

Making hard topics in English easier with ICT

Overview, key outcomes and summaries



A NATE/Becta project

2008

Introduction

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1 The 'hard to teach' project: overview and key outcomes

Key outcomes

The following themes emerge from the case studies:

The ICT element in the teaching of hard-to-teach topics

- was effective in supporting and encouraging both independent learning and collaborative learning;
- fostered individual creativity;
- brought real audiences and real purposes into play;
- enabled and encouraged reflection and evaluation, including self-assessment and peer-assessment;
- allowed teachers to respond to students swiftly and to reflect on the effectiveness of teaching and learning;
- provided anonymity in exchanges and contributions, leading to a much wider degree of participation and a much deeper level of analysis than hitherto achieved;
- encouraged teachers to become more experimental;
- gave both students and teachers confidence and increased motivation.

Organization of the project

NATE recruited teachers for this project on the basis of open advertisement through the website, local authorities and the National Strategy.

Twenty-two teachers from nineteen local authorities attended a conference at Elm Bank Centre, Coventry, in March 2008 with the following agenda:

- What do English teachers consider to be hard-to-teach topics?
- Which areas of ICT seem appropriate in tackling these topics?

Attendees also discussed the kind of project they would wish to undertake in their schools. Each was allocated a mentor from NATE. Between March and July, NATE mentors visited and advised the teachers involved in the project. Email support was also available as well as a dedicated website.

A follow up conference was held in July 2008 where the work of each of the delegates was shared and further advice was given with regard to the writing of case studies, which were written up by the end of the Summer term. Of the twenty-two initial delegates, seventeen completed case studies and one wrote two; these are reproduced in full here.

What is hard to teach in English?

Generally, a hard-to-teach topic is one that:

- is inherently repetitive or tedious;
- is conceptually complex for the developmental stage of the class or individual pupil;
- uses language that alienates or confuses (for instance subject specific vocabulary, jargon, psychology, etc);
- stretches the learner or takes him or her into unfamiliar territory.

More specifically, a consensus emerged that two areas of the curriculum which students find hard seem to be GCSE poetry – especially poetry from different cultures – and the 'literary heritage'.

Skills which students find hard to learn include 'reading between the lines', humour and irony, metaphorical language, alternative readings of texts and authorial intent. They also find it difficult to understand 'themes' and to compare, contrast and cross reference. Understanding and writing about the structure of a text and the writer's language choice is also hard for many students.

Other skills which they find difficult to master are structuring and planning their writing, translating the oral to the written, developing critical thinking and refining their research skills (especially with regard to the Internet). Many students have difficulty mastering 'exam speak' and academic language, together with academic referencing or noting of sources.

What has the project taught us?

The aims of the project were firstly to identify problematic areas of English, subjects or topics that were difficult to teach – or difficult for certain groups of students – and secondly to explore the capabilities of ICT to address those difficulties. The approach was by definition experimental and tentative, and the outcomes uncertain.

As we toured the country observing the resultant practice and as we read these case studies, it was evident that the fresh impetus and the special qualities of some forms of ICT – especially the new Web2.0 tools¹ – have produced remarkably successful results. The ICT has not substituted for inspired teaching (and these teachers are wonderful to watch) but enhanced and extended the impact of their lessons, indeed frequently creating motivated, autonomous learners that continued pursuing learning in their own time as a direct result of the project.

The main positive results are summarised below, but overall we were impressed by the collaboration and the sense of ownership conferred on students by activities such as wikis, blogs and podcasts.

Positive outcomes

Improved standards when writing for real audiences

The way in which ICT brought real audiences and real purposes into play was seen by teachers as a major advantage. Where there was an appropriate audience, the work produced by students (in whatever medium) showed a desire to achieve a more polished, accurate outcome. Although this effect was observed with all kinds of students, it seemed particularly to stimulate and engage boys.

Increased confidence

Students' motivation increased as their confidence developed. Two key factors in this were the familiar and non-threatening nature of the various means of communication, together with the opportunity for anonymity in exchanges and contributions. It enabled students to 'have a go' and particularly encouraged those who were shy, lacked self-esteem or simply might not have wanted to show too much interest in a normal classroom setting.

¹ Web 2.0: 'a term given, rather loosely, to what are called "second-generation" web based functions. These would include social networking sites, podcasts and blogs. Web 2.0 highlights peer to peer relationships rather than the top-down ones which currently dominate internet usage.' (From NATE's *Position Paper on ICT in English*, 2007)

Independent learning

The projects were particularly effective in supporting and encouraging both independent learning and collaborative learning. Although the studies look at whole-class projects, a number of them gave birth to more individual, student-generated activities that continued beyond the formal lessons.

Reflection

It was noticed that the use of ICT enabled and encouraged reflection and evaluation, especially self- and peer-evaluation. It also allowed teachers to respond to students swiftly and to reflect on the direction and effectiveness of the teaching and learning.

A number of the projects allowed a more personalised form of learning – often at the pace and in a manner of the student's own choosing. One of the most noticeable threads emerging from the studies is that of student autonomy.

Creativity

The projects frequently allowed creativity to flourish and not merely in the finished 'product' but in the seeking of new ways to undertake tasks or tackle problems. This empowers both the learner and the teacher. As can be seen from the breadth of practice described in the studies, the ICT element sometimes offered an entirely new approach; in other situations it enhanced teaching and learning by supporting existing good pedagogy.

Technical issues and the digital divide

There were, inevitably, technical problems. Encouragingly, almost all the participants learned to deal with them or were able to adapt their teaching accordingly. Good ICT provision was of course a key factor but the schools represented had a wide variety of provision of equipment, together with easy access and technical support.

The 'digital divide' was recognised by teachers as a factor and where out-of-lesson computer use was needed, efforts were made to ensure students were not disadvantaged. Most students took to the ICT based aspects with the adeptness of 'digital natives' but teachers do need to be aware that not all students are equally adept and that there are aspects of ICT in which they need training and guidance.

Teachers

The outcomes reported here have emerged naturally, without any prompting from the NATE organisers. Teachers were left to decide their 'hard to teach' focus, their curriculum or student area and the sort of ICT best suited to the task.

The project has encouraged teachers to be more experimental than they might usually be. Most did not know if their approach would work or what the outcomes might be. Some had to adapt their projects quite radically in the light of experience; many were surprised and delighted by outcomes. In addition to the work within school, the teachers benefited enormously from the exchange of ideas which took place both at the conferences and, for some, in-between.

Caveats

Before waxing too lyrical about the results of this project, one should bear in mind certain factors which might mitigate against the same techniques being used with the same degree of success elsewhere.

One is the halo effect whereby anything new, or anything promoted by an enthusiastic teacher, is likely to be more successful than tired old approaches. However, student familiarity with ICT is such that the novelty value of such approaches is now much reduced. There will always be some value in fresh approaches, however, and all teaching should, surely, aim to try new things as a matter of professional practice, whether this involves ICT or not.

A further proviso is that these projects were undertaken by a self-selected group of teachers who were already well-disposed towards ICT. The danger that such innovative approaches will be restricted to a group of enthusiasts is a real concern and one which can only be gradually overcome. It should be stressed, however, that it was the attitude of the teachers involved rather than the level of ICT provision or of their ICT competence which was the key factor. Clearly a basic level of competence and a basic level of provision are pre-requisites but the teachers were not, by any means, all ICT experts.

And now?

There are heartening findings arising from this project and they deserve wide dissemination. However, like their students, teachers learn best by doing and it is active involvement in projects of this kind which is most likely to achieve the positive developments we have witnessed and would wish to see multiplied.

2 Project summaries

Title	Target	Method	Summary
<p>Using a visualiser to shine a light on poetry Phil Grosset, Easingwold School, North Yorkshire</p>	<p>Writing poetry</p>	<p>Visualiser</p>	<p>Phil Grosset explains how a visualiser works and provides a number of practical examples of its advantages for rapid text analysis and feedback in the classroom. Its particular advantages, he concludes, are spontaneity, interactivity, variety and its contribution to classroom management. His lively study makes a convincing case for adding a visualiser to an English department's inventory.</p>
<p>Interpreting texts through interactive storyboarding Gregory Anderson, St Augustine's School, Scarborough</p>	<p><i>Romeo and Juliet</i> with Year 9</p>	<p>Images, Bitstrips: online cartoon writing software</p>	<p>Gregory Anderson shows how Web 2.0 collaborative software can bring the over-worked technique of storyboarding to life. Using free web-based resources, he shows how his students learnt to appreciate the different ways in which a scene could be presented and interpreted. Students responded with enthusiasm and reported that the visual medium helped them remember the Shakespeare play they were studying. The case study provides detailed descriptions of the application, including how to obtain printed copies of the finished work.</p>
<p>Engaging with poetry Caroline Mortlock, Bexhill High School, East Sussex</p>	<p>Poems from Different Cultures with Year 10</p>	<p>Images, PowerPoint, Movie Maker</p>	<p>Working mostly with lower-achieving GCSE students, Caroline reports how student motivation, self-esteem and understanding of the poetry was improved by their use of Windows Movie Maker to create short videos about poems they were studying. The students were keen to follow this up with more work of the same kind, using their own drawings, photographs, video and sound. Inviting a class in the year below to evaluate the work, by selecting one film for the school website, produced high level discussion. The activity revealed the need for students to have some proficiency with the software, 'so that the ICT is the medium of the learning, and not the learning itself'.</p>
<p>Poetry for EAL and SEN students Tom Charles, The Bishop David Brown School, Woking, Surrey</p>	<p>Poems from Different Cultures Year 11 and Year 8</p>	<p>Images and sound Movie Maker</p>	<p>Tom Charles explored poetry with groups of students whose first language, in most cases, was not English. He believed that 'visual exploration' of the poetry would help develop understanding and an awareness of multiple interpretations. Like Caroline Mortlock, he used Windows Movie Maker software to collate and display the pictures. He found that his students gave much more spontaneous responses than in the normal classroom situation and gained confidence in expressing their own opinions.</p>

Title	Target	Method	Summary
<p>Enlivening the study of poetry with Year 8 Lisa Tippings, Tredegar Comprehensive School, Blaenau Gwent</p>	<p>Gothic literature, Year 8</p>	<p>Projector and images</p>	<p>Lisa had previously found that students in her school, particularly the boys, were resistant to poetry. Using ICT to present visual material on Keats' 'The Eve of Saint Agnes' resulted in increased engagement and sustained interest through a series of lessons. Having students type their responses on a laptop to share with the whole class encouraged much greater pupil participation. As a result the English department has become much more aware of the power of ICT to enhance teaching and learning.</p>
<p>Blogging, but not for England: a Year 10 venture Martin Brennan, Eastbourne Technology College, East Sussex</p>	<p>Reluctance to write</p>	<p>Blogs</p>	<p>Keen to encourage reluctant students to write, Martin experimented with blogging with his Year 10 group. Although the results were patchy, a number of particularly resistant students became engrossed and a group of six boys then devoted considerable time to writing posts on a regular basis. His lively account explains the basics of blogging, including some pitfalls to avoid. He concludes by recommending that teachers plan short term, easily managed, targeted blogging activities with extension potential for key groups; his next step involves opening up the blog for student book reviews.</p>
<p>Blogs and the National Curriculum Mark Ellis, Newent Community School, Gloucestershire</p>	<p>Work experience reporting with Year 10</p>	<p>Blogs</p>	<p>Mark Ellis has been exploring the use of Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, wikis and media sharing in the classroom. This case study describes how to use one such application – a blog – as a means of promoting high quality original writing for GCSE coursework. Mark adapts this medium with an upper set Year 10 class, who were working on descriptions of work experience. The results are mature, entertaining pieces of writing through which the students show a heightened awareness of audience.</p>
<p>Teaching ballads Chris Mackinder, Woodway Park School, Coventry</p>	<p>Ballad writing</p>	<p>Word processor and multimedia input – film, pictures and soundtrack</p>	<p>Adapting a project that he had used previously, Chris Mackinder sought to exploit the power of ICT to help students write their own ballads. Within a carefully-structured approach which included studying both traditional ballads and a film retelling, students used a number of simple tools to help them with their compositions. Students found this made the activity both easier and more enjoyable. As a result they took considerable pride in their achievements. The activity lends itself to sharing across classes and schools.</p>

Title	Target	Method	Summary
Building learning power with wikis Anna Richardson, Caludon Castle School, Coventry	Poetry with Year 8	Wiki	Anna set out to explore the value of wikis to develop skills in independent and collaborative learning with two Year 8 classes. Her focus, as in a number of other case studies, was on poetry. She discovered that allowing students access to learning from home removed the constraints of the classroom further and developed the personalisation of learning. The project began to take on a life of its own when another class became interested and conversations about poetry developed between the groups, not just during lessons but also at lunch times and at home. Anna was delighted at the sophistication of some of the discussions and the way the wiki gave all students, no matter what ability, a voice which enabled them to ask questions themselves and interrogate texts naturally. Using the wiki totally transformed a number of the students' views of English and, more importantly, of themselves.
The GlobalDover wikiproject Amanda Monk Peak, Dover Grammar School for Boys	Poetry with Year 8	Wiki	Working with a large group of boys who were voluble but often reluctant to write, Amanda sought to develop writing skills including writing styles and writing for different audiences by building a wiki about schools across the globe and using technology to reach other communities. Students soon became engrossed and created a large number of pages on a wide range of topics. They also accepted suggestions and corrections from their peers and kept each other on task. Students' feedback was an integral part of the project; comments online were more honest than their 'official' feedback to the teacher. The project now moves to the next stage: contacting schools in other towns called Dover around the world.
Wikiteers, wiki-wars and the AQA Anthology Carol Weale, Dane Court Grammar School, Broadstairs, Kent	Poetry for AQA GCSE Anthology	Wikis and wiki-wars	Faced with the task of engaging GCSE literature students in the study of 28 poems and exploring the use of language, form and structure in a sustained manner, Carol Weale sought to create an environment for stimulating and interesting student-led discussion. By setting up an AQA Anthology Wiki where students can explore each other's interpretations, she utilised the 'MSN' communication culture that her students were familiar with to engage their interest in posting responses on the site and so engage them in the participation of a literary community. The unfolding open discussion, and analysis of each other's work that resulted, was a fascinating demonstration that students were willing to devote considerable time and energy outside the classroom to continue the discussions.

Title	Target	Method	Summary
<p>Active revision strategies for C/D borderline students Sam Custance, Holsworthy Community College, Devon</p>	<p>Revision program for GCSE Paper 1, Reading</p>	<p>Podcast revision, quizzes, Pictionary and Taboo on the interactive whiteboard</p>	<p>Revision can often mean more of the same, typically in the guise of some rather dry and unexciting worksheets. Just at the time you want them to concentrate the most, they lose interest! Here Sam Custance tackles this tricky situation and explores how ICT can help to make revision an appealing process in which students actively engage with and develop their understanding in preparation for an examination. Through employing a range of websites and strategies, often based around the use of an interactive whiteboard, Sam has made revision an opportunity for students to build confidence and a positive approach to their examinations.</p>
<p>Analysing the language of poetry through podcasts Kate Murphy, Batley Girls' High School, Kirklees</p>	<p>AQA GCSE poetry with Year 9</p>	<p>Podcasting</p>	<p>Seeking to engage Year 9 students in working collaboratively on the language of poetry, Kate asked them to produce podcasts. She developed a structured series of lessons that allowed students to work in groups without disturbing other recordings. Students' conversations as they compiled their scripts revealed detailed consideration of the language of the poems; Anna concludes that the <i>process</i> was important as well as the final podcast. The students developed speaking and listening skills, learnt new ICT skills, really engaged with the poems they were studying and, perhaps most importantly, seemed to be having fun.</p>
<p>Using podcasting to improve close analysis of language in poetry Carrie McMillan, Kingsmead Community School, Somerset</p>	<p>GCSE poetry with Year 10 and Year 11</p>	<p>Podcasting</p>	<p>Podcasting requires a computer, a microphone and recording software; with these tools, anyone can be a broadcaster. Carrie McMillan uses them to help her GCSE classes explore the language of poetry in closer detail. Making her students the 'experts', she provides them with the technology and a real audience, before setting them off on some in-depth analysis of three poems. The results appear to show pupils talking engagingly, enjoyably and knowledgeably about poetry – often with the increased awareness of language that Carrie is seeking. Especially interesting are Carrie's observations of the different outcomes of running this project with both years 10 and 11.</p>

Title	Target	Method	Summary
GCSE poetry podcasts Phillip Lloyd, Laisterdyke Business and Enterprise College, Bradford	Poems from Different Cultures with Year 10 and Year 11	Podcasting using Audacity	Teaching poetry to a challenging group of GCSE students, Phill Lloyd wanted students to engage in active revision. He sought, in particular, to address the difficulties which students, whose own experiences were limited, had in grasping the cultural implications 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 be, at least in part, attributed to the podcast activity.
Teaching the literary heritage Angus Weir, Ninestiles School, Birmingham	Literary heritage with Year 9; oral and media skills	Video, greenscreen and mind maps	Working in a well-resourced school, Angus exploits the technology available to enable Year 9 students to produce short trailers for Stevenson's horror story. In this way, he sought to address problems students find in coping with pre-twentieth century texts as well as in developing speaking and listening skills and understanding media studies terms. In addition, analytical and comparative writing posed a challenge. Working to a tight schedule, students researched, produced and evaluated their trailers. Student comments indicate that the activity had made them much more aware of the techniques both the author and they, as film-makers, had used. This case study and the accompanying online products demonstrate the sophisticated activities possible with the right resources.
Collaborative work on Shakespeare Steven Howell, Stretford Grammar School, Trafford	Shakespeare with Year 7	Shared editing; Internet, word processing	As a strategy to overcome the confusion students often feel when encountering <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , 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. The activity 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.

Title	Target	Method	Summary
Using SMART Notebook 10 for refining and presenting information Sam Custance, Holsworthy Community College, Devon	National curriculum assessments, Year 9	SMART Notebook 10 software	Sam Custance focuses on how the introduction of a SMART interactive whiteboard to her classroom helped students with their problems in refining and presenting information. The interactive nature of the board encouraged students to contribute and share their written work in public. Tools also made it easier to illustrate planning and drafting and to focus on individual words or phrases. Sam provides a wealth of practical examples and concludes with a useful list of fifty teaching and learning ideas. Whilst her examples are from the SMART Board software, users of other boards will find much here to inspire them.

The complete report, including the case studies and additional materials, can be downloaded from the NATE website at www.nate.org.uk/htt