

WEBSITE RESOURCE W15.2

Case study: Responding to and assessing writing throughout a teaching sequence

Leigh planned for her class of ten and 11 year olds to engage in a variety of kinds of writing throughout a four week teaching sequence, designing ways of responding to the writing which would move the children's ideas further, but would not create a burden of marking for her. Informal assessments of the children's grasp of key concepts were made throughout the teaching sequence. The written outcome was for the class to write multimodal mystery stories for the class of eight to nine year olds. Reading and writing objectives were selected to fit with the outcome:

Reading:

- reading books that are structured in different ways: using the complex picture-books *The Wolves in the Walls* and *The Red Tree* to discuss how the modes of writing and image interact to make meaning
- reading film for atmosphere, creation of tension and point of view/perspective
- identifying how language, structure and presentation contribute to meaning
- comparing characters, considering different accounts of the same event and discuss viewpoints of authors and fictional characters.

Writing:

- use of the first person in writing diaries and autobiographies
- use of technical terms like *mode*, *perspective*, *implication*, *effect*
- identifying the audience for and purpose of the writing, selecting the appropriate form and using other similar writing as models for their own
- in narratives, describing settings, characters and atmosphere
- careful choice of language for effect.

Figure W15.2.1 shows the opportunities planned for response and assessment throughout the teaching sequence. There are different kinds of writing, each treated differently according to the purpose of the writing: responded to by response partners; used to gather ideas; responded to in small groups by Leigh and Leyla; displayed in the classroom for general comment. Finally, a multimodal book assessed by Leigh according to her planning; responded to by the target audience.

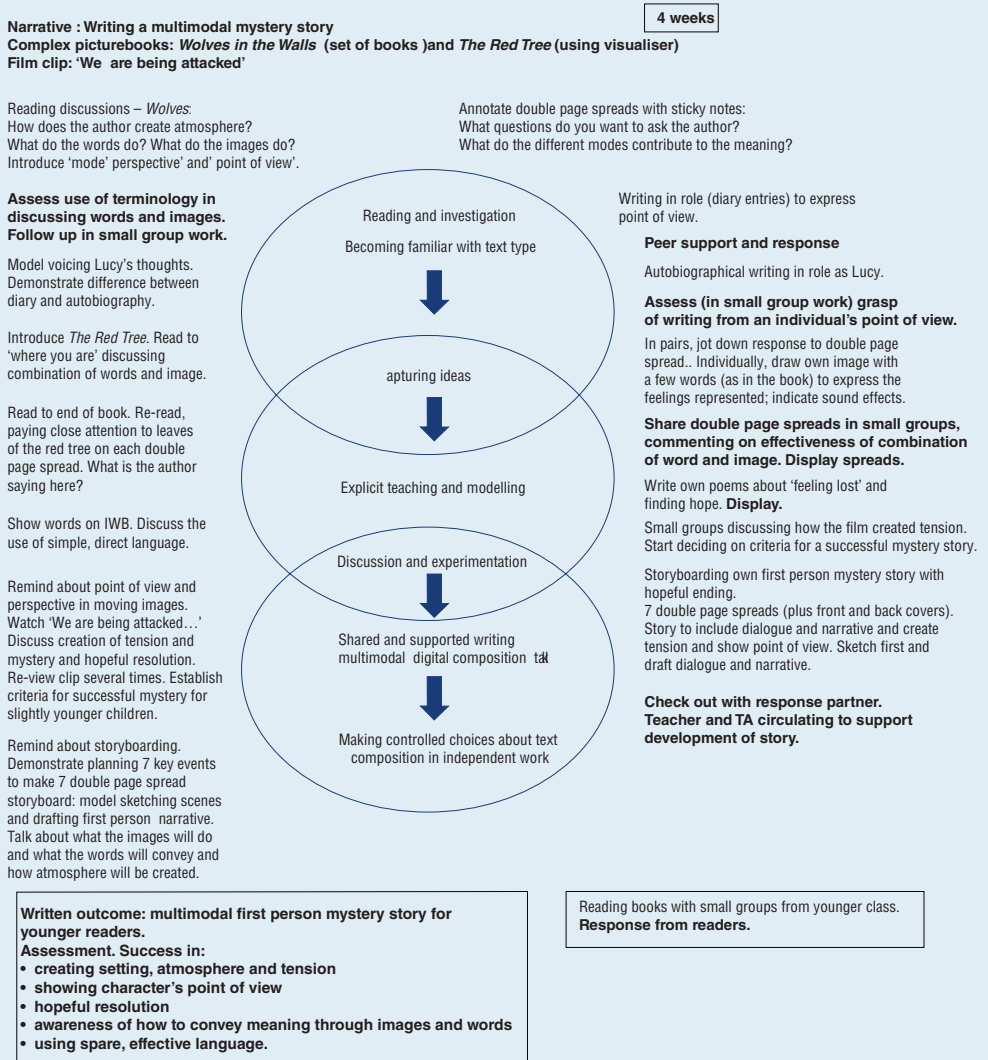


Figure W15. 2.1 Opportunities for response and assessment throughout a teaching sequence

In the first phase of the teaching sequence, to familiarise the class with complex picturebooks and explore their structure, Leigh began by using the visualiser to share the book *The Wolves in the Walls* by Neil Gaiman, considering the use of the pictorial text to create atmosphere and convey the theme. She asked the class to work in pairs to annotate either of the first two double page spreads (up to ‘...crumpling noises’), composing questions they wanted to ask about the text. These allowed discussion of the role played by image and text in creating meaning and atmosphere. In modelling her own questions about the text, she took the opportunity to use the words ‘mode’, ‘perspective’ and ‘point of view’. After reading to the page where the wolves come out of the walls, the class worked in role as Lucy, expressing her feelings – she was right about the wolves but what will happen now? They then wrote these as brief diary entries. Working in small groups, the children shared their work with each other, using the guide question: *How have I expressed the character’s point of view?* In further sessions the class finished sharing the book together, adding to their diary entries when the family were staying in the garden, when they re-entered the house and in response to the resolution of the narrative. As this class was experienced in feedback, they were able to make helpful comments about the content of the diary entries and how effective they were in conveying emotion.

After this introduction to a complex picturebook, the class worked in groups to re-read *The Wolves in the Walls*. Leigh asked them specifically to look at the way the images are presented to evoke atmosphere by point of view, angle and close-up/ long distance views. After several sessions where the groups had explored the books, reading and re-reading them, through shared writing, Leigh demonstrated writing autobiography, based on Lucy’s experiences in *The Wolves in the Walls*: family, age, where she lived, what happened. They discussed how autobiography differs from a diary – the intended audience, for example, and the time when it is written: a diary is more immediate; autobiography benefits from a bit of hindsight. The class then used the information in the books to create their own autobiographies in role as either Lucy or her brother in *The Wolves in the Walls*. The emphasis was on establishing the character’s point of view about the situation the family found themselves in. These were shared, first with partners and then volunteers read theirs to the class.

Leigh then asked the class, in pairs, to take one double page spread of the book that they particularly liked and jot down their ideas about what each mode – the words and the images, including the use of colour, perspective – contributed to the meaning. The pairs then moved to groups of six and shared their ideas, coming up with a group list of the contribution made by each mode. Leigh and teaching assistant Leyla worked in turn with the groups, making sure that they had correctly grasped the idea of different contributions made by each mode.

Once Leigh was sure that the class had got the idea of how words and images work together to create meaning and atmosphere, she began the second phase of the sequence by reading and viewing *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan, stopping before the final pages (at ‘or where you are’). This intriguing and poignant story, told in a complex picturebook, has a girl as the central character for whom life is not going well. Many of the double page spreads depict frightening and bewildering situations. The class spent some time pondering the detail of the pictures, working in pairs again to

annotate a double page spread with questions and comments about what the author is trying to express. Leigh asked them all to look carefully either at the spread with the words 'without sense or reason' or the following spread 'then all your troubles come at once' and to jot down what the images and layout seemed to be expressing and what sounds might be used to accompany the images. She invited them to draw their own double page spreads with a few words to express the emotion depicted and to indicate what the 'sound track' might be. Finally, the class read to the end of the story and found the resolution. This was the signal for re-reading, tracking the little hints at hope in each of the double page spreads, where the children had to be very careful readers of the pictorial text to find the leaves of the red tree. Leigh and Leyla were able to use the annotated questions and to circulate during the discussion and drawing so that they could judge how well the children seemed to have grasped the idea of what different modes contribute to making a story. Finally, Leigh showed the class the words of the book without the pictures. They discussed the bareness and simplicity of much of the language and how you do not always need complicated language to express feelings or create atmosphere. The children wrote their own poems about feeling 'lost' and finding hope. These were displayed and enjoyed as a class resource.

To begin the extended writing phase of the sequence, Leigh showed the class the short film *We've been attacked again – only this time it's our own fault*. (<http://www.literacyshed.com/the-sci---fi-shed.html>, scroll down to New Media clip). They re-viewed it then discussed in pairs what might have happened before this invasion. She asked the class to draw the scenario from the point of view of someone hiding and to continue writing in the first person the beginnings of their own escape story. She revisited storyboarding, a planning strategy they had learned before, and asked them to make a storyboard of seven double page spreads plus front and back cover (on a folded sheet of A3 paper) of their own first person narrative where they try to escape. Using her own sketchy drawings, she demonstrated how to construct a narrative using both words and images to create the atmosphere and point of view of the central character. Reminding them about what they had learned about dialogue and the messages carried by different modes, supported by Leigh and Leyla the class worked on their drafts and finally put their picturebooks together, using an afternoon session to finalise the layout and artwork. They presented their picturebooks to the younger class, asking for their feedback.

The children made their own comments according to how well they thought they had reached the criteria for a successful first person multimodal mystery story. In responding to their final writing, Leigh's comments focused on their success in creating setting, atmosphere and character, the ways they made the different modes work together to make meaning. Further (and perhaps more telling!) response came from the class that read the books.

Children's books

- Gaiman, Neil (illustrated Dave McKean) (2005) *The Wolves in the Walls*. Harper Trophy. ISBN 9780380810956.
- Tan, Shaun (2012) *The Red Tree*. Sydney: Lothian Children's Books. ISBN 9780734411372.