

OPENING
DOORS
to a
RICHER
ENGLISH
CURRICULUM

for ages 10 to 13

BOB COX
with Leah Crawford and Verity Jones

Illustrations by Victoria Cox



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For Lesley, with love

Foreword

I love this book and its companion volume. If I were still a teacher then it would become a key resource for planning, alongside earlier books in the ‘Opening Doors’ series.

Miroslav Holub’s poem ‘The Door’ has always been one of my favourites (it is included in this volume). I first stumbled across this little gem in an anthology called *Voices*, edited by Geoffrey Summerfield, when I was at school. For me, the poem represented an idea about possibility, having the courage to step through the door, come what may – seize the moment, be brave, be bold and see what happens. It has become a metaphor for my life in many ways. The ‘Opening Doors’ movement believes that as schools and teachers we should be opening doors of educational opportunity for children by placing great literature at the heart of the English curriculum – and by literature, I mean the whole range of quality writing from poetry to narrative and elegant non-fiction.

Along with Bob Cox, Leah Crawford and Verity Jones, I believe that we should be teaching English as a subject and selecting the texts that we study because of their lasting quality – because they provide challenge, are worth experiencing and broaden a child’s reading and writing repertoire. I do not believe that choosing books or poems should be dominated by trying to find a text that matches a topic. That way, English is no longer a subject but the servant of other subjects, on the basis of no solid evidence that the approach improves learning in those subjects, let alone English.

A school that is mapping out an English programme will be thinking about placing the finest literature at the heart of the curriculum. Nothing else will do. The choice of texts needs careful consideration. If children are to enjoy and be able to make something of Walter de la Mare's 'The Listeners' in Year 6, then what progression of texts is needed to provide the stepping stones that gradually and cumulatively prepare children for such richness? How do we build the ability to access challenging literature with confidence so that children can comfortably appreciate, enjoy and, critically, read the very best that literature has to offer? If this is not well considered, and the stepping stones are not carefully mapped, children arrive in Year 6 and are ill-prepared for the demands of poets such as Ted Hughes, Edward Thomas, Emily Dickinson, Philip Gross and William Blake.

The 'Opening Doors' movement has been working with great texts and building a repertoire to draw upon when writing with children. The units of work map out possibilities for entering the world of the text, deepening understanding and engagement. The importance of reading aloud should not be underestimated. Children should experience how the language flows, responding to the meaning but also hearing and being moved by the musical tune of the text. It is worth mapping and chorally learning the poems. Key paragraphs or telling sentences could also be learned or performed orally, so that the close and careful study of the texts helps children to internalise the language patterns of great writing. Loitering with great literature, spending time rereading and discussing, and performing with expression allows the language to permeate and embed into children's linguistic competency, adding to their store of imaginative possibility and literary language patterns. Imagine putting the words of William Blake into a child's mind forever!

When Ted Hughes was at Cambridge, he used to get up at five o'clock every morning and read a Shakespeare play. His deep and rich reading put the language and imaginative world of a genius inside his mind. His reading grew his inner world. In the same way, great English teaching grows the imagination and language repertoire of every child through experiencing great literature in depth. If the reading curriculum is meagre, then children will never possess the world of great books and their writing will always be a thin echo of their low-level reading.

'Opening Doors' books are based on what works in classrooms. Over the years, I learned as a teacher that certain texts lend themselves to teaching. For instance, William Blake's 'The Tyger' has always worked well for me in terms of challenging interpretation and leading to deep discussion. Kit Wright's 'The Magic Box' has always stimulated great imaginative writing. Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park* has never failed to yield up riches during oral comprehension. The units in *Opening Doors to a Richer English Curriculum* have been road-tested and refined in the light of teaching experience. I like the way the authors provide suggestions but expect that the teacher will bring their own ideas to deepen the experience for their children's needs. There is room for performance, drama, taster drafts, mini-writes, imitating lines, writing in response and, of course, deep oral comprehension, where children talk their way to an understanding with the teacher orchestrating the discussion.

Loitering with a worthwhile text that has layers of meaning helps children to move beyond having a passing acquaintance with a poem or story to a deeper relationship. Some children will need to read and reread a text so they can move beyond just being able to decode,

shifting into the possibility of deeper understanding. Initial responses can be gathered and discussed, including aspects of what seems significant, interesting or worth discussing, as well as aspects that are mystifying. Spending time discussing vocabulary and the different shades of meaning that so many words and phrases hold is an important part of helping texts to yield up their riches.

What else does an English curriculum need? Across each year, novels, short stories, poetry, non-fiction and film should be identified to build the children's reading and writing stamina. These core books can then be drawn upon during specific units when working with focused texts. A rich reading programme will provide lines of reference and further reading to supplement each unit. Great books will also be useful to develop the children's writing skills: drawing on a range of examples, demonstrating writing techniques such as foreshadowing, and building atmosphere through setting, shift of viewpoint or tension. Such a reading programme provides the daily 'read aloud' sessions for each class and ideally should be supplemented with class sets of books (or at least enough for one between two) so that students can read along, pause, reread and draw upon passages for further work.

Drama can be used to slow the moment in a text, engage emotionally with thought and action, and deepen understanding. Drama also leads well into writing because the writing then arises from the imagined and enacted experience, which throws up more insight and possibility to draw upon when writing. The issue is selecting the right moment and the right activity rather than just deciding to do a bit of 'hot seating'. Where in a text would the reading be deepened through drama, and what strategy should be used? Most teachers have a small repertoire – hot seating, freeze-framing and conscience alley for

decision-making – and that’s about it! ‘Opening Doors’ books are full of techniques to extend your toolkit of strategies.

‘Opening Doors’ approaches also suggest that as teachers we should be writing for and with children to open up possibilities. When shifting into writing, some texts will lend themselves to very obvious imitation. A poem such as ‘The Door’ could be used as a straightforward model, so the children write an imitation using the same pattern. However, rich reading can also act as a springboard into other ideas and forms of writing. The books list possibilities, but I would also try making a list with the class to open up their ideas and encourage independent thinking.

A key aspect for anyone planning an English curriculum is the notion of developing and revisiting ‘key concepts’ to create a curriculum that is based on cumulative learning of the big, underlying ideas. This can be supplemented by thinking carefully about deep themes in texts that might be revisited. For instance, the children might experience the story of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ in Year 2: a tale of a character rejected by society who forms a relationship with someone who sees beyond any physical barrier. This theme may also be revisited in Year 4 through Michael Morpurgo’s *Why the Whales Came* or in Year 8 when looking at *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The ‘Opening Doors’ books leave plenty of space for new texts, enthusiasm and experimentation because the underlying pattern for teaching is easily transferable. The process soon becomes embedded, and that makes teaching easier as our attention shifts from planning the sequence to being able to focus more on the children’s learning.

All of this work has to be underpinned by a strong commitment to developing children as readers and writers. In an ideal world, every school would have a wonderfully equipped library so the children have a range of texts to choose from in their individual reading. To acquire fluency and confidence in reading, children may well want to storm their way through popular texts. However, teachers of English will want to grow each child as a reader, introducing them to new authors and styles, nudging them on to richer texts where the reading experience is not just a glib giggle but becomes something deeper and more long-lasting. Children will never really become great readers until they begin to tackle great texts and learn that sustaining their reading with a classic bears fruit. By the same token, they will never become great writers if their reading is thin gruel because their reading will be echoed in their writing.

The ‘Opening Doors’ teacher is also aware of their own reading and writing life, sharing their love of books with their classes and modelling being a reader. They also enjoy writing for and with their classes, sharing their own drafts as well as composing with the children. In this way, the ‘Opening Doors’ classroom becomes a community of readers and writers where the challenge of great literature and finely crafted writing, which focuses on the effect on the reader, becomes an everyday joy.

Pie Corbett

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Introduction

The ‘Opening Doors’ series has been supporting teachers’ passion for quality texts since 2014. At home and abroad, the books have been signposting richer approaches to English in schools keen to exploit the learning opportunities afforded by a depth of challenge for all learners. We have had the pleasure of hearing from many teachers about their pupils’ delight in discovering famous writers, their growing relish for learning about a variety of literary styles, and their increasing access to literature and cultural capital. Of course, this applies to all abilities and in some schools this has led to the word ‘ability’ being reviewed because ‘Opening Doors’ strategies work on fundamental principles through which *all* learners can be challenged. The highly ambitious approaches offer fresh goals and continual curiosity, but the scaffolds and interventions include and inspire everyone. Each step can represent new knowledge and learning gained in chunks as appropriate for each pupil.

It has been vital that the access strategies enable all pupils to discover just how quirky, fascinating and full of wonder great writing can be. There are big ideas in the extracts and poems we choose for ‘Opening Doors’, and this is important. The originality and beauty of the text leads the classroom discussion, whilst metaphors, adverbs and prepositional phrases, for example, are taught and modelled in context. Pupils are immersed in reading journeys via quality texts, whilst the dialogic talk, philosophy and teaching of new knowledge combine to create rich learning experiences.

As we have toured schools in the UK and abroad, evidence of the positive impact of challenging texts on pupils' work has grown – there are some examples on the Crown House Publishing website.¹ Have a browse and then make links with the first two books – you could even use the pupils' work as a resource in your lessons.

Teachers learn more themselves every time they explore a challenging new text, and there is a tendency to aim higher as a habit. Once we aspire to something almost out of reach, we might just get there! This goes for teachers and pupils: risk-taking becomes endemic and the acquisition of new vocabulary becomes a daily habit. Some of the new words are only half-grasped initially, but it still represents an important encounter for pupils. Children may have to meet vocabulary in various different contexts over time for the meaning to become fully assimilated. Our own adult relationships with new vocabulary may suggest a similar journey.

In this book, and in its companion for the 6 to 9 age group, we want to show how the use of quality texts is not a separate strand of the curriculum or special content for a project day. It can be an integral part of the whole curriculum, with continuity and progression built in. I (Bob) have been working with co-authors Leah Crawford and Verity Jones on both of these new books, which has been a real privilege. Together, we have provided fifteen units of work (thirty across both volumes) which will give you lots of ideas for building the metalanguage and new knowledge of texts needed to raise standards in the most exciting way possible.

¹ See <https://www.crownhouse.co.uk/featured/opening-doors-to-famous-poetry-and-prose-pupils-work>.

Opening Doors to a Richer English Curriculum will support your vision for English, but it will also offer the core principles and detailed units of work that will enable it to be realised. A curriculum with a combination of quality picture books, children’s fiction and literature provides a much more appetising diet than is sometimes offered in schools. With effective transition to Key Stage 3, this will become a journey where reading for challenge starts to become the greatest pleasure any child can encounter – nurtured by sensitive and knowing teachers. We have always thought that what teachers do best is to make new learning possible for all. As Timothy Shanahan (2017) observes, ‘start kids out with complex texts that they cannot read successfully; then teach them to read those texts well’.

We have included a great range of texts both as the core of each unit and as link reading. We have incorporated some contemporary texts to show how past and present co-exist and how various literary styles can be taught using similar principles, all of which are open to further adaptation. Non-fiction gets a mention too, as many schools have started to apply the key principles for depth to all text types. For the first time, we have also suggested key concepts around which the curriculum can be built, with the units providing examples with which you can work. Developing concepts through which English can be taught will offer you the chance to plan a rich map of learning – one that the whole school will understand. One of the things we have enjoyed most about the ‘Opening Doors’ series is seeing teachers grow in confidence as the books signpost the way to their own innovations.

We are very much in favour of the ‘continuing’ part of continuing professional development (CPD), and we want to support teachers’ growth and their love of learning. Growing a richer English curriculum

will enable the most natural, reflective and evaluative CPD to take place in your classroom every single day. The extra challenges afforded by richer texts will stimulate your own learning far more than standard texts. As teachers, we have to think harder, set more profound questions, play with vocabulary and teach specific concepts – but we get so much more back from our pupils, and there are no dull routines!

Summary of the key principles

As befits a brief introduction, we can only list here the major principles and strategies that have emerged from our work in schools. This is not a model for teaching English, but it is a framework to use as part of your own curriculum design – shaped by you and fit for purpose in your school and with your children. See the framework example on pages 6–7.

Access strategies and ‘beyond the limit’ link reading

We call this series of books ‘Opening Doors’ because access is fundamental to new learning. Without the teaching strategies to unlock learning potential, it is likely that new language, genres and styles could be intimidating. But teachers release a whole world of possibility by demonstrating how meaning can be grasped and new literary satisfactions experienced. That’s the joy of challenge!

In this book there are a range of access strategies: pictures, questions, links to existing knowledge/experience and slivers of text (adapting

the length of the material is far better than excluding anyone from the shared excitement). Each unit has a suggestion for a key strategy with a snappy title. This is designed to support the teaching of comprehension because it enables pupils to start learning about different ways to understand a text.

Of course, it is the link reading that will boost children's comprehension the most. We have worked with schools on linking a range of texts to the core objective and planning for whole-text reading as an expected part of the curriculum. Every term and every year, the objectives and texts get progressively harder, but always within the context of a broad choice. Whereas the term 'wider reading' has often been used, we prefer 'link reading' because it is planned into the curriculum for everyone (see pages 6–7 for an example of the big picture of the objectives and link reading). We also call this the 'beyond the limit' section to emphasise that it is the depth of quality reading expected by schools, linked with reading for pleasure acquired more independently, that will support accelerated progress.

Framework Planning Example

Unit 3: A Fire in My Head

‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’ by W. B. Yeats

Opening Doors key strategy: symbol source

Objectives which prompt deeper learning journeys:

- 🍷 Can you understand how symbols can be used to suggest complex ideas?
- 🍷 Can you write an effective poem using symbol and metaphor?

Teach *functional English* as appropriate in this deeper context.



Develop a deeper understanding of symbol source via link reading:

- 🍷 'Woman Skating' by Margaret Atwood
- 🍷 'How to Cut a Pomegranate' by Imtiaz Dharker
- 🍷 'The Door' by Miroslav Holub
- 🍷 'The Call' by Charlotte Mew

Quality text to quality writing journeys:

Apply what you have learnt from W. B. Yeats to write a poem developing your own use of symbol:

- 🍷 Seasons
- 🍷 Day and night
- 🍷 Forests
- 🍷 Mountains
- 🍷 An oak tree
- 🍷 A sapling
- 🍷 An item of clothing

In *Understanding Reading Comprehension* (2015: 51), Wayne Tennent argues that 'when children come to the reading of written text they are not blank canvasses. They bring both life and linguistic knowledge to each reading experience.' Schools that are building link reading and

simultaneously facilitating reading for pleasure are deepening the knowledge that can be applied to the next challenge.

Taster drafts

The idea of a taster draft is for pupils to write early on in the process to help promote their engagement with, and understanding of, the text. The task is usually time limited and/or word limited. Pupils love the freedom this allows, and teachers love the chance to teach spelling, punctuation and grammar, as well as aspects of style, through the resulting mini-plenaries.

Not only is much of this early learning embedded for the long term, but pupils are also eager to hear the full text. We rarely read out the entire text to the children at the start of the activity, but after attempting their own writing they often beg to hear the famous writer's work. You can hear a pin drop as they listen to the reading. It's no surprise that further questions follow.

Reading journeys

When we mention the word 'comprehension' to pupils in schools, we nearly always get a response which is at best neutral and at worst a shrug or scornful look of boredom. A few times pupils have even said that it is what happens at 2pm every Tuesday! Often there is a link between comprehension and being tested. This doesn't have to be the

case. Rather than being something done to you, it can be much more exciting – a reading journey or a dialogue about half-grasped vocabulary or the way a narrative has been expressed. Predictions, questions, new knowledge on technique and effect, and the sharing of ideas can all be part of a reading journey.

You may have your own term, but why not drop the word ‘comprehension’ if it elicits groans or negativity? In ‘Opening Doors’ books, we use a big ‘Opening Doors’ question, with support interventions deployed as appropriate to build skills and knowledge. The glossary also provides prompts for helpful terms and theories. Remember: in your classroom, decisions about the use of resources, questions and strategies pave the way to deeper comprehension for your pupils, so always think of yourself as a pioneer in opening up quality reading routes.

Support questions

Each unit includes an ambitious set of questions, not as a test but to provide a basis for teaching and learning dialogues. The questions are aspirational – a goal for mastery – because all pupils are on a learning journey. Support scaffolds are suggested for those pupils who are struggling, and there are greater depth questions for those who are ready for them. Some pupils will be able to answer the main ‘Opening Doors’ question without much support, and even move on to the greater depth question if you are happy that their answer is thorough. Advanced pupils should not waste time on anything too easy.

Differentiation occurs through the learning stage, not separate content or objectives.

The radial layouts have proved popular as a tool through which differentiated interventions can be made appropriately for each pupil. Flexibility is vital, so it can be advantageous to create guided groups, according to need, so pupils can learn to the best of their ability at each stage. Some pupils may surprise you in being ready for harder work, whilst other pupils may need more advice and scaffolding. However, greater depth opportunities are always built into expectations.

Excellent responses will (include)

You will find success criteria lists throughout the book, but please don't use them as an arid or discrete list. They are designed to enable teachers to explore just how deep they can go using literary texts. More challenging poems, for example, may need a lot of rereading – but the love of a poem can grow through familiarity. It is possible to prioritise one or two criteria and convert them into child-friendly language. In this way, teaching teams can have rich conversations of their own about language and its effect, about themes and about the appeal of the writing.

Opening Doors to a Richer English Curriculum takes Bob Cox's award-winning 'Opening Doors' series into bold new territories, providing a treasury of techniques and strategies all carefully selected to support the design of a deeper, more creative and more expansive curriculum.

Together with Leah Crawford and Verity Jones, Bob has compiled this rich resource to help teachers enhance their learners' engagement with challenging texts and develop their writing skills as budding wordsmiths. It includes 15 ready-to-use units of work covering a range of inspiring poetry and prose from across the literary tradition, complete with vivid illustrations by Victoria Cox.

Bob, Leah and Verity's innovative ideas on theory, best practice and how to cultivate a pioneering classroom spirit are all integrated into the lesson suggestions, which have been designed for both the teacher's and the learners' immediate benefit.

Also available Opening Doors to a Richer English Curriculum for ages 6 to 9



Provides teachers with a cornucopia of poetry and prose as a starting point for truly opening pupils' minds, deepening their knowledge of sophisticated writing and creating the conditions for them to produce substantive, authentic writing of their own.

Mary Myatt, author of *Hopeful Schools* and *The Curriculum: Gallimaufry to Coherence*

Opening Doors to a Richer English Curriculum will help teachers and pupils to rediscover the wonderment of reading and find a true purpose for writing

Kelly Ashley, primary English education adviser and author of *Word Power: Amplifying Vocabulary Instruction*

This book cannot fail to inspire anyone looking to develop their learners' love of reading

**Clemmie Stewart, Senior Head of Prep Schools, Surbiton High School,
Vice Chair of Governors, Langford Primary School**

All of the extracts and illustrations you will need to begin opening doors in your classroom are downloadable.



Having taught English for 23 years, **Bob Cox** is now an independent education consultant, writer and teacher coach who works nationally and internationally to support outstanding learning. Bob also delivers keynotes for national associations, multi-academy trusts and local authorities, as more schools integrate 'Opening Doors' strategies into their curriculum design.

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