

Dramatic Conventions-their use and abuse-an attempt at an explanation.

The frame under investigation:

Victorians

NC goals are often planned for 'coverage' by an attempt to investigate -through the QCA models-questions associated with the time of queen Victoria. There are several challenges to those that hold perceptions of child centeredness in their approaches to learning.

With this approach-often 'coverage' means '**knowledge acquisition**' and is at the forefront of a teacher's mind. Coverage terminology has often been associated with planning for learning outcomes, but with little regard to enabling learners to explore the particular times through enquiry based methods and applying the NC orders in historical skills.

However, with the resurgence of the concepts of 'cross curricular' in literacy mathematics, thinking skills, citizenship, PSHE and ICT for example- Victorians can be investigated in a way that engages learning in a multidimensional fashion- if teachers have the skills to do take on this challenge.

Mind you-many teachers of calibre from the past (and present) have used such approaches within the clandestine classroom for years! The point I am trying to make here is that cross curricular modes of working are hardly a revolutionary concept. Metaphorically, the secret garden is now a place where all can walk or at least those with the will to do so.

In an age presaged by the new mantras of 'personalisation' what could be the learning possible in Victorians that would or could spark youngsters' interests, motivation and engagement?

The QCA has one answer in their key enquiry questions for History units 11 and 12:

- ***What was it like for children in Victorian Britain?***
- ***How did life change in our locality in Victorian times?***

Helpfully the texts and booklets published along side these QCA History units outline an array of learning objectives within the 'big questions' highlighting historical skills (and the '**use of drama**'-albeit at a superficial level.) However there is little in the way of pedagogy.

Clearly teachers can interpret and design their own way through the units to suit themselves and the overall learning needs of their learners. In these days of personalising the curriculum and the urgent need to transform the learning of our

young-housing the curriculum within an imaginative enquiry process or mantle of the expert structure could well suit many purposes in this domain. Furthermore-such approaches act as a '**transformational**' methodology.

But what might it look like in practice?

If the learning is to do with 'children's lives in the Victorian times' an imaginative and creative structure focussed on this aspect could create a number of enquiry based avenues and cross-curriculum opportunities.

Victorians gives us opportunities to 'find out' and investigate, using the websites to explore a range of data, as well as use ICT to represent findings, or explore primary or secondary data sources. If it is housed in an 'enterprise'-we can use the enterprise to harness the mandatory NC outcomes agenda. Here, I mean the sorts of writing reading, recording and assessing that goes with schooling these days. It may seem odd to say this-but an obsession about what and how much learners produce at the end of the day as 'written' evidence seems to take up a great deal of effort by our teachers. A mantle of the expert approach then, needs to pass through the gauntlet of these concerns, as it will often have to form part of a mandatory curriculum. (Perhaps as the millennium progresses, a different mandatory outcome will be required? For example, it may be 'mandatory' for learners to possess the knowledge, skills and understanding involved in the burning of fossil fuels that affects our planet-so that no one is allowed to burn them-and all have to abide by it!)

All this can happen-but the question is to find the key that interests students enough to engage their passions and concerns to take their learning forwards and get them to want to learn more!

However, deciding on the frames (or constructs) for an imaginative enquiry, using mantle of the expert as the main source and inspiration to learn through, might be worth a closer look especially if **learning through** rather than **learning about** is high on the agenda.

We could for example frame the work to imagine:

- An organisation that is able to recreate historical images for museums and advertising firms for example. The organisation in question has been asked to create a living museum so that people can get the 'Victorian experience' from the visit.
- Alternatively we could imagine ourselves as keepers of pit ponies who run a sanctuary for pit ponies as part of the work of the organisation. They also provide a 'real' experience for visitors to see pit ponies at work-how children were deployed-and how Lord Shaftsbury made a difference to the lives of people in coal mines.

Or.....

- A group of historical investigators interested in finding out the truth about working conditions in Victorian coal mines.
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There are of course countless frames we can create for learning-the hard task is to tailor the frame for the learners we have in mind and their needs. It means that in planning-deep consideration of the learners is the key to optimising the work for their learning.

What ever the frame however-a working knowledge of dramatic representation and the conventions associated with its forms will be a critical feature for the work to reach beyond the superficial and critically, affects the pace of learning.

(**Pace** is yet another aspect of learning and teaching that requires a good look-but not in this short paper!)

Goals for learning or goals for ‘activities’? The concept of ‘depiction’.

In classrooms or other settings for learning, the tools associated with the conventions for dramatic action have the function of holding time still for a moment so that we can visualise and investigate human beings and their actions in more detail.

Dramatic representations can, if so viewed, encompass the representations used in other ‘arts’ fields (Kowzan) as a means to constructing and deconstructing learning episodes created by people. For example-imagining that a person is now projecting the role of Lord Shaftsbury in a classroom setting—the role can be ‘depicted’ in a variety of ways-depending on the learning under investigation. For example:

- ***As if a living breathing behaving person.*** (Theatre/film/dance/drama)
- ***As if in a fragment of a film*** that can be paused at will and talked about using the conventions of video and film. (Film)
- ***As if in a sculpture*** created to project power to challenge perhaps. In this frame Henry can be talked about-walked around-analysed and pondered on without any concern that he can hear! (He cannot-since in the moment of time under scrutiny he is imagined as a statue-and statues cannot hear!) Clearly the human mind has to work in 2 modes-one where we know that we making this learning happen and in actuality the person can hear-and one where we make believe that the role is a sculpture and can thus ‘not hear’! (3 dimensional art processes)
- ***As if in a painting*** that has to be viewed as paintings are-i.e. from front on! (2 dimensional arts processes)
- ***As if as a voice only***-speaking from the past-in this frame the visual elements of the role are secondary to his words in terms of focus. (Radio)

- Alternatively a class and/or teacher may create the 'presence' of the role in other ways using objects and language-for example Shaftsbury's invested presence may be implicated by his gloves placed neatly over a chair.
- In an imagined circumstance-Shaftsbury may leave a simple 'S' on a posy of flowers, placed on the grave of a child labourer-as a sign to be discovered (or not discovered) at a later date. It is in the same dimension of human actions that are anonymous-we remember the wood carver whose special mark was the carving of a mouse on all his furniture or the activities of Otto Shindler.

The conventions used, depicting human presence in learning episodes, can be directed to hold meaning that can either be 'deconstructed'-as in the 'glove' example above- or investigated as in the film or sculptural or painting representations above-or actively engaged with as if in a living human being representing and behaving as Lord Shaftsbury. Each has its own unique contribution to learning about the human condition.

The ***conventions continuum*** created at Newcastle University under the direction of Professor Dorothy Heathcote (then Reader in Education) in the 1980's, situates two extremes of drama's unique 'in the now' convention. At one end we have a living human representation (as in life) and at the other extreme-abstracted implications of a human being's presence.

The conventions enable learners and teachers using them to determine and investigate implications of actions that humans take in times of tension.

They can therefore help support understandings of what it means to be human through breaking down the components of invested behaviours (Heathcote) or as Dr Brian Edmiston describes them-'significant deeds'.

The uncovering of the layers of meaning. (Heathcote 1980)

Human actions can be classified under five layers of meaning -ACTION, MOTIVATION, INVESTMENT, MODEL, VALUES intrinsic to the action. (These levels can be imagined as in a layer cake.)

The top layer is the seen or witnessed action.

- ACTION-that is captured for its intriguing meaning in the make believe FOR EXAMPLE IN OUR SHAFTSBURY INVESTIGATION-THE ACTION IS SHAFTSBURY PLACING HIS GLOVES ON THE BACK OF A CHAIR.

The second layer is less visible but can be understood by investigating and enquiring into the action that is 'short term'.

- MOTIVATION i.e factors affecting the moment in question from the viewpoint of the role can be determined through perceptive investigations. (In the theatre an audience has to follow the narrative of the actions as they occur. In a drama for learning experience –learners use selected theatre moments to uncover Shaftsbury's motivations by subtle questions from observers). For example-learners who are in their own role as advisers to Shaftsbury-are invited to engage in conversations with the role to ask questions that investigate ***motivations***. Here, a question might be constructed as follows, and is only used here as an example: If we frame the role as if in a portrait.....

'My Lord-we notice that you place your gloves with great care on the back of the chair-might we enquire what you intend by this action?'

The question invites the role to use language that uncovers aspects of his motivation.

'I place them here so that they are not lost or get dirty.'

For Lord Shaftsbury-it is perhaps a subliminal recognition that not only is it the 'time to take the gloves off', but a signal that might have connections to the concerns of 'lost' children and 'cleanliness'. The quest for establishing the rights of people in mining and factories may be beginning to form in his mind?

The third layer 'investment' requires a different level of effort to gain further insights- witnessing alone or interpretation are not likely to be enough since dialogues, thinking opportunities and making connections help begin to unravel the deeper layers of human actions by probing questions, testing and constructing hypotheses.

- INVESTMENTS are those internal forces that give human beings energy to those aspects that drive their lives-they are long term-for example-framing the role now as if in a photograph at a mine where children work; 'My Lord we read pain on your face as you witness children at work. May we hear the words in your mind?'
'I stand here in all my finery -helpless to take this stain away from my conscience.'

Perhaps for Shaftsbury his investment in the action of visiting a coal mine in the Victorian era has to do with living inside a clear conscience in the use of coal to make industry profitable and keep the country warm.

The fourth layer begins to ask the question that helps mediate human behaviours and understand how and why people behave as they do.

- MODEL represents mind sets or inbuilt habitual responses that we as humans engage in- to live our lives- that are often in the sub-conscious. Shaftsbury for example may have in his past a nurse who taught him that compassion for others was a virtue-or perhaps a church sermon on equity made a huge impression on a young mind? A class could indeed research the life of the peer with this question driving their enquiry.

Finally, through careful listening, researching or questioning -we can begin to formulate a hypothesis that possibly helps us understand how people take the stance in life that they do. These are always based on values of some sort. Thus they engage the ethical dimensions in learning-as the questions are reflective and create understandings through active explorations. However, understanding is one thing-what people do with their understanding is quite another!

- VALUES intrinsic to the actions people take are critical to understanding how others think and behave as well as helping us in reflections, to perceive their drives at the deepest level. They can therefore help us begin to reflect on our own life and drives. We begin to perceive how Shaftsbury's values affect his actions and the train of events he unleashed on the British aristocracy of the time. Shaftsbury's investment may lead to a final layer-that of his values and beliefs that ***all those who work the mines must have their welfare looked after by those with the power to make a difference.*** Whilst this is a highly outmoded sentiment nowadays-for Victorian England it was a revolution allowing a class to experience how history moves on-and what is now on the agenda for change.....

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