

Journal of Trainee Teacher Education Research

JoTTER: Volume 1 (2010)

A critical investigation, using approaches drawn from action research, into how Year Nine English students' creative storytelling can be stimulated through the use of multi-modal texts.

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of using multi-modal texts to stimulate Key Stage Three students' creative writing. My research methodology was carried out as an action research project with a Year Nine, mixed ability English class. Through studying various professional publications and wider literature in the field of creative writing, I implemented my own scheme of work, which will form the basis of this research. I will argue for the effectiveness of using a variety of multi-modal texts in order to stimulate students' creative writing.

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INTRODUCTION

This assignment investigates the effectiveness of using multi-modal texts to stimulate Key Stage Three students' creative writing. For the purpose of this research, the multi-modal texts utilised were film, music and images. My research methodology was carried out as an action research project with a Year Nine, mixed ability English class. Through studying various professional publications and wider literature in the field of creative writing, I implemented my own scheme of work, which will form the basis of this research. I will argue for the effectiveness of using a variety of multi-modal texts in order to stimulate students' creative writing.

Creative Writing and the Curriculum

'Creative writing is a profoundly effective way of bolstering and developing the need for personal development that lies at the heart of the national curriculum.'

(Motion, 2007, July 12th.)

In response to the implementation of the new national curriculum in September 2008 the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, praised the stronger focus on a curriculum that outlines the importance of teaching students to 'value and validate creativity' (Motion, 2007, July 12th).

Throughout his speech at the launch of the new secondary curriculum, Motion discussed the high value given to creative writing in primary schools as well as the sudden 'boom' and popularity of creative writing courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level. When considering the subject between primary and tertiary levels before the new curriculum was in place, he referred to the education system as 'a sandwich with no filling' (Motion, 2007, July 12th). The new curriculum has the scope to 'fill' this, with Key Concepts that focus on 'using imagination,' 'making fresh connections' and 'using creative approaches' (QCA, 2007).

My Own Professional Development

Upon reading the part of Andrew Motion's speech where he refers to the lack of focus on creative writing in secondary schools, I found myself comparing his statements with my personal schooling, and was in instant agreement. As a keen writer myself, I have fond memories of allowing my imagination to run free and create fantastical stories in primary school. My memory then shifts to my undergraduate experience, where I was presented with excellent prospects within the student newspaper and the opportunity to study a number of creative writing modules as part of my English Literature degree. However, when considering my secondary school education, there is an undeniable gap in terms of creative writing. As an aspect of school I had previously enjoyed, this gap seemed fairly obvious to me. As I read Andrew Motion's speech alongside my developing knowledge of the new curriculum, I decided that to formulate a research question around creative writing would not only be an enjoyable and interesting experience, but a worthwhile way of working within the scope of the new curriculum, where I could allow and encourage students to 'invent something of their own' (QCA, 2007).

The Students

I was presented with the opportunity to conduct a creative writing scheme of work with a Year Nine English class, with whom I was already familiar and had begun to build relationships with. There is a broad range of abilities within this class, with students ranging from Level Three to Level Seven, yet it can be said that the class leaned towards the low ability end of the spectrum. However, the majority of the group were lively and possessed confidence when contributing ideas and sharing work. Taking into account the excitable nature of the group as well as the ability levels, I decided that using a variety of stimuli that was familiar to their everyday life could be an effective and interesting method of motivating their creative writing.

Formulating the Research Question

‘Writing can be an extension and reflection of all our efforts to develop and express ourselves in the world around us, to make sense of that world, and to impose order upon it.’
(Smith, 1970: 4)

In response to Smith’s statement, I possess a strong belief that writing creatively helps not only to further the academic achievement of children and adults, but also the social achievement. For many adolescents, particularly of the Year Nine age group, I felt that ‘to make sense of the world’ (*ibid*: 4) was something that was highly relevant, although perhaps not explicitly so in their own minds. I was aware that in order to stimulate the students’ writing, I first had to reach them and grasp their attention. My planning was guided by a number of questions:

- If writing is about making sense of the world, then what is a major influence in an average teenager’s world?

Television, Internet, film, pictures and music are all aspects that make up large proportions of our everyday lives, especially the lives of teenagers. It is always apparent that students enjoy learning through the medium of media within the classroom, and this led me to consider the impact of digital media upon adolescents today. The next question in my planning stage then began to develop:

- How effective would it be to use different forms of digital media as stimuli for creative writing?

By this stage of my planning I was beginning to consider that pursuing the avenue of digital media could be effective in stimulating students’ creative writing. I wanted the class to connect their writing with the world around them, as I felt this could be a strong motivational tool. With these research questions in mind, I began to conduct an extensive review of various professional publications in order to gain grounding for my research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

‘Research may be done alone – but it is never done in isolation’

(O’Leary, 2004: 66)

Before I began to locate literature in the field of creative writing, I consulted Zina O’Leary’s ‘The Essential Guide to Doing Research.’ ‘Working with Literature’ was most helpful in outlining the effective ways to manage, use and review relevant literature in research. O’Leary highlights the importance of using literature that ‘generates ideas, helps form significant questions, and is instrumental in the process of research design’ (O’Leary, 2004: 66).

Creative Writing and Motivation

Under the new National Curriculum at Key Stage Three, creativity is viewed as

‘an area that many feel needs to be represented more explicitly in programmes of study.’

(QCA, 2007)

The revised curriculum has considered many factors that are needed to equip students for life in the 21st Century; ‘The revisions take into account the impact of technology on the subject and include references to exploring how meaning is created in multimodal texts’. These aspects of the National Curriculum helped me to form a backbone for the literature review aspect of this research.

Firstly, I considered the main element of my research; using digital media within the classroom. David Self provides some interesting opinions on the use of digital media in his work ‘*Audio or Visual? Some Thoughts on the Motivation of Children’s Writing*’ (1969). He states that ‘English is communication’ (Self, 1969: 11) and therefore we must encompass all forms of communication within our English teaching. When considering the means of communication in today’s society, it is clear as to why the National Curriculum has had to adopt an approach to the use of multi-modal texts. We are continually communicating and being communicated to through Internet, television, music and films to name but a few. As the world becomes more connected, and devices such as mobile phones are readily available for all, it is clear that communication is a vital part of our lives.

Self then goes on to discuss the importance of communication through verbal and visual starting points in order to motivate students’ creative writing (p.11). I had considered using music as a

stimulus and already had a vague idea of some pieces of music that I could use in order to enable to the students to think about creating atmosphere in their writing. Self states that ‘the response to music is so personal, the poetry or prose that a listening class may produce will be original and frequently excitingly so’ (p.12).

However, the writer then warns against the use of music that has direct associations with anything. He claims that by using music that the class could already ally with something else, their imagination is restricted (p.12). Yet, taking into account the ‘personal response’ he says is achieved through listening to music, I considered that it could be interesting to find a way of determining different students’ responses to familiar pieces of music. I was aware that I would need to think of an inventive approach for allowing the students to creatively move beyond the general preconception of a piece of music. Self also states, in relation to using images to motivate students’ writing that we are ‘dominated by our visual self’ (p.13) and due to this we need to ‘think the class into a picture’s atmosphere, rather than merely display it and hope for the best’ (p.13).

In light of this statement, I felt it could be interesting to somehow combine audio and visual images, to determine to what extent the students were ‘dominated’ by their ‘visual self.’ At this stage of my planning, I was aware that I had read literature about the ways I could get students interested and motivated to write creatively, yet I was also conscious of the fact that I was in danger of moving away from the basic language skills and techniques that are fundamental in teaching English. I needed to focus my research and planning upon areas that would enable me to incorporate this into the work.

The Effect of Multi-Modal Texts upon Creative Writing

‘All the old English is out: and creative English is in.’

(Smith, 1970:4)

Smith states that the new methods of teaching English, as discussed in Self’s publication, make the subject far more enjoyable than it ever was; allowing for the release of energy into teachers and students alike. Although this may be a somewhat dated reference, it still is still relevant when considering the idea of change within a subject. He claims that by using modern technologies to

assist in the teaching of English that 'much of (this) energy and enthusiasm is being dissipated through lack of direction' (p.4).

This correlates with Self's perspective, that predisposing students to music they are already familiar with will have a restrictive effect on their imaginations. Yet, Smith takes a more extreme view of this and states that we are living in an age where the abundance of multi-modal texts means 'no new challenge for their (students') imagination.... but only gimmicks for the moment' (Smith, 1970: 4).

Therefore, it can be said that whilst the wide access to such modern forms of media allows young people to develop the extent of their adult knowledge, and they may have more awareness of particular themes, yet it does not allow them to develop their actual language skills. Although I had begun to formulate ideas of how to motivate the students, I was aware that if I wanted them to actually improve their writing, I would need to take some less creative approaches in the classroom as well. This led me to consider that whilst multi-modal texts may provide an effective stimulus for students' creative writing, they would not necessarily help them to develop their language skills, which is essential to producing a high standard of writing. Consequently, I needed to consider ways in which to incorporate language improvement into the work on creative writing; 'the acquisition of a finer instrument of language and a larger vocabulary helps them (the students) to "see" more clearly, and sift their bewildering complexity of experience more exactly' (Smith, 1970: 7).

Overall, if I wanted the students to 'make sense of the world' through their writing, I needed to help them grasp the language they would use as the 'tool' to reach understanding.

The Creative Imagination

Much of the research discussed so far focuses on what Debra Myhill describes as the 'what' of writing, rather than the 'how' (Myhill, 2008: 13). She states that a common opinion, especially amongst underachieving boys, was that they enjoyed 'the creative freedom of writing in English, in direct contrast to the more functional, content-led writing encountered elsewhere in the curriculum' (p.13).

In her research 'Writing: Crafting and Creating,' Myhill goes on to discuss the desire many students have to 'have authority and ownership of their writing' (p.14).

It is through the students' own imaginations, of course, that this ownership is possible. In terms of the lessons I was about to embark on with Year Nine, it was important that I considered their imaginations as integral in the process of creative writing. Whilst I had considered the ways in which I would stimulate their writing, i.e. the methods I would employ to improve their writing, I also had to ensure that the students' imaginations were utilised to the best of their abilities throughout the process. Following on from this thought, Burton (2008) states in 'Approaches to Creative Writing' that

'Every child possesses imagination, and a child whose imagination has been nourished by exposure to literature and who has given expression to writing his fears, his joys and his bewilderment, will have perhaps an increased chance of developing into an adult with qualities of compassion and sympathetic understanding.'

(Burton, 2008: 19)

Upon reading this, I realised that this was one way for the students to 'make sense of the world' through their creative writing. On the basis of what Burton says, if a child's imagination is stretched and challenged accordingly within their writing, then it can actually be used to help them with the development into adulthood (p.20). Within the desire of many adolescents is the aspiration to be treated like an adult and often digital media and communication can be seen as an expression of this desire.

The effect of the media is a topic that is widely debateable in today's society. The Internet, television programmes, computer games and various types of music are all highly influential and given that teenagers are particularly impressionable; it is this age group that often features at the centre of the debate. A strong, recurring theme within this debate is that with the influx of new media, young people are using their imaginations less. Through conducting some Internet based research, particularly looking at the BBC's Newsround website, I became aware of the fact that the debate between modern media and the more traditional book was rife. I was able to see that this debate was not only fierce amongst adults, but children as well. I found one particularly helpful article on the Newsround website, 'Which do you prefer, books or films?' (BBC Newsround, 2007)

In a comment board connected to this article, children have given their opinions as to which they find better, books or films. One child states:

'I think books are better, because when you read a book your imagination can run wild, books describe more, they are educational without it being like a test or something and when you stop reading the book doesn't carry on without you.'

In terms of films, a common response seemed to be that 'Films make the picture for you but books make you make the own picture in your head and everyone has different pictures'.

Although this article and these responses were not directly linked to the research I was intending to conduct with Year Nine, it was helpful in enabling me to consider the possible hindrance media based texts could have upon the students' imaginations. The Internet research I conducted in this area strengthened the developing awareness that I needed to be careful with the ways in which I used the media. Therefore, in my planning it was imperative that I used digital media in such a way so as not to hinder the students' imaginations, but to encourage them to use their imaginations even more so.

In terms of digital media hindering students' imaginations, I read Havard Skaar's essay 'In Defence of Writing: A Social Semiotic Perspective on Digital Media, Literacy and Learning.' (2009) He states that we are now looking at learning 'in an age when digital media are making multi-modal forms of expression increasingly available to us all' (Skaar, 2009: 36).

My idea for research of using multi-modal texts to stimulate creative writing had been formed out of the concept of considering what was important in the world of the students I was teaching, and how I could use this to help them reach the best of their abilities. Skaar affirms that we are living in a world of social, economic and communicational change (p.38); and these ideas lay behind my own research question. However, he poses that question that although computers and digital media may help us to produce text, 'What does this help mean for what we learn?' (p.38).

Similarly to Myhill, Skaar puts forward an argument that digital media may help with the 'what' of writing, but it does not necessarily help us learn 'how' to write. However, the writer then goes on to consider that perhaps all writing is multi-modal and we can break down the assumption into the design, colour and position of writing within a book.

All of these factors ‘contribute to the creation of meaning for the reader’ (p.40).

Thus, although Skaar highlights the potential problems with using digital media alongside writing, perhaps it can be said that everything is multi-modal and so students are used to the concept. This prepared me to consider, within my own research, how to allow the students to draw the distinction between their own imagination and the ideas presented within multi-modal texts. I became increasingly conscious that if I wanted my research to be successful, the students needed to be able to distinguish between their own imagination and the ideas of others. Writers such as Skaar are not saying that the creative imagination has disappeared, more so that the effect of digital media may have caused it to lie dormant. Thus, it can be seen as a twofold process as ‘Writing forces us to make ourselves visible through our own choices...it is these choices we learn from’ (p. 38).

The Challenge of Creative Writing

By this stage in the literature review, I had considered the reasons why using digital media could be effective in stimulating students’ creative writing, as well as the ways it may effect their imagination. However, at this point in the planning, I was now aware that I needed to take into account what areas of creative writing many students may find a ‘challenge.’ This area of my literature review was particularly helpful in composing questionnaires for the class that would help me to shape lessons around their responses. A.W. Hardy in ‘A Study of the Acquisition of the Skill of Creative Writing’ states that ‘the greatest problem is in formulating the ideas the “plot” to fill that page’ (Hardy, 2008: 48).

Through reading this article, alongside the others mentioned in this literature review, I became aware that although provision of a starting point may be able to motivate pupils, perhaps it was not enough to sustain their motivation, or to necessarily improve their writing. Hardy claims that a common problem with students’ creative writing is that they were ‘groping in the dark’ for ideas. (p.48). Whilst many students may possess ‘an imaginative consciousness in terms of ideas and story,’ it is the linking together of these ideas and the structure, which may hinder their progress. Hardy suggests comprehension style questions so that the student acquires a consciousness of the theme they are preparing to write about creatively. This ‘scaffolding’ of ideas can help the students to feel more guided in their story writing.

At this point, I thought it would be useful to refer to the BBC's Newsround website again, as I found the children's 'comment board' section useful to view the honest opinions of children at school. In terms of creative writing, a common response was that there needed to be more incentive for the students to write, with one remarking; 'They should at least brighten up the classrooms to give us some inspiration.

How can you write creatively in a boring classroom?' (BBC Newsround, 2007) This particular response is interesting when it comes to considering the challenges of creative writing. If this student's imagination were being stimulated accordingly, then it can be said that the surroundings of the classroom were unimportant in the creative writing process. However, it could also be said that with the influx of digital media, perhaps children feel the need to be provided with exciting stimuli in order to get their imaginations going. What I needed to do within my own teaching was to provide the students with stimuli to motivate their writing, and sustain this motivation with sufficient support throughout. In planning the lessons, I needed to take this into account, all the while considering how their imaginations could be used to the best possible advantage.

METHODOLOGY

After reviewing literature in the field of creative writing and the effect of digital media stimuli, I carried out an action research project with a Year Nine, mixed ability class. Through the literature discussed, as well as my own personal knowledge of the group, I created a scheme of work that derived from the main focus of my research question; stimulating Year Nine students' creative storytelling through the use of multi-modal texts.

Consulting Elaine Wilson's 'School Based Research – A Guide for Education Students,' I realised that whilst 'The impetus for some research may stem from a situation being considered as unacceptable in some respects' (Wilson, 2009: 190), my research with Year Nine was 'concerned with the everyday practical problems experienced by teachers'.

Therefore, I would adopt a 'flexible research approach' (p.190). Due to the lively nature of the class as well as the nature of the topic; creative writing, I was certain that a flexible approach to my research would not only be necessary but beneficial as well.

Before I began the scheme of work, I posed some basic questions with the class related to story writing in a questionnaire, which contained closed questions, as well as an open question at the end. However, when analysing the results I felt that perhaps it would have been better to make the majority of questions open. This is due to the nature of some of the results I received and the suggestion that ‘scales should not have central points as this forces the respondent to make a decision about how they feel – but this may be an artificial choice if they genuinely have neutral or mixed feelings about a topic’ (Taber, 2007: 149).

Yet, it was interesting to note that whilst a clear majority of students circled ‘easy’ when asked about their ability to think of ideas for a story, all students but one answered ‘yes’ when asked whether they found it helpful to have a starting point for their story. This indicated to me, a confidence in imagination within the class but a lack of confidence when applying that imagination; whilst they find it easy to think of ideas, they find it *easier* to have a starting point from which to launch these ideas.

The action research project itself was a scheme of work that lasted over fifteen lessons, and was designed to help motivate the students’ creative writing and build up to a final, assessed story. Prior to beginning work with the class, I had read a cross section of horror stories that they had written at the beginning of Year Nine. Through studying these carefully, I was able to identify areas of creative writing that the students were capable of, as well as areas with which they struggled. This data helped me to develop the scheme of work. Each lesson involved writing of some sort, but not at any great length. I aimed to get the students to write small sections at a time and work on perfecting these. I then prepared to work with the class on ways to pull the skills acquired in all of these sections together as one, and create a final, extended piece.

Through having the luxury of no time constraint, I was able to conduct my research as a scheme of work. This was advantageous in more ways than one. Firstly, it allowed me to add variety and flexibility to the scheme. As mentioned before, the class possess a wide range of abilities as well as a very lively and sometimes challenging nature. Therefore, it was important that I could adapt and modify the scheme where I deemed it necessary. Secondly, I feel that it provided me with a twofold advantage when considering the class as research participants. I believed that it would be positive in a class, where confidence in ability is often low; to be honest with the students about the reasons

behind the scheme of work upon which they were about to embark on. As O'Leary states, 'Recognising and appreciating the researched for what they are giving to the research process can go a long way in the researched feeling comfortable enough to expose themselves and provide candid data' (O'Leary, 2004: 51).

Due to the personal nature of the topic of creative writing, I felt that the students' being 'comfortable' was vital in encouraging them to produce personal and creative writing. However, although I wanted the students to be aware of what they were doing, in a sense, the research was a fairly normal school activity, following a scheme of work over a series of weeks, which would hopefully allow the students to act in a natural way whilst I was able to continually reflect upon it. The flexibility in the scheme of work also presented an opportunity to collect data from a number of fields, through analysis of previous work, questionnaires and interviews. By using this type of triangulation there exists 'the merit of counterbalancing the threats inherent to any one method.' (Wilson, 2009:120).

The scheme of work followed a fairly structured pattern of using multi-modal texts to stimulate the students' writing, getting the students to produce a piece of writing and working on ways to improve the quality of their writing. Most of the lessons had a fair proportion devoted to feedback, as in a class where confidence in expression is largely high, but confidence in ability is largely low, hearing one another's work seemed not only to be a popular choice, but one that enabled the other pupils to extend their evaluative skills. I was positive that through evaluating one another's work, the students would gain strength in evaluating their own. At various points during the scheme, I took in the students' books and provided them with formative feedback on class work and homework. This enabled myself, as well as the students themselves to gauge at just what points they were working. Over the fifteen lessons, the class moved towards a final story, which was to be assessed. As I collected data throughout the scheme of work and drew closer to the final assessment, I continually kept in mind Wilson's words;

'For most classroom-focused action research projects, the aim is to bring about a change in your classroom practice so that you and your students will grow as a result of your intervention' (Wilson, 2009:199).

RESEARCH METHODS

Throughout the scheme of work with Year Nine, I collected a number of forms of data to guide both my methodology and findings. I used a variety of methods in which to obtain data, in order to strengthen the findings. O’Leary emphasises the importance of this: ‘Sources of data may vary, and means of accessing and gathering it may differ, but all methodologies are reliant on data and the basic methods and tools used to collect it’ (O’Leary, 2004:150).

Student Data

Prior to the start of the scheme of work with Year Nine, I was given access to pieces of creative writing that they had completed earlier in the academic year. The class had written horror stories as part of their coursework. They had been assessed with levels according to APP assessment criteria. (APP, assessing pupil progress, is a structured approach to in school assessment. It enables teachers to make judgement about pupil progress as it is keyed into national standards.) Through this data, I was not only able to gain an insight into the levels of ability that the students were working at, but I was also able to see which particular areas of creative writing they had difficulty with, as well as the areas in which they were confident. Through discussing this data with the class teacher, I was able to create an informed starting point for the scheme of work.

Questionnaires

I designed a questionnaire (Appendix 1), which I distributed to the class prior to the start of the scheme of work. It consisted of a number of closed questions, and an open question at the end. I deliberated over whether to provide the students with a more complex questionnaire that consisted of more open questions. However, I only intended to use the questionnaires to gauge the students’ opinions of creative writing. Therefore, in terms of analysing the data, I considered O’Leary’s advice that open questions can lead to ‘data that is difficult to code and analyse’ (O’Leary, 2004: p.159). However, as I will discuss in the findings, I incorporated a particular aspect into the open question that did leave me with room to compare this area of the data. I was also wary of providing the students with a questionnaire that was too long, as due to the wide range of abilities in the group; I did not want some students to become bored with the concept of creative writing before the

scheme of work had actually begun! Also, as O'Leary advises in respect of questionnaires, '(those) considered too long can be abandoned, returned incomplete or filled in at random' (p.161). I also referred to the same page for advice in terms of organisation, and chose to place the open question at the end, as 'It is important to ease your respondents into your survey and save sensitive questions for near the end.' The questionnaires were completed by seventeen out of the twenty students in the class and mostly consisted of impersonal choices, except for the final, open question.

Students' Stories

As the final assessment, the students wrote their own story. As a class we had not only looked at work on characters, plot, atmosphere and setting, but a variety of genres as well. I therefore felt that it would not be beneficial and interesting to provide the students with a particular genre within which they had to write. I wanted them to have a free range with their stories, without being restricted to a particular aspect. I felt that, when analysing the data, this would present a more natural presentation of where aspects of digital media had been influential in the students' learning. However, I was aware that (according to the results in the questionnaires) the students found story writing far easier to access if they had a starting point. In light of this, I provided the class with a selection of stimuli that they could use as a starting point, either in their own writing or as part of their thinking. Individuals could choose from a starting sentence, a famous picture or one stanza of a poem.

Interviews

People are 'the biggest barrier to gathering credible data through the interview process' (O'Leary, 2004:162). Although this may be the case, I constructed the interview process carefully and it resulted in being the most enjoyable, interesting and insightful area of my research. I conducted the interviews at the end of the scheme of work and, as I was very familiar with the class at this point, I was able to select five students, two girls and three boys, with a cross section of abilities and personalities. Admittedly, I did select students on the basis of whom I felt they would be willing to share and contribute information. I was aware that 'the bigger the gulf between the interviewer and interviewee the greater the chance it will influence the interview process' (p.162).

With this in mind, I decided that to interview the students as a group would provide more beneficial data, as it would help to lessen the gap between the role I have as teacher, and their role as students. Using the library as a setting was also useful, as it was a comfortable and familiar environment for the interviewees. The students' initials have been changed in the findings.

FINDINGS

When analysing the questionnaire data, I noted some interesting findings, although I had intended the questions to be fairly simplistic. The nature of the final, open question also generated some intriguing responses. I asked the students to name their favourite book, and then led the question slightly by stating that it could be a book they had read at home, or one that they had read in school. Interestingly, nearly half the students said that 'Stone Cold' was their favourite book, which they had read earlier on in the academic year at school. This indicated to me that perhaps many members of the class did not read outside of school hours, and were therefore heavily influenced by what they read at school. Over half of students had circled 'easy' in terms of their ability to think of ideas for a story. However, all but one had circled 'yes' when asked if they found it helpful to have a starting point for their story. I found these findings almost contradictory of one another, and considered that it may be representative of the confident nature the class appeared to possess, but not necessarily in their own ability. However, it certainly allied with my research focus. Bearing in mind that the practically every member of the class said they found it helpful to have a starting point, it would be interesting to see how helpful the variety of multi-modal texts were as a starting point.

Music and Atmosphere

In the first lesson of the scheme of work, I wanted to use a number of pieces of music as a stimulus for creating atmosphere in stories. When selecting the pieces of music I wanted to use, I bore David Self's warning in mind: That if listeners hear music that they are already predisposed to, it may have an effect on their opinion. However, I wanted to generate the 'personal response' he talks of, so I decided that I would use a combination of familiar and unfamiliar pieces for the students to listen to. I selected, Barber's 'Adagio for Strings,' The Lightening Seeds' 'Three Lions' and 'Hero'

by Enrique Inglesias. I felt that all of these songs possessed strong atmospheric natures, and playing them in a classroom setting certainly generated this. In order to get the class to respond to the music personally, I first asked them to listen to the music and write down any words that came to mind. The second time they listened to the music, I asked them to associate it with each of the senses. For example, 'If this song were a smell, what would it smell like?' It was interesting when feeding back the ideas because they supported Self's claim that music creates such a 'personal response,' as the students' answers differed greatly. For example, whilst one student stated that 'Three Lions' smelt like 'fried food,' another said it smelt like 'victory and disappointment mixed in together.' Both of these students had engaged with the atmospheric nature of the songs, but in entirely different ways.

After discussing and modelling various linguistic techniques used to create atmosphere in a piece of writing, the students then had to write their own opening to a story in which they had to create any sort of atmosphere. I told the class that it was entirely up to them which atmosphere they decided to create; as again I wanted to perceive their 'personal response.' However, I also provided scaffolding for some students through a number of topics that their story *could* be about. As the class started writing, I noticed that many students were creating the opening to a horror story, which was what they did for their previous piece of creative writing that academic year. When interviewing the students, a common response to the use of music was similar to EJ's; 'I liked listening to the music in class because it was fun and different, but I don't really understand what it had to do with atmosphere - it didn't help me to create atmosphere in the writing'. Therefore, although the students may have enjoyed the atmosphere created by the music, perhaps I needed to have created a stronger bridge between this and their writing.

Images and Characters

Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles point out the effectiveness of using pictures in 'Seeing, thinking and knowing.' They claim that 'the visual image is more effective than spoken or written language in evoking an affective response from the reader' (Grainger, 2004:186). I wanted to use visual stimuli as motivation for the students' writing. Therefore, I thought it would be interesting to spend a number of lessons focusing on the creation of character through visual images as well as written language. I selected a number of images for the students to look at as well as some character descriptions from novels; working with each of these texts equally. I had noticed, from looking at

the students' creative writing from earlier in the year, that many struggled to develop a second character. They generally created detailed main characters, but seemed to have difficulty in introducing a secondary or tertiary character into their writing. Therefore, I decided to get the students to create a simple script conversation between two of the characters; these could be from the images or from the written descriptions. Interestingly, all students used the images of people to devise their conversation around; which reiterates Self's opinion: that we are 'dominated by our visual self.' I then asked a number of students to read their scripts out loud and prompted the rest of the class to state what did not sound right about the conversation. The answer was clear; that there was no expression in the conversation, and no directions and guidance for this. The class then added stage directions to their scripts before turning them into a narrative. I had been wary that the visual images would mean that the students turned to simply describing the appearance of their character, indicative of the 'gimmick' some multi-modal texts can be said to be representative of. However, through adding stage directions to their scripts, the students became aware of the importance of non-verbal and non-visual aspects of creating a character. In terms of developing more than one character; the stage directions also helped them to develop a sense of characters responding to one another.

During the interviews, this direction generated perhaps the most detailed responses. WJ, a student currently achieving a Level Seven (the highest level achievable using APP at the time this research was conducted), said 'It was really helpful to have the pictures of different characters for when we wrote about them. When we had to make a conversation between two of the pictures, it definitely made us think about lots of other things instead of just how they looked'. CF, a student currently achieving a Level Four, provided a similar response to WJ saying 'The pictures really got me thinking about how it's important to have good characters in your writing, and you can't just describe the way they look'. When reading the students' stories, I was aware that I should have been prepared for this positive response. In a number of these stories, I could definitely see elements of characters that derived from the images I had selected to show the students. Although many of these characters were not explicitly the same, certain key elements shone through. It was particularly pleasing for me to see this, as this particular aspect of the scheme of work had been taught right at the beginning; showing that it had certainly made an impact of many of the students' minds. In terms of being 'dominated by our visual self,' it is also very interesting to note that when

asked about the written character description we had studied, many of the students had difficulty in articulating their responses in the interview, with a typical response similar to GJ's, a student working towards a Level Six; 'I can't really remember what they said, I think everyone preferred writing about the pictures anyway'.

Film and Plot

I wanted to use a film clip to incorporate both the visual and auditory multi-modal texts used so far. I decided to view the 'Pale Man' clip from 'Pans Labyrinth,' as it contained no dialogue, but an excellent use of music and imagery to build up the tension. I felt that this would be an effective way of tying together the stimuli I had used with the class. In light of this, Marsh and Millard argue that 'literacy should incorporate the ability to read visual texts.' I wanted the class to 'read' this film clip. On the first viewing, I asked them to note down anything they could see and hear in the clip. On the second viewing, I asked the students to consider what may have come before or after this particular scene, or whether it was the beginning or end of the film; I was aiming for them to gain a sense of plot and structure. The class then had to create their own narrative to this scene, depending where in the plot they had structured it. They had to describe the surroundings and add dialogue (we had previously spent a lesson experimenting with different ways to use dialogue, including dual narrative).

What I found interesting was that the majority of the students placed this as the beginning scene in a film. Only one member of the class had seen the film, so most were unaware of the context surrounding the clip. I considered that perhaps this was to do with the fact that the scheme of work was primarily focused on starting points for writing. It appeared as though many of the students *wanted* this to be the starting point of the film, as they could let their imaginations run into what happened next, and what the result was. The clip is taken from the middle part of the film, so it was as if the class had difficulty constructing the two 'either' sides of a story, when the middle part was already present.

During the interviews, the responses to the film clip differed, with WJ's response being, 'it was really useful to see the film clip because it was like the story was already there, it helped me to create a position to write a story from'. Whereas JE reiterated a similar statement, FC said, 'I liked

watching the film clip, I thought it was quite scary, but I don't really know what we had to write about'. GJ followed on from this, saying 'it helped me to start a train of thought, but I didn't really know how to write about the others parts of the story'.

It was interesting to note these responses when considering the responses I received from the students in regards to what they would have liked to work on, that we had not covered. They unanimously claimed that we had not covered 'endings' of stories. Indeed, this was highly obvious in their final stories, with many that did not end concisely or, in some cases, did not appear to have an ending at all. In reflection, I should have incorporated work on the endings of stories.

Student Learning:

At the heart of my research with Year Nine, was what they had actually learnt. I received a wide range of stories from the students, and as mentioned previously, I was certainly aware of elements within the stories that had derived from the lessons, especially in terms of the work done on characters.

However, the most interesting finding was one that I did not expect. In relation to the questionnaire responses, I provided the class with a number of starting points for their stories. However, when marking the final stories, I was not able to see how any of these particular starting points had actually been used. In the interviews, the students emphasised this. LA said, 'when we did the work on characters, I already started to think of an idea for my story and none of the other starting points really fitted with that'. GJ told me that 'no one really used any of those starting points, as we already had different ideas.' WJ responded by saying 'when we were doing all the other lessons, I had started to gradually build up ideas of what I wanted to write about, I tried to fit one of the starting points around this, but it didn't really work'. Therefore, in a class where most had explicitly stated the desire for a starting point in their writing; it did not prove very helpful. It could be said that the students viewed the entire scheme of work as a 'starting point' for their final story. However, perhaps the more rewarding perspective is that the students lacked confidence in their own ability to write creatively before the scheme of work began; by the end, this confidence was built-up sufficiently for them to have enough strength and belief in their own ideas to write creatively.

CONCLUSION

As I reached the end of my research with Year Nine, I considered two fairly broad questions when reaching a conclusion concerning the extent of any success the scheme of work carried. Firstly, I asked myself whether the students' writing was stimulated solely by the use of multi-modal texts. Secondly, I considered whether the students had enjoyed the lessons, and if so, on what level could I connect their enjoyment and their learning?

The Students' Learning

The data I collected, and the findings I drew from this, certainly led me to believe that the class had enjoyed many of the lessons, and producing pieces of creative writing. However, the majority of the students had possessed a strong interest in story writing in the first instance, and the questionnaires instantly showed me that many felt that they had no trouble thinking of ideas for stories, which indicates strong imaginative qualities. So, although I believe that the class responded well to the multi-modal texts, it is difficult to determine the level at which they generated enjoyment.

Therefore, it can be said that the students' writing was stimulated through the use of multi-modal texts; but it is unclear as to whether this is the sole factor. It is important to take other factors into account, including the level of access with the lessons, the teaching, different ability levels, varying learning styles and the students' individual imaginations. This began to leave me with a sense of unease, as it would seem appropriate to provide answers for every aspect of my research with Year Nine, and be able to label them clearly; yet this seemed beyond what was realistic.

As O'Leary states, significant conclusions are about 'searching for answers, but not forcing fitting your findings to portray a world without ambiguity and complexity' (O'Leary, 2004: 2000).

Further Research

Whilst carrying out this research, I came across a variety of opinions surrounding the topic of creative writing. It appeared to me that Andrew Motion's statement about the secondary curriculum being like a 'sandwich with no filling' in terms of creative writing, firmly lodged itself in my mind throughout the research. I believe in the importance and relevance of creative writing within the curriculum, as it can be accessed on all levels and gives students a chance to express themselves

and work their imaginations to a high degree. This then led me to consider creative writing on another platform, at Key Stage Five. If I were to conduct further research in the field of creative writing and stimuli for it, I would be interested to undertake this at Key Stage and consider the possibilities for a creative writing at A Level.

My Learning

Carrying out this research has informed my teaching practice and made me aware of the importance of continually revisiting and revising work, as well as the positive impact of self-evaluation.

It has certainly had a positive and evolving impact upon my professional development. The action research enabled me to not only see the benefits of using multi-modal texts, but the importance of using them correctly. Upon reflection, the success of the work with images and characters was partly due to the way I structured the students' understanding through a variety of engaging tasks, whereas some of the other multi-modal texts did not reach the same level of engagement.

Reflecting upon literature mentioned at the beginning of the research, and particularly Smith's claim that 'all the old English is out: and creative English is in,' I became aware of the importance of bridging the gap between traditional methods of teaching, and more modern ones. Therefore, it can be said that the influx of digital media cannot dismiss 'old English,' but they should be used to work alongside one another, so that we do not put more focus on the 'what' or the 'how' of writing, but apply equal weighting to both. Drawing clear conclusions as to the extent the students' creative writing was stimulated throughout the scheme of work was an ambiguous task. However, this research did enable me to see that instead of dismissing traditional methods or modern technologies, working the two alongside one another can create an excellent combination for learning in an enjoyable and effective way. Overall, providing young people with the possibility of creating something for themselves, giving them the opportunity to have ownership over their work and developing their individual imaginations is surely at the heart of education.

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