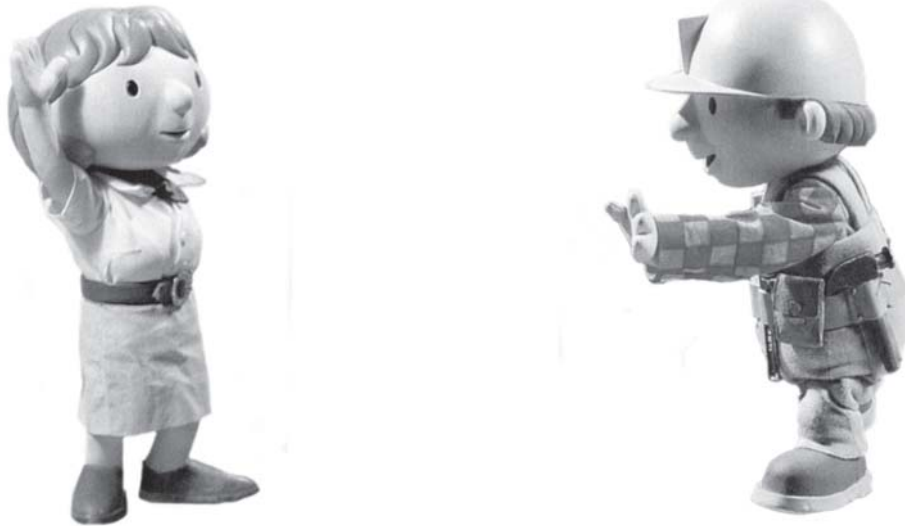


# Can you fix it for Bob the Builder?



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## Young children arrive at school with a wide knowledge of non-narrative texts. So, Helen Bromley uses a special activity to draw out this knowledge and build on it.

If you cast your mind back to your childhood, and think about the games you played, it may surprise you how many of them provided opportunities for non-narrative writing. Playing librarians, for example, could involve making tickets and putting a page into the front of a book to be stamped with the date; playing schools could involve registers; whilst playing shops and post offices (my favourites) could require the production of a wide range of texts from advertisements to receipts. Such texts, when produced, made the game more authentic; they were as much a part of the pretend play as the construction of the narrative. There was a real audience for them, and a real purpose for their production.

As adults, we deal with such texts and many more, encountering them on our daily round, or as they arrive

through our letterbox. Children watch us as we look at the menu for the Chinese take-away restaurant, or at the opening times for the library. And they see us producing our own pieces of non-narrative writing — the shopping list, or the note for the milkman. In fact, children see adults producing pieces of non-narrative writing far more frequently than they see them writing stories. So, they arrive at school with a wide ranging knowledge of this type of writing. And it is the job of teachers to make this implicit knowledge explicit — encouraging children to build on what they already know, rather than just giving them new knowledge.

One way of bringing out children's knowledge of non-narrative writing is to offer them the opportunity to produce such texts as part of play activities in school. In this article, I shall

describe how I went about this with a class of reception children, and how the work fulfilled the requirements of both the Foundation Stage and of the NLS, the documents for which state that children should be taught to write for a variety of purposes, and in a variety of formats.

### A fictional context

I was with the children for half a morning, so I needed make the activities I chose fit into this time frame. Children of reception age can, of course, work for longer periods on a piece of writing; but all children need to experience the sense of satisfaction that writers get when completing a piece of work, and I wanted to set them a task that would enable everyone to contribute and to feel successful during my time with them.

I decided to use *Bob the Builder* as a starting point, as I knew that the vast majority of the children would know



## 'Bob' gets their interest

When the children had gathered on the carpet, ready for the beginning of the session, I introduced myself. I told them that I was a friend of Bob the Builder, and that I had brought something for them from Bob. It was quite clear that I already had their interest.

At this point, I produced the letter, still in its envelope. Together, we read through the address, to check that it had come to the correct place, and I then invited one child to open the envelope and unfold the letter. There was great excitement when the children recognised Bob's picture on the back of it.

I read the letter to the children, clipping it to the flipchart before I did so. I then showed the children the notice board that I had brought with me, and we discussed the contents of the letter and what it might mean for Bob to lose all the things from his notice board. It was clear at this point that the children were already involved in the task, and would be happy to help.

I asked the children to work in twos or threes to decide what might have been on Bob's notice board. It was apparent as they turned to each other to begin their discussions that many of them already had ideas of what Bob would need. 'A list of tools,' one little boy couldn't resist volunteering.

who he was, and that this would create a shared context for the activity. So, my first step was to visit the *Bob the Builder* website, download a colour poster of Bob, and print it off on A4 paper. Then I composed the letter below.

I glued the letter to the back of the *Bob the Builder* poster, to make it look as if 'Bob' had written it on his own special paper. I then placed it in an envelope addressed to the class, and added a hand-drawn stamp with tools on it for good measure. Armed with the letter and a cork notice board full of pins, but nothing else, I set off to work with the children.

*Dear Children,*

*I am writing to you because I really need your help.*

*Last night, I left the window open in the tool shed, and everything blew off my notice board, out of the open window, and far away . . . hoping that you can help me because I need to put my notice board back together again.*

*Everything I need to fix for people has gone.*

*Please could you make me some new things for my notice board. Wendy and I will read every single one.*

*I have heard that you are really good at writing, so I look forward to seeing everything that you make*

*Love from Bob*

*XXXX*

## Everyone has ideas

After the children had had their discussion, I collected their ideas in a list on the flip chart. The initial suggestions included the following:

- a shopping list
- a list to remind him of things to do
- a list of building jobs coming up
- building tickets (further discussion revealed this to mean receipts for building materials)
- notes asking him to do things
- taxi cards
- friends' phone numbers
- information about trips
- a calendar
- train tickets.

I felt that this was an excellent start. All the children had chosen appropriate texts for putting on a notice board, and a variety of genres had been suggested (procedural writing, persuasive writing, and so on). I also liked the way that the children didn't just suggest one list, but were able to suggest a variety of lists that would have different purposes.

As we were reading through the list to make sure that everyone had something that they could make to go on the notice board, it became apparent that one boy had had another idea. So, we stopped reading and asked him to share it. He didn't know the name of the text he wanted to make, but described it perfectly 'A kind of grid. You write on it what you have to do . . . there's squares all over it, and dates'. After some discussion, and with his agreement, we decided to call it a planner — which is exactly what he was describing.

After reading through the list once more, I asked the children to turn to the person next to them on the carpet and decide, by talking with that person, which piece of writing they were going to do for Bob's Notice Board. It was important that all the children should feel that they were contributing, and they were told that they could work with a partner on the writing if they wished, but none chose to do so. I encouraged the children who could not make up their mind to come to the flipchart and choose from the list with me.

## The mechanics matter

The children in this class were used to writing independently, and the room was set up to reflect this. We (the class teacher and I) had made sure that a wide variety of materials was available, and this included a selection of coloured papers, lined and unlined white paper, and a choice of writing implements such as felt-tipped pens. We also made glue, scissors, and sellotape available, in case the children needed to construct a specific text type — for example leaflets or booklets — using these.

Having this kind of equipment available can provide huge motivation for children to write, and it also lends authenticity to the activity. Children know that it is extremely unlikely that Bob would have his notice board covered in texts written in lead pencil on A4 paper! Offering the youngest children such a choice also gives them responsibility, aiding their perception of themselves as real writers. And, finally, it vastly increases the possibilities for constructive formative assessment. It would have been inappropriate for me to design a multitude of patterns of texts for the children to fill in. In real life, all texts are unique. Children know this.

## Plenty of variety

The children were highly motivated and began work straight away. They could produce as few or as many texts as they wanted, and they worked in friendship groups, rather than being grouped according to perceived ability. All the children were able to contribute to the task, and some of their pieces of writing are shown here.

The list of tools (Fig. 1) was drawn first and then the words were put underneath. Hammers, and screwdriver are easily recognisable words, with good attempts being made at quite complex spellings.

Next is a reminder for Bob (Fig 2): 'Don't forget to take Pilchard to the vet. Love from Wendy'. Pilchard is Bob's cat, and in this instance the child has also written in role, as Bob's friend Wendy. Looking at the secretarial skills, she has spelt some frequently used

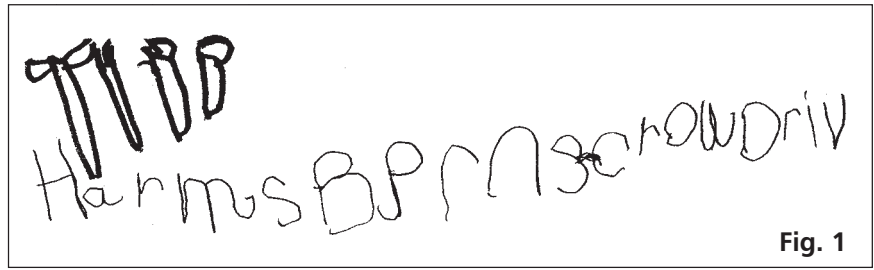


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

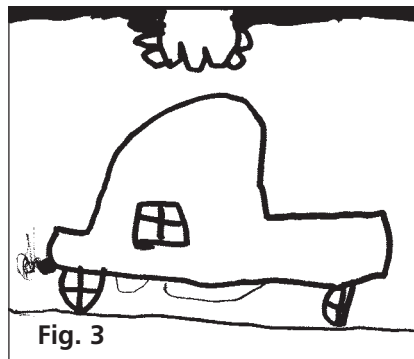


Fig. 3

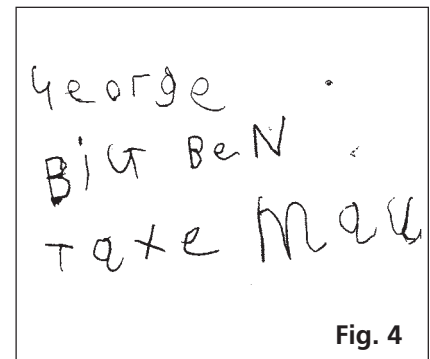


Fig. 4

words correctly, and made good attempts at other, more complicated words. The addition of the picture of the cat livens up and personalises the piece, and is entirely appropriate. In this instance, the picture was drawn after the writing had been completed — the choice of the writer.

Other reminders produced for the board included 'To Bob, don't forget to feed the cat, love from Wendy.' and a bill for 'won can ov oyol' — one can of oil — priced at £564!



Fig. 5

Many of the children were fascinated by both business cards and tickets. These were texts that they clearly knew something about. A lot of time and trouble was spent on them, in order to make them look as authentic as possible. Figs. 3 and 4 show one of the business cards, with the picture on the front and the information on the back. What it is not possible to see from an illustration is that George, who made the business card for Big Ben's taxi service, chose card to make it with. The children who had written the list and the reminder chose paper.

The children also thought of other texts that hadn't been included on the original list. It was clear that Bob received fan mail, and Fig.5 is evidence of this). The delightfully detailed picture of Bob was accompanied by the caption 'To Bob. I.toc.a.pahta' — I took a photo.

### Motivation gets results

As the children completed their texts, they came and pinned them on the notice board, so that by the end of the lesson it was full.

It is important to note that some children worked on their texts for longer than the allotted time, because they were so involved. One such child was Greg, who spent the whole morning finishing his planner (see photo and Fig. 6). He carefully drew the grid, having first made sure his paper had the correct proportions, and then added dates and 'things to do' — starting with 'Builder a wall'.

The amount of concentration and effort required for Greg to produce this work should not be underestimated. At a time when concerns are being aired about boys and writing, it is perhaps worth considering what engaged such a young child for so long.

Firstly, it was apparent from the beginning that the children were clear about the audience for their work, and the purpose for it. The 'audience' was not only imagined — Bob — but was also real, in that I assumed the role of 'Bob's friend'. Status was given to the work almost instantly, because it was 'published' on the notice board. The children were very interested in each other's texts and gathered round to

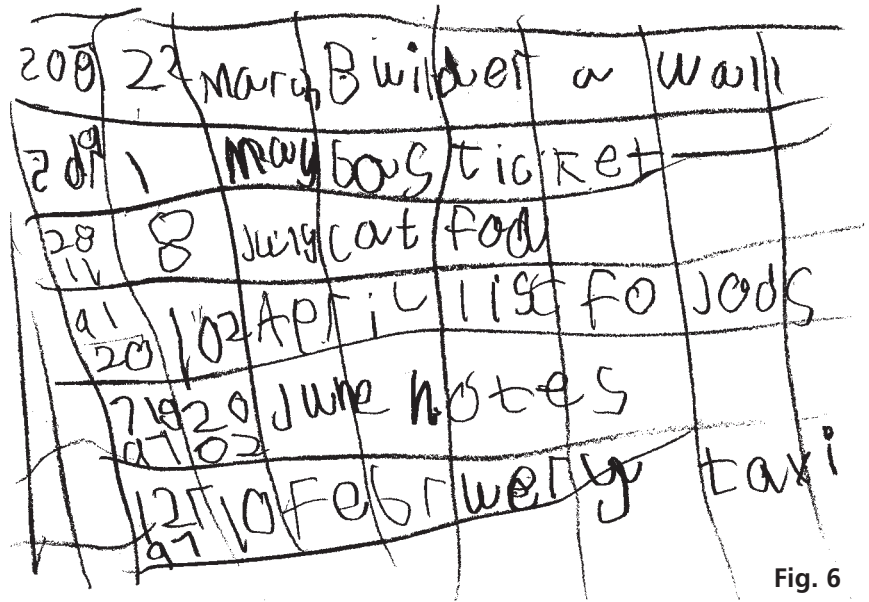


Fig. 6

have a look, both while they were writing and when the session was drawing to a close, when we held a plenary.

Secondly, it was clear that choice and responsibility played an important part in this work: choice of which text to write; choice of materials to write it on; and choice of implements to write it with. Too often school writing can become divorced from writing in the real world, where children can select pens and papers at will. This may not always be possible in school, but it make sense to plan for occasions when children can make choices, as it undoubtedly helps them make their

knowledge about the construction of real texts very clear indeed.

I feel that the other factor which contributed to the success of this activity was the way in which children were able to use their prior knowledge, and to feel that everybody's prior knowledge was equally valuable. As I mentioned above, the children were not grouped according to perceived ability and asked to make different texts. Instead, differentiation was by outcome, and also through the conversations that we had with the children during the task. Examples of work were shared and discussed while the children were writing.

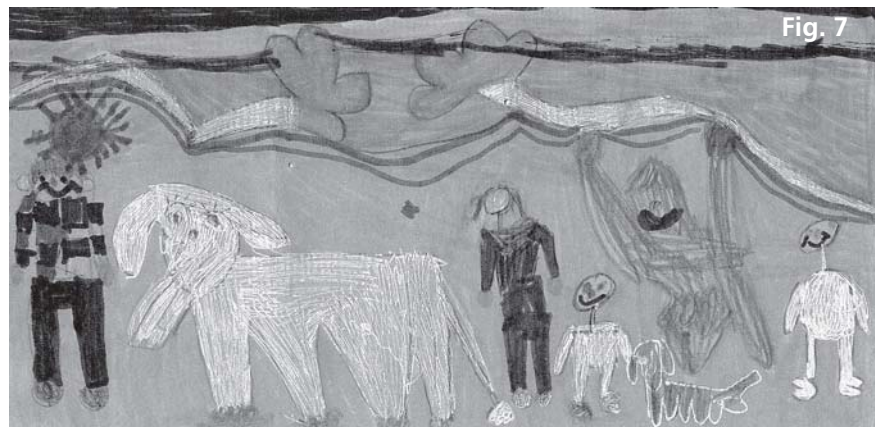


Fig. 7

Finally, pictures played an important part in the task. Whether sending Bob a photo of himself or adding a logo to a business card, the children knew exactly how and when to use illustrations to support their texts. One of the girls wanted to give Bob information about Paignton Zoo, so that he might visit it. On the back of her double sided text, she wrote 'come to the zoo. And see the allfans (elephants). Deir Bob love Nicola. And lots of cis-is' (kisses. The use of the hyphen is hers). On the front was an exquisite picture of Bob and Wendy in their jeans, at the zoo (Fig. 7). This detailed picture is an excellent recommendation for a day out. Like the boy with the planner, this girl spent most of the morning producing the work to a standard that she was happy with.

### A very adaptable idea

Although this activity was done with children in Reception, who were not working to a literacy hour format, it can be adapted for other age groups and fitted into the literacy hour.

Children at Key Stage 2 can work on notice boards for characters from novels they are reading. Producing texts for the notice board in the staff room at Hogwarts', for example, offers enormous potential. I once worked with a group of Y6 children who were reading the 'Goosebumps' novels. After reading the opening chapter of one of these aloud to the class, I asked them to work with a partner and choose a character mentioned in the chapter to construct a 'notice board' of text for. The character and text analysis required to do this was quite complex, and involved the children in some high level inferential work.

Children at Key Stage 1 can be similarly involved — for example when studying fairy stories. Why not ask the children to make texts for the Hansel and Gretel Witch, or for the Three

Bears. At Christmas time, the notice board could belong to Father Christmas — who has carelessly lost everything from it. When I worked with a Y2 class on this task, one child painstakingly produced a 'Map of the Heavens', so that Father Christmas could find his way home. A PGCE student whom I worked with last year even tried this activity with a Y5 class — who thoroughly enjoyed it! One of them even made a Weightwatchers advert for Santa.

### Why it works

Fictional notice boards provide children with a meaningful context in which to produce non narrative writing, with audience and purpose.

Of course, in order to write non-narrative texts, children need to have had experience of them. There is no doubt that the children described above began with texts from their own experiences. The boy who produced the planner had seen one in his dad's study, he told me. Children who had travelled in buses or taxis or trains used these experiences in this new context. Had I been working with the children over a longer period, they would have been invited to bring in examples of junk mail and other texts from home, so that features of these could have been analysed both in full-class and small-group sessions.

Harold Rosen famously wrote that 'Inside every narrative there stalk the ghosts of non narrative discourse'. I feel that this is a useful concept to bear in mind when thinking of ways to encourage children to write non-narrative. Create a story — through role-play or drama — or use a story the children already know, and invite the creation of the non-narrative texts within it. Bob the Builder undoubtedly 'fixed it' for the reception children in this article. You might find a story of your own that will produce equally exciting results.

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