

WRITING THE FLOOD

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Here Gordon describes how he helped year 5 and 6 pupils to make sense of a local, destructive, weather event and to create a lasting memory of the event in their own words.

The flood

Winter night, winter water,
Christmas night,
The river wakes.
The flood is coming.*

It rained. For a month, a week and one day, it rained. On Christmas Eve 2015, when the ground was saturated, the watershed at capacity, every overflow topped, everywhere soaked and all escape routes taken, the River Calder went for a walk across its floodplain. The floods were dramatic: shopping streets in Todmorden and Hebden Bridge became rivers; the delightful small shops of Hebden's Market Street were inundated; the roads, paths, home and gardens swamped. Further downstream at Elland, the river cracked the bridge (Figure 1) and closed the road to the primary school.

An elephant stampede,
Plunging down, plunging onwards
Towards the town, towards the
bridge,
Toward the bridge that
Will crumble like Weetabix.



Figure 1: The strength of the flood cracked the bridge at Elland. Photo © Canal and River Trust.

One year on

A year later the road was restored, the bridge repaired and ready for opening (and, with it, easy access to Elland Primary School renewed) and I was brought in. As Creeping Toad, I work with groups and schools to find ways to celebrate the places where people live, work and play. I tell stories, devise puppet plays, build and shape things, play with celebration: essentially, I give people opportunities to reflect on how they feel about the world around them, offering them ways to express those feelings. With this project, my role for the Canal and River Trust (see web panel) was to work with pupils from Elland Primary School. The idea was to capture their experience of the floods and generate some words and phrases that could be carved into the arches of the new bridge. Here, I offer the sequence of activities we used to explore the pupils' experiences as a possible model for you to carry out similar work.

We began almost a year to the day after the rains started in 2015, and found that the flood was already the stuff of urban legends for our young artists. Some of the pupils had been there; some had seen the river crack the bridge; everyone (thought they) had seen the river in flood. Many pupils had their journey time to school doubled because detours were needed to cross the river. However, they found it hard to remember those moments clearly: 'the river threw a boat against the bridge. I know. I saw it!', 'Oh, no, the boat went right over the bridge and was left in a tree' and 'Wasn't it a cow that was left in the tree?'.

This river is waking.
The river is a volcano ready to erupt,
Murky water stirs,
Turns, rises,
Angry water, kicking the rocks,
Wild as a bull,
Cracking rocks into pieces.

Remembering the experience

Given the tenuous memories mentioned above, we could have done with asking pupils to bring in photos of the floods. However, we had a set of generic photos of rivers and floods, which we took time to talk about, to nudge and to invite recollection. We recorded their memories of those dramatic flood days, encouraging words and pictures, censoring and editing nothing, just getting the pupils to share.

We looked for stages in the run up to the destruction of the bridge: the wet winter, the floods at Christmas, watching the water. We used questions to keep ideas moving about the consequences of the flood 'how did what happened afterwards affect the pupils?' and 'what might happen when the bridge reopened? Interestingly, most pupils who came in cars in journeys 10 minutes long the year previously, which now took 30 minutes, did not seem to recall the shorter journey. This was, perhaps, a reflection on how little attention the pupils pay to the world beyond the family car.

Recommendation: visual aids help us to remember

Curriculum links: talk about river features (literacy – spoken word opportunities), look at overall structure (design – building a river using pictures), water control and settlements along rivers (science and geography).

Imagery

We played with the collected memories: drawing moments with oil pastels on large sheets of paper and adding words to convey movement and emotion. Pupils were encouraged to think from the river's perspective as well as human ones: how did the river feel? Did it feel as angry as it looked? We added starting points for metaphor and simile (Figure 2): describing the river or the scene they were working with as... an animal, a machine, a piece of furniture, a time of day, a sort of weather, a person, something from the kitchen, and so on.

Flooding playgrounds,
The river roars loud as a tiger,
A stampede of elephants.
A rumbling avalanche,
But
Fish swim between swings
Calm water reflects a slide,
No pupils play here now.

Recommendation: allow time for talk

Curriculum links: link to literacy (similes, metaphors and alliteration, and excellent spoken word opportunities) and PHSE (empathy and appreciating action from other perspectives).

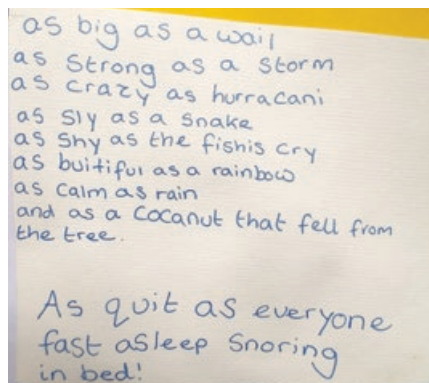


Figure 2: Describing the river featured opportunities for similes, metaphors and alliteration. Photo © Gordon Maclellan.

The flooding river doesn't stop,
A hammer to batter the bridge,
Lifting boats, crashing boats,
A bonfire out of control.
This river is racing, a cheetah after
its prey,
An unsettled blender, turning and
churning,
People are scared and stuck,
frightened.

Walk away, do other things

We left words to settle, to simmer and stew.
We made individual pop-ups of river scenes
(Figure 3) of bridges (cracked and whole),
boats being swept away, and pupils being
rescued from rising waters (none were,
but many wished they had been).

Recommendation: do something related but different to allow time for words to brew

Curriculum links: design, 2- and 3-D construction; different ways of approaching literacy – draw and build before writing

Things to hold

Pieces of shaped stones taken from the 300-year-old bridge were provided for the pupils to explore. They showed mason's marks and pupils liked the connection: they were able to hold something connected to people long gone, but which those people had seen, knew and touched themselves.

Recommendation: to watch how a fish swims or a freshwater shrimp wriggles helps not only with pupils' descriptions, but also offers them an appreciation of how difficult life would be for aquatic species in, for example, a flood. Take a river-dipping trip or have an aquarium of animals in class for a day

Curriculum links: science – animal diversity and adaptation to different habitats; history – human stories, local history; geography – rocks associated with your river.

Wider context

There was not enough time to look at the context of the 2015 floods. Although we talked as ideas developed, a longer project would have enabled us to use weather reports and satellite images to track the storms. We could also have looked at the rest of the country over the same time period to discover if this storm was part of a larger pattern or if it just seemed like a vindictive assault on Yorkshire. It would also have offered the ideal opportunity to make links to climate change with questioning such as: 'was this a one-off situation or had it happened before?', 'might this kind of flooding happen again?' and 'what provoked such rain and floods?' We did manage to discuss flood mitigation and balances between cause and symptom.

Recommendation: tap into wider resources, set time aside for discussion

Curriculum links: geography and science – weather patterns, local weather in a global context, how people respond to natural crises, possible implications of global warning

Come back to the words

We then picked up our words again and worked in groups looking at earlier ideas, speaking words aloud, performing some sections – and from this, we edited our poems.

Recommendation: circulate the group poems around for other groups to edit to try to avoid pupils' protectiveness of their own words. Use the phrases that get edited out elsewhere, possibly to build personal lines into pop-ups

Curriculum links: literacy – draw the activities together as performance poetry or drama to ensure pupil understanding of a whole process

Outcome

We gave the Canal and River Trust the whole of our narrative poems for them to choose lines to decorate the new bridge with. But they didn't, they used whole poems, running the words, like water, under and through the arches of the new bridge over the River Calder at Elland.

And now, and now, and now,
Calm as a sleeping baby,
Peaceful now
But never quite as peaceful again,
Simmering,
Always ready to roar.

*Note: All the quoted lines are taken from poems produced during the project by pupils in years 5 and 6 of Elland Church of England Primary School, West Yorkshire, in 2016/17.

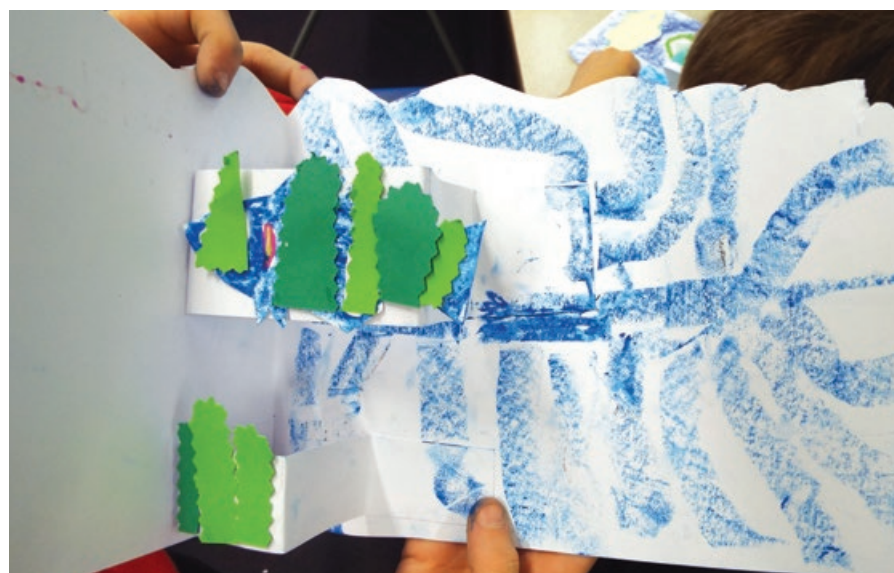


Figure 3: Our pop-up river scenes were created using simple folded card with bracket supports.

WEB RESOURCES

Calder Future: <http://calderfuture.org.uk/>
Canal and River Trust: <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/>
Creeping Toad blog: <http://creepingtoad.blogspot.co.uk>

Gordon Maclellan trained in terrestrial ecology and teaching, and now works (with Steve Brown) as the storyteller and artist, Creeping Toad. Gordon's work revolves around finding creative ways to help people explore the relationships between people, places and wildlife.