

Readers Theatre

For its enthusiasts, Readers Theatre is one of the most powerful strategies for teaching and learning. Steve Williams attends an international workshop to find out more



Every year in July an American organisation called the Institute for Readers Theatre, in conjunction with the University of Southern Maine, arranges an intensive two-week international workshop in London. It is attended mostly by Americans: teachers who want become more expert at using Readers Theatre for their own work and people who love the creativity and good humour of the fortnight. The Institute chooses London as its venue because, in the words of organiser Arlene McCoy, 'there are so many good plays to go to in the evenings'. Last summer I visited the workshop to see Readers Theatre in action and find out why it attracts such devoted enthusiasts.

Scripting

The starting point for Readers Theatre is a script. This is most often an adaptation of a piece of narrative fiction or poetry but it can also carry a debate, a news story, a humorous sketch or a mix of genres framed by a common theme. If a script is adapted from a piece of literature, the author's original words are used with as little alteration as possible. Readers Theatre scripts are readily available but teachers at the workshop argue strongly that, for the full educational potential of Readers Theatre to be realised, teachers and pupils should also make their own.

The opening session of the workshop demonstrated one of the challenges of scripting for Readers Theatre – the task of presenting narrative-heavy text for an ensemble performance. Using *The Little Girl and the Wolf* by James Thurber, tutors from the Institute showed how to use multiple narrators, each linked to a character, and how to assign some of the narrative to the characters themselves at appropriate times. For example:

NARRATOR 1: One afternoon a big wolf waited in the dark forest for a little girl to come along
WOLF: Carrying a basket of food
NARRATOR 1: To her grandmother.
NARRATOR 2: Finally a little girl did come along and she was carrying
GIRL: A basket of food.

It is clear that the act of scripting is a challenge, forcing readers to structure phrases and sentences with an eye towards the impact of the text in performance. Consider, for example, the last two lines. It wouldn't make sense to have the girl say 'she was carrying'. The sentence has to be split at just the right place to work.

Readers Theatre can handle many kinds of texts from complex works of adult fiction to newspaper stories and even small ads. The Institute has developed a quick method of turning any text into a Readers Theatre script by marking it into parts for narrators and characters, coding them with initials, and then marking each reader's lines with a highlighting pen.



Scriptmaking for Readers Theatre

Oral interpretation

Oral interpretation of scripts is the heart of Readers Theatre. It is obvious though, watching the workshop members in action, that oral interpretation involves much more than simply reading aloud. To interpret a line of text one must consider its meaning, imagine the motivations of the characters, speculate on the author's intentions and consider the tone of the whole piece. The successful rendering of a line may require a fundamental exploration of meaning from the reader. As Barbara Egbert, an educator from California says: 'With Readers Theatre, if children are not comprehending what they read, they know it straight away – and so does the teacher.' So if school pupils are to benefit fully from the Readers Theatre experience, then they will require some initiation into the techniques of oral interpretation. And why not? The ability to read fluently, thoughtfully and with feeling is a gift for life and a worthy aim for education.

There are plenty of possible exercises to raise pupils' awareness of oral interpretation such as reading a sentence with different emotions in mind, stressing different words to suggest alternative meanings and imagining the

subtexts implied by an utterance. And, of course, the teacher should be able to model the process of oral interpretation and demonstrate its effects. The performances I saw at the workshop were sometimes hilarious and sometimes moving – responses produced by human voices creating meaning from words on a page.

The thinking voice

'Two arts – the art of reading poetry and the art of listening with discrimination to such reading – can now be developed as never before. They depend upon recognition of the *reading voice* as our prime and indispensable instrument for exploring and comparing meanings.' I. A. Richards, *The Uses of Literature* (1973)

'... the sentence is still something that offers itself to the eye in static precision – there to be examined – frozen still ... But to the ear a spoken sentence is more like a fluctuant, resonant pulse ... It may be rather important now that speech and the ear are getting their chance to stage a comeback.' I.A. Richards, *Complementarities* (1976) originally a radio talk broadcast in 1947

'One of the great benefits of needing to hear words aloud is that speaking encourages both good reading and good writing habits.' Patsy Rodenburg, *The Need for Words, Voice and the Text* (2001)

'I would suggest that one of the joys of reading the prose of, say Charles Dickens, is hearing the tales and characters come to life through a speaking voice. Sound enhances sense.' Patsy Rodenburg, *The Need for Words, Voice and the Text* (2001)



Basic Readers Theatre staging at the international workshop

Staging Readers Theatre

There was much discussion at the workshop about the way Readers Theatre is staged. Readers Theatre performances are usually *presentational* in style. In theatrical parlance the word *presentational* describes an event, like storytelling, where performers explicitly frame the content of their performance for the audience, without pretence that events or dialogues are happening in real time. Performers draw more or less on other theatrical conventions such as mime, props, sound effects and the organisation of movement – all according to taste. More often than not, performers read from scripts held in their hands or placed on music stands so there is no need for them to memorise lines. Reading positions are arranged according to the particularities of each script.

In schools, performances can be more or less polished according to the occasion, ranging from quick renditions for tight lesson schedules to carefully rehearsed events for assemblies or cultural evenings.

In the professional theatre, Readers Theatre is related to such diverse presentational productions as *Under Milk Wood*, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Blood Brothers*. In fact, supporters of Readers Theatre insist that it isn't just an educational tool but an interesting theatrical form in its own right. In America, performances by Readers Theatre companies draw enthusiastic and diverse audiences.

Many American colleges for students aged between 18 and 20 have thriving Readers Theatre programmes linked to nation-wide 'Forensics' events – competitions involving debate and oral interpretation. The Readers Theatre section of Forensics requires students to perform a compilation script made up of texts woven together around a theme and lasting about 25 minutes.

Jill McCall, a teacher at Moor Park College, California says that: 'because the students are preparing for a competition, standards are very high.' In this version of Readers Theatre,

scripts are often memorised and actors move around the performance space.

Jill believes that taking part in Forensics raises the confidence and self-esteem of her students: 'Public speaking is the number-one fear for most of the population; Readers Theatre helps students overcome their natural anxieties.'

Christopher DeSurra of Orange Coast College, California says that Readers Theatre 'develops students critical thinking by exposing them to a wide variety of texts and forcing them to dissect and understand literature through preparation for performance.'

Roland Petrello of Moor Park College believes that one advantage of the honed-down nature of Readers Theatre is that it enables theatre students to perform many texts over the limited length of the course: 'It gives students a laboratory to work on their craft by playing many different characters.'

Readers Theatre in schools

Readers Theatre is first and foremost an enjoyable activity that also motivates pupils to think deeply during reading and writing. And in the words of teachers at the workshop: 'Readers Theatre brings texts to life.'



Barbara Egbert describes Readers Theatre as 'a great motivator for children'. This is one of the reasons why the US federal government has recently recognised it as a 'model education strategy' and awarded one million dollars to Barbara's Readers Theatre project based in California. The project is part of a national initiative to integrate theatre and visual arts into reading and writing instruction. Barbara is the project director and she must document and evaluate results as well as developing teaching strategies for pupils up to fourteen years old. Preliminary results using rigorous tests have been positive. They show gains in reading fluency, comprehension and vocabulary. Children's co-operation and group work also seem to have improved.

For Barbara these encouraging results are only part of the Readers Theatre story: 'the greatest thing is that children seem to get joy from it. If a Readers Theatre session is coming up, they will often clap when the teacher enters the room. The fun they have draws them into reading.' She describes Readers Theatre as low-tech and low-risk: 'For a few dollars spent on music stands and stools you can achieve so much. And it doesn't feel risky for children who are embarrassed by conventional drama.' She is impressed by the way Readers Theatre has 'opened up new possibilities for children to display all kinds of talents.'

One successful project strategy has been the use of Readers Theatre to encourage writing across the curriculum. Barbara says that children will often write up research for social studies lessons in a Readers Theatre format: 'the plain facts are narrated but the children also imagine dialogue for the characters implicated by the facts'. The result is a class research presentation with a difference.

Cindy Turcotte, a special needs teacher from Mount Ararat Middle School in Maine, also uses Readers Theatre as a vehicle for research in social studies. Her pupils wrote and performed a script about Ellis Island, the gateway through which more than 12 million immigrants passed between 1892 and 1954. The pupils imagined what it was like to be Europeans going through Ellis Island. 'Readers Theatre is a useful technique to get pupils motivated and to develop their enquiry skills,' she says. 'After they have written their scripts and rehearsed them, they really know the material. And we don't have to teach them by rote.'

Cindy teaches children with emotional and behavioural difficulties and says that while most enjoy Readers Theatre some don't like to rehearse for too long. She needs to spend time coaching students with poor reading skills or introverted personalities.



Lucy Rioux is an 'enrichment consultant' for the teaching of gifted and talented children in the Lichfield District of Maine. For her, Readers Theatre is suitable for all age groups and subjects. 'It is another avenue of creativity for gifted and talented children,' she says, 'and it helps introverted pupils to overcome their inhibitions because it is not threatening.' Lucy is convinced that working in a team to complete a project with an enjoyable outcome supports those able children who tend to be perfectionists: 'working together and relying on the skills of others protects them from the disabling self-criticism they sometimes heap on themselves'.

Lucy has worked with pupils on Readers Theatre productions about social issues such as harassment and civil rights. The scenes are performed for other pupils and Lucy says the audience is usually gripped: 'children are informed and entertained at the same time and their concentration level is very high during a performance.'

She is particularly impressed by the way Readers Theatre appeals to at least three of the multiple intelligences identified by Dr. Howard Gardner: 'Readers theatre supports *linguistic* intelligence because it requires reading and speaking; It is a *bodily-kinaesthetic* activity and its co-operative nature makes it a tool for *interpersonal* development'.

Readers Theatre and thinking

I left the workshop very enthusiastic about the educational possibilities of Readers Theatre. I was reminded of how much thinking about meaning goes on during the scripting process and in preparation for oral interpretation. I was also struck by the sheer fun of Readers Theatre, particularly when there is humour in the material.

I was impressed by the flexibility of the Readers Theatre format and felt that there were a few more ways it could be used to improve pupils' thinking:

For teaching concepts. Readers Theatre could be a good method of introducing key concepts such as 'cause and effect' to pupils. The teacher (or a group of older pupils) could write the script. Pupils could be challenged to write their own scripts to show their understanding of key concepts. They could be as imaginative as they liked using examples and analogies.

As a vehicle for exploratory writing. Pupils often find it difficult to write extended argumentative essays. The dialogue form is a good introduction to argumentative writing because it doesn't demand a coherent strategy from writers before they begin. The to and fro of dialogue invites them to follow an argument where it leads. Pupils could also experiment with writing their arguments in role – talking the parts of characters.



Readers Theatre staging with costume

For modelling discussion and questioning. Pupils desperately need models for good discussion and questioning. The 'Virtual Learner Project' (McKendree et al 1998) showed that when pupils watched videos clips of their peers engaged in high-quality discussion, their own discussions improved. Readers Theatre could provide a similar service in imaginative and engaging ways. The crucial consideration would be the framing of the script, involving the initial prologue to the audience and the choice of genre. For example, the script could be framed as report on a controversy, a documentary or a spoof game show.

For summing up discussion or enquiry. As teachers in America have found, Readers Theatre provides a stimulating way to report on research or discussion. Because of its *presentational* nature, it is flexible enough to incorporate the imaginative reconstruction of real or possible events *and* commentary on those events. And, as in a dialogue, the outcome can be open-ended so disagreements do not have to be artificially resolved as in an essay. If fact, a satisfactory outcome of an enquiry may be a clearer understanding of competing points of view.

To accompany Philosophy for Children. Philosophy for Children and Readers Theatre were made for each other. Readers Theatre provides an engaging way of presenting the initial stimulus for a Community of Enquiry where children ask their own questions and then follow them up with rigorous discussion (see the article by Joanna Haynes in this issue). Stories, poems, news items and dialogues are often used as a starting point and all can be presented as Readers Theatre. However, Philosophy for Children began with a set of novels (and support materials) written by American philosopher Matthew Lipman. The central characters are school pupils who take an interest in philosophical questions. The novels are most commonly read around the class, but extracts could be adapted very well in Readers Theatre style by teachers and students. I



Readers Theatre performance by pupils in California

think that to dramatise thinking in this way would add a significant dimension to the appeal of the Philosophy for Children programme and may also encourage students to write and perform their own philosophical stories.

Readers Theatre in the UK

Readers Theatre hasn't caught on before in the UK. Perhaps it didn't interest many drama teachers for whom drama was more to do with children *experiencing* than *performing*. For some English teachers, Readers Theatre may have been a bit too dramatic. In any case, Readers Theatre was not on the agenda in either subject. Perhaps now is a good time to renew our interest. Drama teachers are showing a new willingness to use scripts and English teachers have been influenced by much of the excellent work on the oral interpretation of Shakespearean language. Add to that recent worries that schooling isn't interesting or creative enough and Readers Theatre seems too good a strategy to overlook – particularly when, as I have argued, it can also make a major contribution to the development of young people's thinking.

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If you are interested in finding out more about Readers Theatre in the UK, please contact Steve by email: steve@dialogueworks.co.uk

Photographs

- Photographs of the international workshop were provided by Walter Stump.
- Photographs of Californian children at work were provided by Barbara Egbert.

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- Rodenburg, P. (2001) *The need for words voice and the text*, Methuen Drama.
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- McKendree J et al (1998) *Why observing a dialogue may benefit learning*, in *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 14, 110-119, Blackwell.

Websites

- Institute of Readers Theatre Website: www.readers-theatre.com.
- Aaron Shepard's RT page: <http://aaronshep.com/rt/> Scripts for children and tips for scripting and staging.
- Readers Theatre Digest: www.readerstheatredigest.com. A new online journal for Readers Theatre.
- The Readers Theatre project based in California has a small website: www.leusd.k12.ca.us/~project.raise

Books

- William Adams (2002) *Institute Book of Readers Theatre: A Practical Guide for School, Theatre and Community*, Institute for Readers Theatre. Soon to be available in the UK
- Dixon, Davies and Politano (1996) *Building Connections: Learning with Readers Theatre*, Peguis Publishing, Canada.

I have written a Readers Theatre script to illustrate the format (see following page). It is adapted from one of the well-known folk tales about the Moghul Emperor Akbar and his clever adviser Birbal.

BIRBAL'S JOURNEY TO PARADISE

CAST

READER 1: NARRATOR 1

READER 2: NARRATOR 2

READER 3: AKBAR

READER 4: BARBER

READER 5: BIRBAL

- NARRATOR 1** Long ago, Akbar ruled India. He was the greatest of all the Moghul emperors.
- AKBAR** [*Proudly*] Greatest of the all the Moghuls.
- NARRATOR 1** Akbar had many advisors and countless servants but his favourite was Birbal. Akbar thought Birbal was the wittiest and cleverest man in the Empire.
- NARRATOR 2** But Birbal had enemies who were envious of his popularity.
- NARRATOR 1** Most envious of all was the Emperor's barber. The barber knew that favour with Akbar brought fortune. He wondered:
- BARBER** Why can't a barber be the fortunate one for a change? I am clever. I am funny. I have good ideas. I deserve better.
- NARRATOR 2** The barber's envy turned to hatred and he plotted for Birbal's downfall day and night until he had worked out
- BARBER** A cunning plan.
- NARRATOR 1** One day, while trimming the Emperor's beard, the barber found the courage to speak up and put his plan into action.
- BARBER** You know Majesty, last night I dreamed of your father.
- NARRATOR 1** The great Emperor was gripped by the barber's words for he was a superstitious man who loved his late father dearly.
- EMPEROR** My father you say! Did he speak?
- BARBER** Yes excellency. He is very happy in paradise but says that all the residents of Heaven are terrible bores. He wants you to send someone to keep him amused with fine talk. Someone clever and witty.
- NARRATOR 1** Now although Akbar prized Birbal very much, he truly worshiped his own father. After a little thought, he decided to send his favourite advisor to paradise to entertain the old man. He sent for Birbal.
- NARRATOR 2** Of course, the only way to reach heaven
- BARBER** Is through death. What a brilliant plan!
- NARRATOR 2** Birbal rode to court at once to hear the Emperor's wishes.
- NARRATOR 1** Akbar said
- AKBAR** Birbal, if I have not judged you wrongly, I think you love me enough to make any sacrifice for my sake.
- BIRBAL** I know I do Emperor.

- BARBER** [Aside] Yes! That's right. Go on ...
- AKBAR** Then I would like you to go to heaven and keep my dear father company.
- BARBER** [Aside] Yes! Company! That's it.
- BIRBAL** Majesty, it would be an honour. But may I take a few days to prepare?
- BARBER** But your father sir, so sad, so very very bored and sad and ...
- AKBAR** Silence! Birbal, you are doing me a great favour. Of course you should prepare. I will give you a week.
- BARBER** [Mouths the words in silence and rolls his eyes] A week!
- NARRATOR 2** Birbal returned home and
- BIRBAL** Dug a deep pit
- NARRATOR 2** In the grounds of his house. This would be his grave. But he also dug
- BIRBAL** A secret tunnel
- NARRATOR 2** That opened under the floor of his private room. Then he returned to meet the Emperor.
- BIRBAL** Highness
- NARRATOR 2** He said
- BIRBAL** In accordance with an old family tradition, I would like to be buried alive. My family has always believed that this is the easiest and quickest way to get to heaven.
- NARRATOR 2** And so to the delight of the barber [Barber mimes happiness] Birbal was buried alive. With six feet of earth weighing down on him, he scratched and scraped his way to into the tunnel that took him to the safety of his own house. Birbal hid in his room for over six months. At the end of that time, with his hair long and with a shaggy beard, he came out of hiding set off for the Emperor's court.
- NARRATOR 1** Akbar was having his hair cut
- NARRATOR 2** When Birbal arrived at court
- BIRBAL** Majesty!
- AKBAR** Birbal! Can it be you? How did you get here?
- NARRATOR 2** Birbal took a deep breath and replied:
- BIRBAL** From Paradise Oh Great One. Your father enjoyed our talks so much that he gave me special permission to return to earth and tell you all about them.
- AKBAR** Did he give you any special message for his devoted son?
- BIRBAL** Just one Majesty. Do you see my whiskers and long hair? (Akbar nods) Well, it seems very few barbers make it to heaven. Your father asks you to send him yours at once for he is badly in need of a haircut.

[THE NARRATORS TAKE THE BARBER OFF THE STAGE FOLLOWED BY AKBAR AND BIRBAL CHATTING TO EACH OTHER.]