

OPENING
DOORS
to
FAMOUS POETRY
and
PROSE

Ideas and resources for accessing
literary heritage works

BOB COX



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This book is dedicated to all the teachers with whom I have worked who are opening doors for their pupils, and to my own teachers, years ago, who opened mine.

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A very little key will open a very heavy door.

Charles Dickens, 'Hunted Down' (1859)

Introduction

In my work supporting hundreds of schools in the quest for outstanding learning there is always huge interest from teachers about using challenging literature from the past. Primary schools have never lacked enthusiasm for projects featuring Shakespeare or whole days with a Dickens focus, but I began to note some common questions in my discussions with teachers:

- ☛ Where can I find new prose extracts and poems to deepen my knowledge?
- ☛ How can I find out about creative approaches that my pupils will enjoy?
- ☛ How can these resources be used for outstanding English lessons?
- ☛ How can my pupils gain access to literary heritage works in a way that is enjoyable as well as challenging?
- ☛ How can I plan from the top to include the more able but still ensure all pupils can access fascinating ideas?

This last point led to my ‘Opening Doors’ title.

Sometimes, teachers say to me that there are books about learning theory which are fascinating, and there are textbooks with varied questions which are practical. *In Opening Doors to Famous Poetry and Prose* I have tried to combine the two by devising whole units of learning which are ready to use directly with your pupils, combined with plenty of ‘Bob says ...’ tips and advice to support methodology and first principles. The CD-ROM in the back of the book holds all of the resources so that you can use them in your classroom. In short, theory and practice coexist to inspire outstanding English using some of our greatest writers as models.

New journeys in English: the theory

Using literary heritage texts – I am using the term very loosely to mean famous writings from the past which still influence the present – is justified on cultural grounds alone. Teachers have the huge responsibility of passing on an illustrious literary legacy. Successful authors writing in English are known around the world – visitors flock daily to the Brontë’s Haworth, Hardy’s Wessex and Shakespeare’s Stratford-upon-Avon. I have taken coachloads of pupils across Britain and Ireland, discovering Joyce’s Martello tower outside Dublin and following Sir Walter Scott’s *Rob Roy* trail in Scotland.

When introduced to great writers and great writing, children start to discover something deeper, more imaginative and more enduring than that which is understood in a moment and forgotten just as quickly. Of course, I have only been able to select a limited number of texts, so the idea is that you will be inspired to find new writers at the same time as your pupils. My selections are based around texts and ideas which I have used successfully in the classroom to stimulate high level reading and writing, rather than there being any suggestion that these writers are ‘better’ than those I have omitted. The units include American, Irish, Scottish, French and English writers, while the wider reading includes many others, past and present, whose work originates from around the world and may have been translated into English. However, the ‘Opening Doors’ theme of the book means that I have chiefly focused on celebrated literature from the past to elicit creative, ambitious and high quality work in English.

The need for young people to make more progress in English is a concern for educators, for parents, for the global economy and, of course, for Ofsted inspectors. However, high standards, exciting outcomes and the sheer exuberance of writing, as it should be at Key Stage 2, will only come with challenging texts as a stimulus.

If more of our pupils are going to start secondary school at a higher level of achievement, then it is challenging texts and quality teaching that will help them to reach the stage when they are regularly:

- ☛ Reading and understanding ‘between the lines’.
- ☛ Inferring and deducing.
- ☛ Being engrossed in increasingly challenging and wider reading.

Bob says ...

There are more ideas to discover, more words to explore and more styles to understand in these extracts than some of your pupils will have encountered in their education up to now. Using them should help deeper learning to become the norm in your literacy lessons and the potential for outstanding lessons is greatly increased.

- ☛ Writing in varied styles, appropriate to the context or audience.
- ☛ Producing well-crafted and versatile writing – for example, exploring irony and parody.
- ☛ Using punctuation and grammar in accurate and varied ways to enhance meaning.

An impromptu list like mine is just a guide, but Geoff Dean's *English for Gifted and Talented Students* (2008), although about secondary English, has useful research about where very able writers should be at the start of Year 7. My list is a condensed version of the findings of this research. Setting a high benchmark for the standards that the very best might reach in Year 7 is a useful starting point for primary schools as it sets an aspirational agenda from the start.

All the writers in the bibliography have provided me with ideas and inspiration to develop a methodology to enable high level literacy to thrive. I have demonstrated this successfully in workshops with pupils and in consultancy briefs with teachers. Carol Dweck's work on mindsets (2006), Barry Hymer's thinking on gifted and talented education (2009) and Guy Claxton's writing on 'building learning power' (2002) have all been influential. In addition, Deborah Eyre's (2011) *Room at the Top* report has given impetus to my ongoing search for excellence in the classroom with her recommendation to create 'more room at the top for more'.

Of course, the poets and novelists themselves continue to dazzle us: Hardy's glimpses of the past in 'Old Furniture'; Browning's 'Pied Piper of Hamelin' leaving the limping boy behind to dream of an enchanted land; Dickinson's 'Snake' curling around on the farmstead waiting to pounce; Wells's astronauts seeing the first vistas of a new, unknown world. Their originality is the principal influence on us all.

Bob says ...



Our primary inspiration must come from the writing itself, our own reading of the classics and their enduring appeal. Only excellent models are likely to stimulate excellent outcomes.

With so many subjects to teach, primary teachers always need support to use literary texts creatively, to grow their own knowledge and to find new routes into English teaching. In using these resources, I hope teachers will be encouraged to find out more about the featured writers and that this book will be the start of a journey for all concerned.

The poems and extracts I have included offer the opportunity to introduce challenging ideas and concepts which are often missing from more simple texts. When Charlotte Mew writes hauntingly about 'The Call', I find pupils in my workshops talking about eerie atmospheres, the unexpected and even spiritual feelings. When I explore 'The Land of Counterpane', there is much talk about feeling ill, being bored, finding things to do and sometimes loneliness. It is then an easy jump to discuss Stevenson's language and rhythm and for the children to write their own sharp and creative pieces.

Part 1

Opening doors to poetry

Voices on the Sharp Air

‘The Call’ by Charlotte Mew

Access strategies

One principle I would recommend throughout your work using challenging literature is to design specific strategies to support access to the text. Once your pupils start to ask questions, feel curiosity and offer ideas, the chances of making an impact escalate.

Try projecting the following quote from Charlotte Mew’s ‘The Call’ onto the whiteboard as your pupils walk in:



To-night we heard a call,
A rattle on the window-pane,
A voice on the sharp air,
And felt a breath stirring our hair,
A flame within us: Something swift and tall
Swept in and out and that was all.

Ask them to say nothing to each other but on different coloured sticky notes to write down:

- 🍷 Three questions they would ask about words or meanings which they don’t understand.
- 🍷 What each of them thinks the ‘call’ might be.
- 🍷 What these words make them feel and why.

Then ask the pupils to pair up and explore their ideas. The buzz will be enormous! Ask them to share their ideas with you. This will give you the opportunity to pick out shy pupils to answer questions and ensure that able pupils are challenged to evaluate, give evidence and be original. This is **think, pair, share** – a great technique for varying thinking and expression.

Now, how many are ready to throw the javelin high and attempt more? Ask the children how the punctuation contributes to the meaning. Will they mention the colon setting up something mysterious with the pause it brings? Will they describe the way the commas help to build the images one after another (the window-pane, the sharp air, breath stirring hair)?

Another possible **javelin question** is, how does the rhyming and layout contribute to the meaning?

Javelin questions follow the principle of aiming as high as possible and encouraging pupils to reach for the sky. If expectation is set high, teachers often say they are amazed at how well their pupils perform – and it's not always the children they initially thought would excel.

Now set the children the following task: Write the next five lines of the poem beginning, 'Was it a ...?'

Excellent responses will:

- 👂 Imitate the rhyme scheme closely.
- 👂 Continue with the same mysterious theme.
- 👂 Use punctuation to enhance meaning.

Potential **support resources** for those who need them could include:

- 👂 An illustration of the room in the poem or the chance to draw aspects of the room (like the illustration on page 17).
- 👂 Providing the next few lines of the poem.
- 👂 'Mystery' vocabulary on cards which could prompt ideas about suspense.
- 👂 Examples of other poems which build tension.

→ Bob says ...
As a regular habit, set the hardest question first and then use support resources for the less able. You will be encouraging all pupils to practise open-ended conceptual thinking while supporting others at the optimum moment of need.

Using quality texts from our literary heritage and ideas which support national curriculum delivery, *Opening Doors to Famous Poetry and Prose* contains 20 brilliant, ready-to-use units of work for the primary English classroom. Open the door and show the children in your class how to:

- ♥ Foster understanding and appreciation of our literary heritage.
- ♥ Cultivate a lifelong love of reading.
- ♥ Discover and be able to use and explore new and unfamiliar vocabulary.
- ♥ Write in different contexts and for different purposes.
- ♥ Discuss, debate and analyse.

There are books about learning theory which are fascinating, and there are textbooks with varied questions which are practical.

Opening Doors to Famous Poetry and Prose combines the two by devising whole units of learning which are ready to use directly with your pupils, coupled with plenty of tips and advice to support methodology and first principles. Theory and practice coexist to inspire outstanding English using some of our greatest writers as models.



With a carefully selected and considered collection of inspirational poetry and prose texts, Bob Cox has provided this extraordinary book to give teachers the confidence to teach beyond the limits many assume. Appreciating the central importance of language, SPaG and inspiration, this book encourages imagination and deep levels of engagement and is inspired by some of the greatest writers the English language has produced, offering practical ideas and activities to support learning.

Colin Hill, Founder and Web Editor, UKEdChat

This is not a book to pick up over coffee that will give you an idea to take back to class. It is for teachers who want to get back to teaching English as a language and a culture. It will hold your hand as you go through the steps (a CD is provided with lots of resources that are referred to throughout) and give you a wonderful sense of achievement in both your learning and that of your pupils.

Julia Skinner, Founder, 100 Word Challenge

Bob Cox taught English for 23 years, he is now a local authority school improvement consultant and a freelance trainer. He runs conferences, courses, INSETs and a Saturday Challenge school for primary pupils – to inspire teachers and pupils with creative approaches, both nationally and internationally.

The CD-ROM of resources contains all of the extracts, activities and illustrations you will need to begin opening doors in your classroom.

Suitable for ages 7-11

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