Introducing Performance Poetry

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Lesson 1: Understanding performance poetry
'My Pen' by Charlie Dark

Learning Objectives:

- To identify elements of 'performance' and explain their effects

Resources:

Student booklets (text of 'My Pen' by Charlie Dark); video of Charlie Dark performing 'My Pen'; 6 Key Elements of Performance resource sheet; Thinking about performance resource sheet; paper for mind mapping

Starter:

- Put the question 'What do pens mean to us?' on the whiteboard and ask students to discuss this with someone next to them. Then feedback and discuss as a whole group.
- Play the opening film clip of 'My Pen' (up to 2 min 27 sec) where Dark shares his anecdote from Zimbabwe. Elicit students' responses to some of the points he makes, perhaps focusing on his comment about our increasing use of technology and the impact of this on the pen. Then ask students to think of as many metaphors (or similes) for a pen as they can, beginning with the words 'My pen is a…' You could model an example such as 'My pen is a weapon…' See if students can expand the metaphor further, for example, '…with which I do battle on the page'. Share some examples from the group and discuss.

Development:

- Play the video of 'My Pen' without the visuals. Ask students for their initial response to the poem and elicit the key technique that Dark uses throughout (that of metaphor). See if students can remember some of the metaphors they heard. Then play it a second time and ask students to note down all the images that a pen is compared with. Discuss with students what makes these comparisons effective. Can students explain, for example, the effect of the line 'An instrument of opportunity'?
- Then display the phrase 'Performance poetry' on the board and ask students to think about what the phrase means to them. They could generate ideas about the words 'performance' and 'poetry' separately to begin with (consider doing a mind map on each that can be revisited if necessary). Feedback as a whole class and then compare students' ideas to the resource sheet (which includes: Voice projection, Articulation, Timing and Rhythm, Mood, Facial Expression and Gesture). Go through the definitions with students to check understanding.
- Now play the poem again, this time with the visual on the whiteboard. Using the 'Thinking about performance' resource sheet, ask students to identify when Dark uses these elements of performance in the poem and with what particular words/phrases.

Plenary:

- Students should compare their findings with another person in the group. Ask them to select one particular element of performance that they have found. Find this in the film clip and play it to the whole group. Elicit from students what effect/meaning is created by adding this element of performance to the chosen words/line. You might ask, for example, why Dark speeds up and slows down at certain points. Repeat this with other examples from students if there is time.

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Lesson 2: Understanding performance poetry
'Self Portrait as a Creature of Numbers' by Dzifa Benson

Learning Objectives:

- To develop an understanding of the significance of 'performance'

Resources:

Student booklets (text of 'Self Portrait as a Creature of Numbers' by Dzifa Benson); video of Dzifa Benson performing 'Self Portrait as a Creature of Numbers'; 'Self Portrait…' blank resource sheet; 'Self-Portrait…' completed resource sheet.

Starter:

- Put some information about a famous person on the whiteboard in the form of a series of numbers that are significant to them. It could be their date of birth, their house number, their height, the number of hours they have been alive, etc. Tell the students who the person is and see if they can guess what the significance of the numbers is, or you could see if they can guess the person that the numbers represent.
- Tell students that you have just presented them with a self-portrait in numbers. Then set students the challenge of doing the same for themselves, thinking of as many ways to describe themselves with numbers as possible. Share some examples as a group and discuss.

Development:

- Play Benson's introduction to the poem (up to 1 min 37 sec) and ask students for their response to what she says. Why is an understanding of her cultural identity important to her, for example? You could also highlight where Ghana is on a world map for students to establish some of the context for the poem.
- Then play the film clip of the poem on the whiteboard. Ask them for their initial response to the poem. What are some of the things they learn about her identity from this first viewing, for example?
- Then play it again and ask them to note down (on the resource sheet provided) as many of the references to numbers they hear as possible. They should then try to explain the number references so that they begin to explore their understanding of the poem. A completed grid is available for use with some possible meanings that could be shared with the group.

Plenary:

- Referring back to the 'Thinking about performance' resource sheet from Lesson 1, students should consider the elements of performance Benson uses and the ways in which they enhance or add further meaning to the poem. Play the poem again if necessary and feedback and discuss as a whole group.

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Lesson 3: Understanding performance poetry 'Airborne' by Charlie Dark

Learning Objectives:

- To consider the ways in which words can be spoken in performance poetry to create certain effects and meanings
- To explore the significance of actions in performing a poem

Resources:

Student booklets (text of 'Airborne' by Charlie Dark); video of Charlie Dark performing 'Airborne'; Words and Sounds resource sheet; 6 Key Elements of Performance resource sheet; illustrated version of 'Airborne'

Starter:

- Put the following question on the whiteboard: 'Who's the coolest person you know?' Ask students to make a note of this person and then to write down some reasons why they are cool. They could think of a person they know or someone famous. Then ask students to imagine that this person disappears and that one day they ask themselves the following question: 'Whatever happened to…?' Students should now write a short piece of prose about the person. You could model the following example:
- 'Whatever happened to David Beckham? He was the best free-kick taker ever known…'
- Share some examples from the group and discuss.

Development:

- Play Dark's introduction to the poem where he speaks about a boy he once knew called Richard Campbell (aka Airborne). Ask students for their response to what he says about what makes this boy cool. Are there any similarities with what students wrote about in the starter activity? If not, you could see if students have any similar anecdotes they could share, perhaps about a student from primary school they once knew.
- Now play the poem, but without the visual. Ask them to make a note (on the resource sheet) of any language they hear which is spoken in an interesting way or which has an interesting sound. You may want to play this more than once.
- Then give students a copy of the poem. In pairs or small groups they should prepare a performance of the poem, considering their use of the 6 key elements of performance looked at previously. Watch some performances and encourage students to comment on what was effective about them. If possible, you could film them and ask students to self-evaluate their performances too.

Plenary:

- Show Dark's performance of the poem on the whiteboard and discuss his performance of the poem in comparison to the ones students created. Use the 6 key elements of performance as a guide to structuring the reflection.

Extension Task:

- Show students the illustrated version of the poem and ask how the visuals contribute to the meanings and elements of performance discussed in the lesson.

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Lesson 4: Writing performance poetry
Drafting Techniques

Learning Objectives:

- To develop strategies for writing performance poems
- To understand the importance of drafting when writing

Resources:

Video of interviews with Charlie Dark and Dzifa Benson

Starter:

- Put the question 'What inspires you to write?' on the whiteboard and elicit from students anything that they have ever drawn upon from their life experience to write. Some students might write a diary, for example, about everyday events; others may have drawn upon a personal experience for a piece of writing previously done in school.
- Then play the first part of the interview with Dark and Benson where they talk about what inspires them to write. Ask students to make a list of all the different things each poet mentions.

Development:

- Tell students that they are going to start writing their own performance poem using one of the inspirations mentioned in the interview, for example: things outside my window, music, life, family, friends, science, art, the body, a picture (from a gallery visit), a photo, something in the street, a line from a conversation you overhear.
- Once students have chosen a topic, ask them to make a list of as many things as possible associated with it. You might begin by modelling an example together, such as a description of 'things outside my window'. Alternatively (or in addition), you could show students a famous painting or photograph which they could use as inspiration. Students could work in pairs/groups to mind map all the language they associate with the image.
- Then play the next part of the interview, 'What makes a good performance poem?' (from 1 min 31 sec) where Dark mentions that 'it should take you on an audio/listening journey'. Students could now add to their existing list or mind map by adding any words that describe sounds associated with the topic or image (perhaps onomatopoeic language too). At this point they could also reflect on the previous lesson on 'Airborne', in which they identified the significance of sounds in the poem. They should then use this language to start creating their own poems, bearing in mind structure too. They could look back at the three poems studied previously and examine their layout on the page, thinking about such things as how stanzas are divided and where lines end and begin.

Plenary:

- Watch the next part of the interview (from 2 min 55 sec onwards), 'What's your number one tip for writing a performance poem?' Elicit students' responses and focus their attention, if necessary, on the point Dark makes about looking at how the poem's structure can be developed by 'swap[ping] things around, so you see which bits work and don't work'. You could encourage students to continue drafting their poems in a notebook, 'tweaking' them between now and the next lesson.

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Lesson 5: Performing and giving feedback to each other

Learning Objectives:

- To develop performance poetry skills
- To reflect on what makes an effective performance poem

Resources:

Video of interview with Charlie Dark and Dzifa Benson; text of 'Remember' by Christina Rossetti; video of Charlie Dark performing 'Remember'; 6 Key Elements of Performance resource sheet

Starter:

- Give students a copy of 'Remember' by Christina Rossetti as a stimulus for warming up and preparing for performance. They could work in pairs or groups for this. Remind them of the 6 key elements of performance and ask them to consider each element whilst rehearsing. Watch some examples and take feedback from the class on what was effective.
- Then show the video of Charlie Dark performing the poem and elicit students' response (bearing in mind that he is reading from a piece of paper). Students might think about Dark's performance with regards to timing, rhythm, mood and facial expression, for example.

Development:

- Students should now spend some time preparing for performances of their own poems, started in the previous lesson. They could begin by annotating their poems, signalling where they might want certain voice changes, hand gestures or facial expressions and could then practise on each other in pairs in order to receive feedback. Emphasise the importance of trying to memorise the poem as much as possible. You could also show students the section of the film interview 'Performance and Preparation Tips' (from 3 min 52 sec), particularly where Dark mentions dividing the audience into three sections and addressing each one in turn. You could create this arrangement of the audience in your classroom.
- When you feel students are ready, begin the performances. Consider filming some of the performances if students are willing. This could provide opportunities to further reflect on the performances in future.
- To develop students' listening/observation skills, you could give members of the audience a different focus to make notes on as they watch and listen such as:
  - ✓ Subject matter (what it is about)   ✓ Facial expressions (including eye-contact)
  - ✓ Use of poetic devices such as metaphor and simile   ✓ Rhythm and timing
  - ✓ Gestures   ✓ Voice (volume)   ✓ Mood (tone of voice)

Plenary:

- Consider asking students to reflect on/evaluate the scheme of work. You could do this as a group discussion and record the conversation or you could give students a short questionnaire to discuss and fill in. Below are some suggestions of questions that could be asked:
  1) What have you enjoyed about this unit of work on performance poetry?
  2) What have you learnt? How has your understanding of performance poetry developed?
  3) What have you found challenging and why?

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