



HOW TO... link Reading and Writing

By *admin*

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Article Author:

[Bob Cattell](#) [1]

Article Author:

[David Tinsley](#) [2]

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Try a Bookstop or a Book Camp.

We report on two projects which last summer brought books, children, teachers, writers and illustrators together in a creative partnership.

Bob Cattell describes the **Bookstop Project**

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For two hours, one morning a week for five weeks last summer three playcentres in south-east London became a Bookstop. The Greenwich Bookbus, already well-stocked with books, took on extra equipment in the form of typewriters, tape recorders, polaroid cameras and all the materials for making books, and arrived each week staffed by groups of student teachers from Thames Polytechnic. For the first two weeks authors Leila Berg and Bernard Ashley and illustrator Caroline Holden were aboard to launch us on this reading and writing project.

The first question must be why did we do it?

First, there is a well-documented body of evidence that children's reading and writing skills regress considerably during the long summer holiday and we were interested in the ways a project like 'Bookstop' could combat this. But mainly we hoped to demonstrate to children the thrill to be derived from writing and discovering the ideas that lie tucked away within themselves. In making it possible for children to meet authors and illustrators and produce their own work without any of the pressures and formal restraints of school, there was a possibility that the project could kindle an interest in reading and writing which otherwise might remain latent. Children would be involved in voluntarily creating and producing their own books, bringing continuity and personal involvement to a literary development project.

In broad outline we anticipated that we would introduce ourselves to all the children involved through storyreading, tales **and** demonstrations by the authors and illustrator and then settle them into small groups with the students to help them get the hang of all the equipment. We anticipated a broad range of age (5-11 years), interest and talent and the Bookbus workers would always be on hand to help children who just wanted to sit in a corner and read or ask about books or help with the mechanical processes of book production without actually writing their own books.

All the Bookstop workers were provided with special 'T' shirts and we produced 'Bookstop' badges to give away to children and help them identify with the scheme. The number of children involved slightly exceeded our expectations and we estimate that over 300 children came into contact with it during the summer.

Each of the three locations presented its own particular problems in terms of space - in one of them we couldn't get the bus into the playground! But some things were common.

As expected we were working with a vast range of ability as well as interest levels. Sometimes a child was happy to sit down and start writing but "getting started" was the main problem. Often a conversation with one of the authors provided a dynamic beginning to a story but most of the time it was the efforts of the students - coaxing, sometimes acting as a scribe to begin with to get the child's initial words on paper, sometimes sidestepping and getting the child to start with an illustration. We did not have time to use tape recorders as much as we had hoped to get the children to explore ideas for a story - but when used this approach was quite successful.

It became obvious that our resources were going to be stretched to cope with the numbers and the diverse demands of the children and clear that we could have used far larger numbers of adults to work with the children as well as "ancillary workers" to get on with the job of helping to produce the books. Nevertheless the ratio of children to adults was far, far lower than would be experienced in a normal classroom. Although children were involved in every stage of the production of their own books and used the typewriter, guillotines (slide type), staplers glue etc., it was necessary to speed up the process with adult helpers and a full-time, overworked typist who typed as the stories were read back by the children.

Often the children changed stories at the typing stage, replaced illustrations with better ones or decided to use photographs instead. Some children preferred to work and help out with the more mechanical jobs like cutting and mounting books for other children; sometimes they worked together-like "a real author and illustrator"; sometimes they just read books or copied out stories from them. At the end of the summer, we had jointly produced about 60 finished books and hundreds of pages of stories which, for one reason or another, didn't quite reach the finished stage.

Some experiences recounted by our student helpers give a flavour of the whole enterprise.

"The first day I had a Nigerian girl called Yemi. She was very reluctant to write - I don't think she'd really intended to; I think she was just passing - and very sure she had nothing anyone wanted to know about, and that nothing had ever happened to her. I had to coax her to talk. getting only monosyllables from her at first: but I began to write down what she was saying and what evolved was really fascinating and exciting... a rabbit and a snake... and she shaped off the end with a natural storyteller's skill? And at the end of the story, this child who had been so withdrawn was so joyous and proud - the difference in the way she *looked* was amazing."

"One child came along with the name of a character. 'Thomas James Jinks who he wanted in his story. But he had no idea of the story. So, talking to him, using the tape recorder, a polaroid camera and a friend who could draw, we managed to pull together three short chapters, drawn entirely from his personal experience. He was undoubtedly one of the more demanding children and could have been a nuisance to the other children trying to work. But once he got the attention he required his involvement and industry was remarkable."

What did it all add up to?

Well there was not a dissenting voice when it was suggested that we repeat the scheme next year, funds and volunteers permitting.

As for the results, it is virtually impossible to assess whether the scheme provided all or any of the children with a stimulus for reading which will have a lasting effect. There is always the nagging doubt that the child will go back to an environment where there is no feeling for books or stories and the experience of a pleasant couple of mornings will be forgotten.

However, we all felt that one of the very positive points about 'Bookstop' was that it worked on so many levels. There was so much that could be done: reading and buying books, drawing, writing, cutting; measuring: glueing; typing and talking. Virtually all the children found an activity that appealed to them. Inevitably out of all this came an element of organised chaos: but also out of it, we think came a large number of children who had discovered something in

themselves which produced a sense of achievement and pleasure. It was this awakening of their interest in their own story that most of us saw to be the main contribution of the visits.

David Tinsley asks Why not run a Book Camp?

In our school bookshop and library we try all the usual things to 'sell' books and reading: book assemblies, book competitions and challenges, visits from authors etc., etc., and these seem to have the usual varying amounts of success. We decided we needed something exciting, eye-catching, unusual and (if possible) unique to create the feeling towards books we wanted. So the first Methwold Book Camp was dreamed up: three days and two nights away from home at an outdoor activity centre, where everything was to be focussed on reading and books and the potential pleasure to be found in both.

So it was that last summer a string of minibuses containing 35 eight and nine year olds left school heading for our first all-important en route stop, Neil's Bookshop in Swaffham. Of the £6 camp fee, £1 had been put aside for spending in the bookshop (we had given the owner advance warning that we were coming). Choosing and buying a book which could be read at odd moments during the camp was, we reasoned, the best possible way of starting an activity devoted to books. For twenty of the thirty-five children it was their first visit to a real bookshop, and the excitement was tremendous and very infectious. Much browsing took place without any encouragement needed, and teachers joined in to discuss titles, authors and suitability. Forty minutes later everyone left the shop satisfied with their purchase - only I was worrying a little over one eight year old's insistence on choosing and buying a 'Saint' book.

The camp site was a disused Norfolk school which has been made available for outdoor activities. A river runs through the site and the children made straight for it on arrival. We decided that our choice of Water as the theme for the camp was probably a good one. Later that day our first visitor arrived.

He was John Gordon, author of **The Giant Under the Snow**, **The House on the Brink** and **The Ghost on the Hill**, who came under the auspices of the Eastern Arts Association's Writers in Schools scheme. His brief was: tell us about your books, how you plan and write them, and then finish with a workshop where children are motivated to write their own stories using the theme of water. The children's imaginations were quickly captured as John Gordon told of his house on the sea cliff where in the night he often gets up to let his mind become free and to write, and of his conscious decision and determination to become a writer. The children felt his disappointment as he told of rejected manuscripts and of the publishing house which informed him that his style was too similar to one of their established authors.

He told of his childhood in Wisbech and of the museum where the ideas came from for his first novel, **The Giant Under the Snow**, and of how this story was finally accepted for publication. Many children were interested in the practical details of publication, copies, manuscripts, errors, printing etc. and when the time came for the workshop to start most children, I'm sure, saw themselves as budding authors just waiting for the publishers to say 'Yes'. The children's enthusiasm to write was maintained by John Gordon who read their stories, giving advice and offering helpful criticism and encouragement so that their ideas grew and were developed.

This session seemed well worthwhile with enjoyment on both sides. So much so that John Gordon stayed late and came with us on our walk to a nearby watermill for a paddle and, as it was very hot, a swim in the mill stream. The mill visit led into a story session before supper where I read Philippa Pearce's short story, **At the River Gates**. I had read this story often before, but on this occasion the visit to the mill seemed to make the telling more real to me and the children.

That evening we played games. The first involved the telling of a story with the children involved in races, and the second, of course, had to be Charades with book titles.

Day Two began with a visit to the coast for a boat trip to look for seals at Seal Island, and to provide first hand experience of water for their own stories. Back at camp this highly stimulating visit led into another short story session where I read **Through the Tunnel**, by Doris Lessing.

Our second visitor, illustrator Derek Steele, arrived after lunch to show how the work of an author is complemented by

the work of the illustrator. He began by showing work of various illustrators: Sendak, Heath Robinson, Quentin Blake etc. and went on to tell of his recent commissioning by the BBC to illustrate **Gobbolino the Witches Cat** for Jackanory. To show how he works he read us a piece from **Gobbolino** and asked the children to picture in their minds a 'moment in time he had chosen and showed the various trial sketches he had made and worked on until he produced the ones chosen for the programme. This again showed the idea that pictures, like stories, have to be developed, enlarged and refined before they are completed. As on the previous day a workshop completed the session. This time children were asked to illustrate their own story using pen, pencil, crayon, paint or chalk and, as with John Gordon. the communication between a very patient illustrator and some highly enthusiastic children was excellent as first attempts were discussed and retried.

That evening we organised a treasure hunt with clues hidden in a story. An end of camp barbecue brought the second day, and the camp, to an end. The following day it was pack up and home to show stories and books to mum and dad.

Now we can admit that we were apprehensive about the camp: but it went better than we had dared hope. For two days, talk and thoughts were about books: even if this had been the only positive thing to emerge from the camp the time would not have been wasted. However, there was more. The maturity of the children's conversation about many things, their new books, books read previously and recalled, favourite authors, books they planned to read, all made the camp a tremendous success and a venture we can recommend to other schools seeking to promote a real interest in books, reading and writing.

Bob Cattell is the proprietor of the Bookboat bookshop in Greenwich. He co-ordinated the Bookstop Project which was funded by a grant from Wates Foundation. Bob is willing to offer advice to anyone contemplating a similar scheme. Write to BookBus, PO Box 347, Cutty Sark Gardens. Greenwich, London SE10.

David Tinsley is the Head of the Duchy of Lancaster School in Norfolk.

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