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# Using Sophisticated Picture Books & Process Drama to Engage Early Years Students with the Critical Strand

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*This paper examines how sophisticated picture book resources and process drama strategies enable early years students to demonstrate their learning outcomes within the Critical Strand of the Queensland English Syllabus: Open Trial (QSA, 2005). In the introductory section, sophisticated picture book resources and process drama strategies are defined and their strengths as resources and strategies in early years classrooms are highlighted. The paper then overviews the three strands and each of their three substrands of the Queensland English Syllabus: Open Trial (QSA, 2005) document. In addition, specific Foundation level and Levels One and Two core learning outcomes from the Critical Strand are identified. Finally, a range of process drama activities, based on the popular Anthony Browne (1996) text 'Piggybook', are outlined, and their articulation with specific core learning outcomes are made known.*

## Picture Books as Sophisticated Resources

There has been an infusion of sophisticated picture books for early years students in the past decade. One of my favourite authors and illustrators is Anthony Browne. The sophistication in Browne's work lies with the way his messages cannot be understood and enjoyed by engaging with the written text only. The illustrations must be understood and their meanings integrated with understandings of the written text. Sophisticated picture books are fundamentally different from 'illustrated texts', that is literary or non-literary texts with illustrations that accompany the written text (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, 1999).

Graham (2000) suggests that picture book resources are 'simple vehicles' and useful as an entry point before students engage with more complex texts. Miller (1998) also suggests that picture books can be used as an introduction to topics, activate students' background knowledge and stimulate curiosity about subject matter. Whilst sharing the intended platitudes for these resources, I steer clear of labelling them as 'simple vehicles' or categorising them as resources for 'introductory' activities alone.

To fully explore these resources, and to take students into the Critical Strand of the English Syllabus: Open Trial (QSA, 2005), teachers need to offer carefully scaffolded instruction that prepares students for multimodal text interpretation and re-construction. I put forward process drama as both a useful and engaging strategy for such purposes.

## Process Drama as a Strategy

In 1995 Heller (1995, p. 13) made the claim that drama activities help transform school from a place where teachers **tell students what to think** to a place where teachers **help them experience thinking**. Howell and Heap (2005, p. 59) describe

process drama as a form of 'applied theatre' in which students, together with the teacher, take on roles to make meaning for themselves. Process drama provides a range of activities that are essentially improvised in nature, and takes its form from the dramatic action, re-action and inter-action of the students within a learning episode (Bowell and Heap, 2005, p. 59-60). Process drama is a means of making an otherwise abstract or unknown concept more concrete, accessible and relevant (Manna, 1996). Process drama is a medium whereby students can empathise with an experience in order to make sense of it. Such strategies permit students to enter different roles, explore the thoughts behind the action, and thus better appreciate the lived experience of a range of others. Benefits of these strategies include: making connections between students' lived experiences and those in the text under investigation; developing skills at inferring; moving beyond 'visualising' to becoming; and developing a deep understanding or empathy for participants from the target text (Clyde, 2003). When students are involved in process drama, they not only understand more about the complexities of the events, they also forge stronger emotional connections to the content (Galda and West, 1995).

So what Foundation Level and Level One and Two core learning outcomes might the integration of sophisticated picture book resources and process drama strategies allow students to demonstrate? The following section previews the English Syllabus: Open Trial (QSA, 2005) and focuses on specific core learning outcomes from the identified levels of the Critical Strand.

### **The English Syllabus: Open Trial (QSA, 2005)**

In its current draft, the English syllabus has three strands that each has core learning outcomes in the three substrands.

To clarify, the three strands are:

- **Cultural strand:** focuses on making meaning in contexts. Students need to know that cultural contexts and social situations influence how texts are made and interpreted.
- **Operational strand:** focuses on using language systems. Students need to know that specific texts are selected for particular cultural contexts and social situations.
- **Critical strand:** focuses on evaluating and reconstructing meanings in texts. Students need to know that the values and practices of groups influence the construction and interpretation of texts.

Each strand makes an equally important contribution to English as a key learning area. The strands are interrelated and maintain the holistic nature of English (QSA, 2005, p. 7). Each strand is further sub-divided into three substrands. The three substrands of each strand are:

- **Speaking and listening substrand:** focuses on students interpreting and constructing spoken and multimodal texts for a range of purposes.
- **Reading and viewing substrand:** focuses on students interpreting written, visual and multimodal texts that have been constructed for a range of purposes.
- **Writing and shaping substrand:** focuses on students constructing written, visual and multimodal texts to represent people, places, things, events and concepts for a variety of purposes.

Thus there are nine core learning outcomes at each level. The Foundation Level and Level One and Two learning outcomes will be focused on in this paper. Students operating at the Foundation Level are students who demonstrate a level of understanding before that of Level One. Typically students are demonstrating Level One outcomes by the middle of Year Two and Level Two outcomes by the end of Year Three. This paper will focus on the core learning outcomes from the Critical Strand only. It is appropriate to focus more deeply on a single strand for the purposes of better understanding its content and articulation into practice whilst still acknowledging the interrelationship between the Cultural, Operational and Critical Strands. The table below details the possible core learning outcomes that may be demonstrated by students as they participate in the range of activities outlined in the next section of this paper. Outcomes are coded by using the strand code abbreviation, the level of the outcome and then a substrand code. Specifically 'Cr' is the abbreviation for the Critical Strand, 'F', '1' or '2' are the levels, and '.1' is used to represent the Speaking and Listening substrand, '.2' for Reading and Viewing, and '.3' for Writing and Shaping. By way of example, Cr F.1 refers to Critical Strand, Foundation level, speaking and listening substrand.

<b>Substrands</b> →	<b>Speaking &amp; Listening</b>	<b>Reading &amp; Viewing</b>	<b>Writing &amp; Shaping</b>
<b>Foundation Level Outcomes</b>	<b>Cr F.1</b> When speaking & listening students can change their own volume & tone of voice, facial expressions and/or body language to create an effect.	<b>CR F.2</b> When reading & viewing students identify similarities between visual representation of people, places & things, & familiar people, places & things.	
<b>Level One Outcomes</b>	<b>Cr 1.1</b> When speaking students experiment with different ways of representing people, places, events & things drawn from own experiences or from other texts by changing volume, facial expressions, gestures & sound effects. When listening students identify possible reasons for clearly defined variations used to represent people, places, events & things including volume, facial expressions, gestures & sound effects.	<b>Cr 1.2</b> When reading & viewing students identify similarities between own experiences & representations of people, places, events & things in texts & refer to choice of: salient colour & size of image; repeated elements in an image, background or setting; simple font choices; & simple facial expressions.	<b>Cr 1.3</b> When shaping students identify the ways they have represented people, places, events & things through choice of typical facial expressions & body movements.
<b>Level Two Outcomes</b>	<b>Cr 2.1</b> When speaking students select particular people, words or phrases, body language & facial expressions, clearly defined variations in choice & sound effects to change the way people, places, events & things are represented. When listening students discuss possible reasons for differences in the descriptive	<b>Cr 2.2</b> When reading & viewing students identify similarities & differences in representations of people, places, events & things explaining choice of linked noun & verb groups, dominant objects or images, typical facial	<b>Cr 2.3</b> When shaping students identify dominant objects, images, typical facial expressions & body movements.

	words or phrases, clearly defined body language, facial expressions, voice or sound effects used to represent people, places, events & things.	expressions & body movements. When reading & viewing students suggest alternative ways of representing people, places, events & things.	
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## The Process Drama Activities

I'm going to use the sophisticated picture book 'Piggybook', written and illustrated by Anthony Browne, but you can select any suitable text and alter the activities accordingly. 'Piggybook' is a story about Mr Piggot and his two sons who behave like pigs – until Mrs Piggot finally walks out. Left to fend for themselves, the male Piggots undergo some curious changes! The pictures are highly appealing and the everyday setting of the story allows the students to participate in some interesting discussions. Choose your stories carefully as not all texts are suitable for all students. For example, some students may be experiencing domestic unrest and a story about mum leaving home may not be a sensitive choice.

These activities were designed to be undertaken over a number of episodes so students would have time to reflect upon each activity, either orally, visually or in written form. The picture book is not shared until introductory activities are completed. This is because students should be able to bring in their personal or vicarious experiences of the content before being exposed to the text.

### Activity One: Descriptions

- Ask the students to think about their mother. How would they describe their mother? What does their mother look like? How does their mother behave? What does their mother smell like? What sorts of things does their mother do?
- Ask the students to think of the one word that best describes their mother. Go around the group and ask each child to nominate their one word. Repeat nominations, but this time encourage students to use an action and expressive voice as they give their nomination. **Cr F.1, Cr 1.1, Cr 2.1**
- These individual gestural and verbal interpretations can be photographed and scribed for a display. Discuss similarities and differences of interpretations. **Cr F.2, Cr 1.2, Cr 2.2**
- Once students have finalised their verbal nomination and the action that accompanies it, get the students to line up and 'perform' their representation as a 'Mexican Wave'.
- Repeat for 'Father' and then again for 'children'.

### Activity Two: Clay Sculptures

- Working in groups of 2, one child becomes a lump of clay and the other becomes a sculptor. The sculptor sculpts the lump of clay into a Mother statue. It might be more appropriate to get the sculptor to either give instructions or demonstrations rather than physically touching their lump of clay. Take photos of statues & scribe the students' descriptive vocabulary. Discuss similarities and differences of interpretations. **Cr F.2, Cr 1.2, Cr 2.2**
- Swap roles so both students get a go at sculpting a Mother statue.
- Repeat for Father and Child statues.

### Activity Three: Transformations

- Split the students into thirds. Groups two & three form a circle on the carpet while group one stands in the middle.
- Instructions for the group in the middle: Students form the Mother statue that they crafted. Teacher counts to ten (very slowly) & students transform themselves into the Father statue, and through another ten seconds, transform into the child pose.
- Repeat for group two and then group three.

- However, surprise group three. After they have become the child statue, tell them they have one more transformation to go....Ask them to become a pig statue. Photograph these new creations & discuss similarities and differences of interpretation. Ask students why they might have different representations. **Cr F.2, Cr 1.2, Cr 2.2**

#### **Activity Four: Introduction to the Text**

- Show cover. What do you think this book might be about? Who do you think these people are? What are they doing on the lady's back? Who do you think the man is? What sort of person might he be? Who are the children?
- Discuss title, author, publisher, title page &/or dedication page.
- Encourage the students to listen to the book in its entirety. This builds meaning making resources. Avoid adding to the meaning in your own words or eliciting students' interpretations at this stage.
- Read the book again, and this time, talk about the story and pictures as appropriate. Ask the students: What do you think of that? Do you do that? Why did that happen? What do you notice about the pictures on this page? Why has the illustrator drawn the pictures like that? Why did the author select this word to describe the people, events or places? **Cr F.2, Cr 1.2, Cr 2.2**
- For students operating at Level Two learning outcomes, discuss the noun and verb groups used for each family member. **Cr 2.2**

#### **Activity Five: Frozen Photographs**

- Set up working groups. Students to decide on one scene from the text that is particularly meaningful. Create a freeze frame of that scene. (Students can be characters, furniture, cat, bus stop sign etc).
- Get each group to 'present' their freeze frame to the rest of the class. Count the students in by saying '3, 2, 1 & freeze'. Tell students to remain frozen for up to a minute. Use the 'tap-in' technique to bring individual characters or props to life. **Cr F.1, Cr 1.1, Cr 2.1**
- Photograph each freeze frame, both as a medium long shot and as close ups. Encourage students to use angle and focus strategically. Alter image using a program like PaintShop Pro or add in speech bubbles using PowerPoint.
- Students to identify the ways they have represented the Piggot family through their choice of typical facial expressions and body movements. **Cr 1.3, Cr 2.3**

#### **Activity Six: Conscious Alley**

- Raise a dilemma from the story (eg. Mum leaving the family). Tell the students you are taking on the role of Mrs Piggot. Use simple props (eg apron, kitchen gloves & a scarf) to help students to accept that you are in character. Ask the students to think about the advice or comment they would like to make to Mrs Piggot. Set up two sides of an alleyway: those that agree Mrs Piggot did the right thing by leaving her family; and those who believed Mrs Piggot had no justifiable reason for leaving the family. Students have to select the option they most believe in and form a line with those who selected the same option. The two lines face each other to form an alleyway.
- Mrs Piggot walks down the alleyway. Participants on each side of the alleyway take turns to convince Mrs Piggot their viewpoint is right. Participants may raise new ideas or contest ideas previously presented. You are not aiming to have all students believe in the same point of view. The purpose of the activity is to encourage the students to listen to the beliefs of others and debate with each other in a socially acceptable way. You can encourage such behaviour by reinforcing, 'That's an idea we haven't thought of yet. Maybe we need to think about that idea too.' 'Ok, some of us might agree with that.' 'OK, your ideas are interesting.' **Cr F.1, Cr 1.1, Cr 2.1**

#### **Activity Seven: Hot Seats**

- Students take on a role of one of the four main characters (Mum, Dad and 2 Piggot children). Provide a range of simple props to assist children to get into role (eg blazer & remote control for Mr Piggot; domestic utensils for Mrs Piggot; school tie & bag for Piggot boys). Rest of the class asks questions of the Piggot family members. Encourage students in role to use clearly defined body language, facial expressions, voice and sound effects to represent their character. **Cr F.1, Cr 1.1**
- This is useful for exploring character profile, students' comprehension or their differing opinions.

- Students to identify the ways they have represented the Piggot family through their choice of typical facial expressions and body movements. **Cr 1.3, Cr 2.3**

### **Activity Eight: Writing and/or Shaping an Alternative Ending**

- What do you think happens next? Discuss. Reform into freeze frame groups and depict your new ending as a frozen image. Repeat as per instructions given above (Activity Five).
- Students either write or prepare a visual representation of their ending. Take digital photos and alter images using a program like PaintShop Pro or add in speech bubbles using PowerPoint.
- Students to identify the ways they have represented the Piggot family through their choice of typical facial expressions and body movements. **Cr 1.3, Cr 2.3**
- For students operating at Level Two learning outcomes and completing the writing extension, discuss the noun and verb groups used for each family member. **Cr 2.3**

### **Conclusion**

The process drama activities detailed above provide a principled foundation for literacy development that is purposefully differentiated for students working at different learning outcome levels of the Open Trial English Syllabus (QSA, 2005). In doing so, it also offers students full engagement with the critical strand of the speaking and listening, reading and viewing, and writing and shaping sub-strands. The students are learning about their own experiences and perspectives by drawing on their individual lived experiences as well as learning about the experiences and perspective of others through multimodal text interpretation and re-construction. This allows all students to make a clear personal connection to the content of study, as well as enhance their ability to make inferences and consider other viewpoints. The strength of the activities are the way that students are encouraged to tap into all relevant resources and combine personal experiences and the differing viewpoints of others to construct deeper understandings of how texts work and also of the content of study.

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