



# Sit down and speak up

Hot seating can be a great way to develop both drama and literacy skills, says **Michael Theodorou**. Just let children warm up to the idea first...

**T**he adventurous teacher can experiment with all sorts of drama techniques that will add depth, subtlety and excitement to his or her literacy lessons. Perhaps one of the most popular is hot seating; the process whereby an adult or child adopts a different persona and answers questions in role. It's a very effective way to help children gain a deeper understanding of characters from both fiction and non-fiction. It can also be a lot of fun.

However, in order to run a successful hot seating exercise it's important to lay the groundwork. If you've tried this approach before and it has fallen flat, there could be a number of reasons, such as:

- unfocused preparation;
- the assumption that hot seating is easy and that the children will respond immediately with ideas;
- you have not set out the room ready for a drama session;
- you have not done any physical 'limbering up';
- you have not thought of any mood music to use in different parts of the session.

Starting a hot seating activity with some preliminary movement work can make all the difference. I would suggest you try 'character walks' where the children are invited to take a stroll in someone else's shoes.

As well as energising the class, this will get them in the mood for thinking about 'character' and how this can be typified by movement. You can easily come up with your own suggestions, for instance:

- walk like a soldier;
- walk like a security guard;
- walk like a king or queen;
- walk like a butler.

You could ask children to 'find a voice' for the above characters. Ask them to think of a typical sentence that the character might utter. Go round the class and ask each person to speak when you

# Talking books

## TRY THIS DRAMA TECHNIQUE IN YOUR NEXT LITERACY LESSON...

- Ask children to imagine they are books on a shelf.
- Each child should decide how big or small his or her book is.
- The class should all stand in a row as books on a shelf.

Now ask children to decide what kind of book they are:

- Dictionary?
- Horror?
- Romance?

- Bible?
- Fairy story?

Once they've picked a genre, children should think of the very first sentence of their book. When the teacher points to a 'book', 'it' must speak its first sentence – preferably in the correct voice and tone.

As part of an English lesson, children can write out the first paragraph from their chosen book.

In the drama session, they must read out the extract – perhaps sitting on the 'hot seat' – using an appropriate voice to go with the text.

point at them. The rest of the children then have to guess who the character is.

### Take a seat

Once you've spent some time experimenting with character walks, the following steps will help to ensure that children are focused when it's time to start hot seating.

- Place a chair in the middle of the room or studio.
- Ask the pupils, one at a time, to approach the chair, sit on it comfortably and then get up and move off.
- After everyone has had a go, ask children – one at a time – to approach the chair suspiciously, sit on it and then move off quickly, as if the chair is hot.
- Now each child gets a chair of their own.
- Ask them to sit on the chair and start speaking about themselves as soon as they sit.
- It would be best if they all sat down at the same time on a given signal from the teacher (either a hand clap or a drum beat), and spoke

about the same things, i.e. their name, age, their class, lessons they enjoy, lessons they don't like, their friends' names, where they live, etc.

- Everyone should be speaking at the same time and not listening to each other.
- On a given signal from the teacher (a hand clap or a drum beat) they must stop speaking immediately. There must be complete silence.
- The teacher then tells children they must start speaking again and this time speak as quickly as possible – without gabbling.
- The teacher beats the drum and there must be complete silence.
- The teacher beats the drum and they continue speaking quickly about themselves from where they left off.
- When children have got used to working like this, ask if there is a volunteer who would like to speak about themselves in this way with everyone else listening.
- After a few volunteers have spoken, tell the class that, from now on, anyone who hesitates or stops speaking is 'out' and it becomes the next person's go. Stress that children must not gabble when they speak fast. The winner is the person who can speak about themselves for the longest time without stopping.
- Remember to stress that children must start talking as soon as they sit on the 'hot' seat.

Depending on which book, play, poem, novel, story, biography or historical figure the children are studying, you can now start using the hot seating technique to investigate different characters. For example, if you're reading *A Christmas Carol*, the questions raised when Scrooge is taken back to his childhood by The Ghost of Christmas Past would serve as a good starting point for any hot seating activity.

**Who or what are you?**

**What brings you here?**

**Tell us about your childhood.**

Asking these basic questions will reveal how much children know about the book they are studying. It will also help pupils to come up with details about their character that are not necessarily found in the text, but rather deduced from what they have read.

Ask the children to choose a character (e.g. Scrooge) from any book they are studying and write down some answers to the following questions.



**Who are you?**

**When did you live?**

**Where did you live?**

**What work did you do?**

**Were you happy in your work?**

**What happened to change you?**

Ask each child to sit on the hot seat and read their answers in the voice of their chosen character. The rest of the class should then ask further questions, but make sure children are aware this is not a cross examination. They must be discouraged from asking awkward questions to try and catch people out.

If the teacher formulates questions and ideas in advance, this will start the children off on the right track. Success in hot seating is a matter of giving the children the confidence to develop their own ideas. In this way you can use drama to make both fictional and non fictional characters truly palpable.

**Michael Theodorou has taught drama in schools and colleges for over 30 years and is author of *Games, Ideas and Activities for Primary Drama* (Pearson Education Ltd, 2010).**

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The ideas in this article are adapted from Michael Theodorou's *Games, Ideas and Activities for Primary Drama* (Pearson Education Ltd, 2010). The book provides ready-made activities for drama lessons.

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