

Wonder: From novel to play

A project report

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Abstract

This report deals with the planning and implementation of a project in a teacher education programme that brought about the stage performance of “Wonder”, a play adaptation of the children’s novel by R.J. Palacio. It describes how trainees with the main subject English analysed the novel to select themes relevant for the stage version, how writing up was organised as collaborative process writing and how a no-budget production of the play that opened the International Week of 2015 was organised.

Wonder: Vom Buch zum Stück

Ein Projektbericht

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Bericht befasst sich mit der Planung und Durchführung eines Projekts in der Ausbildung von Lehrerinnen und Lehrern, welches die Aufführung von „Wonder“, einer Bühnenversion des Kinderromans von R.J. Palacio, zum Ziel hatte. Er beschreibt, wie Studierende mit dem Hauptfach Englisch den Roman analysierten um die Themen, welche für die Adaption ausgewählt wurden, auszuwählen. Außerdem berichtet er über den kollaborativen Schreibprozess und die Produktion des Stücks ohne Budget bis hin zur Aufführung, welche die Internationale Woche 2015 eröffnete.

Keywords:

Project work
Stage adaptation
Children’s literature

Schlüsselwörter:

Projektarbeit
Bühnenadaption
Kinderliteratur

1 Introduction

The 2015 International Week at the University College of Teacher Education in Baden was opened with the performance of “Wonder”, a stage adaptation of the children’s novel by R.J. Palacio (2014), written and produced by the sixth semester trainees on the secondary school programme.

P.J. Palacio, author, editor, graphic designer, and mother of two boys lives in New York. Her first novel “Wonder” was inspired by an incident in 2007, when Palacio and her two young sons were at a shopping mall where they came across a little girl suffering from Treacher-Collins syndrome, a condition affecting the child’s face badly. Palacio’s reaction was to leave quickly to prevent her three-year-old from screaming at the girl’s sight. Her panicking made the mother and the girl leave, instead. Palacio reports that this made her heart break for the woman and her daughter. Her memories of the situation made her start writing “Wonder” when Natalie Merchant published her song “Wonder” about a child with a disability. She remembers how things just collided in her mind and reports: “The first line came to me, and the whole premise of the novel. The book wrote itself.” (Palacio quoted in Hodson, 2012).

Since then, thousands of people have read “Wonder” and children, teenagers, and adults have been captivated alike. The story of the little boy with the deformed face who does not want to be called “disabled”

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because he feels ordinary although he does not look ordinary goes way beyond the theme of inclusion and touches upon many others teenagers are faced with: transitions, growing up, true friendship, bullying, first-love, loss, rivalry etc.

In a two-semester project the trainees worked on literary analyses, the play script, stage directions, prop lists, teaching materials and many little things that made the performance come true. The following chapters will describe the process of creating a play from a novel.

2 From literary analyses to play script

When the project “Wonder” was initiated in the winter term of 2014, the trainees had already explored literary analysis based on a structured study programme by Roy Johnson (2003). Moreover, they had selected “Drama” to be their elective module in the sixth semester. Project work being the main focus of the module for English in the fifth semester made it possible to focus on one big goal in all courses. In the literature course, the trainees worked on comparative analyses of “Wonder” and “Face” (Palacio, 2014; Zephaniah, 2004), both children’s or young adult novels. The language course provided them with input to support their transition from B2+ to C1 level with an emphasis on register, style, accuracy, fluency, coherence and cohesion, and citation rules in academic writing. Additionally, the language course supported the development of a thorough understanding of the genre “play” with a focus on spoken language and text adaptation. Finally, the methodology course created the theoretical and practical foundation for the drama project including planning, production, and implementation.

In the initial stage of planning, the trainees were given input on project work as a method while they started to design their own project simultaneously. The following tasks referring to setting, characters, plot and dialogue guided the initial phase:

Setting

- Decide where the scenes will take place.
- Write texts that describe the places.
- List the props needed.
- Think of other possibilities for scenes that might be hard to set. For example, a narrator could describe the scenes; write the texts.

Characters

- Write a character list for each scene.
- Write a short description of each character.
- Describe the distinctive features of each character.
- Write props lists for each scene: What will characters wear? Which objects will they use?

Plot and dialogue

- Summarize the text that refers to the scene from the story.
- Which parts can be kept? Copy and highlight these parts as direct quotes.
Which parts will be changed? How can you transfer narrative to dialogue or vice versa without losing the spirit of the text?
- Write the dialogues and the narratives to tell the story in a play.

For writing the play script the following style sheet was used:

- Number and title of the scene
- References
- Character List
- Each scene is a new section
- Start a new line each time a new character speaks
- Put the name of the speaker in a left hand margin, followed by a colon (:)

Auggie: xxxxxx

- Give instructions to the character in brackets (*in italics*).

Auggie (*Opening the door very slowly to let Via in, shoulders hanging*): xxxxx

The below extract from the first scene depicts the outcome. The highlighted text is quoted directly from the novel Wonder (Palacio, 2014, pp. 3 & 10):

Scene 1

Introduction- Meeting the family

(Setting: Home)

*(Characters: **AUGGIE, MOM, DAD, and VIA, and DOG DAISY**)*

(Props: tables and 4 chairs, ice cream cones, ball, dog, Xbox, movable board, Auggie's fringe, stroller)

(Music: Wonder-Natalie Merchant-instrumental random, till play starts)

(Stage lights up)

*(**AUGGIE, MOM, DAD, SISTER, and VIA**, sitting at the kitchen table miming eating.)*

*(Stage lights dim and **AUGGIE, MOM, DAD, and VIA** freeze. Spotlight on **AUGGIE NARRATOR** when he begins his narration.)*

AUGGIE NARRATOR:

Hi guys! My name is August Pullman, but my friends call me Auggie...well if I had any friends...

I know I'm not an ordinary 10-year-old kid. I mean, sure, I do ordinary things. I eat ice cream. I ride my bike. I play ball. I have an Xbox. Stuff like that makes me ordinary. I guess. And I feel ordinary. Inside. But I know ordinary kids don't make other ordinary kids run away screaming in playgrounds. I know ordinary kids don't get stared at wherever they go.

I have man-die-bu-lo-facial dys-os-tosis- which took me forever to pronounce, by the way.

I don't even have to go to school.

*(**AUGGIE NARRATOR** walks over to the kitchen table and stands behind **AUGGIE**.)*

I have had many operations during my childhood and that is why my mom home schools me. So I spend most of the time at home.

*(**AUGGIE NARRATOR** stands behind **MOM**.)*

My mom is the best mom in the world.

*(**AUGGIE NARRATOR** stands behind **DAD**.)*

I also love my dad. He always cracks me up when I'm feeling down.

*(**AUGGIE NARRATOR** stands behind **VIA**.)*

I've also got an older sister Via, she is very beautiful, amazing and caring. But sometimes she overreacts when others stare at my face.

There's also Daisy. She's my dog. She's really old. I love her very much.

Now let me tell you something that happened just a few days ago...

*(Spotlight on **AUGGIE NARRATOR** dims and spotlight on the kitchen table.)*

*(Evening; **MOM, DAD, AUGGIE** and **Via** are sitting at the kitchen table.)*

Mom: Time to go to bed kids.

AUGGIE *(reluctantly whining):* Mom.

MOM: You go ahead Auggie. I'll be up in a minute.

*(**AUGGIE** exits, but returns when **DAD** and **MOM** begin talking. **AUGGIE** eavesdrops.)*

DAD: I don't think it's such a good idea.

MOM: We can't keep protecting him. We can't just pretend he's going to wake up tomorrow and this isn't going to be his reality, because it is, Nate, and we have to help him learn to deal with it. We can't just keep avoiding situations like that...

DAD (angrily): So sending him off to middle school like a lamb to the slaughter...

AUGGIE (makes himself known): School! What's a lamb to the slaughter?
.....

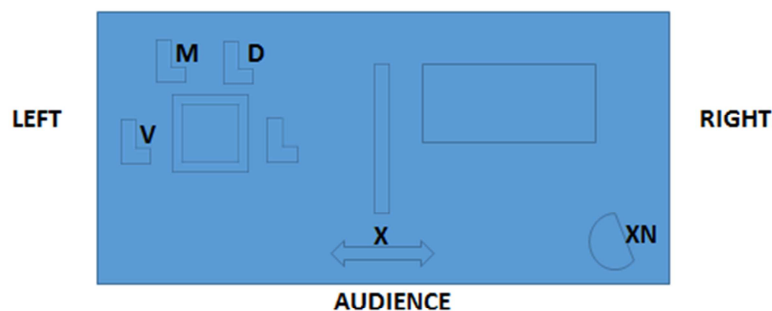
Fig. 1: Extract from Scene 1, based on the children's novel "Wonder" by R.J. Palacio

The novel "Wonder" has eight parts. To select the scenes the trainees formed teams, discussed the plot of each part and selected the content that should go into the play. After vivid discussions they wrote summaries of each scene they envisaged. Finally, the scenes were put in a chronological order and the trainees started to write the script and production plans simultaneously. The script was edited and trialled in read-aloud sessions several times until the eighth version was finally found adequate for memorisation and rehearsal. Two casts rehearsed the play, i.e. each trainee took on a role to be performed. This was considered an essential goal to be achieved for future language teachers who would soon put role-play, sketches or even small plays into practice in real classrooms.

3 From play script to performance

Producing the play included the development of stage directions, the acquisition and management of props, read-aloud sessions and stage rehearsals. During this phase all course tutors and the native speaker assistant supported the trainees in their work and introduced them to drama strategies like conscience alley, cross-cutting, image theatre, narration, freeze frames in combination with thought tracking as well as tableaux and dance.

Scene 1: Meeting the family



1. Stage lights up; family miming eating
2. Spotlight on XN; XN starts talking, family freezes
3. Spotlight on kitchen table
4. X is sent to his bedroom, V leaves stage to the LEFT
5. M and D keep on talking, X eavesdrops
6. X joins the parents conversation
7. Lights fade out

Fig. 2: Stage directions for scene 1

The stage directions for scene one depict some of the drama strategies used by the trainees. The scene starts in the kitchen, where the family are having dinner. A freeze frame closes the first part of the scene and provides the opportunity for introducing the main character in more detail though his narrative self. As the scene goes on, cross-cutting allows for Auggie's eavesdropping his parents' conversation. This creates the first

dramatic moment in the play: Auggie gets to know that he will go to school soon and that all the family are anxious about this.

Rehearsals were held in all courses throughout the second semester and only an extensive collaborative effort made the performance real. This included moving huge objects out of a lecture theatre and carrying improvised props and electronic equipment in. Finally all went well and the excellent singing of one of the trainees created the perfect atmosphere for the play and linked the adapted stage version with the authentic music by Natalie Merchant that had made the author R.J. Palacio choose the title “Wonder” for her novel.

4 From performance to classroom

Apart from the opportunity to create a real performance, the project work described in the previous chapters was also aiming at the production of a script and teaching materials that could be used with pupils in lower secondary education. The trainees were thus asked to create the script with A2 to B1 learners in mind and to think about how reading the novel “Wonder” in school could foster extensive reading while working on dialogues from the novel in language classes could engage the pupils in text adaptation and role-play so that they would either use the available script or their own adaptations for their performances depending on their readiness or the time available.

Moreover, a project plan was designed with a whole language approach in mind, i.e. the tasks that were built around extensive reading and the performance of parts of the play or the whole play should focus on all skills and emphasise critical and creative thinking. The latter aimed at developing English as a domain rather than a subject and at creating a new quality of discourse which would support higher level thinking and reflection in addition to mere competence orientation or task achievement as suggested by Fischer, Greiner & Bastel (2012).

To achieve the above mentioned goals the trainees transferred their own experience of producing a play into planning and material production for the implementation of the play in lower secondary foreign language education. A project flowchart (see Figure 4) was used as the framework for the envisaged school project. Each task, material or intervention was based on this framework and planned in way that it would fulfil language goals as well as content goals and develop thinking skills from concrete to creative.

The following reading task depicts how goals from concrete to creative and from declarative to social referring to the same passage in the book create tasks for diverse classroom settings:

Reading task	Letters, Emails, Facebook, Texts (Palacio, 2014, pp. 160-167)
Materials	Laminated photocopies of pages 160 -167 cut up so that all Emails or text messages are on separate pages; headlines to text messages cut off
Procedural goal	to differentiate between long and short texts
Declarative goals	to identify Emails and text messages to identify sender and receiver to identify salutations and end notes to explain the differences in salutations and end notes written by adults and children
Affective goals	to create an understanding for the writers’ feelings and the rationale for their texts
Social goals	to create a classroom atmosphere that will help prevent the pupils from reacting aggressively in situations similar to Jack’s and Julian’s
Concrete thinking	to identify letters written by adults and such written by children
Abstract thinking	to categorise letters and text messages according to function (apology, thank, complaint, explanation, information, request) to identify key words and phrases that create certain functions
Analytical thinking	to identify the reasons for writing messages in a certain way
Creative thinking	to create a personal note to the head teacher to express a certain opinion

Fig. 3: Goals for a reading task

The task for the classroom activity is depicted in figure 5.

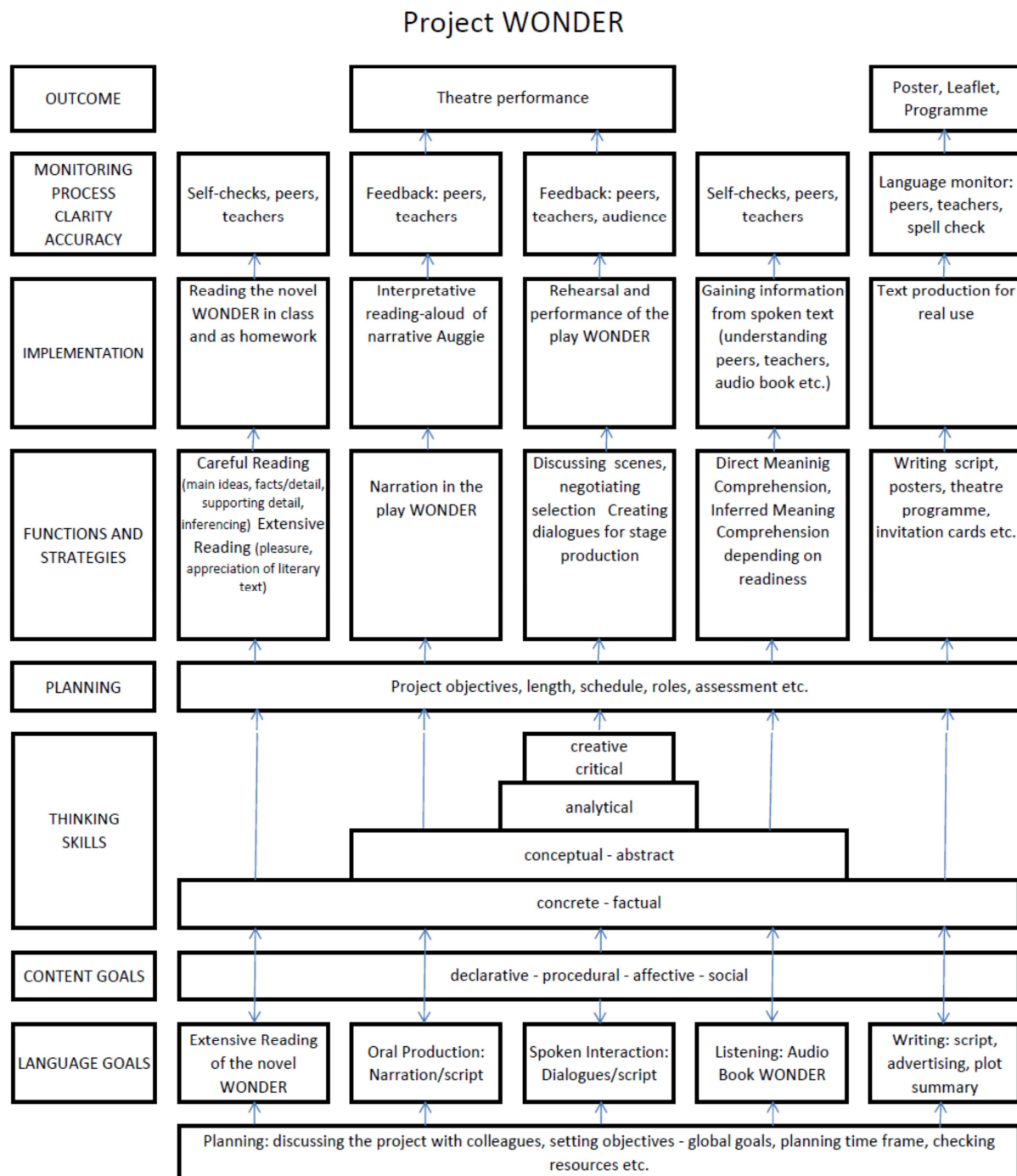


Fig. 4: Project flowchart for a school project based on the children's novel "Wonder" by R.J. Palacio

Materials	Envelope titled "Letters, Emails, Facebook, Texts"	✉
Organisation	Pair work	😊😊
Reading task	1. Take out the texts and sort out Emails and text messages What is the difference between Emails and text messages? (short notes)	📖 📄
	2. Which texts were written by children or adults? How do you know? Underline the parts that will support your arguments (Use a soluble OHP pen, colour 1).	
	3. Why have people written the Emails or text messages? What do they want to express? Discuss reasons or use the functions on the reverse to label some or all of the texts. Underline the parts that will support your arguments (Use a soluble OHP pen, colour 2).	
	4. Write your own message to the head teacher and express your ideas about the incident. Write from the point of view of a classmate.	✍️ 📄
	5. Wipe off the materials and put them back into the envelope.	✉
apology, thank, complaint, explanation, information, request		

Fig. 5: Reading task based on "Letters, Emails, Facebook, Texts" (Palacio, 2014, pp. 160-167)

5 Conclusion

In recent years, content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and project work have been used increasingly to encourage authentic student engagement with language and content learning in teacher education. Through CLIL, the trainees develop language skills while simultaneously becoming more knowledgeable and skilful teachers. By integrating project work into CLIL scenarios, teacher educators can create learning environments that stipulate active involvement, stimulate higher level thinking skills, and give the trainees responsibility for their own learning. Through incorporating project work into teacher education programmes, tutors distance themselves from teacher-centred instruction and demonstrate how to create learning communities of inquiry involving authentic communication, collaborative learning, and problem-solving.

The project "Wonder" provided an authentic learning scenario for a group of trainees whose project presentation became the opening of the 2015 International Week. This provided stamina, motivation, and a real goal that made the trainees grow personally and professionally. Their performance was more than an opening event; it contributed substantially to their transition from being trainees to becoming teachers in that it made them experience actively the magic and power of drama in language education.

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