

T R A N S F O R M I N G A T E X T

Martin Phillips

ABSTRACT

Using digital camcorders and editing software, groups of participants produced their own moving image transformation. Working with a given poem, visual image and a selection of music soundtrack options, pre-production, production and post-production activity were completed within the two hours.



THE CREATIVE TASK

This workshop provided delegates with a practical experience of digital editing. Its purpose was to explore the way that meaning is made in different textual forms, addressing elements of both critical practice and creative process.

The 30-minute introduction to the session focused on the basic functions of the editing software package, which for the purposes of this workshop was Pinnacle Studio. Having been given an overview of the functions of the audio and video toolboxes and the choices which they facilitate in terms of meaning making, the delegates worked in pairs to the following brief:

Adlestrop is back! Concerned that far too many children are – quote – ‘Ditching poetry for pop videos’ (TES 16th June 2005), the DfES has told Teacher’s Television to make a series of classic poems as filmed shorts. You are a production company who have been commissioned to make a poem film of *Adlestrop*.

It must:

- Capture the spirit of the original
- Appeal to the MTV generation

YOUR RESOURCES

- An album of stock footage in the Pinnacle Studio edit software
- A camcorder, tape and tripod for recording additional material if you so choose (but in 90 minutes we suggest you choose not to!)
- A headset for recording a reading of the poem
- A CD of music for possible use in the film

YOUR CHOICES

Like all filmmakers, there is a range of possible choices open to you:

- Video manipulation. Essential priority will be given to decisions about matching the pace and style of the edit to the tone or mood you wish to convey to your target audience. Stage one will be to get the basic 'building blocks' in place – assembling the various shots into sequences. Then you can consider which types of transitions to use (just cuts, or will you use fades or even wipes between shots?). Finally there are a number of other possible changes you can make to your film, including:
 - Speed changes: slo-mo or quick-mo
 - Adjustments to the colour
 - Additional visual effects
 - Creating title boards or other on-screen print
- Audio choices. You will need to decide on how you are going to read the poem and record a voice track. Then you need to consider whether to add music – and if so, what and where.

All pairs managed to produce a final outcome; some chose to concentrate on a detailed re-working of one verse, though the majority had produced a poem-film of the whole piece within the tight time constraints of a 90-minute editing period.

CRITICAL PRACTICE

Engagement with the initial literary source was high. Delegates were quickly involved in animated discussion about the choices they should implement to meet the brief. This reflects the experience evident where this approach has been trialled in classrooms. An identifiable impact is usually discernible on the critical practice being undertaken. Documented work with Year 10 (14-15 year-old) students in St Bede's School, Bristol (ref 1) and Woodhey High School, Ramsbottom (ref 2) indicates the way in which textual transformation can positively enhance the initial encounter students have with the poem they are transforming.

The St Bede's students were of higher ability and the class was mixed gender. They were expected to get (and subsequently obtained) an A or B grade in the GCSE English and English Literature examinations. Working with John Cooper Clarke's poem *I Want To Be Yours*, these students storyboarded a series of video images they could shoot around the school campus to accompany a reading of the poem. The recordings of the discussions of the students drawing up the camera shots they intended to use showed not only some quite careful analysis of the poem, but also a clear focus on the meanings they hoped to convey through an audio-visual transformation. One group produced an oppositional reading of the text – a 'reading against the grain' – where the object of the (male) poet's desire rejects his verbal advances in an additional visual 'twist' added to the end of the sequence filmed for each couplet.

The Woodhey students were of lower ability. They were working in an all male group which had been specially formed to address their under-achievement in English. As part of their GCSE English course they had to study a range of 'poems from different cultures'. Rather than approach the study of these texts from a conventional literary critical/analytical direction, the students were put into groups of three or four and each group was given a different poem to produce as a short film. The initial resistance often evident among students when faced with deconstruction of poetry was circumvented: the boys began to burrow into the texts, immediately looking for the visual means to represent these very different set of poems. Like the students from St Bede's, all groups produced a final product which had amplified some aspect of the meaning of the original piece. Some showed impressive creativity in the use of the limited number of settings available to them. The group working on *Night of the Scorpion* by Nissim Ezekiel used a candle, silhouetted figures walking behind an open paling fence, the groundsman's hut and skilful editing to create an atmospheric rendering of this poem – no mean achievement on a wet Wednesday in Ramsbottom!

CREATIVE PROCESS

Both groups described above were engaged in a creative process. The Woodhey students took the process further by producing fully edited versions of the poems – which they subsequently submitted as the practical production pieces for their GCSE Media Studies coursework.

The **poem:image:film** project (ref 3), conducted by Martin Phillips and Nick Jones of Devon Curriculum Services and supported by BBC documentary director Peter Symes, also explored the links between poetry and film. Symes has been instrumental in developing the film-poem genre through his work with Tony Harrison. In his introduction to Harrison's scripts for his film poems he makes an interesting analogy between the poetry and film:

Still words combined into lines are doing for the ears what single frames projected at speed are doing for the eyes. (ref 4)

It may be that it is that each has the potential to work at the level of metaphor. Certainly in his initial input to the project, Symes was clear that the production of the film poems was a highly creative process. Harrison himself worked closely with film crew, editors and Symes himself, working on the way that meaning was created when words and moving images came together.

Over 40 film poems were produced by school students during the course of the poem:image:film project. Some took the approach adopted in this workshop – transforming existing verse into moving images. Others were closer to the Symes/Harrison model, where students created their own poem films, using their own original writing and video material. The outcomes reinforced the notion that as a means of supporting both critical practice and the creative process, making links between these two textual forms can be highly productive.

REFERENCES:

1. Video recordings in the tape archive of DCS's digital Media Education Centre. The St Bede's material was developed in collaboration with the Head of English at St Bede's Roman Catholic High School, Bristol in March 2000.
2. Ibid. Material recorded at Woodhey High School involved Head of English, Alrene Hughes, in June 2004.
3. Between 1998 and 2003 teachers from 12 Devon secondary schools worked on explorations of the way in which poetry and film interact. An initial two day conference held at the Digital Media Education Centre in Exeter in June 1998 set the agenda, with practical workshops sessions being complemented by theoretical input, including a presentation by Peter Symes which traced the history of film and poetry from Night Mail to the present day. The outcomes of a five-year period of working with various Devon secondary schools on the links between poetry and film were distilled into the DCS publication poem:image:film by Martin Phillips and published in 2003.
4. Harrison, T, *The Shadow of Hiroshima and other Film Poems* (Faber, 1996)

Martin Phillips is Director of the DCS Digital Media Education team, has been Chief Moderator for A/AS Level Media Studies and is currently an Assistant Principal Moderator for AQA GCSE English. Martin has written a variety of books and articles on English and Media Studies teaching, most recently GCSE Media Studies (Heinemann, 2004).

Martin Phillips has directed more than 40 Video/DVD resources for secondary schools on English, Media Studies and Art