

## Assessment: what is there to talk about?

Neil Mercer and Lyn Dawes share some useful ideas on the way in which talk can be used when assessing all aspects of English.

Primary teachers have large classes of disparate, lively minded, individual children, and are constantly required to make some assessment of how they are progressing. Most teachers make good use of talk to organize their classes, to reinforce good behaviour with positive comments, and to guide children's learning. But talk is also a vital tool for assessing children's progress, in relation to specific tasks and over a longer timescale. Of course, all teachers use talk to some extent in this way; we ask questions to which children are expected to provide the right answers. But we can also make the most of opportunities to assess children through more open dialogue, creating assessment opportunities as part of everyday activities.

Here's an example. Using a strategy called 'Talking Points' (Dawes, 2008), a teacher had asked a Year 5 class to consider, in groups, a series of statements about the solar system, which might be either true or false. The groups then reported what they had decided to the whole class.

**T:** Keighley, would you read out number nine for us?

**Keighley:** (*reads*) The moon changes shape because it is in the shadow of the earth.

**T:** Right, now what does your group think about that?

**Keighley:** True

**T:** What, um, why do you think that?

**Keighley:** Hm, because it's when earth is dark then, hm, we're not quite sure but we think it was true

**T:** Right, people with hands up (*to K*) who would you want to contribute?

**Keighley:** Um, Sadie?

**Sadie:** I think it's false because when the sun moves round the earth, it shines on the moon, which projects down to the earth.

**T:** (*nods*) Do you want to choose somebody else? That sounds good.

**Sadie:** Matthew



**Matthew:** Well, we weren't actually sure 'cos we were (thinking) the actual moon changes which it never does, or, if it is our point of view from earth, which it puts us in the shadow.

**T:** That's a good point isn't it, it doesn't actually change, it looks as if it changes shape to us, that's a really good point.

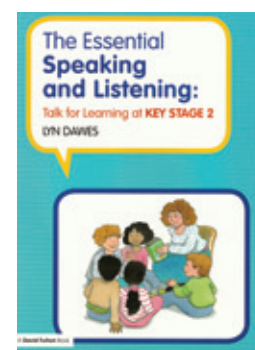
This open discussion continued to allow everyone to articulate their thinking, hear a range of points of view and compare other ideas with their own. Children may harbour misconceptions – we all do! – but talking things through brings the recognition that ideas are not just either 'right' or 'wrong', but can be developed through dialogue. And as a result of this whole class session, the teacher was able to make some informal assessments of what children already understood about the solar system, and what they did not – and so plan her teaching accordingly.

Simple strategies like 'Talking Points', designed to promote and sustain discussion, can be rapidly integrated into the usual work of your classroom. 'Concept Cartoons', mind maps and concept maps are other examples. You can generate your own strategies; you can be creative with board games such as *Taboo*, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, *Trivial Pursuit* and so on. They can be adapted to provide a stimulus for discussion in which

you will be able to hear what children know and understand, and what they are confused about. There are online games, mobile phone games, and other software, all of which can support educationally effective talk if they are framed in the right way. Such resources can be useful 'assessment tools' because they offer everyday chances to evaluate children's understanding.

### Resources

- ▶ *The Essential Speaking and Listening: Talk for learning at KS2* by Lyn Dawes (Routledge, 2008)
- ▶ *Exploring Talk in School*, edited by Neil Mercer, N. & Steve Hodgkinson. (Sage, 2008)
- ▶ *Creating a Speaking and Listening Classroom* by Lyn Dawes (Routledge, 2010)
- ▶ The *Thinking Together* website: [www.thinking-together.org.uk](http://www.thinking-together.org.uk)



# Assessment at the crossroads – which direction for reading?



## David Gibbons takes a positive look at the variety of assessment strategies now being practised.

No one doubts the value of assessment in education, but SATs, league tables, targets and a focus on data during inspection has led schools and teachers to treat the whole area with suspicion and indeed cynicism. We seem to live in a world where, to many professionals, assessment for accountability has a higher priority than assessment for learning.

Across the country green shoots of optimism can be seen and one factor seems to be common in effective practice that is emerging. Assessment should not just be periodic – an isolated snapshot – but should inform the next steps for pupils. Assessment should, first and foremost, inform what pupils need to do next to progress.

Developments in the area of 'Assessment for Learning' (AfL) have transformed practice in many classrooms with teachers increasingly focusing on clearly delineated progression during the course of lessons and sequences of lessons. Classroom practitioners are now using a wide range of strategies to develop children's understanding and to 'take stock' of where the children are currently. From the framing of precise success criteria which are owned by the children to a range of peer and self assessment methods, this process is clearly most effective when it is done **with** not **to** the children.

One of many examples of how this process can be used to both personalise learning and promote 'standards' is in Guided Reading. Imagine the transformation in a small group of able readers who are given a reading task away from their session with clear reference to the assessment focuses/success criteria that will be used in the session – perhaps taking the form of carefully framed questions. The guided reading session becomes a dynamic round table discussion with real focus and allows children to challenge and develop each other's thinking. At the same time, staff working with them are able to observe and assess against clear and levelled guidelines. It makes standardised comprehension tests look like something from the last century... which is what they are!

Carefully planned guided reading sessions are an essential element in moving towards a dynamic and personalised method of assessing and teaching reading. With independent activities for the other pupils – for example pre-reading for their own guided reading sessions, phonics work or independent writing tasks – the teacher can focus closely on the needs of one group and doing so on a weekly basis allows assessment to be constantly feeding into 'next steps' for pupils.

A recent meeting of teachers quickly came up with the following list of possible 'assessment opportunities' for reading. Obviously this is not exhaustive, but is

illustrative of how easily we can change our thinking and practice:

- guided reading diary – adult notes
- reading comprehension tests
- records of cross curricular reading, for example, reading for writing, note taking
- children's comments in reading records/ journals
- discussions with adults and other children
- parental comments in reading journals
- reading age tests
- role play
- hot seating
- paired talk
- adult and peer feedback
- re-telling
- running records – letters and sounds, stages of phonic development
- speaking and listening activities – snowballing/envoying etc
- visual literacy responses.

All of these approaches allow the teacher to establish a clearer picture of a child's reading development and also give tools to enable this development to continue and indeed accelerate. It is an exciting time for assessment with methods changing very much for the better and many staff and pupils beginning to feel able to experiment and challenge accepted orthodoxies.

# Raising attainment in writing through storytelling

## The Birmingham Story Spinner Project

A key aim of this project was to raise standards of writing by developing children's oral storytelling. Eight schools were given *The Story Spinner* set of DVDs (2007), a compilation of stories from around the world (told by storyteller Phil McDermott) suitable for Reception → Year 6/7.

## Achievements in writing

Each teacher developed a storytelling project with their own class and collected evidence of children's writing before and after the project.

Teachers found that storytelling emphasised for the children the importance of considering the audience, telling a story in a coherent sequence, engaging and holding attention, and enchanting or thrilling listeners. When the teachers analysed the children's writing at the end of the first phase of the project the positive effects on writing included:

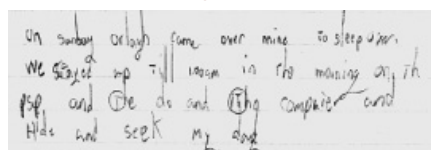
- ▶ improved sequencing of events
- ▶ greater attention to characterisation
- ▶ a more assured story voice.

## A case study

Use of the QCA Assessment Focuses for writing allows us to identify the type of improvements made by the following Year 4 pupil:

'Lucia was very reticent when it came to writing. She admitted to having no ideas and not knowing where to start putting pen to paper – even when it was a recount of her own Easter holidays. The Story Spinner project has given her that spark and eagerness to get going and her descriptions are bringing her stories to life.'

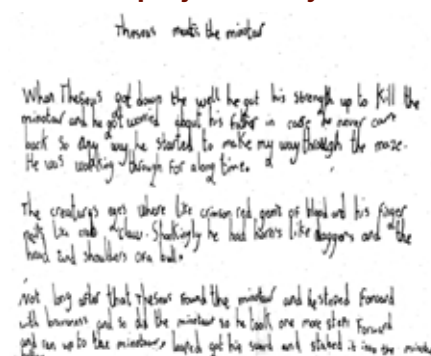
## Before the project – April



*On Sunday orlagh came over mine to sleepover. We stayed up till 1.00 am in the morning on the psp and The do and The compuiar and hide and seek my dog (?)*

This is not an imaginative, interesting and thoughtful text (AF1). It fulfils the purpose (AF2) (to write about a holiday experience) but there is little sense of awareness of the reader. The sequence is purely chronological and unselective, describing everything the girls did (AF3). As a paragraph AF4 is not met. It is made up of one short and one long sentence but the second particularly does not convey clear sense (AFs 5/6). Much of the spelling is correct but the language is unadventurous (AFs 7/8).

## After the project – May



*When Theseus got down the well he got his strength up to kill the minotaur and he got worried about his father in case he never came back so anyway he started to make my way through the maze. He was walking for a long time.*

*The creatures eyes where like crimson red gems of blood and his finger nail's like crab claw. Shockingly he had horns like daggers and the head and shoulders of a bull.*

*Not long after that Theseus found the minotaur and he stepped forward with braveness and so did the minotaur so he took one more step forward and ran up to the minotaur, leaped, got his sword and staked it into the minotaur's belly.*

In great contrast, this piece is interesting and imaginative (AF1); addresses the reader 'so anyway' and selects important actions (AF2); is sequenced and structured clearly (AF3). And the paragraph structure begins with narrative, shifts towards the description of the Minotaur, and brings the two protagonists together in the third paragraph (AF4).

Lucia also reveals a consistent (mis)use of apostrophes, giving her teacher an opportunity to address this (AFs 5/6). Her use of 'stepped' and 'staked' signal the need for explanation of the use of double consonants (AFs 7/8).

The vocabulary is more adventurous than in the first example and is used effectively. The imagery is appropriate and telling. Most of the spelling is accurate, including unfamiliar words such as 'Minotaur'.

The development of secure storytelling voices, the expansion of language and style, the secure structure and cohesion of the narratives as well as improvement in technical features and handwriting all bear witness to the value of storytelling, using *The Story Spinner* DVDs. The project proved effective in raising standards in writing through the use of talk for writing.

## Conclusion

The project showed children how to engage and sustain a listener/reader's interest, and storytelling language and phrasing became commonplace in the children's telling and writing.

A full report of the project, by Marilyn Mottram, appears in the Spring and Summer 2009 issues of *English 4-11*.

**DVD** *The Story Spinner* (2007) Day One Productions. [www.thestoryspinner.co.uk](http://www.thestoryspinner.co.uk)





## NATE (National Association for the Teaching of English)

### NATE Conference

**'Making Meanings – English at the heart of learning', 9–11 July 2010 at Hinckley Island Hotel, Leicestershire**

NATE Conference is renowned for its atmosphere of fun, creativity and inspiration. This year there will be a special Primary Day on Saturday 10 July with **Pie Corbett** as keynote speaker. As usual, there will be energising workshops, a research strand and informative seminars as well as an exhibition with leading publishers of groundbreaking resources. Come along for the day, or for all three days! Contact NATE office or look on the website for more details.

### NATE Classroom

'Assessment' is also the main theme in the Summer (June) issue of NATE's magazine for all English teachers. Look out for Simon Wrigley's article on 'What does APP spell? Appealing or Appalling?'

The Autumn issue will focus on 'Special Needs/Gifted & Talented' – contact the editor ([classroom@nate.org.uk](mailto:classroom@nate.org.uk)) if you would like to contribute an article.



**NATE (National Association for the Teaching of English)**

50 Broadfield Road  
Sheffield  
S8 0XJ  
tel: 0114 255 5419  
fax: 0114 255 5296  
email: [info@nate.org.uk](mailto:info@nate.org.uk)  
[www.nate.org.uk](http://www.nate.org.uk)



## UKLA

UKLA promotes good practice in English teaching. It has a strong membership in the Primary sector of professionals committed to developing literacy education. As well as professional support, members receive *Literacy News* with accounts of UKLA activities and projects, *English 4–11*, published jointly with the English Association, and *Literacy*, which reports research with clear classroom implications.

### Conference 2010

**UKLA's 46th Annual International Conference *The Changing Face of Literacy: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow***

**The University of Winchester  
Friday 9 to Sunday 11 July 2010**

The conference will provide an opportunity to examine, discuss and debate what has shaped literacy practices in the past, to speculate about the potential new forms of literacy, and to extend thinking about already existing literate practices.

### Publications

#### *Miscue Analysis in the Classroom*

ISBN 978 1 897638 36 1 Robin Campbell  
The second edition of this popular mini-book remains focused on an adapted miscue analysis for use in busy classrooms. It also includes some new material and examples as well as a short section on invented spelling and an open critical look at miscue analysis.

**Price: £7.00 (members) £8.00 (non-members)**



**UKLA (UK Literacy Association)**

4th Floor  
Attenborough Building  
Leicester University  
LE1 7RH  
tel: 0116 229 7450  
fax: 0116 229 7451  
[www.ukla.org](http://www.ukla.org)

## The English Association

The English Association aims to further knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the English language and its literatures and to foster good practice in its teaching and learning at all levels. The Association's journal for primary teachers – *English 4–11* (co-published with UKLA) – is dedicated to the teacher in the primary classroom.

Keep an eye out for the summer issue of *English 4–11*, which includes the winners of our awards for the best children's illustrated books of 2009. Prizes are awarded in four categories, Key Stage 1 Fiction; Key Stage 2 Fiction; Key Stage 1 Non-fiction and Key Stage 2 Non-fiction.

Check out our website for winners over the past years: [www.le.ac.uk/engassoc/publications/411awards.html](http://www.le.ac.uk/engassoc/publications/411awards.html)



**The English Association**

University of Leicester  
University Road  
Leicester  
LE1 7RH

tel: 0116 252 3982  
fax: 0116 252 2301  
email: [engassoc@le.ac.uk](mailto:engassoc@le.ac.uk)  
[www.le.ac.uk/engassoc](http://www.le.ac.uk/engassoc)



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