

Reflection of John Mee delivering 'Flannan Isle' Drama Workshop

R&D Trial 1: Year 5 Burley and Woodhead CE Primary School

In the classroom the children obediently follow the teacher's instructions as the first task is introduced before the workshop begins. The students are asked to reflect on the previous time they had participated in a workshop with John. An instantaneous buzz and faint squeaking from marker pens can be heard from around the room as ideas and memories are enthusiastically scribed onto their individual whiteboards.

Many children share feelings of 'excitement' and many are eager to *"pretend to be someone else"*. One child told me: *"Sometimes 'doing' gives you a better understanding of what you are writing about"*. I found this interesting as this child was expecting the drama workshop to include elements of creative writing, or at least he had made a link between the two practices.

John takes the lead in introducing the workshop and directs the class in a word collecting game with 'mixed up sentences' in envelopes. In groups, children are asked to create their own sentence. The activity is extended by suggesting they collectively share their chosen sentence and add actions as a group. The class seem to enjoy group work and I notice the more confident children begin to lead 'idea generating' for their groups. Less confident children are happy to participate, without sharing their ideas. I asked one of the quieter children if they enjoyed this task. He said: *"Yes, I liked it because it didn't have one answer."* Another told me: *"I liked it because there were multiple answers and we could choose what we wanted to say, and how we say it"*. I found these two statements interesting as both of these children knew that the task was providing them with freedom and 'agency' in their work, which seems (from their comments) they enjoy the responsibility of. However, during the task neither of these two children shared any of their ideas in their group. Both of these children happily engaged in the activity but waited to be told what to say, how to say it and what actions they should do, not by an adult, but by their peers. I wonder if during the research and development of this particular workshop if adaptations could be made to this activity to ensure all participants have agency and freedom in the task. Possibly more opportunities to share ideas in pairs or drawing/writing notes would allow for more protection into role for the first task (depending on the needs of the participants).

Next, John introduces the images of people/places in 1890. The class are asked to share suggestions about the different people in the pictures; what they are wearing, if they are rich/poor and what their job could be. The class were able to identify the person's wealth and inferred mainly through the costumes (e.g. top hat = rich). The students were not as confident with suggesting jobs and this is where I thought a little more time could have been spent, possibly freeze framing different characters or 'mantles' as a whole group to allow the children to be modelled different role types before being asked to choose their 'job'. Linking this activity to the last, could anyone suggest a statement/sentence to describe one of the freeze framed characters? (e.g. geologists). This would also help students to contextualise the job title by adding an action and scenario.

Phase 1 – Flannan Isle – Lighthouse Commission Meeting

Once in the hall, the class are taken on a journey back in time to 1890 and the whole class tableaux outside an 1890's train station starts the workshop with a sense of curiosity, cohesion and 'metaxis'.

Throughout the workshop John transitions in and out of role and the participants happily follow him. When their deputy head teacher signals he is joining the acting space by donning a waistcoat and flat cap, every child happily suspends their belief and chooses to believe the character their teacher has become. The children listen intently as this new character explains he has been commissioned to build a lighthouse on the dangerous 'Flannan Isles'. The 'meeting' they are currently in has been organised so the 'experts' can share ideas and suggestions as to how he may overcome the many problems he faces. The whole-group circular meeting strengthened the sense of 'team' which was an effective frame as the participants were working towards a common goal. At this moment, it was clear that the more confident children were happy to not only share their ideas for solutions, *"we will need a boat to have a*

look around before we build anything”, some were already beginning to independently elaborate on the group narrative by adding more problems “the giant cannibal birds have sunk five of my ships and now I don’t have the wood or the men to build any more ships. Now I can’t fish around the area. I don’t have any money because I can’t sell my fish.” And one child used her own background and influences to bring a different dimension to the story “I speak French and I am a Politician and a lawyer. I will speak to the French politicians and ask them to help us”.

However, most of the group found it difficult to share ideas about an abstract problem whilst relating it to their role. I believe this was due to minimal time spent prior to this activity on the roles and responsibilities of the people in 1890. Once directed into smaller groups and armed with multi-coloured fine tip felt pens and A3 paper, it was obvious that many of the more introvert characters in the group preferred to work in this way. In the group I supported I asked one of the girls who hadn’t said anything in the whole group discussion. “What is your role?” She shrugged her shoulders and looked away. I changed my question “who would you like to be?” She paused and then said “farmer”. I asked her “what problems have you faced whilst on your farm near the cliffs?” She said “None. My farm isn’t on top of the cliffs.” At first I thought this was just her way of telling me she didn’t want to suspend belief in that particular moment, so I suggested she draw her farm and then she could tell me about it”. I spoke to other children in different groups and when I came back to her group she hadn’t drawn a farm but she had written bullet points of things she could do with her animals to help the people building the lighthouse. This included meat and crop farms for food and wool from her sheep for clothes for people to wear. Once I had read her work aloud with her, she told me *“my farm isn’t on this island. It is on the island next to it. We will need boats to ship the food and wool across the water”*. I found this section in the workshop highlighted just how invested the children were in the common problem and how quickly they had all begun to make logical and natural links to each other’s mantles and backstories. All of the children I spoke to during this activity from different groups confidently shared ideas to resolve the common problems from their role’s perspective and contextualised the information they had received throughout the ‘meeting’ activity. The freedom to choose how to represent their ideas ensured inclusion and self-differentiation.

I hoped there had been time to share one or two ideas from group ‘notes’, however a short comfort break and time restraints meant the next ‘phase’ of the workshop had to begin in. An opportunity as a whole group to discuss a few of the ideas that had not yet made public knowledge, would have ‘tied up’ the shared narrative, include children’s ideas who had not spoken yet and conclude phase 1 of the workshop (as it had started), as a team.

During a participant’s feedback session after the workshop, it was clear this was a very popular section of the morning. One child told me *“I liked it because you get to have a real job - like a grown up”* Another said *“the meeting and that bit I liked the best because even though I’m not a lawyer I got to pretend to be one. It was a bit weird though because I have never been a lawyer before so I didn’t always know what to do.”*

“I liked the lighthouse [meeting] part because it was like we had a mission and I was older”

Phase 2 – Story Makers

Participants demonstrate an ease and willingness to switch roles from the 1890’s role to the role of a present day ‘story maker’. John (back in role, alongside the children as a fellow story maker) shares his example of the story he can see in the stone. The ‘story makers’ are asked to create a title, a freeze frame and one line of dialogue/narration in their groups. They are offered a stone if they want to use it to ‘see their story’. The stones, they are told, “hold the stories of Flannan Isle”. The stones had been collected (by John) from the beach on Flannan Isle. Using something visual from the actual location created a sense of ‘realism’, combined with John’s commitment to his own story, children were then able to create a relevant story titles, interesting story content and descriptive language when looking at their own ‘story stone’. I wondered if the teacher would include ‘story stones’ in planning their next creative writing piece as I could see how effective they were with this particular group of children.

"I liked the 'Storymakers' and the story we have just done the best. I liked making my own thing up – not doing something that has already been done."

On the whole the task set a buzz around the hall and children explored the space taking on different roles, creating their own problems for their characters to face and began using some of the vocabulary modelled throughout the morning. For example, I overheard intertextualised phrases such as *"the blackest of fogs"* and *"piercing, crashing waves"* from students describing what they could see to their friends in their story.

The opportunity to work as a small group allowed the confident children to take lead of the ideas and make the suggestions for the group once more. Again the less dominant members of the group happily followed orders and waited for direction. The more varied range of opportunities for idea generation (note making, drawing, constructing etc), the higher the level of participation for every child. Possibly applying a tighter frame for some groups by placing quieter children in a higher status position may allow those children to confidently demonstrate their investment and ideas more frequently.

Phase 3 – Story Tellers

"I liked showing our performance because I have never made my own performance before"

Without instruction to do so, the children begin asking when they can 'share their performance'. The story making phase was collectively being viewed as a 'rehearsal' for a final performance to share to the rest of the group. One child told me: *"I knew it was just for fun. As I am not on my own, I am not nervous. I have been practicing my actions. I enjoyed rehearsing in phase 1 and phase 2 so I knew all my actions and what I wanted to do"*.

John creates a supportive space and frames this performance section with rules to provide seamless transitions between performances, and to unify the different groups as one whole performance. This provided an extra layer of protection as all children were positioned on the same 'team'. Apart from one or two children who decide to watch their group, everyone enjoys sharing their group's piece and I was particularly impressed with the contextualised use of story language and 'dark' problems their characters were facing as they travelled to and around 'Flannan Isle'.

Moving forward for the next trial of this workshop, as a teacher, and a drama practitioner, I have reflected on the children's comments in the feedback session and my own notes whilst observing the session. Whilst the workshop is in the development phase, I would suggest more time is spent on understanding the roles and 'creating the environment' before transporting children to 1890s, possibly through the use of 'theatre in education' techniques or incorporating props/construction materials. (Two children suggested in feedback session that the group could have *'built Flannan Isle'*). A practical or physical activity may help some of those children who do not wish to vocalise their ideas, providing more opportunities for those particular children to develop agency and self-confidence.

Throughout the morning, John's experience in planning and delivering effective, child-led and immersive drama workshops is clear to see. John's ability to seamlessly transition in and out of role without confusing the participants is one of his many skills as an artist educator. The questioning and open ended approaches allow children to lead their own learning, collaborate with their peers, problem solve and build confidence in sharing their own ideas. His ability to create an atmosphere of 'awe and wonder' stands out throughout the workshop. The only external behaviour management tool is a quiet bell which is used effectively to signal to participants to stop and listen to their next instruction. The investment in the shared narrative is due to John's excellent rapport and commitment to role, but the children's demonstration of outstanding behaviour and attitudes to learning is testament to the Year 5 participants and staff at Burley and Woodhead CE Primary School.

I have used this opportunity to reflect on my own teaching practice, some of the children's comments and my observations of John and the participants, I have begun to adapt my own drama workshop which is in its early R&D stage: *'Jack and the Police Talk'*.

I have now ensured every activity in my workshop has an opportunity for children to choose *how* to engage. I have introduced 'Police Training Journals' so that at any point in the workshop they can make notes, draw or bullet point ideas if they would rather not vocalise them. I have added a physical activity as I would expect a year 2 class to enjoy 'building' their stories as well as 'telling' their stories. I have also ensured all of the drama conventions allow children to adapt and add to the 'shared narrative'. Prior to this, the shared narrative element was quite tightly framed and pre-planned and I realised I was enforcing a particular perception of a police officer onto the participants in my workshop. Ethically it is not my right to tell someone how to perceive a role - however by providing more open-ended activities such as stepping into the police officer's shoes on different 'case studies', feeling first-hand how a police officer may feel, will hopefully create a safe space for group debate and participant's own interpretations of how a police officer contributes to society- 'metaxis'. I have provided more opportunities to step in and out of different roles to experience a scenario from multiple perspectives (including myself as the workshop facilitator). The children enjoyed pretending to be 'older' and 'having a real job' so I believe my 'police-in-training' framework will be effective for children to work within, whilst exploring the idea of the role and responsibilities of a police officer. Having a fictional text to tie the ideas together worked well throughout John's workshop, therefore using fictional fairy tale characters to discuss the police officer's responsibility of managing anti-social behaviour provides contextualisation and an extra layer of protection when debating and verbalising some of these complex ideas.