

Drama and Reading for Meaning: – using drama to create a perspective on events in a fictional text.
Lorraine S Harrison

Whenever drama is mentioned as a strategy for teaching reading for meaning, it is often in relation to some form of re-enactment. A good re-enactment can indeed bring a scene to life, but it has limitations. Children are not necessarily the best actors and a passage acted badly can do more damage than good. Neither does it afford much opportunity for discussion and analysis and often only directly involves a small number of children. Most teachers are aware of hot-seating, but this has limitations, especially if the children are not primed beforehand to ask the most effective questions, or if they are unfamiliar with events in a new novel. If we are looking for some form of emotional engagement to encourage and facilitate reading for meaning, then other dramatic strategies are far more effective.

Whole group role play, teacher-in-role and thought tracking can be employed to good effect. If the teacher can create a group role for all the children, that enables them to view events from inside the novel, then a kind of magic happens. It is linked to children's innate desire to play. They become absorbed in the events and characters, have opinions and strive to understand the storyline. In other words, they become emotionally engaged, so the brain tells them that what is happening is significant. This makes them more inclined to read for meaning.

An example of whole group role play and teacher-in-role

I recently worked with years 3-6 in Crofton Junior school in Wakefield Yorkshire to introduce them to my new novel Red Snow. The children had not read the book before, so I read them the first few pages and summarised the rest of the first chapter. Then we made up another scene; something that *could* have happened but wasn't in the story. For this to take place, I needed to create a feasible group role, linked to the events in the book, so the children had a perspective on the action. I also needed a couple of character roles that they could talk to. I needed one role to impart information and another role they could interrogate.

One of the characters in my book had returned home early from a coffee morning at a local community centre because the heating had broken down. This gave me an opportunity to create a new group role – The children could play the parts of volunteers waiting for the heating to be fixed. I could then use teacher-in-role as the caretaker, to convey some new information – I told them that I had seen a woman behaving strangely the night before. From my description, they recognised her as a character from chapter one, called Irene.

I then gave them time, out of role, to invent some more stories about Irene based on her love of the woods and her dislike of people walking near her woodland home. This meant that they would have something to add to the conversation when the caretaker came to talk to them.

In role as Sue the caretaker – (who was not in the book) – I asked them to find out more about Irene, if they should meet her. Then I used teacher-in-role again to play the part of Irene, so they could interrogate me.

I used the following drama strategies in each of the 8 classes I worked with.

- The drama contract – an agreement to enter into a pretence
- The teacher-in-role contract - an agreement to accept me as teacher –in-role when wearing a particular costume such as a coat or scarf.
- Using the words Action and Freeze to start and stop the drama.
- Using thought bubbles at the end of the scene to deepen the discussion.

After my visit, I wrote up the following scene - as if it were in my novel - and sent it to the children.

Suggested addition to chapter 2 Red Snow by Lorraine S Harrison.

Based on improvised drama sessions by pupils of Crofton Junior School, Wakefield Yorkshire. January 2018

Chapter 2 Red Snow

The next morning was the start of the half term holiday and there was a light dusting of snow on the ground...

At 8.30am a crowd of people began to arrive at Oakton Road community centre. They were volunteers who had come to help run a coffee morning in aid of the Woodland Trust.

Sue, the new caretaker let them in, but they could tell by her face she wasn't happy.

'The heating's broken,' she said. 'The plumber's not sure he can fix it in time for the coffee morning, but he says he'll try.'

'Well we'd better sit down and wait,' said one of the volunteers. 'I hope we don't have to cancel it.'

Sue unlocked the store room and brought out some chairs. She waited for everyone to be seated and then she closed the door. 'Can I talk to you for a moment?' she said. 'I need to tell you something.'

The volunteers turned their chairs to face Sue.

'I thought I heard an owl hooting last night,' she said. 'It was coming from somewhere near the path into Oakton woods, so I looked out of my window to see if I could see it.'

'I wish I lived close to the woods like you,' said a woman volunteer. 'What kind of owl was it?'

'Well, I didn't actually see any owls,' said Sue. 'But I did see something else. I saw a woman standing by the path. She was just standing there, staring down Oakton Road. I couldn't see her face, but I could see her hair in the moonlight. It was silvery grey and it hung down her back in a long plait.'

'She's called Irene,' said a young man. 'She lives in the woods in one of the gatehouses.'

'She's a bit strange,' said another man.

'What do you mean *strange*?' asked Sue.

Several of the volunteers began to tell Sue about the times they had come across Irene in the woods. Some had seen her telling children off for climbing trees or riding bikes. Others had seen her telling people off for just walking past her house and told of how she had spoken harshly to children playing near her garden.

'She seems to care about the woods, but she obviously doesn't like anyone going near her house, does she?' said Sue. 'I wonder what she was doing last night.'

'Did you see anything down the road that she could have been looking at?' asked a woman.

'Not really,' said Sue. 'I may have seen a door closing further down the street, but I can't be sure.'

Sue looked at her watch. 'I'd better go and see if the heating has been fixed,' she said. 'But if you happen to see Irene any time, can you find out what she was doing last night? I'd love to know what she says.'

As Sue left the room, the volunteers began to talk about what they would say to Irene if they saw her. They knew it would be difficult.

Just at that moment, the door opened and to everyone's surprise, in walked Irene.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'Is this where the coffee morning for the Woodland Trust is being held?'

One of the volunteers explained about the heating and invited her to sit and wait. She nodded and pulled up a chair. They watched as Irene sat back in the chair and began to yawn.

This was their chance to find out what Irene was doing last night.

'You look tired,' said one of the volunteers. 'Did you have a late night last night?'

'Yes,' she said, 'I did.'

'What were you up to last night then?' asked another.

'I was looking for my cat in the woods,' said Irene.

'What sort of cat is it?'

'It's just an ordinary cat,' said Irene, shifting nervously in her chair. 'How long will we have to wait? I have things to do at home.'

The volunteers didn't want Irene to leave just yet, so some of them tried to distract her by talking about other things.

'I like your hair,' said one volunteer. Irene smiled but said nothing.

'What do you like about the woods?' asked another.

Irene smiled again and began to relax.

'I love animals,' she said. 'I find them easier to talk to than people. We have to look after the woods and all the creatures there.'

However, when the volunteers tried again to get her to talk about last night, she became suspicious.

'Why are you asking me all these questions?' she snapped. 'It's none of your business what I was doing last night. I'm not waiting here any longer. I'm going home.'

'No wait,' said one of the volunteers. But it was too late. Irene had left.

The volunteers were disappointed. They still had more questions to ask her.

'Is that why she was looking down the road?' said one, 'because she was looking for her cat?'

'Maybe,' said another, 'but why would you look for a lost cat in the middle of the night? It doesn't make sense. She's hiding something.'

Just then Sue came back. 'We'll have to cancel the coffee morning,' she said. 'The heating can't be fixed until tomorrow. We'll have to hold it next week instead.'

'Sit down Sue,' said one of the volunteers. 'We've got something to tell you about Irene.'