MEDIA EDUCATION & ENGLISH

Jenny Grahame

ABSTRACT

Although we know that visual and moving image texts can support and extend students' creative, analytical and argument-forming skills, it's often hard for over-stretched classroom teachers to find the time, energy and resources to combine engaging material with active media literacy strategies. This workshop will explore the relationship between reading and writing media, using innovative software programmes. PicturePower and MoviePower are designed to offer user-friendly whole-class approaches to media concepts and analysis, focusing on the role of editing in constructing meaning, and the development of writing and editing skills. Participants will explore hands-on the cross-curricular potential of these manageable one-stop resources, using stills, moving image extracts, soundtracks, sound recording and editing options to deconstruct and write in a variety of topics and genres, from advertising copy to environmental campaign, video poem to news items to music video.

It's long been acknowledged that visual and moving image texts have enormous potential to support and extend students' written, oral, analytic and argument skills; the argument that media literacy should be an entitlement for all young people has been fought and won; and it is now unarguable that reading and writing in media – the critical practices which inform the media curriculum – offer powerful and transferable opportunities for genuine creativity and engagement with critical ideas. With changing technologies, funding schemes and commitment from government, regulators and the media themselves, the resources to explore and critique these practices have never been so accessible, and the will to implement them has never been greater. So why then, twenty years after the introduction of the National Curriculum, has it proved so hard to embed into the English curriculum a model of media literacy for all students which does what all literacy activities should do: integrate the reading and writing of media texts, offer a critical vocabulary enabling all students to articulate their responses more clearly, and systematically develop the core skills required to read and write across media platforms both creatively and critically?

Of course, we all know many of the answers to this question: lack of time in a curriculum still primarily focused on the mechanics of print literacy; lack of access to texts, resources and kit, often jealously guarded (where it exists) by specialists in Media and ICT departments; lack of confidence, training and expertise in an area frequently deemed insufficiently relevant to league tables and results to merit CPD; and so on. But the assumption that media literacy work must of necessity be costly, time-consuming and organisationally difficult needs challenging – as does the claim that it should be the province of the English department alone.

This workshop aimed to explore the ways in which media analysis, concepts and skills can be explored through digital production processes within the reach of most classroom teachers, curriculum areas, and institutional contexts. It introduced delegates to two pieces of software developed by the English and Media Centre. PicturePower3 is the third generation of a CD-ROM which introduces students to the construction of meaning through selecting, sequencing and editing still images and sound and the creation of 'still-image movies'. First developed in the mid-1990s, it has been piloted, monitored and well used in classrooms from Year 5–Year 12; its second version won the BETT prize for Secondary Educational Software, and was used nationally with Literacy consultants as part of the KS3 Strategy training programme for English. MoviePower is a newly developed moving-image equivalent, offering simple editing software for use with a variety of extracts covering diverse genres and topics. Both are intuitive, easy to use, and highly flexible, with the additional advantage of incorporating their own content, teaching activities, and classroom guidance; altogether a more feasible proposition for less experienced teachers on limited budgets than conventional editing software.

STAGE 1

From print to screen – old technology to new

The workshop began with an overview of the basics of the PicturePower3 (PP3) software in classroom mode. Starting with one of those classic cut and paste activities which never fails to deliver, pairs of delegates worked together on Mainline Station, a series of 32 still images shot around Euston Station, to construct the 10-shot opening of a short narrative. Each pair worked to a generic variation, including a 'Day in the Life'-type documentary, a thriller narrative, a video diary, or a health and safety information ad; the aim was for each pair to decide on a narrative sequence with a notional soundtrack and suggestions for editing techniques.

We then explored the same activity as provided digitally on the PP3 CD-ROM. This software allows students to order, crop, manipulate, time and create transitions for their sequences and play them as 'still-image movies', full screen and in full colour. It also offers them the opportunity to create text captions or speech bubbles, select from a range of soundtracks, and to record their own voiceover commentary, dialogue or analysis, which can be synchronised with the images.

As different pairs constructed, and then deconstructed, their own sequence for the rest of the group, the results – which of course differed widely according to genre and format – demonstrated the effects of selection, sequence, juxtaposition, framing, sound and context on the meanings of each image. Thus, a single image of a girl alighting from a train might have a completely different meaning depending on whether it was held for five seconds as an establishing shot, juxtaposed with a threatening looking youth, or faded out at the end of a sequence, preceded by a title such as The Runaway, or accompanied by a stream-of-consciousness monologue. In little more than ten minutes, delegates were able to 'read' the impact of context, genre, and expectation, on the texts they themselves had 'written', in the format of still-image movies.

In debriefing this introductory activity, the group discussed pedagogy and the relationship between analysis and practice. For example: given the intuitive drag-and-drop nature of the 'practice' offered by the software, why not cut straight to the chase, and go for the digital bells and whistles without the old-tech cut-and-paste introduction? That's where the 'critical' bit comes in: the opportunity to slow down and distance the activity, to encourage reflection on the process and impact of editing, and to rehearse the terminology for different types of camera shot, angle and transition, and their impact on the viewer/reader. At a more sophisticated theoretical level, slowing down the activity makes it possible to explicitly draw out a number of key semiotic principles implicit in the practical processes of constructing a sequence. For example, the group was able to articulate and discuss:

■ the polysemic nature of images, and the anchorage offered by captioning, spoken or musical soundtrack

■ the transformative effect of juxtaposition – the Kuleshov experiment in context

■ the difference between perspective, viewpoint (the position of the camera in relation to the subject), and point of view (the subjective perspective of the protagonist)

■ how readers/viewers is positioned by the sequence – who is looking at whom, and to what effect, and the different reading they bring to the experience

■ questions of representation and stereotyping, and so on

The group also looked beyond the development of critical media concepts to consider broader pedagogic strategies. Work on the Mainline Station exercise generated intense and highly focused talk at the cut and paste stage; whole-class modelling onscreen made the debriefing process manageable and explicit. The process was explored in terms of a literacy event, with equivalence to the word-sentence-whole-text focus of the strategy. We looked at alternative ways of displaying student work, particularly the use of the storyboard facility, which enables students to annotate, describe, create commentary for, and then print out their sequences, thus providing hard-copy 'evidence' for a portfolio, production log, or as scaffolding for critical evaluation. We discussed the use of the activity as a springboard for creative writing in English, which has been particularly successful with Key Stage 3 students using earlier versions of the PicturePower software. Members of the group working in City Learning Centres and with special needs learners commented on the value of the process to a range of different learning styles and needs, particularly visual, kinaesthetic, and aural; again, early versions of the software have been used to outstanding effect in a number of special schools. Finally, we also raised issues of transferability: how might this activity be adapted for other forms of technology, and for other curriculum areas – which took us into Stage 2.

STAGE 2

Doing it ourselves – and making it our own

This part of the session took on a more speculative life as we experimented with a range of the other 'stories' or resource-banks provided in PP3. Pairs were each allocated a separate story and a given task; over the two sessions, these included:

■ an alternative news bulletin based on images of a confrontational demonstration, in which police and demonstrators clashed violently (Kill the Bill)

■ a short film for Children's TV featuring school-based images of truanting pupils and anxious staff (Out of Class)

■ a news item celebrating the centenary of the Suffragette movement, requiring the evaluation of a range of documentary photographs, posters, pro- and anti-suffrage propaganda (Picturing the Suffragettes)

■ a soap opera storyline constructed from images from a Grange Hill episode

■ a title sequence for a C4 documentary series called Rich World Poor World, using a montage of images of wealth and poverty and a selection of music tracks all entitled Money

■ a video poem, using the 'empty' Do-It-Yourself module into which any scanned, Googled or photographic digital images can be imported – in this case a library of diverse images of 'London' to accompany a reading of William Blake's poem of the same name

■ the construction of stories, meaning, and cultural context from close reading of narrative paintings, including the work of Brueghel, Wright and Ford Maddox Brown – much as explored in Ian Wall's 'Just an Image' workshop

Pairs of delegates worked intensively and with much discussion on these exercises for too short a time to create finished sequences, but for long enough to 'taste' the learning objectives and critical ideas embedded in each exercise, and to come up with engaging and creative ideas and solutions. Before debriefing, they were asked to consider the sorts of knowledge and skills they (and by extension their students) brought to the activity, and the different sorts of decisions they were having to make in their selection. The resulting discussion brought up the following interesting pedagogic debates and dilemmas:

■ The potential of the Do-It-Yourself module, which can be used in a variety of ways:

– as a framework for teacher-sourced images to illustrate a literary or non-fiction text, debate or issue, virtually anywhere in the curriculum

– as a presentation tool for students to research digital images online, and construct their own documentary slide-show around a given topic

– or to import screen grabs from film or TV for analysis and sequencing in the study of a moving image text, key scene or trailer

– to double as the framework for students' own digital photographs, to create photo-montages, music videos, or audio-visual presentations

– best of all, to construct digital storyboards – a new media alternative to the tedious ritual of drawn stick-men in boxes, which forces students to consider not only the action of their chosen narrative, but the elements of mise-en-scène, location and camera position visible in each frame

■ The role of the process in areas of the curriculum beyond English and Media Studies. The Suffragette exercise, for example, was intentionally planned to support the History curriculum in its requirement to evaluate and challenge contemporary documents and evidence; it could also act as a model to investigate documents from other historical periods, imported into the D-I-Y module. Similarly, the themes of the Money exercise raises issues for Citizenship, but could also be modified and adapted for Business Studies, Geography, or PSHE.

■ The extent to which prior knowledge of media genres and conventions is required for these activities, and their pedagogic grounding in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. Thus, in the Kill the Bill exercise, while some students might be able to start from their cultural familiarity with TV news, those with a less strong grasp of news values and conventions will acquire these concepts through the scaffolded process of constructing their sequence.

■ The social and collaborative focus of the process, which relies on the group- or pair-sharing of ideas, knowledge and skills. There are no 'right answers' or aesthetically correct decisions; the value of the activities lies as much in experimentation, play, talk, and negotiation as in the acquisition of individual skills.

■ The genuine ease of use and mixed ability nature of the exercises, where differentiation really can be evaluated by outcome. PicturePower software has been used effectively by students from Year 5–Year 12, in contexts ranging from KS2 literacy lessons as stimulus for creative writing, to Media students as part of an AS induction unit preparing students for practical production work. This in turn leads to . . .

■ . . . the question of when, where or indeed whether to locate the activities within a scheme of work; whether to use the experiential learning offered by a PP3 exercise as the starting point for – or the conclusion of – genre analysis, creative writing or practical media work, or to use it as an end in itself.

■ The role of collaboration, play and simulation. Henry Jenkins describes the value of games and play as a form of problem-solving, which he identifies as a core skill of 'New Media Literacy'. He also describes simulation as the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real world processes, another core skill new media. It could be argued that PicturePower3 incorporates both elements of problem-solving games, and a form of simulation, in which students participate as screenwriters and editors.

STAGE 3

But where do we go from here? Movie Power and the question of progression

The last twenty minutes of the workshop offered delegates the opportunity to experiment with Movie Power and consider what it adds to the experience of PP3.

The 'reading and writing' model underpinning PP3 is not intended to be an alternative to, or substitute for, moving image production; but it could be seen as a building block which introduces students to the choices – narrative, editorial, aesthetic – involved in making meaning in moving images. The software offers the potential for development from a simple storytelling or selection exercise to a more sophisticated activity requiring editorial viewpoint or a particular representational perspective, and thence to an original digital storyboard to a given brief. From there, progression to small-group video work is the logical conclusion; ideally, the experience of using PP3 exercises embedded into the curriculum should provide students with critical, editorial and organisational skills they can then apply to more open-ended and original production work. Indeed, the interface of PP3 has been designed to resemble the interface of existing editing programmes such as MovieMaker and iMovie, to ease the transition from still to moving image editing – where such facilities exist.

As we know, such opportunities for students to progress on to fully-edited production work in schools are limited, and far too often restricted to Media Studies classes and the resource-rich curriculums of specialised Media Arts schools. Movie Power, the new moving-image version of PP3, aims to bring the process and experience of editing within the reach of all students in any classroom in a manageable and structured way, via a similar pattern: a number of resource banks of moving-image clips, soundtracks, and a series of limited but manageable tasks which focus more closely on the language of the moving image.

Using a similar interface which incorporates more of the features of commercial editing programmes, including an expandable time-line, in- and out-points, time-coding and a range of advanced options, students can edit together sequences which explore the horrors of war, the arguments for or against zoos, montages of lyrical images to support the writing of poetry or haikus, environmental campaigns, music videos, or spoof commercials; the facility to import students own or found footage, will be developed for later versions. As with PP3, the aim is not to offer a full experience of production, but to critically explore the implications of scripting and editing moving images: Movie Power creates structured opportunities to focus more closely on issues of continuity editing, conventions such as cutting on action and the grammar of different transitions, the techniques and structure of different types of documentary footage, the impact of music and commentary in reinforcing, dramatising or undermining the meaning of a sequence of images, and so on.

Groups worked on a spoof TV advert for a product of their choice, drawing on a range of diverse clips, including time-lapse sequences of natural phenomenon, eccentric animals and surreal human behaviour; they were also offered a range of pack shots, backgrounds, text boxes and display conventions to ground their spoof ad in a fictitious product. While time constraints only allowed for the briefest of experiments, the experience was hugely enjoyable, judging from the hilarity which overtook the room; like students, teachers clearly enjoy nothing more than to subvert, pastiche or otherwise parody existing media formats, and did so in spades – perhaps another example of the power of play?

In discussion delegates identified endless possibilities for using Movie Power within the English curriculum. Besides its focus on the process of planning, creating and redrafting, it can generate relevant and contextualised Speaking and Listening and Writing to Persuade tasks as well as scaffolding of narrative techniques. There are multiple explicit opportunities for using Movie Power as a stimulus for creative writing; the range of images provided, both moving and still, could be used in isolation or alongside texts studied – for example, War Poetry as a powerful stimulus for writing, creating Drama, Art and Music. Modules could also be used for 'calculations' in Mathematics, for 'obtaining and presenting evidence' within Science, for 'communicating in ways appropriate to task and audience' in Geography and exploring issues within RE, P.S.H.E. and Citizenship.

CONCLUSION

New media literacies and the bigger picture

In an influential paper published by the MacArthur Foundation (1), Professor Henry Jenkins, Director of the Comparative Media Studies programme at the Massachussetts Institute of Technology, describes the challenges facing the formal education sector in developing new media literacies, which develop the social skills and cultural competences young people will need to access the participatory culture required by the new media landscape. Building on the foundation of traditional literacy, research, critical and production skills, he identifies a number of what he calls 'new media literacy skills', which include the following:

Play – the capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving

Performance – the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery

Simulation – the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes

Appropriation – the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content

Multitasking – the ability to scan one's environment and shift focus as needed to salient details

Distributed cognition – the ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand mental capacities

Collective intelligence – the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others towards a common goal

Judgement – the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources

Transmedia navigation – the ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities

Networking – the ability to search for, synthesise, and disseminate information

Negotiation – the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms

Three things are notable about this list of core skills. Firstly, how closely they are rooted in what we know to be pedagogical best practice; secondly, how much they depend on collaboration and networking; and thirdly, just how many of these skills are structured into, and developed out of, the processes of PicturePower3 and Movie Power.

Of course in an ideal world, schools would be equipped with the technology, time, resources and expertise to initiate a curriculum of digital experiences which progresses from Key Stage 1 through to Key Stage 5; but continuing inequality of access ensures that this is still some way off, even amongst those Media Arts colleges which have pioneered whole-school approaches to media education. In the interim, accessible and user-friendly one-stop software like PicturePower3 and Movie Power might go some way towards offering every student the opportunity to explore both critical practice and the creative process, and to acquire the new media literacies to which they are entitled.

(1) Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Literacy for the 21st Century, Henry Jenkins, Director of the Comparative Media Studies Department, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, published by the MacArthur Foundation

Jenny Grahame taught Media, English and Sociology in inner London comprehensives for many years before joining the English and Media Centre in 1988 as advisory teacher for media education. Since then she has run INSET and CPD courses on all aspects of the Media and English curriculums, and co-authored a wide range of publications and award-winning classroom resources, including the Advertising Pack, Doing News, the KS3 Media Book, Panic Attacks, MediaRelate and Double Take. She is editor of MediaMagazine. Jenny has been involved in major research projects into conceptual learning through practical production, the value of media education for young people at risk of exclusion, and the role of media in sex and relationships education. She has also worked regularly with QCA, BFI, the Institute of Education's MA in Culture, Media and Communication, and the KS3 Strategy team.