



# The power of play

Tim Taylor stands up for the use of play in the primary classroom, and shows how imaginative inquiry and the conventions of dramatic action can be put into practice.

Outside of early years, play is often mistrusted in today's classrooms. This tendency grows, along with the children; play is almost unused in high schools. Yet, play is an important learning medium allowing people (not just young children) to safely explore new ideas and experiences, build knowledge and skills, and develop greater understanding.

## Effective learning experiences

Our education system's mistrust of play is the product of a general rejection of 'progressive' ideas in teaching and learning over the last twenty years. Play is now seen as important for the very young, but too frivolous and superficial for 'proper' academic learning. This is a mistake, both because it dismisses

the wisdom and experience of a whole generation of educationalists, but also because it misunderstands an approach that can create effective learning experiences for children.

I am not advocating a happy-clappy, let's all play games, laissez-faire education – rather, a planned, structured use of play that develops meaningful opportunities for gaining knowledge, skills and understanding. We might call it a 'rigorous application of playfulness'.

## Case study

This article will use a case study from my own classroom to explore how children's play can be developed by the strategic use of inquiry teaching and the conventions of dramatic action to create opportunities for developing new skills and knowledge. There are 30 children in my Year 4 class. They come from a range of backgrounds

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and include a number of very disaffected boys. We were studying the Anglo-Saxons as our theme for cross-curricular learning, imagining we were working as a team of history researchers for a new TV series: 'The Really Interesting History of Britain'.

This was an early session, setting the context and the children were studying the Battle of Hastings. We had already watched a documentary on the history of the Norman invasions and looked at a painting of the battle by the artist Tom Lovell.

## Reconstruction

The aim of the session was to create an interpretation of King Harold's Anglo-

Saxon camp on the eve of the battle – a *Time Team*-style reconstruction. It was going to be a challenging activity for some of the children who find it difficult to work together, listen to each other, and keep hold of their emotions and individual needs. In order for the camp to feel authentic, the students needed to remember what they had learnt in previous sessions and apply this knowledge within the context.

The session started with everyone on the carpet:

*'I wonder what the Anglo-Saxon camp was like the day before the battle? Just before Harold arrived with his soldiers having marched directly from the North. I expect there was a lot to organise. The stables for the horses, the kitchens for cooking the food, the medical tent for the sick and wounded, and the armoury for sharpening and repairing the soldier's weapons. If we move the tables and chairs around the classroom and use our imaginations, we might be able to recreate what it was like. What do you think? We might need some paper for drawings and possibly some other resources.'*

### The room takes shape

As the children start to organise themselves, I walk around the room handing out resources, helping them make choices, and providing extra information.

After about 10 minutes the classroom is starting to take a different shape: tables and chairs are moved around to create four separate spaces - one representing the stables for horses, another the kitchens and eating area, a third the medical tent for the sick and injured, and the last the training camp for the soldiers to practice fighting skills.

I notice (not unexpectedly) two boys creating swords for themselves out of card, sellotape, and rulers. Once

## Further information

- For more information on the imaginative-inquiry context and to access a detailed plan of the whole teaching unit described, including resources, please visit [www.imaginative-inquiry.co.uk](http://www.imaginative-inquiry.co.uk). Schools can subscribe to this website edited by Tim Taylor which has lots of ideas for using drama and imagination in the classroom.

they are finished, they start to play-fight. This is an alarming situation for teachers: all kinds of terrible events rush through my mind – broken rulers, screams, tears, popped eyeballs! – and I need to do something fast.

From experience I've learnt not to feel disappointed when things like this happen. And what did I expect? This is a training camp for soldiers on the eve of battle after all. My job is to act calmly and help the children 're-structure' their play into something more controlled and meaningful. To help me in this I've learnt to use the conventions of dramatic-action to slow down the sometimes frenetic action of play into moments of stillness and reflection.

### Four steps to dramatic inquiry

The conventions of dramatic action were first listed by Dorothy Heathcote in her influential essay *Signs and Portents* (see other resources box). There are thirty-three in all. Using these, I can take a playful situation and re-focus the activity into a dramatic-inquiry and a meaningful learning experience. There are four teaching steps:

1. Play
2. Dramatic action
3. Invested action
4. Reflection

Each step deepens the meaning of the action and creates opportunities for reflection and learning. I walk over to

the boys, who, for a moment or two, are so involved in their play they don't notice me. Eventually they do, and stop and look a bit guilty.

'Are you training for the battle?' They nod. 'I see.' I look at them both, deciding on my next move. I go through the list of conventions in my mind and decide on number four, which holds the moment in time as if the participants are effigies in a sculpture. Using this strategy will move the activity from Step 1 (Play) to Step 2 (Dramatic Action).

The shift requires the participants to raise their actions above playfulness and into a moment of theatre. This is a challenge: to be still; unafraid of being stared at; and to use acquired knowledge to make the moment authentic and meaningful. Silliness and frivolity are not acceptable and will not be tolerated. This is serious work.

### Into dramatic action

'Let's imagine,' I say to the boys, 'that this painting,' I point to the one on the whiteboard depicting the battle, 'is only one of many paintings of the Battle of Hastings. Others show different events during the day, or things happening before or after. If you two were in a painting showing the time before the battle and the warriors training, could we see what that would look like?'

The two boys make a pose. 'I see, now hold it there, keep yourselves still, like in a painting.' I step back and look at them (the boys take note of my seriousness and can see I'm not messing about). 'I wonder could we see another?' They move into another pose.

By this time other children are taking up rulers for swords and want to be involved. I wave them in to become part of 'the painting' and they are soon demonstrating the training skills of the warriors in still moments. After five

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minutes there are about 15 children involved, all quite still and self-controlled. Many are the disaffected boys I mentioned earlier. The rest of the class are still busy building the camp but I decide this is a moment of learning worth sharing. I ask them to gather round and explain the situation. Some join in, others are happy to watch.

## Creating investment

The next teacher move I use is to shift the work into Step 3 – Invested Action. One way to think of invested action is as a dramatic action (fighting with swords) within a specific context. I give the children ‘in the painting’ different contexts to imagine for the training they are engaged in. Meaning changes as the context changes, for example:

- Context one – training at home for a fight that might never happen.
- Context two – training at Harold’s camp the day before the battle.

*Dramatic conventions in action: children in Tim’s class become ‘invested’ in various contexts of soliders-in-training.*



## Other useful resources

- [www.mantleoftheexpert.com](http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com) – Information about the dramatic enquiry approach. Dorothy Heathcote’s essay can be found in the articles section of the website.
- [www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL93E4B69BCCo4o15](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL93E4B69BCCo4o15) – Documentary watched by Tim’s class on the history of the Norman invasions.

- Context three – training at Harold’s camp the day before the battle, with my brother.

With the changing context the level of investment (what the action means to those involved) becomes more significant, because of the change in time and location, and the closer family bonds. Now, when the children take up the pose of those in the painting, they are no longer playing or pretending to fight but representing warrior-brothers on the eve of a battle that will change their lives forever. The children’s play has shifted into a moment of significance and appreciation.

I consolidate this developing understanding by bringing in those who are watching, shifting the inquiry into the next stage: Step 4 – Reflection. I ask the participants to hold themselves ‘in the painting’ for a moment longer and for those watching to reflect on what they see. I then ask the warriors if they would mind answering some of our questions. Before long the whole class are involved in an open inquiry, building new knowledge and understanding. Plus, they also practicing speaking and listening skills, which many of the class usually find difficult to use and apply.

## Messing about?

A critic might ask, ‘but haven’t the two boys, who were messing around with rulers, been “rewarded” by becoming the centre of attention?’ This is one interpretation. Another is to view the boys as being creative and mindful of the situation, acting responsibly and applying their knowledge, but lacking the skills to make their actions meaningful. What they needed was the help of a sympathetic adult who could help them focus their actions and bring in their classmates to turn their playfulness into a significant learning experience.

The two boys (and the others that joined them) were learning to control themselves and work collaboratively within a context to create meaning and value. The whole group were applying their recently acquired knowledge and reflecting on the impact of the events of the Norman invasions on people’s lives. They were sharing knowledge, practicing cognitive, social and creative skills and developing a greater understanding.

## Bridging gaps

This is an important function of dramatic inquiry, which is often built from playfulness. To my mind, it is a mistake to think of drama for learning as just acting out situations or being in character. There is little value in simply re-enacting the Battle of Hasting with the children pretending to be soldiers, firing arrows or riding horses.

The purpose of using drama in the classroom is to bridge the gap between the children’s own experiences and the content of study, and to give them significant experiences for reflection and for building understanding. It is not enough for children just to know there was a great battle in 1066 and who was on which side and what happened to the two kings.

Education should be about more than the transmission of facts. It should be about developing a greater appreciation and insight, which can be applied across a wide range of different subjects.

The Battle of Hastings was a human experience; the people involved felt many of the same kinds of emotions we would feel in the same circumstances: I guess some were brave and others were cowards. For children to understand and appreciate this they have to develop their imagination beyond playing or re-enacting or, worst of all, merely remembering a list of dates and names.

**PTU**