

Training dragons at KS2: A look at *How to Train Your Dragon* through Drama

KS2

Helen Day

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Introduction

Cressida Cowell's *How to Train Your Dragon* is a contemporary classic. Full of humour, and also great drama, its well-rounded central character is a wonderful study in the growing pains of trying to fit in. This scheme of work provides an accompaniment to a classroom reading of the book, with games and exercises inspired by events and episodes from the text.

The scheme has been written with the drama objectives of the KS2 National Curriculum in mind, and explores creating and sustaining roles, working in small groups to produce tableaux and short scenes, improvisation, presenting work in front of peers, as well as fun games to encourage focus and concentration. Spoken language skills will be developed, and students will participate in group discussion and interaction throughout the scheme.

Learning objectives

By the end of this scheme the students will:

- ▶ Have used a range of dramatic techniques to explore *How to Train Your Dragon*
- ▶ Have experience of creating and sustaining roles
- ▶ Have explored characterisation through vocal tone, body language and facial expression
- ▶ Have experience of working in small groups to produce tableaux and short scenes
- ▶ Have developed their spoken language skills
- ▶ Have experience of presenting their work in front of their peers
- ▶ Have experience of constructively responding to the work of others.

Lesson 1: Catching your dragon

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson the students will:

- ▶ Have explored the use of facial expression and body language through tableaux
- ▶ Have developed their listening skills, responding imaginatively to source material
- ▶ Have worked creatively in small groups to co-develop an idea, developing their teamwork skills
- ▶ Have improvised in role
- ▶ Have experience of presenting their work in front of their peers.

It is important that students are familiar with the book to at least the end of Chapter 5 for this lesson.

Warm-up: Don't Wake the Dragons! (10 mins)

A warm-up game to get everyone focussed and in the mood for dragon catching!

Divide the class into two groups, and ask each group to form a line opposite each other. Everyone should then turn their backs and close their eyes.

Select one student to walk as quietly as possible between the two rows. If anyone in either row thinks they hear the student who is walking past them, they can quickly turn around and say 'Viking!'.

If they have turned around at the right moment, the dragon has been woken and the challenge has been lost; the person who turned around is next to try walking between the rows.

If they turn around at the wrong time, however, they are out of the game. This means that participants have to choose their moment to turn around very wisely!

Repeat the game a few times.

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Listening and tableaux (10 mins)

Divide the class into groups. Around five or six students per group should work well.

You will read a section from Chapter 2, one paragraph at a time. After each paragraph, invite students to form a group tableau, depicting what they have just heard.

Give the groups about ten seconds to form each tableau, and then call out 'freeze'. Take a few moments to point out any groups that have done particularly well, through use of facial expression, body language, or indeed simply the overall image they have created, before moving on to read out the next paragraph.

Remind students that they should focus on working together each time to form the best image. Sometimes they might be a main character, and sometimes they might form part of the background. Encourage a sense of teamwork in this exercise.

The suggested extract begins with the paragraph that starts '*The tunnel was dripping and clammy*', and continues for the next five paragraphs.

Create a dragon (10 mins)

Students can continue working in the same groups for this exercise.

Read out or display the description of the 'Monstrous Nightmare' found at the end of Chapter 3.

Each group should now create their own dragon, with a description and statistics. A scribe in each group should take notes.

Presenting the dragons preparation (5 mins)

Each group will now present their dragon to the rest of the class. They should nominate one member of the group to be the dragon, and the rest of the group should describe it, as if presenting the creature at a festival or fair. The groups have five minutes to prepare.

Presenting the dragons (15 mins)

Give each group the opportunity to present their dragon to the rest of the class.

After all the groups have presented, ask students to comment on which dragon(s) they found the most interesting. Why was that? Was it because of its characteristics, or was there something about the way the group presented it that was particularly engaging? Which one of the newly created dragons would students like to catch if they were a novice Viking?

Improvised duologues (10 mins)

Remind students about the conversation between Hiccup and Old Wrinkly in Chapter 5. They may not remember every detail of it, but the main points are:

- ▶ Hiccup tells his grandfather that he has caught a dragon, but that it is very small.
- ▶ He bemoans that he is '*the least Heroic boy in the whole Hooligan Tribe*'.
- ▶ Old Wrinkly advises that Hiccup has a great imagination, and can use that instead of strength to become a great '*Hero of the Future*'.
- ▶ Old Wrinkly advises that if Hiccup cannot train his dragon using the advice in Professor Yobbish's book, then perhaps he could use his special skill and talk to it.

In pairs, ask students to improvise this scene between Hiccup and his grandfather. They do not need to use exact words or phrases from the book at all. This is a scene inspired by what they remember and their own imagination about these two characters.

Although I have not allocated time to see any of these improvised duologues during this lesson, if the exercise becomes unfocussed, you may wish to allow everyone to watch one or two pairs for a few minutes before continuing. This can help to keep everyone's minds on the task at hand.

Lesson 2: Training your dragon

Learning objectives

By the end of the lesson the students will:

- ▶ Have explored the use of facial expression and body language through the improvisation game 'Opening the Book'
- ▶ Have examined the inner thoughts of characters through the thought tapping exercise
- ▶ Have experience of devising in small groups and of performing in front of their peers
- ▶ Have further experience of improvising and communicating in role.

It is important that students are familiar with the book to at least the end of Chapter 9 for this lesson.

Warm-up game: Opening the Book (10 mins)

Place a chair in the playing space, along with a book (or piece of folded paper or card to represent a book).

Invite students to take the chair one at a time. When they do so, they should open the book, and imagine that they are reading the oh-so-brief *How to Train Your Dragon* by Professor Yobbish.

As they imagine reading the book, they should demonstrate their reaction to it, through the use of facial expression and body language. Do they think it is useful/ amusing/outrageously short? Is it informative/exciting/as expected? How does their Viking character feel about the book?

The book is short, so the performances can be short! There should be enough time for each student to have a go.

Tableaux with thought tapping (15 mins)

Read aloud the section from Chapter 7, which begins, '*Newtsbreath and Hookfang, Stoick's hunting dragons, came padding into the room*', and which ends '*muttering obscene dragon curses under their breaths*'.

Invite three students to build a tableau depicting the three dragons interacting. This need not necessarily be directly devised from the extract; it can be an imagined scenario.

Once the tableau is formed, invite three more students to stand behind each of the 'dragons'. One by one, they should gently tap the dragon on the head, and the dragon should speak his or her thoughts out loud. However, following this, the student doing the tapping should say what that dragon *would say they were thinking* when challenged by their owners.

Repeat the exercise so that many of the students get to have a go, whether as a performer in the tableau or as a thought tapper. If needed, throw in a few ideas to inspire the tableaux. For example, 'the three dragons when they first meet'/'the three dragons at a family picnic'/'the three dragons being told off', etc.

Speaking Dragonese – preparation (10 mins)

Divide the class into groups. Four or five students per group should work well.

Hand each group a piece of paper with one of the Dragonese phrases (and translation) on it from the end of Chapter 7.

Each group should devise a demonstration to show how practically to use the phrase to communicate with a dragon.

Performances (10 mins)

Invite each group to take to the playing space, one by one, to show their demonstration of the Dragonese phrase.

'Rumours': How is Hiccup training his dragon? (15 mins)

Hiccup is trying to train Toothless unconventionally. Imagine how this might be spoken about and viewed amongst the Viking community! How might the rumours spread that exaggerate and change people's perception of what he is doing? Play the rumours game to find out!

Ask students to move around the room on their own. When you clap your hands, they should meet in groups of no more than three, and speak *in character as Vikings from Hiccup's village* telling each other what they have heard about Hiccup and his dragon training methods. When you clap your hands again they should move about once more, until you repeat this and they meet in different pairs or groups. This time, they take whatever information they heard from others last time, and exaggerate it.

Resources needed

- ▶ A book, or piece of folded paper or card to represent a book
- ▶ Write or print out the Dragonese phrases from the end of Chapter 7, along with their translations, on individual pieces of paper. You may need several of each, depending on your class size.

For this exercise it is possible for students to choose between a few different roles. They might narrate the demonstration, or be an actor in it. Are they the expert in Dragonese, perhaps, informing the audience as to how to speak and use the phrase?

After a few rounds, stop and ask for feedback on what the last things they heard were. Have a short discussion: how exaggerated have the rumours become? Do students have experience of rumours spreading in this way in their own lives? Can rumours be dangerous?

Lesson 3: Thor'sday Thursday

Learning objectives

By the end of this lesson the students will:

- ▶ Have experience of speaking in front of their peers
- ▶ Have experience of improvising in small groups in front of their peers
- ▶ Have explored argument development in small groups
- ▶ Have experience of improvising and speaking in role in front of their peers
- ▶ Have experience of creating characters
- ▶ Have considered the use of vocal tone and language to convey expression.

It is important that students are familiar with the book to at least the end of Chapter 11 for this lesson

Warm-up game: Tell the Dragon a Joke (10 mins)

Ask students to start this lesson by thinking of their favourite joke. Remind them that they must keep it clean and fit for their audience of yourself and fellow classmates!

Place a chair in the playing space and nominate one student to sit in the chair. The student is representing a dragon, and his or her job is to try to keep a straight face, no matter what.

One by one, other students can volunteer to enter the playing space and tell the dragon a joke. They can do so using whatever voice and body language they want to (but they cannot touch the 'dragon'). If the joke makes the dragon smile at all – even a smirk – then the dragon will leave the chair ('flying off to catch a fish'). The joke teller will then become the dragon and someone else will have a go at coming up and making them laugh. If the dragon keeps a straight face she stays in the chair and someone else has a go at making her laugh.

Quick-fire improvisation exercise: Thor'sday Thursday (15 mins)

In this game, small groups of students will be asked to improvise together in front of the rest of the class, without discussion.

Invite a group of students to take to the playing space. Between five and seven students at a time should work well. Now, read out one of the Thor'sday Thursday celebration activities from the start of Chapter 10, with the description if applicable.

Students should then quickly start playing a short scene of that activity taking place. There should be little discussion before they commence (ideally none).

Debate – preparation (15 mins)

'A Chief cannot live like other people,' said Stoick, looking almost pleadingly at Hiccup. 'He has to decide what is for the good of the Tribe.'

Suddenly Hiccup was very angry.

'Well, don't expect ME to pity you!' said Hiccup. 'What kind of father thinks his stupid Laws are more important than his own son? And what kind of stupid Tribe is this anyway, that it can't just have ordinary people in it?'

Divide the class into groups. Four or five students per group would work well.

Ask each group to spend a few minutes discussing Stoick's dilemma here. Can they see why this is a difficult decision for him?

Next, tell each group whether they are going to be 'for' or 'against', making sure that about half the groups are on either side.

Those groups that are 'for' must now spend a few minutes forming their argument as to why Stoick should banish Hiccup and the others. Those 'against' must formulate an argument as to why this shouldn't happen.

Each group should nominate a spokesperson.

Debate presentation (10 mins)

One by one, ask each group to present their argument as to what Stoick should do.

After all the groups have presented their arguments, take a class-wide vote on the matter. Should Stoick banish Hiccup and the others, or should he allow them to stay?

It usually follows that in this exercise one student will start playing and others will fall in. This is a great way for groups to undertake this exercise. Remind students that if they are not the first to start, they should be observing what others are doing and trying to complement/build on it.

Dragon on the Beach (10 mins)

Round off the lesson with this fun improvisation game.

Ask each student to imagine that he or she is a member of the Viking village that has seen the dragon on the beach. It didn't leave when they yelled at it. How do they feel about it? They are probably scared, but is their fear mixed with anger, a desire to fight, or perhaps just absolute terror?

If you have space, ask students to form a circle (if you do not, standing spread out around the room will also work). One by one, they should take to the centre of the circle or playing space, and speak a couple of lines, *in character*, to their fellow Vikings. They might describe the dragon, or say how it made them feel. What does their character think they should do about it?

Encourage students to consider their use of voice and choice of words to convey character in this exercise. How differently might their character speak if they are angry as opposed to fearful, for example? How can vocal expression and choice of language help us understand the sort of character they are playing?

Lesson 4: Dealing with dragons**Learning objectives**

By the end of the lesson the students will:

- ▶ Have explored improvised tableaux as a whole class group
- ▶ Have experience of working in small groups to devise, rehearse and present a short performance
- ▶ Have participated in classroom discussion.

It is important that students are familiar with How to Train Your Dragon to the end of the book for this lesson.

Warm-up: These are the Vikings (10 mins)

Get everybody moving and in the mood for drama with this fun improvised tableaux exercise.

All students should be on their feet and in the playing space.

You will call out 'These are the Vikings ...', followed by a description of what they are doing. After each description, students have five seconds to adopt a pose in response, and then they should freeze.

Students may work alone, or may also work with others to form their poses.

Here are some ideas for things to call out:

These are the Vikings ...

- ▶ ... being woken up by the Big Drums
- ▶ ... hearing about the dragon on the beach for the first time
- ▶ ... yelling at the dragon
- ▶ ... seeing Gobber the Belch being flicked through the sky by the dragon
- ▶ ... watching the dragon set fire to their ships
- ▶ ... running away from the dragon in fear.

Group discussion (5 mins)

In the book, Hiccup comes up with the idea to set the two dragons against each other, and in the end the plan works.

Do students have any other ideas for how the Vikings might have dealt with the dragons? Ask them to contribute a few ideas in a group discussion.

Group devising exercise: Brain Storm (10 mins)

Divide the class into groups. Four or five students per group should work well.

Ask each group to come up with their own idea for how to deal with the dragons.

Note: the plan need not necessarily be a good one. It does not need to work, as in the scene devising that follows, they could depict the Vikings coming to a sticky end!

Scene development (10 mins)

The groups now have ten minutes to stage their idea. They should act it out to show what the idea is, and how it works out for the Vikings. It is optional to include specific characters from the book, or to play imagined Viking characters of their choice (or a mix of both).

Final rehearsal (5 mins)

During this five minutes the groups should do a final rehearsal of their devised piece.

Watching the scenes (20 mins)

Give each group the opportunity to perform their scene in front of the rest of the class.

Splitting the time up like this can help KS2 students with the process of scene development. Without setting clear timescales, they have a tendency to use too much time for discussion, and not enough for rehearsal. Setting clear boundaries to show what they should have achieved, and when, can really help with this.

Group discussion (5 mins)

After all the groups have performed, take a few minutes for discussion. Were there any characters, ideas or dramatic moments in the scenes that students really liked?

Plenary (10 mins)

Bring this lesson, and this scheme of work, to a close, by reflecting on the book as a whole. What did students like about it? If they had the opportunity to play any of the characters in a performance, which one would they choose, and why?

Extension exercises

A few additional ideas for exploration include:

- ▶ Make a statistics chart and drawing for each of the dragons created in Lesson 1.
- ▶ Have a group discussion about the way Hiccup's fellow novices treat him. Have students ever experienced or known about this kind of behaviour in real life? What do they think about it?
- ▶ Write a news report about the dragon on the beach, at the point at which Hiccup is sent in to talk to it. What angle might the reporter take when telling the reader about Stoick sending his soon-to-be-banished son to try to save the day?
- ▶ Write a letter in role, as a member of the Viking village, describing the incredible display put on by Toothless when he appears to come back to life at his own funeral.