Peering through the fantasy portal

The fantasy genre for understanding and composing texts

Joanne Rossbridge, an independent English, EALD and Literacy Consultant, explores how the fantasy genre develops skills, knowledge and understanding about texts and language.

The following discussion and strategies concentrate on the fantasy genre as a necessary ingredient when engaging in the English subject area through both print based and multimodal literature. The teaching and learning examples have been used in several teaching contexts and reflect the content of the NSW English K-10 Syllabus with a particular focus on Stage 3. The fantasy genre will be explored for developing not only skills, knowledge and understanding about texts and language, but also thinking in creative and reflective ways.

Overview

In recent times, since the introduction of the NSW English K-10 Syllabus, many teachers have felt constrained by the terms imaginative, informative and persuasive types of texts when looking at literacy and, in particular, when teaching writing or composing. As the syllabus states, these are only general classifications of texts. Further discussion around such types of texts should be carried out with reference to the definition in the syllabus Glossary where the potential purposes of each type of text are unpacked in greater detail.

The term 'genre' is used in the English K-10 syllabus. Genre is defined as, 'The categories into which texts are grouped. The term has a complex history within literary and linguistic theory and is often used to distinguish texts on the basis of, for example, their subject matter (detective fiction, romance, science fiction, fantasy fiction) and form and structure (poetry, novels, short stories)' (NESA, 2012). The syllabus, developed from the Australian Curriculum, draws upon the functional linguistic and genre theory approach to learning about texts and language in context whilst also valuing the role of literature in the English subject area (Derewianka, 2012 & 2015).

By considering multiple theoretical influences on the design of the NSW English Syllabus, teachers can move deeper within the three types of texts to delve into a range of texts for a range of purposes from authentic contexts. This is a key focus across syllabus outcomes and requires the use of authentic literature from the past and present. The range of purposes and text forms under the imaginative banner, opens up a world of literary genres and imaginative worlds for both responding and composing.

When focusing on any literary genre (for example, fantasy, realism, mystery, humour) many typical narrative conventions can be identified. However, certain features are particular to certain genres. To broaden student knowledge and engagement with literature, representations of the fantasy world have been investigated and used as models for students composing their own texts. The following strategies have been planned and implemented within the teaching and learning cycle (Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Rossbridge & Rushton, 2015). This involves field
building through speaking and listening and reading and responding, modelling or text deconstruction, joint construction and independent construction. During a focus on writing, students were involved in reading and viewing a range of fantasy texts including a shared novel with the whole class; students' independently reading fantasy novels of choice, engagement with a range of picture books and viewing of short films. In addition, as models for writing, students developed conversations around the choices made in extracts from a range of texts.

**Context and features of fantasy texts**

The fantasy genre has evolved over more than three centuries (Levy & Mendlesohn, 2016; Saxby & Winch, 1991) and has often been a response to the social and cultural concerns related to the role and importance of imagination at any given time in history. One could even say the current English Syllabus is a similar response with the inclusion of **Objective C** and the ‘think in ways that are imaginative, creative, interpretive and critical’ outcome. There are many perspectives on the value, interpretation and features of fantasy in both children’s and adult literature (Levy & Mendlesohn, 2016).

In order for students to build field knowledge and tap into existing knowledge around the concept of the fantasy genre, a range of quotes related to fantasy can be provided from a website such as Goodreads. Students can use quotes, like the example below, to begin to discuss the purpose, possible audiences and features of fantasy narratives.

> Fantasy is silver and scarlet, indigo and azure, obsidian veined with gold and lapis lazuli. Reality is plywood and plastic, done up in mud brown and olive drab. Fantasy tastes of habaneros and honey, cinnamon and cloves, rare red meat and wines as sweet as summer. Reality is beans and tofu, and ashes at the end. George R.R. Martin.

Students can also be involved in sorting a range of picture books, novels, films, poetry, cartoons, graphic novels and so on based on narrative genres such as fantasy, realism, mystery, humour. They can also come up with their own way to classify a range of texts. Fantasy texts can then be distinguished and be placed on a timeline based on when they were composed. This may even include the ‘disneytization’ (Bryman, 2004) of some classic texts such as ‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’ first published in 1865 and ‘Peter Pan’ published in 1904. Such classics have been themed into fantasy worlds of Disneyland as well as various aspects of globalised culture. Students may be surprised to realise how old some texts may be, leading to conversations about longevity and influences over time.

McDonald (2017) provides a comprehensive description of the general types of fantasy and typical fantasy conventions in children’s literature. Types of fantasy tend to reflect the nature of the setting or worlds created. These choices impact upon the connection between worlds, choice and features of characters, role of magic and the journey to be undertaken. Typical types of fantasy can include:

- The fantasy set in the real world with magic.
- The fantasy beginning and ending in a fantasy world.
- The fantasy starting in the real world and moving into a fantasy world.

By first considering the broad fantasy world, the focus in this case is placed on appreciating and engaging with fantasy texts that move from the primary to the secondary world.

**Beginning to peer through the portal**

In the examples shared, texts were chosen particularly due to their shift from the real or primary world construction of character and movement across settings. A significant aspect of such texts is the movement of the main character/s from the primary to the secondary world through some type of portal. For example Alice, from ‘Alice in Wonderland’ (Carroll, 2015), falls down a rabbit hole to Wonderland and Lucy, from ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’ (Lewis, 2001), enters Narnia through the back of a wardrobe.

Students can investigate a range of texts through both shared and independent reading and viewing, to identify
movement between worlds, by identifying portals through which characters travel. Viewing short films is particularly useful for identifying the movement between worlds through a portal of some form.

*Adventures are the pits* by Esquirebob (2:13) demonstrates a soft play slide portal.

*Something fishy* by Jiyoon Jeong (2:20) demonstrates how a washing machine is the portal.

*Crayon Dragon* by Toniko Pantoja CalArts (3:13) uses a painting as the portal.

*Dream Giver* by Tyler Carter (5:54) turns a night of dreams into a literal nightmare when an orphan's book of Ancient Aztec Mythology comes alive.
By recording the portal and other features of the fantasy narrative, students become familiar with the genre and tools for creating their own fantasy texts. They also become involved in conversations about both character and setting choices made by authors, particularly reflecting the outcomes and content descriptors for **Outcome EN3-5B** and **Outcome EN3-7C**.

Based on engaging with multiple texts, possibilities for portals and other features can be recorded for future use when constructing own texts. Recording features in texts read and then for planning own writing can be guided by identifying the following features:

- name and description of the real/primary world,
- name and description of the real characters,
- portal to fantasy world,
- name and description of the fantasy/secondary world,
- name and description of the fantasy characters, and
- complications/quests in the fantasy world.

Students can then beginning planning their own texts using storyboards (see examples below) in order to structure their narratives while incorporating fantasy conventions.
Moving through the portal

When reading a range of texts with a close focus on the shift through the portal, it becomes apparent that authors often foreshadow the shift from the primary to secondary world or highlight the actual setting shift through use of words to ‘trigger’ to the reader that something different is about to occur. The picture book, ‘Isabella’s Bed’ (Lester, 2007), is an effective text for showing a subtle move through a portal through both words and images. The main characters, Anna and Luis travel on a magical journey on their grandmother’s bed entering a fantasy world through a picture of the sea on the bedroom wall.

The transition of the characters through the portal is conveyed to the reader with adverbials and connectives placed at the beginning of clauses to hint at something new to come.

As I drifted into sleep …
Suddenly I awoke …
Then slowly over a desert plain we rolled, …
Silently we drifted …
(Lester, 2007).

Often these ‘triggers’ are at the beginning of a clause and may consist of one or more groups before the main subject and verb of the clause. They can flag circumstances of the experience through adverbial groups or are connectives often highlighting shifts in time. The group or groups before the main verb in a clause are referred to as ‘theme of clause’ (NESA, 2012b; Derewianka, 2011; Humphrey, Droga & Feez, 2012).

These grammatical themes function to alert or flag to the reader that something different, unusual or extraordinary is about to occur. Significantly, these choices help to not only guide the reader through the character’s journey but also to creative cohesive ties and to structure the unfolding narrative. The Reading and Viewing Outcome EN3-3A contains the content descriptor, ‘understand that the starting point of a sentence gives prominence to the message in the text and allows for prediction of how the text will unfold (ACELA1505)’, which reflects the focus on choices relating to theme of clause. By identify such features in variety of texts, students are able to develop a list of possibilities to adapt and apply to their own writing.

The implied entry

The following is an example of part of a joint construction written by a teacher and students. ‘The large book appeared to sink back into the wall as the children approached the portal. The book appeared to be yellowing on the open pages and the writing was a script that was quite foreign to our heroes’ eyes. They could glimpse strange bubbles exploding out of an opening in the book’.

As this was an early joint construction with much input from students, it can be noted that students were effectively engaging with descriptive language to establish the setting and portal. However little was left to the imagination for the reader in regards to implying that the character was approaching a portal. Additionally, characters are stated as heroes before even moving into the fantasy world and experiencing the upcoming adventures and quests.
This was also evident in students' initial independent writing (Draft 1), particularly with the explicit view of the actual secondary world in which characters were entering, for example, 'The World of evil'. This provoked a return to looking at model texts where focus was placed on how authors subtly guide the reader through the portal without using the word portal or stating the name of the world as this would be unknown by the character upon first entry. **Outcome EN3-2A** contains the content descriptor ‘create literary texts that experiment with structures, ideas and stylistic features of selected authors’ (ACELT1798) showing the need to use model texts to focus on features employed by authors of the fantasy genre.

When looking at Harry Potter's (Rowling, 2018) transfer to Platform 9 ¾ there is a great focus on escalating action as he speeds up yet closes his eyes while moving through the barrier to suddenly see the Hogwart’s Express steam engine. Similarly, Blyton’s ‘The Adventures of the Wishing Chair’ (2012) is action based as the chair takes Mollie and Peter on a range of adventures to fantasy lands. In ‘The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe’ (Lewis, 2001), Lucy’s experiences are of perceiving and feeling as she shifts between worlds. This is similar to the ‘Jumanji’ picture book (Van Allsburg, 2017), where the characters perceive or see a change in surroundings as they are transported by the board game. In ‘Alice's Adventures in Wonderland’ (Carroll, 2015), there is a combination of action and perceiving as Alice falls down the rabbit hole yet notices features on the walls of the well. Clearly, authors draw on both action but also sensory processes as the characters shift between worlds. In early writing students were focusing particularly on description of the secondary world rather than processes undertaken by the character. They also tended to take the reader on a very quick movement into the fantasy world resulting in the reader needing to make few inferences about the transition. By slowly taking the reader on the journey there is a greater need for inference on the part of the reader.

As a way of placing themselves in the shoes of the character and considering both actions and sensory experiences, students were involved in drama strategies such as walk in role and tap in (Dutton, D’Warte, Rossbridge & Rushton, 2018; Ewing, Simons, Herzberg & Campbell, 2016). This consisted of students being in the role of characters from texts or as their own character for writing. Students would act out the entry through a portal into the fantasy world and be tapped on the shoulder by peers who asked questions regarding the action and sensory experiences. Questions include:

What are you doing now?
What can you feel beneath your feet?
What do you see around you and in the distance?
What can you hear or smell?

From this, a range of processes or verbs (Derewianka, 2011) could be recorded for use in writing. For example,

**Action verbs/processes** - trip, cascade, tumble, drift
**Sensing verbs/processes:**
- Thinking - wondered, thought, imagined, realised
- Feeling and wanting - feared, wished, desired
- Perceiving - see, notice, glance, scan, smell, hear

In this way students had banks of words and also synonyms to draw upon in their own writing. In one conversation students made the connection to the bread crumbs left by Hansel and Gretel in that the choice of a range of processes in the transition is like the bread crumbs slowly scattered which act to take the character and reader through the portal often in a subtle manner rather than a sudden leap into an obviously new world (Draft 2).
## Character encounters

Once inside the fantasy world, ‘real’ characters begin to encounter fantastical characters. Initial physical description of the fantastical characters is critical in giving insight into not only characters but also the secondary setting. This serves to create believability about all characters in the fantasy world and upcoming quests. In some cases the character development may draw upon other known mythological creatures, possession of magic powers and objects or clothing which are unusual in the primary world (McDonald, 2017).

In ‘The BFG’ (1982, p24) Roald Dahl clearly describes the appearance of the BFG through extended noun groups (Derewianka, 2011; Humphrey et al., 2012). Students were asked to draw a picture of the BFG based on the description with detail from the noun groups removed. In the first drawing below, a student drew the image, including the shirt, waistcoat, green shorts and sandals. When the original text, containing extended noun groups, was then read aloud, detail appeared in the second drawing including ‘a sort of collarless shirt and a dirty old leather waistcoat that didn’t seem to have any buttons, the shorts that were far too short in the legs and a pair of ridiculous sandals that for some reason had holes cut along each side, with a large hole at the end where his toes stuck out’ (Dahl, 1982). This task highlighted for students the need to develop description through the extended noun group in order to show, in this case, the unusual yet subtle differences in clothing of the character as Sophie began to engage in the fantasy world.

![Student pictures of the BFG](image)

Knowledge of the noun group is also useful in planning to develop characters. The potential of the noun group can be seen in the table below as detail can be added both before and after the main noun.

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<td>a</td>
<td>glowing</td>
<td>mystical</td>
<td>creature</td>
<td>with a golden mane</td>
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Students can use this table to not only unpack the language choices in the texts they are reading but also to plan for their own written descriptions. They can also trial the effectiveness of descriptions by repeating the above listen and draw activity with a peer and receive feedback on the power of the description in building a picture for the reader. The Grammar, Punctuation and Vocabulary Outcome EN3-6B highlights the importance of looking at the extended noun group with the content descriptor, ‘understand how noun groups/phrases and adjective groups/phrases can be expanded in a variety of ways to provide a fuller description of the person, place, thing or idea (ACELA1508).’

Unlike the fantasy characters, the real world character/s are not as dependent on being described physically. Generally the reader already has some experience of real world knowledge to apply to the image of a character once some traits are revealed such as gender, age and the time period of the setting. Of greater importance, for the believability of the fantasy journey, is the initial description of the character, usually the main protagonist, in terms of sensory details. Again this can be a planning tool for students as they decide on their own characters and what they think, feel, want and perceive in the real world and how these traits may be applied or indeed impacted upon as they move into the fantasy realm. The main character is the readers’ connection between the real and fantasy world and it may be that the character’s thoughts and feelings are challenged as they move through the journey.

One particular group of students came to the conclusion that the main protagonist has to be curious and willing to take risks in order to either move through the portal or commit to moving through the fantasy world upon entry. They made the connection to the well-known line ‘Curiouser and curiouser!’ (Lewis, 2001) from ‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’ as Alice showed her inquisitive yet surprised reaction during her quest through Wonderland.

**Conclusion**

The strategies described are only a few aspects implemented when engaging with the fantasy genre. There are also many more fantasy texts available for use, both print based and multimodal. Choice of texts can be based on the needs and interests of particular groups of students. Regardless of texts chosen as models, students need access to a range of such texts for independent as well as shared reading and deconstruction. The ideal ingredients for engaging with both fantasy and life consists of close connections between reading and writing layered with creative and analytical conversations around language choices and their relationship to context and purpose.

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**Fantasy literature**


References


*English K-12 Syllabus*. © NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) for and on behalf of the Crown in right of the State of New South Wales, 2012.


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Portal fantasy: Like in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe or Alice in Wonderland, characters enter a fantastical world through a portal. In C.S. Lewis' series, the portals are magical pools in a wood that lies between worlds, at first. Children are teleported to this world when they try on rings created by a main character’s uncle in The Magician’s Nephew. Immersive fantasy: The reader sees the magical world through the eyes of the protagonist, for whom the world is the only known world. Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea series is an example. Intrusion fantasy: The fantastical or magical aspect intrudes on characters’ worlds, and we see how characters navigate this supernatural ‘breach’. Portal fantasy or portal speculative fiction is a story which transports the characters into a magical world via a gate/wardrobe/magical tree or anything else the author might imagine. As a child, this was my favourite kind of story, alongside the everyday humorous category of middle grade fiction written so well by Beverly Cleary. Are we no longer willing to go Through The Looking Glass? from io9 asks why publishers have decided not to publish any more portal fantasy. There are several reasons I’ve heard, regarding why agents aren’t interested in representing authors of portal fantasy: A lot of first time authors write portal fantasy and first time authors don’t tend to be ready for publication. Triple Triad is a puzzle-type card game available through the Final Fantasy Portal App, being the third official installment, with the 1999’s Final Fantasy VIII Triple Triad as the original one, and the 2013’s Final Fantasy XIV Triple Triad as the second one. The app has more in common with the latter, like the card design and the player not losing cards for losing a match. The Portal App installment is related to Dissidia Final Fantasy series.