

'Explain yourself what you mean when you say podcast': GCSE poetry podcasts

Phillip Lloyd, Laisterdyke Business and Enterprise College, Bradford

Overview

Teaching poetry to a challenging group of GCSE students, Phillip Lloyd wanted students to engage in active revision. He sought in particular to address the difficulties students, whose own experiences were limited, had in grasping the cultural implication of the 'Poems from Different Cultures' cluster in their anthology. Podcasting offered a focused way to achieve this and, whilst there were difficulties along the way, the activity was productive. Examinations taken shortly afterwards demonstrated that students had a good grasp of the poems, which could at least in part be attributed to the podcast activity.

The school context

Laisterdyke Business and Enterprise College is a mixed 11 to 18 comprehensive school with 830 pupils on roll, based on a former middle school following re-organisation in 1999. The school serves an area of high social deprivation and the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (41%) is well above the national average. A high proportion of pupils (almost 80%) are from ethnic minority backgrounds and almost all have English as an additional language. There are 15 pupils in the early stages of English language acquisition. Most pupils come from Pakistani backgrounds with smaller numbers from Indian and Bangladeshi backgrounds. Other than English, the main languages spoken are Urdu, Punjabi, Pushto and Hindi. Overall standards of attainment on entry, although covering a wide range, are very low in comparison with schools nationally, with little or no difference in standards in English, mathematics and science. The proportion of pupils identified as having special educational needs is 45%.

The class context

The class is a set 4 out of 7, known as 10 Lister. This group has some of the most difficult students in the year group. The academic context of this group is one that can speak English, but not necessarily write it down – or want to write it down. Attitude to learning is at times very poor and this impacts on the nature of results achieved. This group has been put together in a streamed fashion that takes into account their English, science and mathematics ability; so some are a lot stronger than others. The group has a range of students, from those who have the chance of gaining B grades in the Summer 2009 examinations to those who will achieve E grades. The most influential student in the year group is a member of 10 Lister; so his mood can easily sway the success of an activity. Also, there is language support for seven students within this group. At times, some students may, through choice, go for the whole school day without eating – this has an impact upon behaviour.

Aims and ICT

The overall aim of the project was to incorporate an interactive solution to the notion of revision. In this case, it was to create a podcast to aid revision of the 'Poems from Different Cultures' section of their GCSE course. The reason for this decision was threefold really. Firstly, it would fit nicely into the

curriculum map and serve as a revision tool before our Year 10 trial mocks. Secondly, it would act as a long term reminder for students allowing them to have their active thoughts recorded on an mp3 player or iPod for future use. Thirdly, as part of my own interest, I had previously done a lot of work with video and so wanted to broaden my own ICT horizons in the classroom.

The hard-to-teach topic

The hard-to-teach topic I chose was the ‘Poems from Different Cultures’ section of the GCSE anthology. This was not because teaching poetry is necessarily difficult, but because the concept of ‘culture’ is confusing and often alien to the students; so, I decided to focus on the cultural implications of the poems. This concept is hard to teach, especially to those who have a limited view of the world beyond Bradford’s BD3 postcode area. The idea of ‘what do they think?’ and ‘why do they think it?’ and ‘how that represents a body of people in terms of tradition, ritual and customs’ is extremely complex.

Method

I had a long term plan with a short term usage of ICT. Having been previously involved in the National Strategies’ ‘Hard-to-teach concepts’ working group, I learned that ICT, when used in longer periods, can have a negative impact on the quality of the work produced if pupils become bored with the task. Therefore, I decided to keep the ICT use short and sweet. The input of the poetry teaching far outweighed the time spent using ICT. Taking into consideration my knowledge of the group, I knew that they enjoyed ICT use but a long exposure to the technology might lessen the quality of the work and lead to off-task negative behaviour. Therefore, the ICT use followed the simple pattern of model, try, apply, secure.

The plan simplified:

- Teach the Cluster 2 poems using the SMILERS technique.
- Embed knowledge through comprehension tasks and exam style questions.
- Introduce podcasting as a concept and an active way to revise.
- Set a challenge that would bring the poems from different cultures and podcasting worlds together.
- Produce a product for own revision and consumption by others.

Description

The plan was in place and, in many ways, was dictated by the speed at which we progressed through the poems. The biggest issue was organising the ICT facilities in preparation for this task. The school has some fantastic resources with regards to ICT, but they are fundamentally under used or disregarded.

The project was initially intended to utilise the department’s laptops. In March, I started to speak with the ICT technicians to ensure that they would be able to cope with the podcasting task. Podium was the software which I was intending to use. However, due to the constraints of the VLE, this piece of software was incompatible – a real shame as it seemed to do everything that I wanted the students to do. I was then put onto Wild Voice, another podcasting piece of software. This came highly recommended by the ICT consultants in Bradford. Over the months, I kept talking with the ICT technicians – who had to deal with not only my requests, but the whole school and a complete server

meltdown. It was only two days before the project actually took on the ICT phase that we found out the Wild Voice could not be networked and so I turned to Audacity to save the day.

To get a feel for the Audacity software, I planned for the students (in pairs) to record the story of *The Princess and the Pea* and then change it to give a new story using the program. Problems arose as the majority of the laptops failed to connect to the server – making this process pretty redundant. In order to progress and not wanting to look foolish, I decided to book an ICT room in order to ensure that the technology being used would be secure and safe. The group started the podcasting process with a short talk from me and a brief demonstration of what a podcast might sound like. After a short analysis of podcast content and the introduction of the ‘Poems from different cultures’ challenge, we moved to the ICT suite to start the process.

As part of the challenge, it was necessary that the students looked at the background of the poet and the culture from which they hailed. This meant some Internet research needed to take place. The results in many respects were quite pleasing as students did find some useful information and were able to cut it down to fit their purposes; rather than just copying and pasting from Wikipedia. A rough draft of what was going to be said was needed before any recording could take place.

For some, the research element took a reasonable amount of time, for others it maybe took too long; and this is where support was needed to speed up the process. The recording went well, with the initial silliness that could be expected with any new toy dying down quite quickly. The majority of the students were managing to record their ideas quite quickly and also limit their noise in order to prevent disruption to others. One of the noticeable features of this process was the fact that until the students were shown that they could edit mistakes out or cut out dead time, they preferred to go back to the beginning and re-record the whole podcast. Do’h! Back to the drawing board.

The room we worked in for the majority of the time did not have an interactive whiteboard so listening to the podcasts as they developed became an issue. This meant that pairs progressed without too much on the spot analysis or feedback about their own work and others. This would have been of great benefit. After the trial mock examination, the students still continued to work at good pace and with enthusiasm, but have been limited in their progress due to work experience interrupting the process.

Conclusions

From this whole experience I have concluded the following:

- It should not take two months to prepare the ICT element. You need to feel comfortable and be able to rely on all aspects related to the ICT.
- If the students were used to podcasting – the software and concept – previously this process would be a lot smoother.
- Did the students manage to consider the notion of culture? It’s difficult to say, but in the mock examinations all approximately reached the targets set for them for the end of Key Stage 4. Is that due to this process aiding their revision or good quality of teaching and learning throughout the year? Probably a bit of both.
- More time needs to be devoted to the whole process. More playing with the software, quieter recording conditions and more preparation in order to meet the needs of the challenge - in particular the cultural aspect.

Next steps

Personally, the experience and process has been useful and mainly positive, despite the technical issues faced. The students have enjoyed the opportunity to use ICT more actively in the lessons. However, there are a few further considerations:

- Taking into consideration time restraints, the podcasts need to be completed as best they can and uploaded to the school website. In reality, only a few might make it for public consumption. The rest will be available for individuals to use and complete as they see fit.
- Given more time, the use of music could be developed a lot further; with music tracks being selected to support content or even being created by the students themselves. Again, due to time restraints, music is an under developed feature within the finished products.
- In order to promote an idea of culture, country and identity, one original idea I had was to geo-tag the podcasts to something like Google Earth (or a map at least); so that when a student clicks onto it they can get an idea of sound, image and geography.
- Formal feedback needs to be gained from the students, in order for us to plan and refine this process for the future. We are planning a Year 7 scheme, due to run in mid-September, that will take the form of a *Desert Island Discs* podcast – but without the discs.
- The ICT framework is in place for this process to happen again if we use desktop computers. We need to ensure that it stays that way in order to prevent long delays and disappointment. However, the laptops need to be made more secure in order for us to be more flexible within the department.
- We could also develop the podcasts into video casts for further revision purposes. This process is not a concern with regards to my own skill level, but other members of the department will need training up. The biggest concern with this may be the ICT provision being secure in a shorter amount of time.

Supporting materials available online

These materials are available with the online version of the case studies on the NATE site:

- Three student podcasts as examples
- Podcast challenge sheet issued to students
- Introduction to podcasting and Audacity: a PowerPoint presentation used with students