Drama approaches to pre-20C texts

The distance between the lives of young people today and pre-20C texts can seem difficult to span. Here, in the second of our articles on using drama to draw pupils into this literature, Iona Towler Evans and Sam Law offer an approach to a short story by Conan Doyle that uses the drama system of learning known as ‘Mantle of the Expert’.

The impetus for this project came from the two of us working as mentor (Iona Towler Evans) and PGCE trainee (Sam Law) in a school that found itself in challenging circumstances. In this school, Sam was faced with a Y8 class which consisted mainly of boys, a number of whom displayed challenging behaviour and disaffection. In addition to this, five pupils had statements for special educational needs and four had English as a second language. Our intention was to engage these pupils and provide them with opportunities for dealing with non-fiction writing, speaking and listening in a range of contexts, as well as enabling them to access a pre-20C short story — ‘J. Habakuk Jephson’s Statement’ — written by Arthur Conan Doyle using the real mystery of the abandoned ship, the Mary Celeste (changed from the original by Conan Doyle to the Marie Celeste).

We adapted our activities from a project on the Marie Celeste devised by Luke Abbott, Lead Senior Adviser for the ‘Mantle of the Expert’ approach, who works for Essex County Council. Luke Abbott trained with the great drama guru Dorothy Heathcote, and it was she who invented Mantle of the Expert.

In the MoE approach, pupils run a fictional enterprise of some kind and this activity provides a context — and, gradually, motivation — for a variety of work: speaking, listening, reading and writing. For example, they might be librarians running a library service; or they might be scientists running a laboratory; or they might be industrialists running a factory. By taking on this responsibility, they are empowered to take on responsibility for the work they do throughout the project. In MoE, we are always looking for ways to help pupils learn without the teacher telling. For the group we were working with, ‘teacher telling’ and other instructive methods were failing. Instead, we wanted them to develop a concern for their enterprise’s ‘clients’ which would lead to motivation and authority in their work.

The frame for work on ‘J. Habakuk Jephson’s Statement’ would be that of people running a shipping insurance company. This perspective really appealed to the class once the pupils hooked into the idea of ‘people who make false insurance claims’.

Building the context

The pupils were shown pictures of a range of buildings and asked to decide which one they thought an insurance company might operate in.

‘If we were to run a company in the late nineteenth century that dealt with insuring ships, cargoes and so on, I wonder what our building would look like.’

Thus, from the outset, pupils were given a choice about the resources they used.

After looking at a range of images of suitably authentic period buildings, the class selected their premises. We described to ourselves the inside, the staircase, the chairs, and the plate on the door. We created signs for class members’ desks. We selected a range of Victorian names (from a set provided by the two teachers) for past and current clients. And together we invented some of the mishaps these clients had encountered and the claims they had asked us to deal with.

This lead to the pupils writing their own rules for dealing with claims, and these included a requirement that claimants produce evidence of losses and evidence that a vessel had been seaworthy and fit for the voyage in question. The rules also
insisted that the crew’s experience and competence could be proved. This process of setting up their enterprise gave the pupils a voice in the work and eventually stimulated them to take responsibility for it.

**The clients — a purpose for language**

We talked about how we would get people to want to insure with us. Some of the pupils thought insurers were ‘rip off merchants’; others thought that clients also tried to ‘rip off’ the insurers.

At this point, the pupils had a go, individually, at designing a logo which would appear on their company writing paper and on the outside of their building, so that when people saw it they would know immediately what the company did and that it was a trustworthy company. The pupils came up with images such as waves and clasped hands, accompanied by catchphrases on the lines of, ‘Your life safe in our hands’, ‘We will help you in all weathers’ and ‘Beat the storm with us’.

The class was then encouraged to do some market research to find out how friends and family would react to their logos and catchphrases. They were also asked to appoint a committee of pupils who would make the final choice from these once the market research had been done. For one committee member this was a challenge: he only wanted his own ideas to be considered. In fact, collaboration was a big challenge for most of the members of this class. But by getting them to research the views of people outside the classroom, we gave their enterprise authenticity, a sense of requiring ‘real work’ as a company; and by setting up the committee, we challenged them to start taking responsibility for the enterprise and its decisions. It was also a way of introducing the idea that choices have implications.

We now introduced a new claim, set out on the business’s claim form (complete with logo and catchphrase, from the owner of the *Marie Celeste*). This was a claim for compensation for the loss of everyone on board. The dramatic tension of the situation lay in the fact that, according to the ship’s owners, all those on the ship had disappeared without trace. This was a challenging insurance claim.

**Factual evidence, emotional response**

The two of us provided evidence for our insurers drawing on the vast amount of material available on the internet. We provided information on weather conditions, the dates and destination of the voyage, the experience of the captain and crew, and the passengers. We also drew on the resources included in Luke Abbott’s scheme, and those in Conan Doyle’s story.

The pupils’ response changed to a more emotional one when an inventory of the items discovered on the ship, and where they had been found, arrived. Descriptions of the items were written on labels (hand written in black ink) for sorting. Some of
these we had selected from those given in Conan Doyle’s short story. One item, ‘a baby’s bottle’, elicited a very emotional response. ‘How can we measure the cost of a baby’s life?’ one boy asked. In response another boy, very sensibly, suggested, ‘I think we should get advice from another company which has dealt with this before’. Sam got them to develop the discussion in the way an insurance company would by asking, ‘Can we predict the baby’s future earnings?’.

Interestingly, inspecting the items and considering their implications challenged some of the rules the pupils had drawn up earlier, for example, ‘Compensation will only be provided for crew who are suitably experienced’.

**Reading — inferences and hypotheses**

The pupils were asked to sort the labels describing the items found on the ship into categories. They did this in teams, with the aim of establishing what the items told us about who and what was on the ship. They filled in a table with columns headed ‘Item salvaged’, ‘What it tells us’, ‘What we think we know’ and ‘What we want to find out’.

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<th>Item salvaged</th>
<th>What it tells us</th>
<th>What we think we know</th>
<th>What we still want to find out</th>
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In this work, the pupils were drawing inferences from the items found. Their motivation was high: they were being given the opportunity to make sense of the situation by working together to decide from the labels what sort of people had been on board and how this might have led to the ship being found abandoned. No-one really knows what happened to those on the Marie Celeste — not even, for once, the teacher — and this meant that the pupils were being set a real challenge. Giving them the labels to hold in their hands promoted group dialogue and provided an aim. It stimulated hypotheses as to what might have happened. A mutiny? The need to deal with danger from the cargo (alcohol)? Or even something supernatural?

When the pupils had used the labels to identify what they could say they knew and what they still wanted to find out, they asked if it was possible to speak to the owner of the ship.

**Teacher-in-role challenges preconceptions**

Many of the pupils initially wanted to prove that the owner of the ship — the person responsible for the cargo and the passengers — was guilty of ‘conn ing’ them as insurers, and that he was keeping things from them. The two of us wanted to rebut this too-simple solution and to demonstrate that the person in this role was shocked by what had happened, that he was concerned about the loss of the crew rather than just wanting to get what compensation he could. So, we provided a teacher in role as the ship’s owner to challenge the pupils’ preconceptions and induce them to deal with someone in a more sensitive way than they were originally planning to.

The pupils were asked if they would agree to Iona standing in as the ship owner, the client whom they had insured. Iona added to the reality of her role by having with her a few shipping items such as a towing rope, a buoy and an old fisherman’s bag.

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The atmosphere changed when Iona went into role. The pupils encountered a person whom they had to deal with in ‘now time’ (as if the events were happening now), and they made notes on the responses they got from her quite spontaneously. The kind of dialogue they entered into with her was not typical of classroom dialogue: she was no longer an all-knowing, authoritative teacher. For example, when they asked, ‘Did you check out how good the crew were, how able they were to take responsibility for the voyage?’ the answer was not a teacher’s, ‘Oh, of course I knew them very well,’ but a less confident, ‘now time’ response: ‘Looking back, I wish I had done more to find out about them.’

Later, Iona picked up on the loss of the Captain’s child and wife: ‘You see, the Captain insisted that this time he wanted to take his family with him.’ This shows that the owner is feeling responsible for the loss of the Captain’s family. His response is more about his misgivings as a human being than about deliberately getting the best deal from the insurers. Iona went on, when asked, to describe how she had had to inform the Captain’s parents and his school-age child (who hadn’t gone on the voyage as the Captain and his wife didn’t want him to miss school) of his disappearance. The pupils, who had been determined to withhold compensation from the owner if they thought he was deceiving them, were moved in spite of themselves by what they heard. In the next stage of the project — their deliberations on compensation — they spent some time deciding what they thought would be reasonable compensation for the lives lost, and saw it as a quite separate item from compensation for the loss of the ship and cargo.
determined to make good use of the time and ask the questions they wanted answered. They were speaking to Iona in role from a position of power, a position that groups of learners, particularly ones with behavioural and other difficulties, aren’t often helped to take up.

**Reader response to a pre-20C text**

This work lead into the reading of Conan Doyle’s ‘J. Habakuk Jephson’s Statement’, and meant that the pupils were able to read from a particular, familiar perspective. Although the story is fiction, Conan Doyle drew heavily on the original event, and this meant that our pupils felt confident in assessing his ‘eye-witness account’ of the end met by those on the mysterious ship. It meant they were able to draw on their own research to produce a response to Conan Doyle’s version in class discussions on the story.

The pupils were also able to consider how, why and what a writer selects from their sources to create fiction, and to make comparisons between fiction and non-fiction. It enabled the two of us to ask them, ‘If we could access any of those people’s diaries or hear their statements, I wonder what they would say?’ This stimulated a further initiative, the writing of diaries from the perspective of those on board, and Sam bravely took on the challenge of taking the project in this new, creative direction. Not only that, but she herself kept a diary of the whole process and this has provided insights into her learning as a teacher: ‘The work leads on quite naturally from the context, and it offers learning styles and reaches pupils that a more rigid scheme of work probably wouldn’t. It was meant to be a short trial of a different approach, but we found that the pupils didn’t want to let go of it and came in talking about checking things out on the ship and looking at the evidence.’

Sam’s research into the pupils’ response to this project showed that the aspects they were most engaged by included meeting the owner (using teacher-in-role), sorting out the labels for items found on the ship, and — perhaps most significantly — working as a group. As one pupil said, ‘Often teachers don’t think we can do things and this has proved that we can actually run something very big.’

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More information on Mantle of the Expert, including conference information and the Marie Celeste scheme, can be found on www.mantleoftheexpert.com and from Andy Grey at andy.grey@essexcc.gov.uk.

A West Midlands conference on Mantle of the Expert (supported by the Qualifications and Curriculum Agency) will take place at Aston Business Centre, Birmingham, on 21 January 2008.

‘J. Habakuk Jephson’s Statement’ is included as an appendix in the book Mary Celeste: The Greatest Mystery of the Sea by Paul Begg, published by Pearson Education in 2006. It can be downloaded as a free E-book from www.classic-literature.co.uk/scottish-authors/arthur-conan-doyle/j-habakuk-jephson's-statement and this is how Iona Towler Evans and Sam Law made copies for their pupils.