Teaching the literary heritage

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Overview

Working in a well-resourced school, Angus exploits the technology available to enable Year 9 students to produce short trailers for Stevenson's famous Victorian horror story. In this way, he sought to address problems students find in coping with pre-twentieth century texts as well as in developing speaking and listening skills and understanding media studies terms. In addition, analytical and comparative writing posed a challenge; he describes it as not 'so much hard to teach as hard to make interesting'. Working to a tight schedule, students researched, produced and evaluated their trailers. Student comments indicate that the activity had made them much more aware of the techniques both the author and they, as film-makers, had used. This case study and the accompanying online products demonstrate the sophisticated activities possible with the right resources.

Introduction

Ninestiles School is a mixed 11-18 comprehensive school of 1500 students drawn from across the ability range. Ninestiles has long been established as Specialist Technology School with a large wireless network and specialist e-learning support team led by Chris Silverton, with a DTP specialist and two web designers. This team was initially employed for the introduction of the VLE but they are now involved in creation of multi-media resources. They are in addition to the IT support team. The GCSE English course followed is the Edexcel pilot, which includes a media production unit.

The hard-to-teach focus of this case study

In my view, a number of topics and skills present themselves as being harder to teach than others and also as particularly ripe for an ICT-based approach. These are:
- comprehension and understanding of texts which use archaic or very formal 'old-fashioned' standard English, such as most Victorian texts;
- speaking and listening skills when students in a group do not, perhaps, have much confidence in their relationships with each other;
- Media Studies terms such as signifier, connotations etc.;
- the skill of writing in-depth analysis and comparison of texts (both media and literary). This isn't so much as 'hard to teach' as 'hard to make interesting'.

Studying *Jekyll and Hyde* with Year 9

Our case study has focused on teaching a Year 9 class *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.* There were a number of reasons for doing this. Predominant amongst these was the need for students to be reasonably familiar with the text prior to producing a piece of GCSE coursework in Year 10; there was also the need to promote good working relationships amongst students in the class to allow them to have the confidence to express themselves in formal speaking and listening assessments during the Autumn term.

Students were also expected to extend their understanding of literary heritage by relating major writers to their historical context; as well as explaining the appeal of these texts over time. From a drama perspective, students were expected to convey action, character, tension and atmosphere when scripting and performing a play (albeit a short one).

Resources

At Ninestiles, we are lucky enough to have a fully resourced e-learning laboratory. They built a mini-site for our Year 9 Intranet area upon which all the resources for the project were posted. The resources were:

- copies of all the videos used as stimulus – this negated the need for students to go onto YouTube
- a copy of the rubric
- a copy of the letter from the NATE mentor
- model mind-maps
- links to dictionary.com and the websites used for storyboarding
- chapter 4 of *Jekyll and Hyde*
- hard copies of the whole text of *Jekyll and Hyde* were also available.

For the filming we used:

- high quality camcorder and tripod
- 4m x 4m green chroma key backdrop rig
- 3 x lighting lamps
- software: Adobe Premiere and Adobe After Effects.

Information on all the resources can be seen at http://www.ninestiles.bham.sch.uk/greenscreen/. The 'links' section contains the resources on *Jekyll and Hyde.*

Process and methodology

At Ninestiles, we have begun to work towards introducing problem-based learning into our curriculum. This project drew on the theory of this method. It used a real-life document – a letter from the NATE mentor – to launch the project. Students then created substantial artefacts to prove their learning – these took the form of a trailer for a fictitious computer game based on *Jekyll and Hyde* and a detailed justification and reflection document.

The process was as follows:

- Students were given the letter from the NATE mentor.
- Students were then shown the problem they needed to solve, in this instance they had four two-and-a-half hour lessons to plan, record and evaluate their trailers.
- Students were introduced to the rubric for assessment for the project.
- Students were then given the opening paragraph of Chapter 4 of *Jekyll and Hyde* to read.
- Students were asked to produce a mind-map entitled 'What we know'.
- Students were then asked to produce a mind-map entitled 'What we need to do to be successful' – this then informed the rest of the tasks.
- Students divided into three groups – one group did guided reading of Chapter 4 and analysed it using De Bono's 'Thinking Hats'.

- Students were then given instructions to watch three video game trailers: *Resident Evil, Silent Hill 2* and *Haunting Ground.*
- They then mind-mapped the conventions of these games.
- By the end of the first session students had gained the following: a clear understanding of the characters and plot events of *Jekyll and Hyde*; the genre conventions of Gothic and Gothic-influenced computer games; a clear idea of what they were going to do in the forthcoming lessons.
- Students started the next session reflecting on the learning from the previous lesson.
- They then had to perform three tasks throughout the course of the lesson: learning the definitions of a range of Victorian words; storyboarding their trailers; reading the text of *Jekyll and Hyde.*
- In session three students rehearsed and recorded their trailers.
- In session four students watched and evaluated each others' trailers and then wrote their justification and reflection documents.

Student testimony: Adam

Before doing the project I found understanding how to change written texts to video texts a problem. I didn't know much about the story of *Jekyll and Hyde*. Without having to think about our storyboarding our work would have been much harder as it would have been much more difficult to identify the key parts of the story.

Previously my group and I have felt uncomfortable performing work in a drama studio-type situation. By using ICT and recording our work and creating something with special effects we've become more confident as our finished product is much better than it would be. As I can put the video file on my phone it allows my parents to see it and this also helps me get confidence.

Some of the language in the story is hard to understand and this sort of work is often difficult for teachers to teach as it is quite dull and boring. Choosing to have our trailer narrated meant that we had to concentrate on snippets of text and assess how dramatic they were. When you see our final video you can see that we've had to think about the affect the words have on the audience.

Having to write a reflection essay at the end of the project made me think very carefully about the techniques we'd used. Doing this at the end and having to talk about both the text and the project made it easier to think about what we'd learnt.

Having all the resources on the school Intranet means that the pace in the lesson is much quicker than it would have been which, I guess, makes teaching this sort of thing easier. If we know where to look, it means that we can concentrate on what's important rather than having to explore the whole Internet.

Reflections, obstacles and suggestions for further developments

- The primary obstacle to successfully completing this project will be a lack of IT and multi-media resources – however, instead of using green screen effects, students could still access the

stimuli and then film their performances for evaluation later. This would still leave them with an artefact and allow for some editing with sound effects, music etc.

- The essay part of the project will need some clear modelling in order to allow students to gain the higher levels outlined on the rubric.
- A starter activity in which students analysed connectives and sequencing words would work well.
- The difference between a good artefact and an excellent artefact is the costume and attention to detail students pay to their performance.
- Filming requires the teacher to work in role as a director and check students' understanding through intensive and assertive questioning. The role play element of this means that fairly brusque comments can be made without impacting on students' confidence.
- Given the strict time frames involved, any students not attending need to be marked down on the performance level of the rubric as their absence can adversely affect the work of others.
- Students need to have a mature approach to group work and this needs to be encouraged by the school – expectations should be made clear in advance.
- If time or students' ability allows, more in-depth comparisons of other literary heritage texts could be made.
- If using the online links to dictionary.com, it might be worthwhile linking the words on the Intranet to their definitions.

Appendices

1. Link to sample resources.
2. Launch letter to students from the NATE mentor.

Appendix 1: Link to sample resources

These resources on the school website give a flavour of the extra support put into our case study. At the time of writing it wasn't entirely finished. Click on 'Links' at the top of the page to see the stimulus material and sample of the work produced.

http://www.ninestiles.bham.sch.uk/greenscreen/

Appendix 2: Launch letter to students from the NATE mentor

NATE

National Association for the Teaching of English

A message to Mr Weir's Class at Ninestiles School

Welcome to the latest interactive project from the National Association for the Teaching of English and Becta, the Government's agency for ICT in education . We're delighted that you're taking part and looking forward to seeing the results. Each time I've visited Ninestiles I have been very impressed by the facilities and even more by the enthusiasm and hard work of the students. I'm sure you'll work with Mr Weir to create some great material for our conference next month. We want to be able to show a group of teachers, and others who work in schools and advise the Government, that using ICT can make a real difference to learning in schools.

Mr Weir tells me that you are going to be exploring ways of telling stories to capture the interest of modern audiences. Everyone loves stories – telling them, listening to them, acting them out, watching them, laughing at them, wondering what will happen next. What we would like you to show is how teenagers, who know about modern communication and ways of telling stories from books and films to graphic novels and computer games, can use the technology in interesting ways – perhaps updating old stories and using familiar settings in new ways.

Show us the best that you can do! And good luck!

Tom Rank

Manager, NATE/Becta Projects

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