Let me tell you a story

Using the interactive whiteboard to create a narrative

Everybody loves a story – yet there's a craft to constructing an interesting narrative that can be learnt. There are many ways to stimulate ideas, from a single word to a creative response to a novel read in class.

The whiteboard can be used to focus class thinking on the structure of a piece of narrative writing, building the components and organising the paragraphs. The public display makes the process explicit, both for students who find structure easy and for those who struggle. The visual nature of the medium ensures the main components can be animated and illustrated – especially the mobility of the text and the fact that the positions of paragraphs can be changed. This activity does not deal with syntax – it works with the bigger structures and the thrust of a narrative or description.

The activity proceeds through collaboration, debate and discussion, mediated by the teacher. At all times the mobility of the structure needs to be illustrated – and the whiteboard makes that an easy, efficient process.

Suggested activity outline

- Create a few pages of story ideas of a kind suitable for your class. These could include an opening line, one or more characters, a place, an object, a date – the possibilities are endless so keep to a manageable number of options. Remember, this is only a model (though you may be asking the class to write the planned narrative for homework). The accompanying SMART Notebook™ software file, "Story_telling.notebook", provides some examples, including simple graphics taken from the clip art provided with the software – you can use your own images or photographs if you prefer.

Continued overleaf

Suggested activity outline (continued)

- We may not be gifted artists, but we can all paint with words - begin by demonstrating this in a simple way. The accompanying file contains a page with a few simple face sketches ('emoticons') and shows a one word label for each. Challenge the class to use words to describe the feelings more fully than an image or a basic word, such as 'sad' can convey.

- Brainstorm ideas with the class; what can we say to make this more interesting? Record all suggestions on the board, using new pages if you need them.

- Keep the font size big enough for the class to read the text without straining – 24 point is a good starting size.

- You may already have one or more interesting items that could be used in a story. Put these on separate pages, to make it easier to move them around later.

- Move on to the components you have already prepared. On the whiteboard, show a word or image to represent a key element – a character or a place, perhaps. Again, brainstorm ideas with the class – what would readers need to know?

- Look at other components in the same way (including some that involve events or situations that will help with plotting), building up a description on a separate page for each. If possible, give a short label to each page to make it easier to identify the elements later.

- Once you have enough for at least the bare bones of a narrative, it's time to look at the structure as a whole. Display thumbnails of the pages you have created and invite suggestions for the best opening for the story. By simply dragging the pages around in the thumbnail view you can demonstrate the effect of each. This also emphasises the fluid nature of text; there is not just one 'right' order.

- The whiteboard can make visible that a story needs more than just discrete elements such as character and place. Where can we place crucial plot elements such as a crisis or resolution?

- You can also demonstrate how information can be revealed gradually. Rather than tell the reader everything about a character at the start, aspects can be drip-fed into the narrative so that a crucial element only becomes apparent at the very end. You should be able to drag individual items from one page onto another to show this.

SMART specifics

SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard - the way that the pages and text on each page can be manipulated - lends itself to the discussion of the structure and organisation of story ideas.

Text can be dragged from the main screen directly into an existing page or into a new one. This makes the visual illustration of experimental re-organisation of ideas very efficient – almost magical – for the class.

In addition, ideas can be continuously revisited – they are on view all the time as long as the number of pages you use don't exceed the vertical space. Just clicking on a page brings it up on the main page. If it's in the wrong position in the sequence it can be dragged to a better place as easily as rearranging cards on a table top – except more efficiently.

Show the 'page sorter' by clicking on the tab on the edge of the SMART Notebook screen. To prevent the sorter being hidden again when you click on the main page, click to remove the tick in the 'Auto-hide' box at the bottom of the 'page sorter'.

You can display the page sorter on either the left or the right of the main page – simply click on the blue arrow at the outside edge of the screen to switch sides.

If you want to give students printed copies of the pages, select Print and then in the 'Print What Section', select 'Handouts' – you can choose between two, four and six pages per sheet.

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Extension activities

Once you have assembled the elements, you could model the writing in more detail by creating some topic sentences with the class and demonstrating how and where these could be used.

Having modelled the basics of narrative writing, it would be useful to explore the structure of a range of approaches – the use of flashback, for example.

If you wanted to show how a multi-viewpoint narrative might work, each character could have a page or pages. Plot elements can be interspersed as appropriate. The effect of changing the order in which we read each of these can then be made visible.

Resources

Computer clip art, of the sort supplied either with whiteboard software or a word processor, should provide perfectly adequate images. If you want to look at a painting or photograph for more detailed ideas, you may want to search the Internet or use a scanner.

You could take a series of photographs with a digital camera to suggest a photo-story that could then be built up in words as well.