

Extending Interactions with Texts: Theory into Practice

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Introduction

Ms. M's class of year four children were studying *Change* as their term's topic. As part of the topic their teacher wished to look at how the town in which the children lived had changed over time. She also wanted the children to use contemporary documents as well as more usual information sources such as books for their research.

Like most teachers, Ms. M was concerned that her pupils should begin to develop good research habits but she wanted them to learn what are often called 'study skills' within the context of real information handling tasks, rather than as isolated skills lessons. There was, of course, the usual wide range of ability and differing levels of literacy competence within the class and although she was convinced that all children should undertake what HMI describe as 'the three-fold process of formulating appropriate questions, selecting and reading texts to find information and writing it up in their own words' (DES 1989), she was worried that some of the children might find this a difficult task. Ms. M had been working with the EXEL project (the Exeter Extending Literacy project: a Nuffield-funded, curriculum development project based at the University of Exeter) and was interested to see how the ideas and strategies suggested by the project might work in her classroom to help develop her pupils' interactions with non-fiction texts.

The project has developed a process model (the EXIT model) to describe interactions with non-fiction texts and the term's work was guided by this model. The theoretical basis of the model is discussed elsewhere (Wray & Lewis, this issue) but in this article we shall follow Class M through some of their topic and see how the model worked in practice.

Planning the topic

Before the topic began Ms. M had gathered, in the classroom, a collection of books linked to the topic together with photographs, maps, local shop advertisements from various eras, a variety of historical sources and some artefacts. She intended to take the

class on a walk along the High Street and to the parish church. Although she had planned the main historical events she wished to cover (the Great Fire of Crediton, the Civil War, changes in the High Street and what that showed about changes in shopping habits, etc.) Ms. M wanted the children themselves to be involved in the more detailed question setting.

The first session began with the teacher wanting to activate the children's prior knowledge about the Great Fire of Crediton. Schema theory shows us that the activation of prior knowledge has a vital role to play in helping children comprehend the texts they are to read, and in making the learning of new information more effective. Foregrounding children's prior knowledge also gives them an active role in learning right from the beginning. By asking what they know, self-esteem and a sense of 'ownership' of knowledge are enhanced.

"I don't know anything"

Sometimes prior knowledge is readily accessible (for example, most children will come up with something about Space or Families or other such topics) and the children can go straight into brainstorming, concept mapping, KWL grids (Ogle, 1986) etc. However, when Ms. M asked the class what they knew about the Great Fire of Crediton their answers were ones all teachers will recognise: - "Nothing . . . I don't know anything. . . . Never heard of it. . .".

This kind of response often occurs when children are asked direct questions on some topics which seem remote from their immediate experience (this often occurs, for example, with some of the National Curriculum history areas of study such as the Aztecs or the Ancient Greeks). Such replies are misleading because they may indicate not that children really know nothing, but that they do not recognise what it is of their own experience that may be relevant to the topic under discussion. They need help to 'key into' what they know.

In this case the teacher probed their knowledge with a series of questions:

“What can you work out from the fact that it was called the *Great Fire of Crediton*? What does the word ‘great’ tell you?” (Asking the children to deduce. Deduction is based on existing knowledge.)

“It was big . . . It was in Crediton.”

“What happens when you get a big fire?”

“People try to put it out. . . . There is damage. . . . Buildings get destroyed. . . . Sometimes people get killed.” (These replies show the children drawing on their existing generic knowledge of fires.)

Once this discussion started several children then remembered that they *had* heard of the Great Fire of Crediton before. This episode clearly illustrates the importance of the social nature of activating prior knowledge – often our memories need jogging and talking with others is an important trigger.

The teacher scribed the responses on an easel and when the children actually began to recall what they knew about the Great Fire of Crediton one child contributed the information that it started in a baker’s shop. This was incorrect (the child was probably confusing it with the Great Fire of London). Here we can see another important aspect of activating prior knowledge. Not only did the teacher have access to what the children knew, and the gaps in their knowledge, but, importantly, she also had access to their *misconceptions*. She did not correct this misconception by immediately providing the correct information but scribed the comment whilst mentally noting that if no-one else suggested that one of their research questions should concern where and how the fire started, she would make sure it was included. Often misconceptions that are merely corrected by the teacher will fail to have much impact upon the children who will simply hold on to them. Children are far more likely to change their minds if they play an active part in correcting their mistakes. A common example of this is a child’s spelling error corrected by the teacher but still repeated in subsequent rewritings.

There are other strategies that can be used when children feel they ‘know nothing’ but let us for now stay with Class M. Once she had listed the children’s responses, the teacher read them back to the children, thus reviewing what they knew, and she then asked the children if there was anything they wanted to know about the fire (*Establishing purposes*). Questions came quickly:

- When was it?
- How did it start?
- Were people killed?

Again the teacher scribed the questions and at this point was able to put a question mark after the ‘It started in a bakers’ shop’ statement. Turning statements, whether correct or incorrect, into questions is a useful question-setting strategy.

Ms. M then asked the children how and where they thought they might find the answers to their questions (*Locating information*) and they came up with a range of suggestions: books, newspapers, interviews with people who were there, photographs and television reports. This was a good list for a contemporary event but it was then pointed out to the children that as this had happened a long time ago not all these sources might apply. They went through the list, reassessing the sources, and as it was a local event the children also discussed why they might find it unproductive to look in the general history books available in the classroom.

Ms. M then produced 10 historical sources including eyewitness accounts, newspaper reports, insurance company accounts, disaster fund appeals etc. and explained what each was but *did not* read them to the children. They were then told that they were each going to decide which question/s they wanted to research and that their final piece of work would be displayed, along with the sources, on the wall in the corridor (*Establishing purposes, Communicating information*). They were each given a QUADS sheet to

Questions	Answers	Details	Source

Figure 1: A QUADS grid

record their work (see figure 1) and in pairs or small groups were given a set of sources (photocopied) to share.

A QUADS grid (Cudd & Roberts, 1989) consists of 4 columns – questions, answers, details, source, and provides a simple framework for recording information. However, it does more than that. By splitting the response into answer and details, it encourages children not merely to copy a chunk of text as they answer. They have to decide which information is central to answering their initial question and record that first. This often involves summarising what they have read which gives children practise in recognising the ‘main idea’ of a passage. Extra information then goes in the details column. The source column encourages the children to begin to develop a very important research habit – noting where the information came from. This is vital if you need to recheck the information, share it with someone else or assess the validity of your materials. Children can be successfully encouraged to develop this crucial research habit from a very early age.

Interacting with the text

Having decided on, and written down, their questions the children of Class M turned to the sources. A certain amount of initial browsing went on and children shared comments and puzzlement (the shape of the *s* for example looked more like an *f* to their modern eyes). It was not possible to use contents or index pages with these document sources but the children were encouraged not to try to read the whole thing but to skim over the materials looking for key words or phrases (e.g. fire, started, died) contained in their questions. Skimming was more sensible than close reading in this initial hunt for answers (*Adopting an appropriate strategy*). Having key words to focus their searching was especially important as the language was difficult for many of the children. Again the collaborative nature of the task was important for when the children found a section they thought might be useful they were encouraged to read it aloud with each other and to work together to try to understand what it was saying (*Interacting with the text / Monitoring understanding*). The children were actively engaged in monitoring their own understanding rather than turning instantly to the teacher to have the text read to them, although of course this remained a final option.

Several of the children discovered that different sources gave different information, for example about how many people died and how many buildings were destroyed and this both demonstrated to them the importance of recording the source and also the importance of questioning the credibility of the sources (*Evaluating information*). They were encouraged to try to think for themselves why a newspaper

account from the next day might say 20 houses were destroyed while an insurance company account written a week later gave a different figure and to decide which they thought was the more accurate figure.

The children then shared their questions and answers in a session on the carpet in order for them to get a complete picture of the event and to *review and revisit* their research. At this point a class flow chart or grid could have been produced to review and revisit the information but there was not time to do this. Finally, as planned, the children produced a final version of their work to go on display (*Communicating information*).

One small group of about four children with very poor reading ability did not undertake the research from original documents but had a simple account of the events prepared by their teacher. They had to interact with this text by sequencing it. They had, however, joined in the rest of the session along with the other members of the class. The rest of the class had been paired so that more and less able readers were working together.

A different task – a different route

On the occasion described above the children had gone through each of the stages of the process but different information tasks will determine different routes through the process stages and any one event may not necessarily use all the stages. Let us follow two further afternoon’s work to see how the model worked in different contexts. A week later the children in this class had moved on to looking at the Civil War and how it had affected the town and its people. They had been on a walk along the High Street noting pre- and post-fire buildings (*reviewing and revisiting*) and had visited the Parish Church which contains a leather boot reputed to have belonged to Oliver Cromwell. Back at school they discussed the boot and its owner.

On this occasion the children moved straight into question setting. Their curiosity was already aroused by the artefact they had seen. The plaque alongside the boot had given them some information and they had also been given some brief ‘on the spot’ information and this had generated further questions.

The children wanted to know more about Cromwell, the clothes he wore, and also about the clothes of another group of people called the Cavaliers. However, it became clear that there was a danger that nobody was actually going to raise a key question their teacher felt the children should address: i.e. what was the civil war about and how did it affect the country? On this occasion the teacher decided she needed to play a more active role in the question

setting. She recognised that it is part of our professional role sometimes to guide and direct as well as enable children to set their own questions. These are not mutually exclusive processes – either the teacher or the children setting the questions – but there is a role for both. She did not however set the question herself but she lead the children to ask the questions she wanted them to include. She divided the class into roundheads (the term had come up in the discussion) and cavaliers, appointed a leader for each army and got the leader to line up their army and march them around the classroom. A lively five minutes followed with children stamping around and orders being called before the two armies drew up facing each other. At this point the teacher told them that the two armies were getting ready to fight each other and had they any feelings or questions about this. Many questions arose including the question of *why* they were fighting – just as the teacher had planned that it should. These new questions were added to the existing questions and the children then began to research the answers. On this occasion they were working in groups with information books on their tables. A computer programme on the Civil War was also available for them to use. After some time during which children used indexes, contents,

picture as sources of information, browsing, and asking each other as strategies to answer their questions the teacher drew their attention to a comparison grid on the board and the children pooled their information to complete what they could of the grid. (See Figure 2)

This sharing of information not only enabled children to review and revisit their work but ensured that the children got a fuller picture of the events than they might have acquired from their individual research.

For the final communication of their personal research the children had a drawing of either a roundhead or a cavalier and were asked to present their information in the form of a direct question to the figure with the answer coming as a speech bubble from the mouth of the drawing. By asking the children to transform their information into direct speech the teacher was lessening the opportunities for them to copy undigested chunks of text. The technique of asking children to operate a form of ‘genre exchange’ is a very successful strategy for helping them restructure information and make it their own (cf. Lewis, Wray & Rospigliosi, 1994).

	Roundheads	Cavaliers
Leader		
Supporters		
Religion		
Beliefs		
Army composed of		
Uniform/clothes		
Main battles		

Figure 2: Comparison grid for class completion

A further session

When we return to Class M a few weeks later the children are looking at the shops in the High Street nowadays and seeing how they might have changed from 100 years ago and 50 years ago. Their teacher wanted them to become aware of how changes in shops reflect changes in society (e.g. a video shop would not have existed 50 or 100 years ago). From their previous walk along the High Street they had a photographic record of the shops (plus, of course, their existing knowledge of a familiar street). They also had certain contemporary sources from about 100 years ago in the form of shop advertisements, a local trade calendar, etc along with the current Yellow Pages and a selection of books on shops and shopping.

The teacher had prepared four large grids on sugar paper (See Figure 3). Each of the cells of a grid act as a question to be answered and give the children a specific focus to their research rather than the more general "Find out about shops in the High Street" (*establishing purpose*).

On this occasion the teacher had prepared the grids but the children can often be involved in the creation of grids and this is another way of getting them to set their own questions and consider which are appropriate questions. The grid also provides the children with a logical structure for recording their information.

Groups of children used their prior knowledge to fill in types of shops e.g. butchers, supermarkets etc, and the teacher added unfamiliar types to each grid e.g. haberdashers, chandlers, etc. The teacher ensured that her additions were different for each group. In order to fill in the next column the children had to use a variety of strategies. They used dictionaries to discover what some of the unfamiliar shop types were and then used a combination of prior

knowledge, books and searching advertisements to discover what each type of shop sold. Using each source effectively involved them adopting an appropriate strategy – from alphabetical searching (dictionaries), skimming visual sources (advertisements, trade calendars), to using titles, contents and indexes (books). The teacher modelled for various children how they might use the sources as she moved around the groups and articulated her thoughts as she did so.

"You're wondering what a milliner is, are you? Well, how could we find out about words we don't know? Yes, a dictionary might help. Now, M . . . somewhere near the middle as it's in the middle of the alphabet (flicking quickly through pages) . . . L . . . nearly there (slowing down and turning a page at a time) L . . . M . . . Here we are. What letter's next? i, I want m, i. M, a . . . M, a . . . Ah . . . M, i."

This strategy of making explicit for children the thought processes a competent language user goes through (metacognitive modelling) helps make explicit for them a process that is usually invisible. This is an important aid in helping children adopt an appropriate strategy – and one that teachers and adults have used instinctively for many years.

Two further groups of children were engaged on a different activity whose aim was to lead them to a discussion of changing shopping habits over the last hundred years. In pairs, they had itemised supermarket bills stuck on a large piece of paper. They used different colour pens to underline items they would have had to get from separate shops if the supermarket had not been there. So, for example, in red they highlighted anything they would have bought from a butcher, in blue anything from a greengrocers and so on. This use of text-marking enabled them to organize very long lists in a useful way and they were being introduced to a new information retrieval skill – the use of text marking – in a meaningful context. Marking in different colours

Type of shop	What does it sell?	Does it exist now?	Did it exist 50yrs ago?	Did it exist 100yrs ago?

Figure 3: Grid used in shop research

enabled them to quickly relocate information they had highlighted and link together items that were some distance apart on the bills.

Some of this they could do from existing knowledge but eventually they were left with various items they could not place – needles, batteries, matches etc. They had to search the old shop advertisements, or use the index of books about shopping to see which shop would have sold that item and to discover the name of that type of shop. (Incidentally, this activity showed that the word *grocer* appears to have totally dropped from young children's vocabulary. *Grocer* was as unusual to them as *haberdasher* or *draper*.)

All the children in the class knew they would be sharing their work with each other at the end of the session and that they would have to explain their findings to the rest of the class (*establishing purpose / communicating information*).

Conclusion

The sessions described above may not appear to be radically different to the kind of teaching that goes on in many of our good primary classrooms but what was evident was that the teacher's awareness of the processes involved in interacting with text enabled her to plan into her topic specific activities for the

children to experience, for example, question setting or adopting an appropriate reading strategy. She was concerned not primarily with the content of the sessions (although, of course, that had some importance) but more importantly with the processes the children were undertaking to enable them to become more effective users of information. The awareness of the *process* had been instrumental in how this teacher planned and structured the sessions and a knowledge of the theory had informed and illuminated her practice.

References

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Children Reading Non-Fiction for Pleasure

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The teaching of reading in schools has become a widely debated issue, but while methods may vary, teachers all aim to enable their pupils to become confident and enthusiastic readers. This article sets out to explore the part that non-fiction reading can play in promoting such an aim.

Wray (1990) sets out the two main purposes for reading:—

1. "We use reading to get information, and usually we have a reasonably clear idea of what information we want before we begin reading."
2. "We often do read for pleasure, when the information we derive is not important, but the experience of reading is."

As adults, much of the reading we encounter is functional, and 'environmental' print cannot be avoided. In *Literacy in Action* (Wray, Bloom, & Hall, 1989) the authors list a bewildering array of the increasing number of forms print takes in our society:—

"It cannot be said that things are getting simpler. Not only are there new experiences with print to cope with, but the level of operation demanded by everyday print is increasing." (p. 2)

The demanding nature of much of the print encountered by adults has implications for teachers in school. Children need to be prepared for the world of functional reading, so that they can employ the strategies necessary to cope with it. If they encounter only