

## **Enlivening the study of poetry with Year 8**

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### **Overview**

Lisa had previously found that students in her school, particularly the boys, were resistant to poetry. Using ICT to present visual material on Keats' 'The Eve of Saint Agnes' resulted in increased engagement and sustained interest through a series of lessons. Having students type their responses on a laptop to share with the whole class encouraged much greater pupil participation. As a result the English department has become much more aware of the power of ICT to enhance teaching and learning.

### **Introduction**

I am the Assistant Head of English at Tredegar Comprehensive School. The school is a mixed comprehensive with one thousand pupils on role. It is an 11 to 18 school and the only comprehensive serving the town. Tredegar is in Blaenau Gwent, one of the most deprived areas of Wales with one of the poorest LEAs. Unfortunately money does not exist to purchase an abundance of technology and there is very little, if any, extra funding to apply for. As a result technology provision has been forced to take a back seat as money has always been needed to purchase new texts for the three key stages. Eventually, however, the department was able to purchase a laptop and projector but we were unable to buy an interactive whiteboard. Every classroom is equipped with an ordinary whiteboard. There are five teachers in the department and resources were stretched so I purchased my own laptop.

### **Aims**

I decided to get involved with the NATE/Becta project as we were becoming more and more concerned that as teachers of an important core subject we were not giving the pupils their full ICT requirement. Even with our limited resources we wanted to ensure that ICT was seen as an integral part of English and something that could enhance the pupils' experience and enjoyment of the subject. The department does not have a computer suite and it is very difficult to book the Learning Resource Centre as it is needed for ICT lessons. However we knew that our actual teaching and the learning of the pupils could be enhanced through carefully planned lessons and through considerate sharing of limited resources. More than anything we wanted to capture the imagination and interest of the pupils and successfully prove to them the value of ICT use in English.

### **Hard-to-teach topic: the teaching of poetry**

I decided to focus on the teaching of poetry mainly because some of the misconceptions held by our pupils mean it can be a difficult topic to teach. Blaenau Gwent is an area heavily involved with sport, in particular Rugby Union. It is also an area that does not necessarily welcome the idea of the 'New Man'! Poetry is perceived as feminine and not something any self respecting rugby fan should admit to enjoying. The girls are generally far more tolerant although there still exists a belief that poetry appreciation does not necessarily lead to promising job prospects. Ultimately I wanted to show the pupils that poetry was not just for love-struck romantics but that it can be dynamic, lead to greater

understanding of the world and most importantly that it can be enjoyed purely for the sake of enjoyment and entertainment. Teaching poetry appreciation through the medium of ICT would hopefully give the subject more teen appeal!

I decided to use my top set Year 8s as my guinea pigs. They are on the whole a willing and able class. However there is a substantial tail end of sometimes difficult boys, all of them rugby and soccer fans and all of them liable to cause a disturbance simply because English is not PE and I am not a six-foot-four male or a rugby-obsessed Head of PE.

## **Method**

I decided to introduce the pupils to Keats' poem 'The Eve of Saint Agnes'. I was definitely throwing myself in at the deep end but I decided that there was no point in making only a half-hearted attempt at experimenting with something new. If I was going to convince Senior Management that more money needed to be invested in the use of ICT in English, there could be no half measures. Lack of department training and equipment meant resources and ideas were limited. I decided to begin by simply projecting talking points for the students to consider from the laptop onto the whiteboard. This had an immediate effect as did the fact that questions based on an illustration for the poem were delivered in the same way. It was hard to believe but after the pupils read an extract from the poem and considered their discussion points in groups, the pupil with the most to say was a previously very disruptive boy who often treated the subject with scorn! After the lesson I asked him if he had enjoyed the lesson and this was his response:

Yes, Miss. You have never really used the laptop before and I liked the fact that you did something different today other than turn your back and write on the whiteboard.

I was sure there was a compliment in there somewhere! Indeed the boys' behaviour continued to improve throughout the series of lessons that I taught. I later asked his ICT teacher about his attitude in ICT lessons and was told that the pupil was one of the most attentive and responsive in the whole class!

During the lesson it was also noted that the pupils seemed wary of annotating the illustration they had been given. It seemed this was because the pupils felt this was an expensive resource that needed to be kept clean for future classes. In the next lesson and with help from a colleague I projected the image on to the whiteboard. I then encouraged the pupils to type their thoughts on the laptop and therefore project them on to the whiteboard. This relatively simple task encouraged much greater pupil participation than previously experienced. The pupils wanted to use the equipment so felt encouraged to give their opinion knowing they could be active participants as a reward.

Throughout the remaining lessons I taught I ensured that ICT use was an inherent element of each one. The pupils were encouraged to share their opinions on the laptop so that these could easily be referenced in future lessons. We began to keep a log of poetry read and enjoyed and it was so much easier to keep track of changing opinions and ideas on the laptop than on random pieces of paper that inevitably run the risk of getting lost. The pupils were keen to use the equipment so were much more giving of their opinions and thoughts.

## Key findings

In conclusion I realize that to many, our achievements seem minor and our use of ICT limited given all that the medium is capable of achieving. However we have come such a long way. Before this project the equipment we had was very rarely used and no extra funding was available for further purchases.

Yet in the space of several short months the following has happened:

- Following a meeting with the headteacher where I put my new-found knowledge to good use (particularly the Becta report *Key research evidence about ICT in the English curriculum*<sup>1</sup>) the department was awarded further funding to purchase two more laptops and projectors.
- Plans are afoot to turn an empty classroom into an English ICT suite. It will probably take another year and at the moment we might have to have computers from the ICT room instead of new, but this is infinitely superior to what we have now, i.e. nothing!
- The department has purchased a poetry pack to be used specifically on the laptops. It contains poets reading their own poetry and will I am sure capture the interest of the pupils.
- We will be purchasing a copy of *Twenty Things to do with a Word Processor* from NATE.
- I have given my first PowerPoint presentation!

Most important however is the effect the project has had on the pupils. My Year 8s were given a questionnaire to fill in following the series of poetry lessons I had taught. Here is a selection of their responses;

I don't usually like poetry but I have enjoyed these lessons.

I like the laptop being used. It means we are more involved and can take part in the lesson.

English isn't always my favourite subject. I like science and maths but I felt better using the laptop as I'm used to having more IT use in lessons I like.

There can be no better evidence than this that the project has been a real success and not just for the pupils. As a department we have become much more aware of the power of the medium and the responses it can provoke. We will certainly be investing more time and energy into ICT use in the future.

Many will see our journey as being a small one but on the contrary it has been monumental. We have come such a long way in terms of ICT use since February when the project began. We have gone from being a department that rarely used ICT to embracing it fully and to ensuring all future units of work contain ICT strategies, therefore enhancing both teaching and learning. It is a future we are looking forward to with great enthusiasm.

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<sup>1</sup> Becta, 2003: [http://partners.becta.org.uk/upload-dir/downloads/page\\_documents/research/wtrs\\_english.pdf](http://partners.becta.org.uk/upload-dir/downloads/page_documents/research/wtrs_english.pdf) – although slightly dated, this contains useful pointers to the value of ICT in English.