Interpreting texts through interactive storyboarding

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Overview

Gregory Anderson explains how Web 2.0 collaborative software can bring the over-worked technique of storyboarding to life. Using only 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.

Introduction

Teaching different interpretations of a text is difficult, not least because we may have our ideal interpretation of a scene. Is it surprising that pupils want to be told a 'right' answer? Should it also be surprising that pupils find it difficult to explore different interpretations when some struggle to discover even one? Perhaps collaborative storyboarding will be an effective way to support the teaching of this important English skill.

Context

As a reward in the aftermath of intensive revision for SATs tests (a trial that future groups will thankfully no longer have to endure), my mixed Year 9 class in a North Yorkshire 11-18 comprehensive were scheduled for a series of lessons that were interactive, pupil-centred and fun. In practice, though, there was time for only one lesson. The remit was for the pupils to explore how user-friendly the comic making website www.bitstrips.com was to use. An informal questionnaire had previously revealed that 88% of pupils had access to the Internet. It was not surprising that, as digital natives, these pupils thrived; with no prior training the class were able to create at least one comic strip per pair.

As a bonus, by emailing these comics to a central email address, they could be collated, uploaded into a word document template, and edited into a full colour comic book. This book was printed for £4 plus postage and packing from www.lulu.com.

Aims

The purpose of this project is to encourage the exploration of different interpretations – of Shakespeare scenes for example – through the use of interactive storyboarding. Storyboarding is a visual modality accessible to all pupils. Similar to mind-mapping, it allows pupils to understand and work with concepts that they would struggle to explore in linear writing. Whereas drawing a storyboard by hand in the classroom has recognised pedagogical benefits, the use of ICT in this project intended to produce a more professional, novel and seamless storyboard by using www.bitstrips.com

You may also want to celebrate the work of the pupils through digital and print publication (see http://ganderson.wordpress.com/). Another aim might be to facilitate straightforward collaboration between different classes and different schools.

Hard-to-teach topic: Different interpretations of texts

Although skills associated with traditional storyboarding can be developed, there is surely more potential in the use of higher-level thinking skills – that is, of exploring different interpretations. While traditional storyboarding encourages pupils to ensure a clear link between each comic pane, apt punctuation and spelling, and some adherence to the conventions of comic strips, the potential of ICT allows interactivity and collaboration.

Method

Use a PowerPoint slide showing a moment from a scene in a Shakespeare play: The one shown below has taken a frame from a simple Bitstrips cartoon showing Romeo overhearing Juliet at the balcony that I had created on the Bitsrips site.
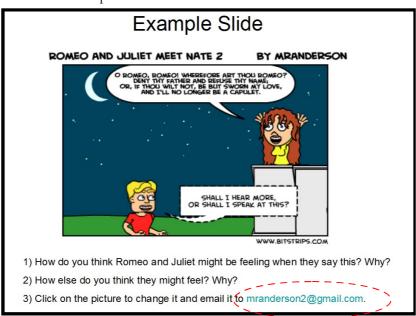

Figure 1 – PowerPoint slide using a frame from the Bitsrips site

Notice the layout:

   a) a title, which could be a reference to the set scene;
   b) a comic representation of the scene, which could be pre-made by the teacher or a pupil (because it was hyperlinked, clicking on this picture would open it up for editing – see below);
   c) a series of prompt questions;
   d) an address to which pupils can email an edited picture (this doesn't have to be your personal email!)

Using the first question as a whole class activity – or as a starter – you can discuss one possible interpretation based upon the body language and facial expressions of the characters. At this point you could ask yourself what other questions could this picture stimulate? In addition, could these questions be phrased more appropriately? For example (as the project focuses on exploring different interpretations), should the questions be phrased more specifically?

Some pupils may experience difficulty with the second question. Having already written and discussed one interpretation, there may be a sense that this scene has been dealt with, and that it should be time to move on. In addition, as the characters in a traditional storyboard have specific, immovable expressions, where is the legitimacy of a different interpretation?

Perhaps it is the moment when pupils witness the changing of expressions and body language that different interpretations are legitimised. Because the text, scenery and positioning of the characters has already been created, teaching can focus on the expression and body language.

Editing the pictures

Simply clicking onto the picture (either via a laptop or your interactive whiteboard) whilst PowerPoint is in slideshow mode will open the picture for editing if you've created a hyperlink in PowerPoint to the Bitstrips page for your cartoon. If you are already logged in to Bitstrips your screen will look like Figure 2.
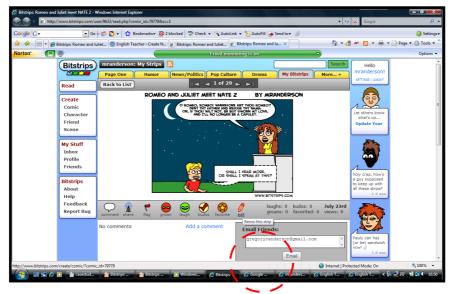

Figure 2 – Clicking on the PowerPoint picture links to the Bitstrips site, where the image can be edited

Clicking on **edit** (the pencil icon underneath the cartoon) will open up the next screen, Figure 3, where you can create alternative interpretations of the scene.
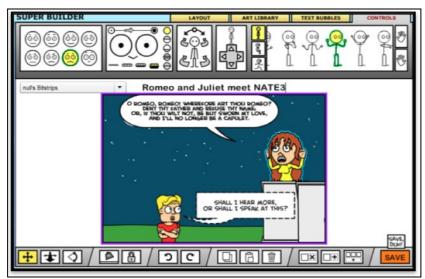
Figure 3 – Editing interface of the picture on the Bitstrips site

Pupils begin by clicking onto a character; selecting the control tab and then they choose different expressions or body postures. This is perhaps the most important teaching point: to emphasise that although the *words* are not changed, their *meaning* does depend on expression or body language.

Once you click **save**, it is possible to enter details for the purposes of emailing the strip to yourself or to the students. Once you have done this you will access this screen:
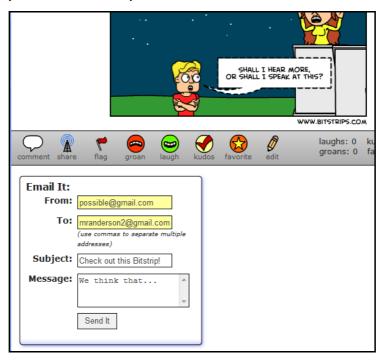

Figure 4 – How to email your storyboard

Now pupils can send their interpretation to the agreed email address. Note that by sending a short Point-Evidence-Explanation (PEE) paragraph in the message box too, you are creating another learning function. An example of a PEE paragraph might be:

> On the other hand, Romeo may be so happy that Juliet is unknowingly declaring her love for him that he may enjoy eavesdropping on what she is saying. Perhaps he wants to both listen to what she is saying, to 'hear more', and to speak directly. Also, Juliet seems happy and liberated and speaks her words with conviction, 'if thou wilt not'. This seems clear to me because she will clearly compromise her life to be with him.

Note that it is the moment when you can see several different interpretations on the same screen, all captioned next to their respective storyboards, that pupils can appreciate how different interpretations are created – especially if they have been involved in justifying their interpretation and storyboard themselves.

Outcomes, or how would the storyboards and interpretations be used?

The interpretations could be emailed to a common address and posted on a secure educational blog (e.g. http://ganderson.wordpress.com). Furthermore, collated set scenes could be edited and published in a 'print on demand' revision book, which is free to download or can be purchased from lulu.com for a small sum.

Depending upon how these comic strips are used afterwards, high-level thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and comparison can be accessed. Pupils could see, through collaboration with other classes, how characters can show different interpretations through body language and facial expressions, how these can be justified, and how these justifications are equally valid.

Key findings

Enthusiasm amongst pupils for using interactive storyboarding is high. Universally, pupils seemed to appreciate being able to create professional-standard comic strips, and recognised its strength for visual learners:

> I prefer it to drawing because I can't draw as well. (School A, 2008)
> I like the way I can make the characters change their expressions easily. (School A 2008)
> I prefer learning by making it a picture. (School A, 2008)

Some pupils expressed its potential usefulness as a revision tool:

> It helps you visualise what you put down... it helps you remember what you thought about, and it helps you relate the characters to pictures... which helps me remember the story.
> (School B, 2008)

Also, some apt criticism was also provided:

> [It is not as good] when people put their interpretations when they are not a visual learner [*sic*]...maybe they should be able to put some audio to it too. (School B, 2008)

Another key finding was that the ICT is straightforward: no software needs to be purchased or installed, although updating the latest free Adobe Flash is essential (only your ICT administrator can do this, but it should be a five minute job); there is no need to sign up to an account (although it is recommended); therefore no ICT expertise is required by the teacher. In addition, the new curriculum specifies the important of a real audience. If you consider another classroom and/or another school to be a real audience, then this project provides a real audience.

Next steps

This case study shows the first few tentative steps into the collaborative use of interactive storyboarding. While computerised storyboarding has existed for a time – especially for Shakespeare – this project aims to take full advantage of the collaborative function of Web2.0 applications, and of the new curriculum's emphasis on creativity. (The webmasters of bitstrips.com are trying to encourage use across education institutions worldwide, so any teachers who would like to share their ideas or practice are heartily encouraged to contact me on mrandersonyork@gmail.com.)

Some further ideas for how to use this collaboratively came out of the NATE working party meeting:

- Editing the pre-set characters – why do they have different appearances? Why different clothes? What quotations can back this up? One character you can edit is Juliet from the set scenes above: http://www.bitstrips.com/character/65679/ .
- Editing pre-set scenes – why different props? Why different facial expressions? Why different positions?
- Adding to another class's story – what are the conventions of a horror story? A crime story? A love story? This would be slightly trickier, as pupils would be expected to follow on from each other's stories as a whole class. Perhaps pupils would be allocated a certain story to each pair (for example ten pairs?), and each class would complete three to six frames of the start of a story, showing structure, development and crisis. These could be sent to another class, and the other class would have to solve the stories. Finally, these can be brought together and shared amongst all classes.

Having previously worked with largely teacher-centred ICT projects (Boardworks-style Flash games for example) it became clear that the most pedagogically sound ICT projects were:

- pupil-centred, allowing the creation of pupil content;
- collaborative, involving more than one class and another audience;
- straightforward, low-cost and easy to maintain.

I hope you have found reading this case study useful. Hopefully, like me, you see and value this project's potential for collaboration. Please feel free to email on gregorycanderson@googlemail.com to discuss any part of it, or to look on the blog www.ganderson.wordpress.com later in 2008/9 to see how other teachers are getting involved.