

The Adventures of Perseus

Talk and Drama for Writing

Patrice Baldwin

For the last three years, I have had the pleasure of working with Pie Corbett once or twice a term, exploring and developing 'Talk and Drama for Writing'. The way we work a story with whole classes of children is different but complementary.

I often use drama techniques with picture books, paintings or poetry to provide a 'lived experience' that emotionally engages a whole class of children. The drama purposefully generates 'thought and talk' and this can be prior to writing. The drama generates content and ideas; and within the drama writing opportunities can arise or be planted by the teacher.

Drama engages and motivates most children. They understand and enjoy entering and acting out stories together, using their bodies and voices. At its simplest, Drama can be a linear re-enactment or retelling of a known story, bringing to life a chronological sequence of events. Getting children to simply

'act out' stories (as imitation or mimicry) is something that most teachers feel safe and comfortable with. The use of drama strategies can take this further. Teachers who have a few basic drama techniques at their disposal, can use them to help children to hold important moments in stories still. This aids their inter-thinking and collective 'thought and talk' either in or out of role. Through Drama children can actively explore and communicate meaning together, create new scenes and dialogue, innovate and elaborate on the known story. This can lead into writing that generates new text.

Different types of Drama Strategies can be selected to purposefully generate different types of 'thought and talk', which may be used to help prepare children for different types of writing. For example, some strategies may be selectively used to support the creation of images (freeze frame, tableau), episodes

(small group playmaking, performance carousel), dialogue (improvisation, eavesdropping), monologue (thought-tracking, talking objects), settings (visualisation, making 'sense' of the story), characters (hot seating, role on the wall).

Drama with whole classes, contains its own immediate and responsive audience and the children are both participants and spectators at different times.

Drama enables and requires children to use language and image effectively, to tell/re-tell and present/perform stories clearly. It also demonstrates and improves their knowledge and understanding of the content, key moments, the sequencing of episodes, the complexity of characters, the development of themes, as well as their understanding of symbols and metaphor.

Retelling the story, repeatedly associating words and phrases with certain bodily actions, is central to embedding the story





structure in 'Talk for Writing'. It engages and involves all children and helps them to internalise a story structure embedding in both their long term and working memories. Drama is also an embodiment of story. It is visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and tactile. Importantly, it invites empathy and links the cognitive and affective domains. It enables affective and cognitive engagement with characters, themes and situations. In 'Talk for Writing' and in Drama the children enjoy a sense of belonging, as both approaches are inclusive and require everyone to be actively and socially involved.

All Drama is story and in some senses, all story is Drama. When we read stories alone, the 'drama' of the story is usually just in our heads but in both 'Talk for Writing' and Drama, children are invited to experience the story through embodying it. This makes it memorable.

The following drama lesson is one I developed, using Pie's version of *The Adventures of Perseus*. He wrote this for the National Gallery and it links to a dramatic painting that hangs there, *Perseus turning Phineas and his Followers into Stone*, by Luca Giordano. Pie's story and a download of this image

are both freely available for use by schools via the National Gallery website. <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/learning/teachers-and-schools/teaching-english-and-drama/out-of-art/stories-for-use-in-class/the-story-of-ariadne-by-pie-corbett/>.



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When I first tried out the drama lesson below with teachers, I was in the unusual and fortunate position of following straight on from Pie Corbett, personally and vividly retelling his version of the story 'live' to the dozens of teachers present. Before starting this lesson yourself with children, you may wish to first read aloud Pie Corbett's version of the story to them. You should have Giodarno's painting ready to use towards the end. If you have some atmospheric music to use as background (for example, for the Performance Carousel in activity 7), it can help re-evolve the emotions and memories if children are writing in connection with the drama afterwards.

The drama strategies used in this lesson can also be used with other stories and images.



THE ADVENTURES OF PERSEUS

NO.	DRAMA STRATEGY (AND PURPOSE)	TEACHER GUIDANCE
1	Dramatic game	Warm up (an adaptation of 'What's the time Mr Wolf' with Medusa instead of a wolf). The teacher in role as Medusa. Freeze whenever 'Medusa' turns and looks at you and speaks. This is an opportunity for the teacher to give information and model rich, spoken language, whilst turning towards them in role, e.g. 'I am the dreaded and dreadful gorgon Medusa', 'My hair slips and slithers with slimy venomous snakes', 'One steely stare from me and you stay stuck as stone statues'. 'Stay away from us Gorgon Sisters, you mere mortals. Beware my moods and mysterious magic. Beware of me, Medusa'.
2	Teacher in Role	In role as worried Perseus, the teacher briefly tells the children the story so far (see below), up to the moment when he tells them he has vowed to bring Medusa's head as a wedding present. The class can then ask Perseus questions, to gather more information. The class are just 'shadowy' questioners, i.e. they have no particular role, other than that of questioners.
	Shadowy Role	The main parts of the story so far, that the teacher to get across are:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gathering information (setting, character and plot) Clarification of character 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perseus and his mother Danae were locked into a chest and cast to sea by her jealous father Acrisius.. They were washed ashore on Seriphos, where the kind fisherman Dictys found them and took them in. The King of Seriphos (Polydectes) has fallen in love with Danae and wants to marry her. Perseus has told Polydectes that he needs Perseus' permission to marry Danae. Polydectes and Perseus have argued and Perseus has sworn by Zeus that he will bring Medusa's head as a wedding present to Danae. Any living creature that looks at Medusa, will turn to stone.
3	Thought-tracking	Perseus is now worried about how he will carry out what he has sworn to do. What are his thoughts? The teacher as Perseus, stands still, looking out to sea. Ask the children to speak aloud Perseus' thoughts (in the first person), at this anxious moment. They can pass the stationary Perseus as they speak his thoughts (passing thoughts) or it could be carried out as a static thought-tracking activity.
	The 'I Wonder' game	Alternatively, this activity can be done by children each using a repeated sentence stem every time, 'I wonder', e.g. 'I wonder where Medusa lives?' 'I wonder if I will come back alive?'
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To encourage and share 'possibility thinking' and speculation 	



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NO.	DRAMA STRATEGY (AND PURPOSE)	TEACHER GUIDANCE
4	<p>Rumours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To focus their imaginative thinking on the witches To introduce and develop characters To build dramatic tension 	<p>Tell the children that Perseus now has to visit the three 'one eyed' Graeae, as they know where Medusa lives. The Graeae can see, only by sharing one eyeball that they pass between them. Rumours abound about these three hags. Ask the children to make up a plausible rumour about these Graeae and then move around, spreading and gathering rumours about them.</p>
5	<p>Mime and improvisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building collective belief in an imaginary object, verbally Verbalising descriptions aloud (can precede descriptive writing) <p>Physical Theatre</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To bring a visualised image into being, physically <p>Talking Objects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To stimulate language that can later support writing (personification) <p>Performance carousel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enact the sequence of events with all contributing To create a whole class, collective performance <p>Hotseating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gain and share more information about each object To deepen engagement with the group role 	<p>Perseus is given gifts to help him in his quest.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Athena gives Perseus a shield. Athena gives Perseus a sword. Hermes gives him a cap of invisibility Hermes gives him a pair of winged sandals Hermes gives him a sack for Medusa's head. <p>Divide the class into 5 groups. Each group is allocated one of these imaginary objects. Try to make groups no larger than 5 children. If necessary, more than one group can be allocated the same object.</p> <p>Seated in groups, they pass the imaginary object around, commenting on it, describing it, verbally building up a collectively agreed image of the imagined object, e.g. 'This shield is very shiny' 'These shoes have very light feathers sewn along the side of them, etc. They need to listen to each other to build one image and not contradict each other about what it looks and feels like.</p> <p>Each group physically and collectively becomes their object. In slow motion, each group forms themselves into a single still image of their object. The object can be formed gradually by one person at a time, adding themselves to the group image.</p> <p>Alternatively the object can be formed by all members moving into the image simultaneously (this requires rehearsal time).</p> <p>As each person adds themselves to the image, they speak descriptively as the object, e.g. I am the sharp sword that can cut through any metal...' 'I am a strong feather in the wings of this shoe...' etc.</p> <p>The groups rehearse and then present their group image in turn, continuously, i.e. with no break between the group performances.</p> <p>After the sequence of group performances, they can ask questions of each object, to get further information, e.g. 'Are the feathers all the same sort?'</p>
6	<p>Conscience Alley (Thought - tracking)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To verbalise and hear pros and cons of a course of action To engage with a key character at a key moment To build dramatic tension <p>Teacher in Role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide a focus for the children's response 	<p>Ask the class to get into 2 lines facing each other, to create a narrow passage for Perseus to walk through. Perseus journeys through the passage, to where the gorgons are. As Perseus (Teacher in Role) passes by, each child has the opportunity to speak aloud to him. One line will try to persuade him to go forward and slay Medusa. The other line tries to persuade him to retreat. Encourage children to justify, logically reason and explain to Perseus, e.g. 'Go back Perseus because ...' or 'Go on Perseus because ...'</p>
7	<p>Talking objects Physical theatre Active Storytelling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To engage them with a key moment To develop the concept of personification 	<p>Ask the class to get back into their 'talking object' groups (as activity 5). Tell them that we are now focusing on the moments just before, during and after Perseus chopping off the head of Medusa . Each group is given one section of the scene (see bulletpoints below) to tell and present together, as the object. The recounts (spoken by the objects as 'eye witnesses') will be presented to the rest of the groups, as audience. Voice and sound effects can also be used.</p>

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NO.	DRAMA STRATEGY (AND PURPOSE)	TEACHER GUIDANCE
<p>7 (cont.) Performance Carousel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enable an inclusive, whole class performance to be compiled To give a focus (audience) for the recount 	<p>After a few minutes rehearsal, the scenes can be presented in turn, in chronological sequence.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> The cap (helmet) of invisibility speaks about going into the cave and the moment when Perseus first sees the gorgons; The bronze shield tells the story up to the point where Medusa is reflected in it; The sword picks up the story from the point of the sword being held and raised, finishing at the point when Medusa's head is severed; The bag tells the story from when the head is put inside it until they are back at the entrance of the cave; The winged feet tell the story, from the moment they take flight, carrying Perseus and the bag homeward, up until the moment that he sees Andromeda below and hovers for a moment, indecisively. 	
YOU COULD STOP HERE IF YOU WISH OR CARRY ON TO THE NEXT OF PERSEUS' ADVENTURES.		
<p>8</p> <p>Conscience Alley</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To share and consider the pros and cons of a course of action To give opportunity for persuasive speech (which can precede persuasive writing) To identify with a character's possible inner thoughts, feelings and motives (which can precede written monologue) <p>Teacher in Role</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To give a focus for the responses To guide pace for – reflective thinking 	<p>Should Perseus detour now to rescue Andromeda from the sea monster (the Kraken), or should he head straight back home to save his mother from marrying King Polydectes? Time is of the essence!</p> <p>Ask the class to get into 2 straight lines facing each other, to create an alley. Pass as Perseus (Teacher in Role) between the lines. Each child has the opportunity to speak aloud to Perseus, as if they are a voice inside his head. One line tries to persuade him to fly down and save Andromeda from the Kraken, whilst the other line tries to persuade him to fly straight home.</p>	
<p>9</p> <p>'Making sense' of a picture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To encourage engagement through multi-sensory memory To draw attention to and verbalise the detail in the picture To stimulate a verbal, shared imagined experience To construct descriptive sentences aloud that could help if writing later 	<p>Project the painting of Perseus showing the Gorgon's head to Phineus. Say, 'Travel the picture with your eyes...' Ask them to pick up on the detail to be seen in the picture and speak aloud sentences starting with, 'I can see ...'</p> <p>Next, 'Travel the picture with your ears ...' (what sounds would they hear if they were present in the scene?) Their responses should start with, 'I can hear ...' ('I can hear bodies falling to the ground').</p> <p>Next, 'Travel the picture with your nose...' (what smells would they hear if they were present in the scene?) Their responses should start with, 'I can smell ...' ('I can smell the sweat')</p> <p>Next, 'Travel the picture with hands/bare feet...' (what tactile sensations would they feel if they were present in the scene?) Their responses should start with, 'I can feel ...' ('I can feel the heavy handle of my sword').</p>	
<p>10</p> <p>Tableau</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enable all to engage verbally with a key moment To build shared belief in the imagined experience To encourage creative 'thought and talk' <p>Improvisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To build dramatic tension To ensure all are included in a key moment <p>Teacher as Storyteller</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To offer a model of recounting To provide a focused climax 	<p>Now ask them to imagine that the scene in the painting is like a film scene. It can be rewound, to the moment just before Perseus enters the banquet scene.</p> <p>Ask them to imagine that there are more people, either side of the painting that we cannot see (but can imagine). They can now choose to be either characters from the painting itself, or from just outside it. Tell them that you will be Perseus and that when you hold up the head of Medusa they must freeze (turned to stone).</p> <p>They then build the picture, entering the scene in turn and bringing it to life. Then Perseus enters (teacher in role). As Perseus you could have a real bag with a mask in it or just mime it. As Perseus you narrate aloud what is happening (but as a recount).</p> <p>For example: <i>'I arrived at the banquet hall. I was in a hurry. I needed to get this business over with and get home to my mother's wedding. The people stared at me as I entered and I strode forward towards Phineas. I was on my guard. I felt unsafe and wondered if he meant to harm me or let me leave. It was then he shouted his final words, 'Kill him!' Quickly, I reached inside the bag and pulled out the heavy, snake filled head of Medusa. I turned it towards the hostile crowd and slowly the room fell silent, turned to stone.'</i></p>	



Some possible writing opportunities to select from:

- **Diary writing (Following Activity 3):** Perseus confides in his diary, after he has vowed to deliver the head of Medusa and has no idea how he will do it! Writing the inner thoughts of Perseus in his diary, leads on from us hearing and contributing to his inner thoughts through 'thought-tracking'.
- **Monologue/soliloquy (Following activity 6):** The Conscience Alley has enabled us to hear contradictory and persuasive voices inside Perseus' head as he is about to enter Medusa's cave. These voices have provided the content of a possible written soliloquy.
- **Eye witness accounts/ personification (Following activity 7):** The children (as objects) have already verbally recounted the beheading of Medusa by Perseus. They were eye witnesses to the event. In the drama the event has been sequenced, with each object telling part of this story episode. The eye witness accounts can now be written by the objects and can be sequenced (as they were in the Performance Carousel).
- **Monologue or recount (Following activity 8):** The Conscience Alley has enabled us to listen in on Perseus' thoughts as he faced a moral dilemma. Should he save Andromeda or just fly straight home? This can now be written by Perseus in the present tense (as a monologue) or in the past tense (as a recount).
- **Setting the scene (Following activity 9):** They have studied the painting, 'as if' they are someone who is present in the scene, waiting for the arrival of Perseus. They have been guided to focus on and verbalise the multi-sensory aspects of the scene. They can now write an opening paragraph that sets the scene and precedes Perseus' entry to the banquet.
- **The main event (Following activities 9 and 10):** The children have been in the scene depicted in the painting and heard the teacher, in role as Perseus, narrating the scene as it unfolded before them (the eye witnesses). They can now write what they have witnessed up to the moment they look on the head of Medusa. This could be written in such a way as to follow directly on from the 'Setting the Scene' paragraph above.
- **Final recount:** Imagine that Perseus recounts the whole adventure to someone sometime later (for example, to his mother). Following a verbal recount (to a listening partner), the adventure can then be written in the first person. It may be helpful to suggest that the children storyboard it or record it in as few sentences as possible first (as paragraph prompts for elaboration).



Patrice Baldwin is past Chair of National Drama and Past President of the International Drama Theatre and Education Association (IDEA). She has been a Primary Headteacher, LA School Improvement Adviser and was an Ofsted Inspector. Patrice has also worked for BBC Education as a series consultant and scriptwriter for *Let's Make a Story*. She is an established educational author of several books, her most recent (with Rob John) being, *Inspiring Writing Through Drama* (Bloomsbury, 2012). Patrice is a visiting lecturer at several universities in the UK and was honoured as a Cultural Leader for Brock University (Canada) in 2013. She now runs her own business, *Inspiring Professional Development and School Improvement* (www.patricebaldwin.com), providing courses, Conferences, advice and support to schools. Email: patrice@patricebaldwin.com