always of a much higher quality, because of the first hand experiences the children have encountered."
- "Using the art work as a stimulus and bringing the characters to life through the children, has opened up a wealth of opportunities for cross-curricular work in the classroom. Following on from the visit we hope to continue the balanced argument until the children are confident telling it. The children will then write the balanced argument using the features appropriate to that genre. The children will then write a balanced argument of their own based on other issues from the Victorian period. We will also be completing art work based on the painting and hope to look at issues around gender and class"
- "I found that the lower ability, in particular the children with English as an additional language, really benefited from the work and phrases which they could steal and use in their writing."

Evidence from children's work:

The sample looked at consisted of three pieces of writing:

- A piece written before the visit on the discussion topic: 'Should teachers have PPA (planning, preparation, assessment) time?'

- A piece written the day after the gallery visit, reconstructing (and in some cases extending) the balanced argument from the text maps they had created after learning the text for the discussion ‘Should beer be banned?’
- A piece written a few days later, where the children were allowed to choose what topic their discussion writing would be about

There were six sets of writing from those with a below-average level of writing, five sets from those with an average level of writing and four from those with an above-average level.

As the teacher noted, the lower ability writers showed particular benefit from the ‘Talk for Writing’ approach used, showing a good ability to reconstruct the text from the gallery visit and also to use structure and language features in their independently-created text. This is not to say that the other writers did not also use these features too, only that the difference was most marked in the lower-ability group’s writing.

Of the other groups, three of the average-ability group (60%) and two of the higher-ability group (50%) not only reconstructed the ‘beer’ text, but extended it with an additional paragraph of arguments for and against.

For all three groups, the vocabulary and structures of the ‘beer’ text were accurately reconstructed, demonstrating that they had been able to internalise the text through the three-pronged approach (speaking, visual stimulus, gestures).

Equally, it was not just a case of learning the text by rote, as all the writing samples for the final independent piece show evidence of the vocabulary and structures, suggesting that the Talk for Writing ‘imitate, innovate, invent’ element provides writers of all abilities with scaffolding to support their independent writing.

It should be emphasised that ‘balanced argument’ discussion texts are generally considered the hardest of the six non-fiction genres taught at Key Stage 2 for pupils to internalise. The combination of immersion in the roles in the main Victorians workshop and the ‘imitate, innovate, invent’ approach to internalising the text in a fun and engaging way suitable to a range of learning styles appears to be a very positive way for pupils to improve their writing skills.

### **Obstacles and issues**

- Bolton Museum faced a period of both financial cutbacks and losses of staff and were unable to commit the time to the project. In addition, the teachers involved with the project were, unfortunately, not convinced that using ‘imitate, innovate, invent’ was appropriate for year 5 classes.
- Manchester Art Gallery also had financial and staff pressures at the time and the Senior Manager for Schools and Colleges, while wholeheartedly supporting the project, was unable to be involved in the delivery of the actual workshop. This role was ultimately shared between the co-ordinator and the two teachers and worked well.
- One of the schools located for the project pulled out the day before the training day, but fortunately a second teacher from the other school (St Chrysostom’s) was able to join the project shortly after and the two teachers from the school supported each other and the co-ordinator.

### Actual outcomes

- A good working relationship has been developed between the co-ordinator on behalf of Renaissance North West and Judy Clark from the National Literacy Trust. This project has been reported on in a national conference organised by Renaissance North West and Preston Museums and Schools on Partnership, as well as in a series of training events organised jointly by the Museum Libraries Archives Council's (MLA) Strategic Commissioning strand and the NLT
- St Chrysostom's school are happy to work with Manchester Art Gallery again
- 3 teachers (1 from Manchester, 2 from Bolton) were trained in Talk for Writing in the context of museums/galleries and in terms of non-fiction writing
- Bolton Museum's Education Manager and Manchester Art Gallery's Senior Manager for Schools and Colleges took part in training and development work on Talk for Writing in the context of museums/galleries and in terms of non-fiction writing
- 2 workshops took place at Manchester Art Gallery, using the 'imitate, innovate, invent' element of Talk for Writing to build on their pre-existing Victorians workshop – 49 Year 5 and 6 pupils (aged 9-11) took part

### Actual outputs

- The two Manchester teachers were used to Talk for Writing in school (one more so) and now seem more confident of how TfW could be adapted for use in a museum/gallery context. In the pilot workshops, one teacher 'told' the framing elements of the text (introduction/conclusion), while the other teacher and the co-ordinator took on the roles of the two opposing arguments (the temperance campaigner arguing that beer should be banned, while the navy argued that it was better than drinking dirty water and contracting cholera)
- There was a high level of pupil engagement and motivation during the TfW workshop. It was clear that the pupils were engaged with the text and using the text map and gestures to support them in learning the language and features of a discussion text in a very immersive way. Their emotional engagement with the issue built very successfully in their total immersion in the four roles in the main Victorians workshop.
- There would probably need to be some limited additional support to both the Gallery and teachers, but the process was not difficult to implement and could be fairly easily replicated in future.
- There is clear evidence from the pupils' writing samples that the 'imitate, innovate, invent' element of Talk for Writing in a non-fiction and museum or gallery-based environment provides a high level of engagement and motivation with both writing skills and the content thereof.
- It is particularly noticeable that vocabulary and language structures were internalised and re-applied in different writing situations, particularly for those with a lower level of writing ability and/or those for whom English is an additional language

### Lessons learned

- Some of the issues for this project arose around time constraints, as well as at a point when museums and galleries were under a lot of pressures. While this did not stop half of the project going ahead, it was perhaps not the ideal situation, so longer timeframes for planning and implementing would be worth it for any future similar projects.
- There is patchy understanding and take-up of Talk for Writing in different schools. This should not be underestimated in developing any future work. Ensuring a reasonable level of understanding of and commitment to TfW from teachers involved will be essential. Equally, demonstrating the validity of using the 'imitate, innovate, invent' element of Talk for Writing with older primary pupils needs thought. Unfortunately, there was insufficient money to arrange to video the TfW workshops, but this may be a useful thing to do in future.
- For any teachers or museum educators using the 'imitate, innovate, invent' element of Talk for Writing, it is important not to underestimate the commitment to learning the words and gestures for the text. This does take some time and is possibly the most major commitment needed if this approach is developed further.
- Talk for Writing, although primarily devised to support and develop children's understanding of fiction texts, is quite robust and flexible enough to work with non-fiction texts as well.

### Next steps

- Museums and galleries who have already undertaken a commitment to involving more literacy elements in their workshops (especially speaking, listening, group discussion and drama) may find that Talk for Writing either for fiction or non-fiction texts may be a very useful and positive way of enhancing their work. It can relate very well to collections and to the stories, issues and discussions which relate to them.
- Clear communication with schools will be necessary, ascertaining their understanding of Talk for Writing, especially the 'imitate, innovate, invent' element, as well as their commitment to this.
- Equally, it would be pointless to undertake such a partnership with a school if teachers are not involved as much as feasible in planning (and delivering) this and in embedding it in their longer-term curriculum planning.