

## Collaborative work on Shakespeare

### Steven Howell, Stretford Grammar School, Trafford

#### Overview

As a strategy to overcome the confusion students often feel when encountering *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as well as an attempt to encourage more collaborative working, Steven devised an activity based on the main characters. Students would create their own profiles and then review the work of other groups. Limitation in the school's network kept the ICT to a basic level but the activity nevertheless had interesting effects on the students, many of whom seemed to find the provisional nature of each step of their work liberating since they knew it could be revised, extended and improved by other groups. The activity confirmed Steven's desire for a more flexible, wiki-style resource that would make collaboration much easier.

#### Introduction

ICT helps pupils learn in English by enabling them to communicate, edit, annotate and arrange text quickly and flexibly.

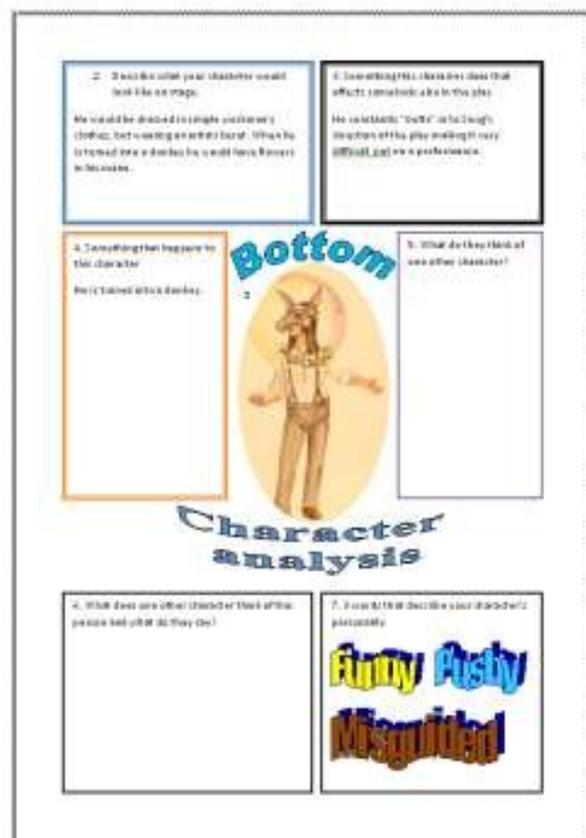
*DCSF*

It's not working Sir!

*Year 7 student*

Although few of us as English teachers would disagree with the first statement, we probably hear the second statement enough to throw it into doubt. In the past at Stretford Grammar School it was not uncommon to say 'nothing's working', with the ageing ICT infrastructure creaking along on the technological equivalent of string and elastic bands. Luckily last year saw a huge investment in the school's ICT facilities, kitting out three ICT rooms with brand new equipment and making a commitment to developing the provision of distance learning.

Stretford Grammar School is a mixed 11-18 selective school in Trafford, Greater Manchester. It draws from a surprisingly diverse range of students through the 11+; the intake has been described as being a bit more streetwise than the average grammar school pupil.



## The hard-to-teach focus of this case study

On considering my hard-to-teach topic I also wanted to consider what I found to be genuinely new and interesting about using technology to teach. I had taught Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the previous year to Year 7 and despite using a simplified version of the play I found that students reported much confusion as to which characters were which. Was that Helena or Hermia? Demetrius or Lysander? Who's in love with whom? What's with Puck? Although we had a lot of fun with this confusion, and particularly getting to know our favourite, Bottom, some students were put off with this encounter with Shakespeare. How could I use ICT to make their access to the play easier?

## Using ICT to make access to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* easier

I think that one of the most exciting possibilities of using ICT is the ability to review each other's work over a network. Students have the ability to access others' work, change it, adapt it and save it. This is particularly powerful as a means of peer correction and group working, with some of the added benefits of anonymity – students who wouldn't normally work together helping each other – shy students contributing as much as the boldest. My Year 7 class would be typical of the school: bright, articulate with plenty of ideas but often slow to start writing and very reluctant to revisit and edit work. In addition, there were only six girls in a class of 28, which made it very boy-orientated so that boys could often dominate the lesson.

## Method

I aimed for my students to have a clear understanding of the characters and their role in the play. I decided that the students should create a profile of each of the characters. They would use what they already knew from the play to fill in a proforma I created, complete with some guiding questions. I would have five folders with five character files already created. Students would then be directed to a particular folder, answer a particular question before saving it and then another student accessing that file and adding to or editing it.

The lesson itself could have been a disaster. The original plan had to be rewritten due to the school's shared space on the networked drives being read only, meaning that students would not be able to make changes to the master documents I had placed on the drive. In fact I was surprised to learn that there was no space on any of the drives where the students had this type of access. This ruled out any kind of collaborative work across a network as I had envisaged. Despite talking to the technician who agreed it was possible, I was told it would, not could, compromise network safety. This conclusion was reached ten minutes before the lesson was due to begin. 'Very well!' I thought, 'Time to improvise!'

What should have occurred was this: students would be guided through a PowerPoint presentation I had made about the creation of a worksheet. Periodically told to save their work, they would go to a preordained folder and select another character and another question. Over the course of the 40 minutes students would have produced 30 completed worksheets and have worked on all characters. Finally, for our plenary we would dip into the collective folder and chose characters at random and share good work. I would also print them off to create five character guides to be reviewed in class later on.

## **The lesson in practice**

What actually occurred was a variation of an old classroom favourite of pass the paper. I've often had students completing a part of a sheet with guide questions and then passing the paper to the next person and so on until they have a completed page, so I decided to do the same in the ICT suite. Although, the computers couldn't move the students certainly could. So rather than saving work to the network and then opening a new document, the students would just swap seats. So simple, I wish I had thought of it first! Sometimes our experiments, or keenness to use ICT, can over complicate some things. Sitting at a desk, staring at a screen can be a dull pursuit. Far better to take a break every few minutes and move to the next work station to find a new character and a new question to work on.

This new approach proved to be a success with the students, providing a much needed kinaesthetic element to the lesson with students up and moving around at regular intervals. It also helped create an even more urgent deadline to complete the question as somebody else would be trying to sit at the computer you were on. Nobody wanted to be the cause of a traffic jam!

Each student was given a number and was guided to load that numbered worksheet up on their workstation, thus: 1 Demetrius, 2 Helena, 3 Hermia, 4 Lysander and 5 Puck. The first question proved easy: find a picture for your character. I had demonstrated this with Bottom to avoid any embarrassing situations, or the school's filter becoming overloaded. Some took pictures from productions, others found famous people they thought would play the character and some chose symbols such as love hearts for Lysander or a potion bottle for Puck. Inserting and resizing the picture proved to be more of a challenge, needing a quick tutorial on altering the properties of a picture in Word (Right Click – Format Picture – Layout Tight – Alignment other – OK!).

Students then moved to the computer on their right. At first this was bothersome for a few who hadn't heeded timed warnings but for the following questions this became easier:

2. Describe what your character would look like on stage.
3. Describe something this character does that affects somebody else in the play.
4. Describe something that happens to this character.
5. What do they think of one other character and what do they say?
6. What does one other character think of this person and what do they say about them?
7. Write three words that describe your character's personality.
8. What would constitute a perfect evening for your character?

## **Key findings**

The questions tried to help the students stretch their knowledge as well as their imagination. Most proved to be accessible enough for the less able in the class while offering scope at the highest end for development. The interesting learning took part when the students moved on to another workstation. I constantly re-enforced the need for students to first read through previous answers to familiarise themselves with the character before answering the next question. I also made it clear students were to edit anything they thought was incorrect, add anything they thought necessary and make it as good as they possibly could.

This had several effects. One weaker member of the group found the experience of having others read his work quite daunting, particularly as they would be following him. Being able to access across the network would have randomized and completely anonymised this. Some liked editing and adding information, often saying they didn't know the answer to the question and on being reassured that it

didn't matter because someone would improve their contribution, feeling freed to write whatever they wished or just add to other questions. Some liked spotting the mistakes and changing them. This, however, did lead some to question whether things were changed always for the better; some suspected that some people didn't know the play and were 'correcting' right things into wrong.

The class feedback proved interesting: the majority of the class thought that using the computer room had helped them learn something more than if they had been in the classroom. But many expressed concern that their work had been altered by others. Co-operative editing breaks down ideas of taking ownership for work – some felt they were left doing all the work, correcting other students' sloppy workmanship.

One thing that came out of my teaching of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* this year that hadn't previously happened was when I showed the film version as an end of term treat. Students often quoted lines they knew along with the DVD. Perhaps that was not entirely down to ICT but certainly evidence that the class had engaged with and enjoyed the text more.

### Next steps

The obvious way to develop this would be some kind of wiki-worksheet which we could all go on line to edit. However I was pleased with the lesson itself and will repeat it this year with a few tweaks to randomise who is working on which worksheet!

### Appendices

These materials are available with the online version of the case studies on the NATE site, [www.nate.org.uk/htt](http://www.nate.org.uk/htt)

1. Lesson plan
2. Student worksheet sample on the character of Bottom