Wikiteers, wiki-wars and the AQA Anthology

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Overview

Faced with the task of engaging GCSE Literature students in the study of 28 poems and exploring the use of language, form and structure in a sustained manner, Carol Weale sought to create an environment for stimulating and interesting student-led discussion. By setting up an AQA Anthology wiki where students can explore each other's interpretations, she utilised the 'MSN' communication culture that her students were familiar with to engage their interest in posting responses on the site and so engage them in the participation of a literary community. The unfolding open discussion and analysis of each other's work that resulted was a fascinating demonstration that students were willing to devote considerable time and energy outside the classroom to continue the discussions.

Introduction

There are some parts of the curriculum that make most English teachers groan, as students find them the hardest to grasp, but I began to wonder if ICT could provide another line of attack? Anyway, was there a particular area that makes students shudder? If anyone knew the answer to this, it had to be the students who were about to put this to the test: my GCSE classes. Within nano-seconds of the question being presented, they chorused back with a unanimous voice: the AQA Anthology. And, strangely enough, my heart was with them. I'd heard of using a Wiki in education (Wikipedia) – it is not a new concept, just new to my classroom – but the question was, could it provide a way of meeting this challenge?

My school, a mixed grammar, is in an area of social and economic deprivation with mixed ability classes. I've got a Year 10 group who are usually up for anything and full of the enthusiasm of those who have not suffered coursework burnout; and Year 11 who can't wait to be released from pre-exam burnout! Both classes faced examinations imminently so we all had a focus.

Aims

So how do you engage students in the study of 28 poems? How do you get them to explore the use of language, form and structure in a sustained manner? How do you elicit that personal response that has not come out of a carefully rehearsed answer? The aim of my AQA Anthology wiki was to:
- create a student-led environment for stimulating and interesting student-led discussion where they could explore each other's interpretations;
- use the MSN 'communication culture' to engage their interest in posting responses and so involve them in the participation of a literary community.

Method

Web 2.0 offers opportunities for collaboration and communication and seemed to be the obvious platform upon which to create my student-led environment as it subsists entirely on collaboration to create a community charged by a student voice. One of the positive aspects of wikis is that they invite different levels of participation which may increase as confidence grows and self-interest takes over. If I

was lucky, as they became more familiar with how to edit the pages and add widgets, the wiki would become voluntary and self-censored, creating its own rhythm through involvement and, if I dared to hope, even excitement.

Learning takes place most effectively when it is done voluntarily and as we faced the leaden weight of the Anthology, I decided that an unorthodox approach might tap into their natural curiosity. Plato said that *'education should be a form of amusement'* so although I thought that the wiki would 'amuse' them, I did ponder whether my Head would think it might not have a quantifiable benefit. Time would tell …

The first task was to acquire a wiki space. On recommendation, I joined www.wikispaces.com. When prompted to start a new space/wiki, I scrolled right to the bottom of the page and clicked on the 'Find out more' button under K12 Educator which allows you to have a completely free wikispace which is locked and private. I had a chat with senior management and got them on my side. That was an important step because anything that involves outside sites or Web 2.0 excites their suspicious minds and child safety issues must be looked at before inviting students in. That is the next step and it is a good idea to have a policy about usernames and passwords. I asked mine to join using their school ones to ensure a degree of formality and enable contributors to be identified.

Description

Introducing the idea to my GCSE classes was interesting as they had very different reactions: the Year 11 class who were about to go into the exam hall were the most cautious but were curious enough to give it a go. The Year 10s were the most enthusiastic as they had survived a diet of ICT strategies and saw that they had everything to gain. I explained the objectives and asked them to join Wikispaces as homework.

We had a few lessons generating revision notes on key poems and agreed a 'house style' so that everyone would have a writing framework (see Appendix A). Then, full of confidence, I booked a series of sessions in the ICT suite (having arranged to temporarily disable the filters for Wikispaces and YouTube) and taught them how to add new pages, edit other people's notes and add images or widgets (applications such as videos from YouTube, audio or polls to mention just a few). I organised them into pairs to add items to their chosen poem page which, as it turned out, ended up as the only teacher-led activity of the entire project. What happened next was frustrating, but led to the most fruitful and unexpected bonus of the project: the school network routinely blocks pop-ups and the Wiki editing toolbar is a popup so my initial lesson ground to a halt. Out of sheer desperation, what was to become the real driving force of the wiki came to light. Unable to add notes easily in school, the students clicked on the discussion tab behind each page and found that *they* were filter-free. And so the wiki-wars began!

I had placed a couple of questions or thinking points on a few pages and soon the students were intensely engaged in trying to answer them. Their journey could be charted through the progression of their language: at first it was awkward as they seemed to be in 'worksheet' mode (See Appendix B) with responses to a question on 'My Last Duchess' as to whether the Duke was mad or bad, eliciting:

> The Duchess is guilty of inappropriate behaviour because she is married to him but she flirts (and more) with alot of men 'she has a heart...too easily impressed'

But as their friends responded, they became more confident and were prepared to start interpreting and what was more important, arguing a case:

And finally Lydia, you said the mother is 'sad' because 'her daughter doesn't have such a need for her as she wishes,' which is wrong, the rope of love is red, signifying passion or hate (ie passionate hate), sadness is the colour of deep blue. I rest my case.

Wiki wars finally broke out over one afternoon in an ICT suite. I had asked them to contribute to the site in some way and I was expecting more of the gentle joshing of each other's ideas. Suddenly, from various corners of the room, I could hear their volleying shots as they battled for a lead position:

Just a few, yeah you got owned :)

When asked whether they actually held the opinion that they were strongly arguing, one girl replied that she didn't, but just enjoyed debating the point! (See Appendix C.) Looking at her wiki involvement that afternoon, it became clear that she had taken part in four separate, simultaneous wiki-wars – which is typical of the toggling managed by MSN participants.

Normally, it is difficult to engage students in the Anthology, but I had decided upon a new policy. I would not interfere with the spelling or grammar as I saw my place in the controlled environment of assessed essays; neither would I intervene if a student made an incorrect point as the wiki became self-regulating. This gave them a new freedom and as the platform was within familiar MSN type of territory, they soon forgot that I was there (see Appendix D). I did not set homework during this period either as they should have been revising for exams, but I was rather hoping for student participation at greater levels than just the classroom and I was not to be disappointed! The morning lesson had been and gone, but the wiki wars continued: another response was posted during a different curriculum lesson in the afternoon:

Right Lydia let's settle this

And continued after school

I have more but I'm going out now :p

And into the late evening

If I had time I would prove you wrong, but we're going out now :(

And even into the early hours (12.17am) as they attempted to have the last word. What was more surprising were the types of students who were the most active. One boy had steadfastly refused to cooperate throughout the year, hated writing so his coursework was routinely late or undeveloped. Suddenly, he had an outlet and a desire to 'speak' and it was to one of his friends – one of the quiet girls whose essays were usually top A*. He wanted to argue with her and now motivated by that thought, he relentlessly thrashed out issues concerning a range of poems until exhausted, she amicably conceded defeat. Until the next time …

So the quiet and the unmotivated suddenly came to life and the wiki was populated with their quips, wit and analysis without fear of censure from a teacher. Only once did another student go off task and he was quickly whipped into line with

Yeah Bruce be quite! This poem has nothing to do with the slave trade – it's about a man killing his wife! Woo! Go me and Tanya

A few students' contributions remained at a low level as they preferred to 'watch' the discussions either because they were inhibited or still found the poetry difficult to grasp but it had made a significant difference to the majority of the students. I followed up in lessons with wiki updates using extracts

which I re-broadcast so they were not only aware of their own contributions but those of others, which generated a new sense of respect to those who had been dismissed as quiet.

While the wiki-wars raged in the classroom, I decided to use homework to edit the main pages so, in a very short space of time, our wiki had a working skeleton of revision notes, videos, mindmaps, essay plans, and my stash of exemplar essays. We'd all pitched in together and it was time to see if it had all been worth it: had it merely 'amused' or 'educated' or both?

Key findings

The Year 11s sauntered confidently into their GCSE final exams having been merely spectators in the wiki world, but the wiki usage logs showed a series of raised yellow spikes just before the Literature exam, indicating that they had been poring over the site as part of last minute revision. The wiki had achieved its objective there. Next on the scaffold were the Year 10s. Again, a similar pattern of spikes emerged in the days leading up to their mock but the real validation came in their performance. Not only had they used the site to revise, it had appeared to noticeably improve their grades. In the previous year's exam, the boys had achieved an average of C while the girls came in with a B; this year the boys zoomed up to an average of an A, with surprisingly little difference in the girls' performance. I re-checked the figures: the previous year, only three boys had scored a B grade or better, whereas this year that had improved by 300% as nine boys were in this category. What could have made such a difference? The intake was similar so I asked and they said that making the vodcasts/podcasts and the wiki were the significant events that '*offered a different dimension to revising*', '*It gave me more views to take on when writing my essay. I got an A, surprisingly!*' and it was summed by one boy, '*I think it should be for everyone as they would gain vast amount of different interpretations giving us a wider knowledge of the poems.*' (See Appendix E)

So they had been 'amused', 'educated' and it had made the difference to their achievement. But the after-effects went further: it gave them a sense of control over their learning and a metacognitive response to how they learn best. The three learning styles were catered for but the kinaesthetic style dominated as students were the contributors as well as the editors: they had made the materials that were being used by their peers for important exams. This is not achievable in a normal classroom environment where interaction is primarily auditory. Finally, it provided a real opportunity for autonomous self-motivated learning but this did lead to a digital divide as those who were most active gained the highest grades, possibly inspiring others next year? Perhaps the words of an ancient Chinese proverb holds the key as to why a wiki is such an effective tool:
    'I hear I forget; I see I remember; I do I understand!'

Conclusions

Wikis offer a fluid learning process which promotes creative thinking (see Appendix F) rather than a didactic, linear structure as they create collective knowledge and with this comes the mutual respect as they comment on each other's work. This generates a surprising emotional involvement with their learning as a sense of fun finally envelops the Anthology experience. Most important of all, they have become producers rather than consumers and it is this active learning role that makes the difference. ICT simply offers the opportunity to activate it. The process of collaboration is not really about the end product – the exam result – as we did not anticipate the outcome; it was a journey of discovery.

It was not all plain sailing though and apart from Internet filters and e-safety issues, the main concerns are about control: control over who joins as the teacher can block or ban contributors; control over the make-up of the group itself as opening a wiki to other year groups might be inhibiting; and control over the content to make sure that nobody posts anything inappropriate or irrelevant. I had expected the last area to be a possible problem but no-one overstepped the mark and they were not exactly angels! Other hiccups affected page content as clumsy editing resulted in deleted material but this was easily rectified with the History button on each page which allows you to revert to earlier revisions. Simultaneous editing of pages is to be avoided as they can accidentally erase each other's ideas but careful planning avoids this (the discussion pages are not affected). Most of all, I would advise wikiteers make friends with the ICT department so that Internet filters don't thwart the process!

Next steps

Would I do it again? Definitely! I believe that this approach is adaptable in most schools or groups, not just top sets as they get so much more out of the process. Next steps for me include using the wiki to debate poetry questions rather than setting an essay, start a wiki for the Different Cultures Anthology as well as *Lord of the Flies* at the request of Year 10 who have got a taste for the action …

Appendices

A: Wiki student notes on the poems
B: Initial entries showing students' tendency to respond in worksheet mode
C: Wiki-wars
D: Self-generated discussion on 'Patrolling Barnegat'
E: Student thoughts on taking part in the wiki
F: Thinking skills pyramid 2001

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Appendix A: Student notes on the poems – in the 'house style'

☆ 🔒 **Affliction of Margaret**

| PAGE | DISCUSSION (3) | HISTORY | NOTIFY ME |

IDEAS:
Portrayal of obsessive and tragic woman abandoned by only son/child. Universal concept so stands for mothers everywhere. Affliction is not only loss of son but not knowing what has happened to him. Poem focuses upon her present feelings.

📝 Edit This Page

STRUCTURE: 11 stanzas of despair – each stanza devoted to an aspect of the woman's psychological situation, culminating in final desolate conclusion

LANGUAGE: *'I have no other earthly friend'*
Formal dramatic monologue with poetic diction mingled with rhythms and colloquial speech. Contrast of positive language concerning her son *'an object beauteous to behold'* and negative images of the *'unkind'* world *'chains tie us down by land and sea'*.
Focuses upon her feelings and role as a mother *'kind mother have I been, as kind as ever breathed.'*
Supernatural elements as Wordsworth was a Romantic poet but they are not Christian elements yet there is a feeling of the afterlife *'fowls of heaven..'*
COMPARE: *Catrin, First Sonne, Digging*
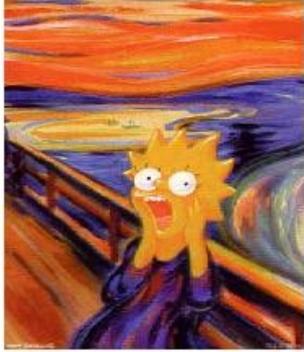
Appendix B: Initial entries

dc04daeche **Laboratory and My Last Duchess**
'The Laboratory' has a similiar subject to 'My Last Duchess' - a person who kills, or who is about to kill, her rival in the presence of her lover. The lover seems to be connected to the speaker in some way - perhaps her husband or an ex-lover who has spurned her for the rival who is soon to die.

The form of 'The Laboratory' is a monologue, and the silent listener is important. He is an expert in poisons (like the apothecary in Romeo and Juliet) who sells his services to a wealthy woman.

Henry
Posted Apr 28, 2008 11:38 am - [delete]
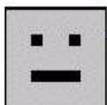
dc04howard re: Laboratory and My Last Duchess
ANCIEN RÉGIME refers to an old rule or governement siggesting that the speaker comes from a past age. We do not know for certain that the speaker is actualy female but this is then suggested in the 5th stanza she will carry her poison ("...an earring, a casket/A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket..."), and by her offering a kiss to the poison maker , when he has finished his gruesome work.Browning explores the jealousy and vengefulness of someone disappointed in love. and how this makes them vengeful.

Appendix C: Wiki-wars

This argument may seem a little stupid but it's hard to come up with reasons :(
Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:55 pm - [delete]

DC04Woodburn re: did the duke over react to the duchess' "spot of joy"?
It's hard to come up with reasons, because deep down inside you agree with me too ;)

Sure women were treated badly back then, but a stray blush shouldn't be a reason to kill someone. This rash decision merely suggests that he has in fact over-reacted.

[I'm running out of ideas now :(]
Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:59 pm - [delete]

Joe_Brooker re: did the duke over react to the duchess' "spot of joy"?
Good Mwahahahahaha! He did over react to her spot of joy but who cares? She deserved it because it's obvious she didn't really love him and just married him for the luxury and wealth!
Posted Apr 30, 2008 3:19 pm - [delete]
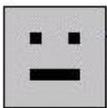
DC04Woodburn re: did the duke over react to the duchess' "spot of joy"?
You just agreed with me there.

You fail Joe.

Appendix D: Self-initiated discussion about 'Patrolling Barnegat': Good or Evil?

dc04giles **Good or Evil?**
Is this poem made to show the power of evil or the the power of good that can be provoked because the TRINITY could refer to the Father Son and Holy Spirit but in the poem it also says about the Demonic laughter which conjures up images of evil.Which one of these do you think it is trying to depict or maybe you think both? please expand on your answer.

Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:13 pm - [delete]

dc04ilett re: Good or Evil?
Evil!!! I think this might be an inverted trinity. The imagery used suggests that this trinity is more destructive then productive and therefore not one of God. Why would God destroy what he has created?? The demoniac laughter also supports this! the word demon is liek a creature from hell, not one from heaven. An maybe the weird forms could be the demons??

Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:20 pm - [delete]

dc04daeche re: Good or Evil?
This poem really shows the hostility of nature to the natural world. Whitman is trying to show everyone shaw power, and force of nature, and that nothing or no-one can even think to face nature head on.

Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:20 pm - [delete]

dc04ilett re: Good or Evil?
But do you think that it is natural?? or more supernatural?? I think this is a supernatural side of the world not the natural side necessarily.

Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:22 pm - [delete]

dc04howard re: Good or Evil?
It certainly seems as though Whitman is trying to depict the the evil side of nature and how it could be linked to a religous sign of God's wrath. Evidnece for tis is the many s and t sounds , these portray the storm of being very harsh and full of wrath. The ING endings also reiterate the harshness of the storm

which link in with the one view of the savage tinity the father son and holy spirt , the supernatuarl religous evil side to walt whitmans poem because iot sounds as if the storm is inncessant with never ending battering og the shipwreck in the poem and Walts mind

Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:23 pm - [delete]

dc04ilett re: Good or Evil?
Yes, you seem to think between me and daeche Tom but, the verbs used are very violent and almost personified, for instance, fitfully. This makes it sound liek it is quite violent. The trinity, not one of the son the father and the spirit, but maybe its not that, because this trinity is not out to destroy! I think it is the hells version of this and he gets this along. Also, the red signal flaring, a flare glows, the colour red indicates hate and makes it seem eeryier and more hellish then orignally thought.

Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:27 pm - [delete]

dc04daeche re: Good or Evil?
Yes, that is true, it is even too powerful to be supernatural! The 'savage trintity' really shows the hell, and the dark side of nature, also the hostility!

The supernatural force rebels against all of God's laws, they're too powerful for God! Hell has the supernatural force of the 'Savage trinity lashing' 'Waves, air, midnight'. The nature is EVIL! Whitman wants us to loathe the weather, and how unpredictable it is, which is shown by the structure, and layout of the poem, the commas show the storm is endless, it's unstoppable, it's HELL!

By the way this is a reply for Lukes!

Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:28 pm - [delete]

dc04howard re: Good or Evil?
i do agree with most of this but the red signal flaring , red could also be passion and awe that Walt Whitman feels towards the storm and in reply to henry rorke daeche walt perhaps does want us to see the force and hatred of nature but he also he wants us to see the supernatural and amazing side of

nature and perhaps it clenses the evil of hell by doing destructive things

Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:33 pm - [delete]

[dc04ilett](#) re: Good or Evil?
Maybe though, it's not anything in real life. Maybe it's his mind. I got this idea from the undertone muttering and demoniac laughing. This gives me an idea of schizophrania and paranoia. The storm could be a metaphor for a storm of emotions, or a storm of voices in his head. The trinity could be not waves air and midnight, but that could be a metaphor for uncertainty, emptiness and darkness in the mind?? maybe?? i don't know haha

Posted Apr 30, 2008 2:33 pm - [delete]

Appendix E: Students' thoughts on taking part in the wiki
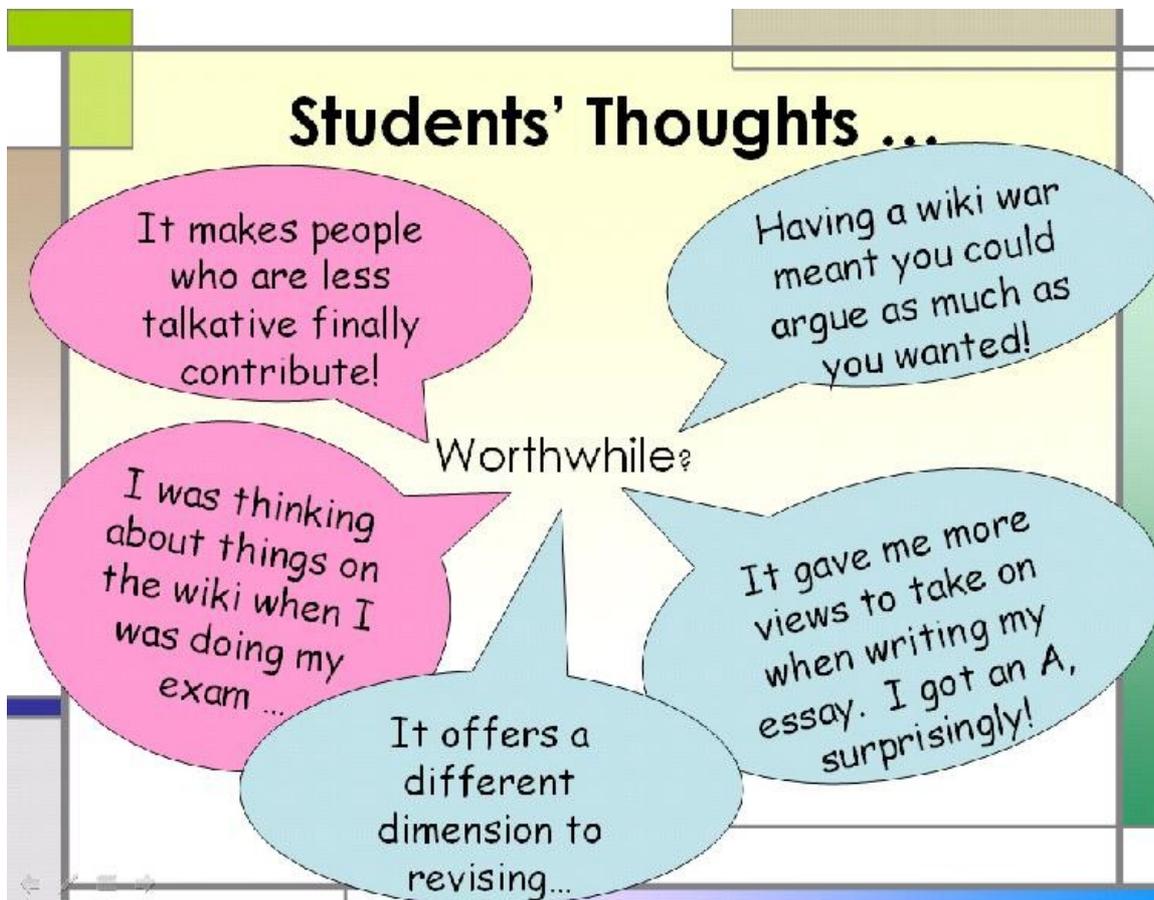
Appendix F: Thinking skills pyramid 2001

Revised taxonomy of the cognitive domain following Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)
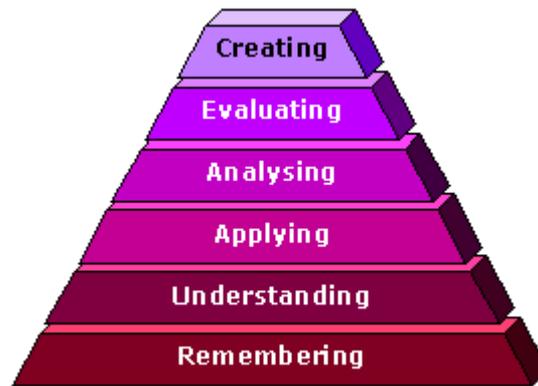
Atherton J S (2005) *Learning and Teaching: Bloom's taxonomy* [On-line] UK: Available at:
http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/bloomtax.htm