Engaging with poetry

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Overview

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 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 select 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'.

Introduction

When we met for the first time in Coventry as a team, there was considerable discussion around the definition of terms – what constituted ICT, and what constituted a 'hard-to-teach' topic. 'Hard to teach' was understood to mean anything that students are reluctant to engage with – therefore a very wide field! There was, however, particular emphasis on poetry and on critical skills, which led me to make my own choice: Year 10 (low ability and challenging behaviour), studying 'Poems from Different Cultures'.

Aims

I had two main aims: to increase students' engagement and motivation; also to improve their understanding of the set poetry and their ability to write about it.

Context

The school I work in is a large (1650) mixed comprehensive, situated on the south coast. The intake covers the full ability range, but with a markedly extended 'tail'. Achievement in English in the school is strong compared with other subjects. Year 10 are divided into two bands according to whether they are pursuing vocational, college-taught courses (Z Band), or academic options (Y band). The Z band has a higher number of lower-achieving students, and students for whom language-based courses present significant difficulties. The group I chose for this study were 10Z4. In English, we group in three tiers; in the Z band, 10Z1 follow an accelerated course; 10Z2 and 3 are parallel middle ability sets, and 10Z4,5 and 6 are parallel bottom sets. 10Z4 contained five students with significant behaviour issues and one persistent truant. The class numbers 25 in total, with eight students on the SEN register. The three students with the highest GCSE targets in the group all have significant behaviour issues.

Topic under focus

The topic under focus is study of the AQA 'Poems from Different Cultures' section of the GCSE anthology, specifically 'Island Man' and 'Hurricane Hits England'. The skills are those of analysis and, ultimately, those of writing under examination pressure.

ICT strategies

With 'Island Man' we began by the students writing their own poems, following the same narrative/subject outline as 'Island Man' using a guided visualisation and then using images from the web to illustrate those poems

We then moved on to using Movie Maker to create a mini movie of 'Hurricane Hits England'. I selected the images; we made a recording of the poem using one of the school staff, a food technology teacher, which was available on the students' shared network area along with the images.

Methods

With 'Hurricane' we began by talking about the great storm of 1987, right at the end of a lesson. I then asked the students to talk to parents/older family members about what they remember of the storm, and to bring those memories into the next lesson. It was a great start to the following lesson to have everyone telling their stories and sharing their memories – for another time, the best thing would be to record those memories using Audacity, making a class oral resource. We then set about reading through the poem together and making some minimal annotations – not much more than who Oya and Shango are. The students then got straight to work on Windows Movie Maker. They had had some limited experience of using the application in IT; some were very confident, two were significantly resistant. Most were highly engaged, even if their skills were limited. This process could be slowed down another time and work done with the images and the poem on paper before moving to working on computers; it would depend on the class. With the class I had, they needed to go straight on to the computers to achieve a sense of momentum. They worked on their movies for two double lessons. This was not continuous work as individuals in the class had coursework they were completing, and there were, as always, absences. When three students had completed their movies they needed extra work and that increased the pressure to move on to the next topic.

I then used the best of the videos they had made with several small groups of higher ability Year 10 students, asking them to evaluate the videos and choose which would be best to include on the school website. This produced some high level discussion and was meaningful as it was a real task – their choice is now the one on the website. Videoing some of the discussions enabled us to stop when one of the students came out with a particularly good comment and analyse it further – this is certainly an approach I would like to use a lot more.

Outcomes

The students enjoyed the lessons and want to do more Movie Maker work in future. They want to film, draw and gather their own images. They were frustrated with the frequent crashing of the system and the general slowness of the computers. There was a marked improvement in self-esteem amongst the students who completed their projects. The class attitude to poetry is better than one might normally expect from a group of this kind; all of their work with the Anthology poems so far has been of a practical and exploratory kind.

Key findings

Using ICT, specifically Movie Maker, to work with poetry was engaging and productive; it improved the students understanding of the work and kept them involved – but I feel it's a very small beginning. The best thing is the students' enthusiasm for more work of this kind. They are very keen to use their own drawings, photographs, video and sound to do more work of this kind.

There is an issue about skills. Students are going to learn much more about the texts, the hard-to-teach topics, if they are already confident users of ICT. ICT is not a magic bullet, and it is as capable of alienating students as it is of engaging them. In the case of my class, there were three students who excelled. One was a confident user of technology already; the other two were very quick learners of the necessary skills. For the weaker members of the group, the ICT was a barrier we had to overcome. When they understood how to use the application, they were fine – but made much slower progress and did not complete the project. I spent more time enabling them to use the ICT than enabling them to engage with the texts – and that's not ideal. They'll be fine on the next project! A better approach would have been to group the class according to skills and give each student tasks they were confident with. Then my ICT experts could have got on quicker and the others would have felt much more involved and engaged.

Next steps

I want to develop the movie making approach – definitely including student drawings and possibly some animation work. I think it is also essential to plan so that the ICT is the medium of the learning, and not the learning itself – tuning tasks to students' abilities so that they are challenged and engaged.

Appendices

    A: 'Hurricane hits England': resources and teaching outline
    B: Hurricane Hits England: picture sheet
    C: 'Island Man': text for guided visualisation

Appendices: Engaging with Poetry: resources

Appendix A: 'Hurricane hits England': resources and teaching outline

Michael Fish: 'Earlier on today apparently a lady rang the BBC and said she heard that there was a hurricane on the way. Well don't worry if you're watching, there isn't.'
http://www.bbc.co.uk/weather/bbcweather/forecasters/michael_fish_1987storm.shtml

Teaching outline

- Begin by talking to students about storms and hurricanes at the end of a lesson. Ask them, for homework, to ask an adult what they remember of the Great Storm of 1987. Use the stories they bring in to start the next lesson. These stories could be recorded using Audacity; making a good En1 assessment.
- Read the poem together and do whatever 'can-opening' techniques you do with a poem to ensure the students have a basic understanding. Simple notes on Oya and Shango can be found at http://www.pantheon.org/articles/s/shango.html ; http://pantheon.org/articles/o/oya.html
- Assign groups of students a stanza each and ask them to highlight the most important two words in each line of their stanza. Use a plenary to discuss these; make sure everyone's got something highlighted in each line and make clear that they will need this done before they do the movie-making.
- Issue pairs or groups with the 15 pictures and get them to match these with their highlighted words – works well as a 'paste onto a sheet of A3' activity.
- Pairs open Windows Movie maker; import pictures and sound.
- Use their understanding of the poem to create a mini movie – keep saving it as a 'project' until you are happy with the results.
- Ask students to evaluate their own movies – explaining what key ideas they wanted to get across and how successful they feel they've been.
- Ask students from outside the group to choose the best video(s) for inclusion on the school website.

YouTube versions

- 'Hurricane Hits England' read by Grace Nichols: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsa_QAFMs5o
- 'Half Caste' by John Agard: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLD_OtM0gsk&feature=related

Appendix B: Hurricane Hits England: picture sheet
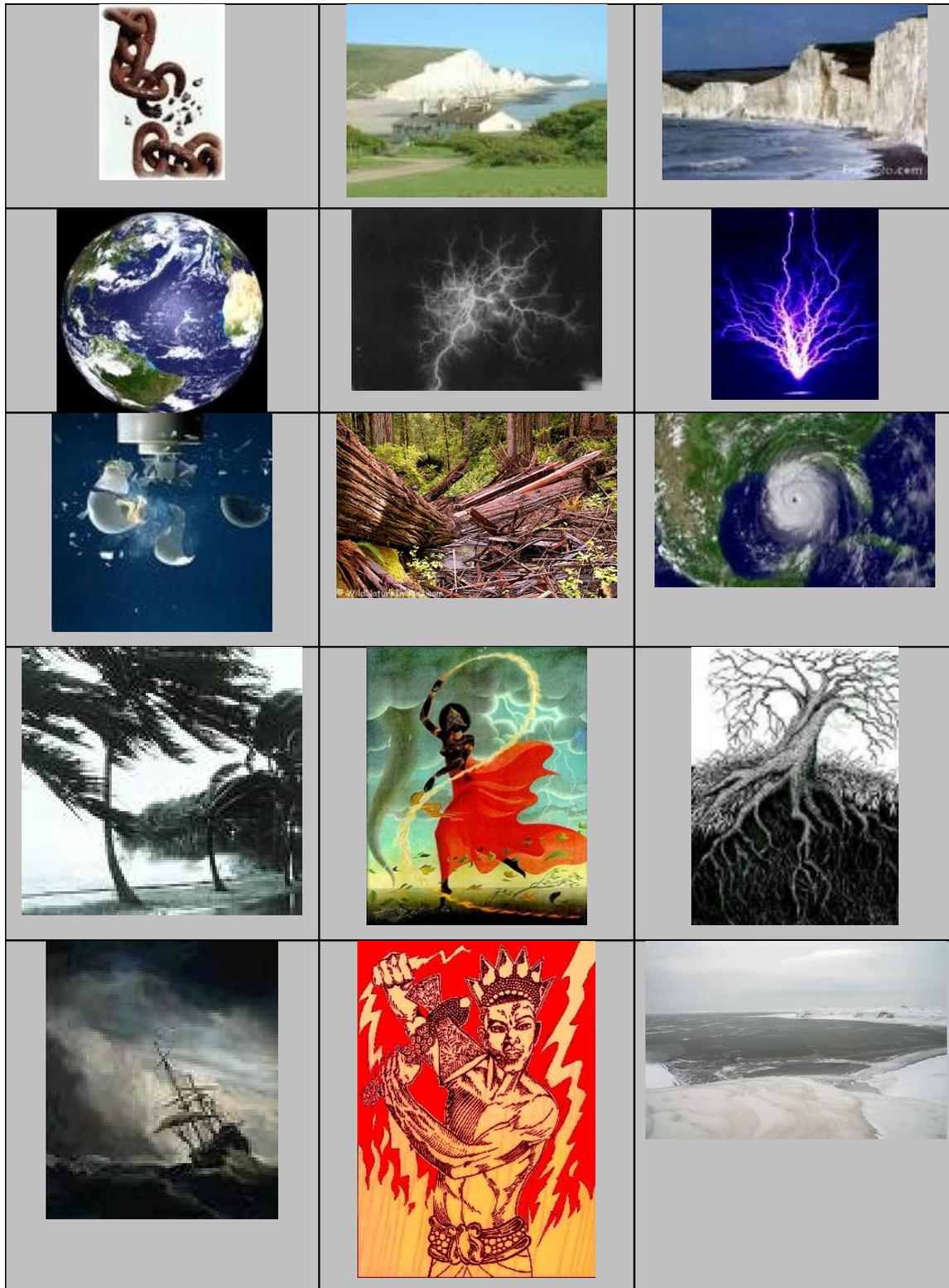
Appendix C: 'Island Man': text for guided visualisation

Imagine you are on a tropical island. You are near the sea. You can hear the waves. You can hear seabirds. Somewhere nearby, fishermen are getting ready to out in their boats. Feel what the sun is like on your skin. Look inland. The colours are strong. There are trees, with bright green leaves. All the time, you can hear the waves.

You start to realise you are dreaming. You are not on the island. There are different noises. You are in London. You can hear lots of traffic, really loud. You are waking up now, you feel heavy. It's another day in London. It's grey.