

Premier's Lend Lease English Literature Scholarship

Teaching Stage 4 boys creative writing using ICT and new media

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Nature of study tour

My study title/research question was: How can NSW teachers best assist students, in particular boys, to write creative fiction (short stories) using ICT and new media in Stage 4 English?

The focus of my study tour was to investigate how pedagogical practices and research in creative writing in secondary and tertiary sectors and e-learning centres in the United Kingdom could inform teaching practice about effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) in New South Wales schools, with a particular reference to boys' education. I understand ICT to mean any technological medium available for teaching and learning. This report outlines the implications of using ICT and new media in the classroom. Through my research I gained insight into the exploratory nature of the use of new media in the classroom: its form, new technologies and how to use them, as well as new ways of reading and writing.

The study tour comprised of visits to:

- Tertiary institutions and literacy organisations involved in the developing action research projects aimed at developing teaching creative fiction writing using ICT;
- Secondary schools where exemplary practice in teaching boys' creative fiction writing is being conducted;
- Online learning organisations which facilitate learning opportunities for students through new media concepts;
- The British Council Seminar at the Manchester Conference Centre titled ICT in ELT: putting the learning back into 'e-learning', which provides the framework to define, discuss the range of practices, procedures and methodologies with ICT in English literature teaching (ELT).

Implications for using ICT in the classroom

ICT provides for new ways of thinking about learning, creating, receiving and understanding texts. When using ICT, sharing and exchanging are closely related, as both are occurring at the same time. This is demonstrated in chat rooms, for example, where typing, speaking and listening occurs simultaneously. In addition, students are publishing their creative writing online, which is more powerful than just reading and writing for the classroom alone. Therefore, sharing ideas is becoming very important as students use ICT to transform texts for real life purposes. Through ICT, students are able to change the audience and purpose of various texts in order to recreate their own texts. The appropriate development of these skills required to accomplish this learning style is the central issue for using ICT in the classroom.

Developing a culture where teaching staff believe in the value of technology has been a major challenge for the teaching profession in the United Kingdom. Money has been thrown into ICT projects—the teachers, education and technology are available, but ICT is currently being under-utilised because the teaching profession do not yet believe in the value of technology. Therefore, throwing money at schools for ICT fails. A 'buy it and they will use it' philosophy does not work. Teachers need to be given opportunities to work with ICT that already functions successfully in the classroom in order to develop confidence with the medium. This also provides opportunities for teachers to add to the pre-existing ICT content and therefore develop competence and belief in the relevancy of the technology. At the same time, teachers need to take back to schools what they have learnt from various in-services on ICT and not only put it into practice, but share this experience and expertise with their colleagues.

Developing the skills and knowledge to be able to use technology effectively is perceived in the UK as a new load of work for teachers. As a consequence, people have avoided using it in the classroom. At the moment it is difficult for teachers to see the advantages of using ICT over normal practice. The problem is accentuated by the fact that so many teachers are not confident using technology in the classroom. Teachers often feel frustrated using ICT in the classroom when the medium fails to provide the expected learning opportunities for students due to the breakdown of the medium and systems in place. Teachers are less likely to utilise ICT when lessons are wasted and they cannot control the outcome of the lesson. One way of overcoming these concerns is to develop teacher forums on the Internet. In these forums, teachers ask questions of each other to find solutions to their problems and troubleshoot in order to assist their teaching. Forums also allow teachers to gauge their own understanding and learning and allow for people who are not comfortable with expressing their ideas to do so in a non-threatening environment (See Communities of Practice).

When planning to use ICT in the classroom, consider the technology available. It is important to consider the tools which best suit the purpose of lessons and student needs and abilities. A low level of ICT can effectively deliver a high level of understanding in English lessons. Often ICT is not valued as a teaching tool for learning as students can use traditional means like pen and paper to deliver the same message. When programming you need to match the attributes within the school (teacher, student, skills etc) with the purpose. In other words, how confident and knowledgeable are teachers with the technology available. It may be more appropriate to use low technology at first and move towards high technology when professional development occurs.

Good training/teacher development is crucial to the success of the use of ICT in the classroom. Ideally new teachers should be trained from a tertiary level. Those leading the use of ICT in the school need to take teachers from where they are at present to where they need to be in the future. Forcing teachers to use ICT is ineffective. Instead, staff ICT interests should be considered when planning. However, many academics suggest that best practice is to concentrate mainly on those staff members who are interested in developing their ICT skills. In addition, the cultural context of the school needs to be considered. A supportive environment is imperative as glitches will definitely occur. A supportive environment allows teachers to play with the technology in order to develop their own skills and confidence with using the technology. Also required are professionals in the right place who have an impact on the culture of the school and can assist teachers and students when required.

When planning at a school and classroom level for the use of ICT, how students and teachers normally experience learning in the educational context needs to be considered. This will affect the way teachers and students are able to use technology in the classroom. The decisions teachers make about the choice of ICT activities will be affected by the nature of the learners, technology available, the institution and views of methodology. Computers can be threatening, especially for boys who hide exposing failure as writers. Some of the problems associated with the use of ICT in the classroom are linked with the ways teachers see teaching creative writing. Teachers fear giving control to students and the nature of pedagogical practices using technology encourages this. Teachers need to relinquish control of the writing process to students in order to effectively utilise ICT in the classroom. Teachers should also expect that there will be some students in the class who know more than they do. These students can provide positive learning experiences for other students through peer tutoring, which encourages collaborative learning.

Implications for using new media in the classroom

New media can be used to raise literacy levels of students, in particular boys, through collaborative e-learning, a blend of face-to-face delivery with electronic technologies. New media is experimental and nonlinear, thereby providing the changing and challenging conditions suitable to raise boys' achievement in writing. The potential fluidity and complexity of the form of new media poses considerable concerns for teaching professionals. Rather than skills based in approach, which the standard curriculum tends towards, new media aims to provide opportunities for improvisation and creativity. It is through the creation and building of trust as the basis for collaborative work with e-learning that those students will be able to reflect on and assess their own learning. This technology provides opportunities for students to use their writing and reading to clarify their own ideas and evaluate their own learning. It is through e-learning that students can best understand that texts express views of their broadening world, thereby enabling students to learn their relationships within it.

Although many writers within the new media community, young and old, are using the Internet to publish work, very few are using the Internet to publish new media. Currently, people are not taking new media seriously and few see reading hypertext stories as worth reading. This could be because of the nonlinear nature of hypertext. Chunks are missing from work and this makes it frustrating to read. Broadband has been responsible for providing easy access to new media as it is much faster than dial up. New ways of reading and writing are therefore available. Unfortunately, a lot of what is available to read on the Internet is boring and not well written, as publication is open to everybody and regulation is absent. However, people are now reading differently. For example, online novels allows for collaborative reading, which provides for more sophisticated work and a higher standard. Unlike any time before, the user experience is having a huge impact on the context of writing online. This involvement with writing online has impacted greatly on writing and reading.

Why use ICT in the classroom?

ICT is good for mixed ability classes as it gives all students access to learning. Flexibility, pacing and timing can be provided for. The mix of using different tasks and mediums in the classroom enhances motivation and caters to different learning styles. The perception of creativity can also limit experiences with ICT. Using ICT in the classroom is not the only way to creativity, but one of many creative approaches.

We live in a digitally aware society. The emerging pattern is that schools are not reflecting the way students are learning outside the classroom. Schools need to be developing skills that students already possess. The nature of literacy and language is changing—language now fritters around. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) argue that children are becoming so adept at ICT use outside of school and finding computer-mediated communications so satisfying that visions of school-based literacy, as well as teachers' pedagogical approaches, will need to adapt to become more rooted in the multi-modal literacies encompassed by ICT. We are impatient consumers of text—we observe so much more than ever before.

Technology allows opportunities for students to make connections between real life and the classroom. The key for ICT use in the classroom is to give learners and teachers an opportunity to make connections in different parts of the world. The opportunities for students to use ICT in the classroom needs to be useful within society. In *Boys' Ed*, it is good for making connectivity with the outside world. ICT must have value for boys, and teachers should choose topics that students can relate to in order to get them involved.

Pedagogical practices for teaching and managing creative fiction writing to boys at secondary level using ICT

Planning

Most academics recommended that teachers interview students in order to identify their creative writing strengths and weaknesses. Not all students have equal knowledge and skills when it comes to creative writing and therefore there is a need to prioritise the skills to be taught. Also when planning, an awareness of learner preferences and unit outcomes are crucial. Are there activities that are better completed in a print medium or an electronic medium? The use of pen and paper can be incorporated in an ICT lesson. Consider which activity best leads to learning in the context of teaching, the technology chosen to deliver the objectives of the lesson, and how learners access and interact with ICT resources. The ICT skills of teachers also need to be considered when designing activities.

At every stage of any teaching strategy using ICT in the classroom outlined in this report, modelled written responses should be given to demonstrate good creative writing.

Pedagogical strategies

Memory recall

Students are to think of a vivid memory. The teacher asks students about 8 to 10 questions related to the memory. Students are to write down answers on the computer with the monitor off. The advantage of this is that students will concentrate on the words and language and not worry about their spelling. Enter key after each question. After writing, turn the monitor on and fix typing errors. Students take out words they do not need to carry the meaning.

Reading on screen

Using computer games is a positive way of bringing to the classroom what students experience in real life. Student knowledge of computer games can be effective in informing school writing. Games which build societies, called god games, can be utilised when teaching other text structures like narratives. Images from games can be used as the writing frame for narrative structure (orientation, complication, series of events and resolution). The same can be applied to other texts such as film texts and when navigating reading on the Internet. Text messaging can also be used to teach aspects of language like register, vocabulary and acronyms. Students can create the written narrative to compliment photographs or still frames of an image saved in PowerPoint. In drama, students can create a picture of something and film it or take a still picture. Underneath the frames, students can write the narrative.

Cinliteracy

An important part of teaching story writing is to develop the idea that students should show and not tell. They can do this through developing cineliteracy. The reason this is effective is because film relies on many aspects to tell a story—sound, editing, lighting etc. By focusing on these aspects, the importance of showing and not telling becomes more apparent.

Developing character

Show pictures/images of characters' faces which have been scanned or captured from a film onto the computer. Ask students to draw faces of the different emotions in their books. Around those images students need to describe what is happening in the image

that identifies that emotion. For example, a sad face is identified by the mouth downturned, frown on the forehead, etc. This teaches students how significant it is to show the reader through your writing what you want to say about that character. This activity can also be used for inference. What deductions can we make about the character from the image?

Laying hooks

Fictional hooks drive the narrative. Without them stories would be considered boring. Show a scene from a film on the computer, such as Wallace and Gromit's *The Wrong Trousers* that demonstrates the idea of narrative hooks. Students describe shots and explain what tells the viewer that these are examples of fictional hooks. Which shots are used along the way to hook the audience? What are the patterns? Students can create storyboards for a separate scene, such as a chase scene, and decide when they are going to put in hooks while considering how they are going to represent the tension. Students are encouraged to use film techniques to represent the hooks. For example, an extreme close-up could represent a point of tension. Students can turn the storyboard into a small written piece, demonstrating the skill of showing, not telling the reader.

Setting the scene

Scan images onto the computer from a visually rich story, such as Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree*. Students describe the setting and mood by referring to various images in the picture.

Lighting/ colour/ time

Watch a clip from a film, such as Tim Burton's *The Nightmare before Christmas* and capture relevant images which use lighting and colour to create meaning. Students are to identify where the light is coming from in the image and the effect of this. How does the lighting make you feel? Why? What time is it? How do you know? What words go with the image to describe the time? Show the clip and captured images again. Students identify what colours are used and the mood created. In visual images, sketch the various colours. Use adjectives to describe the colour. Students are to write a scary scene similar to the clip shown.

Sound effects

Play the sound only (no image) for a dramatic scene with a variety of levels of conflict in a film which uses diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Wallace and Gromit's *The Wrong Trousers* is also good for this activity. While students are listening to the sound, they are to draw what they think is happening. Play the scene a second time with sound effects and ask them to write what is happening. Ask students to write emotionally. This is good for encouraging students to use a variety of long and short sentences at a crucial part of the narrative. Once students have finished writing, they will have to play around with sentence length to create a realistic rhythm.

Narrative structure

Copy and save pictures in PowerPoint which demonstrate different stages of narrative structure. These can be used as a template for students and teachers. It is best if a collection of pictures is prepared in advance to avoid the lengthy process of collecting. Students are to write the text that goes with each image, which solves the problem demonstrated in the images. Model how to write paragraphs first. This can be informally done with the teacher constructing the paragraph with student assistance. To make the activity more difficult, the teacher or students can crop and rearrange the images. Ask students what happens if we change the order of these images. They will realise that meaning changes. Students will talk about the changes, and then they can write a paragraph for each of the images that create an eventual story.

Hypertexts

Students can create their own branching stories using their own hyperlinks. These texts are not chronologic texts and are typically used in websites. Hyperlinks can be used for planning for a narrative or a non fiction text. Students can create two different directions for their narratives, like a 'choose your own adventure' story. Students can add colour, sound, etc, to the web page to enhance their meaning. In addition they can create photographic narratives or nonfiction images through hyperlinks to the various websites which relate to their topics. Teachers can create a template of things students could use, such as a picture or sound archive, to avoid wasting time finding relevant pictures and sounds. Teachers need to model reflective language and language of negotiation in order to show students how to explore possibilities. This includes asking questions which prompt students to think about how and what might happen.

Blogs

Walker (2003) defines a blog as:

A weblog, or *blog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first. Typically, weblogs are published by individuals and their style is personal and informal.

Huffaker (2005) notes that '... blogs promote self-expression; a place where the author can develop highly personalized content'. This suggests that blogs are an appropriate resource for creative writing. Not only do they provide opportunities for students to publish their writing, but to receive feedback about their work from others outside the classroom context.

With careful planning, collaboratively working on blogs helps students become better writers. When creating a blog for use in the classroom, it is best to start small and limit the number of people who have access and can post ideas. It is important that all users are aware of the safety issues concerning the use of the Internet and blogs. Letters home to parents explaining the use of blogs is also strongly recommended. Once a piece of creative fiction has been posted on a blog, students can criticize, add suggestions and develop the piece of writing. Students need to be taught how to make valuable comments that will improve the quality of writing. This can be done by giving a model of a positive comment and comparing this to comments made by students. Consideration of the network needs to be taken into account, as there will always be blocks in the way. An alternative plan is recommended. A considerable block to creativity is when students fear making mistakes; therefore, students should be encouraged to embrace the opportunity to contribute.

Tools to aid pedagogical practice in the classroom

Communities of practice

Communities of practice (CoPs) are communal groups that learn online. These groups of people come together to explore an interest in a particular area such as teaching creative writing using ICT. When developing practices for using ICT in the classroom to teach creative writing, CoPs can be useful in sharing knowledge and in the development of interpretation of knowledge. This affects retention of information. The bonding which results provides exposure to common problems people experience. Different levels of competencies will be drawn upon at different times by talking, sharing and solving problems. More creative practices develop once new ideas are tried out and brought back to the group for evaluation and reflection.

The implication for using this CoP technology is the time it takes to develop and maintain the groups. Often messages are posted, but no replies are received. If there are too many emails, people will unsubscribe. Management of these groups is an issue, especially considering the volume of responses possible. Many CoPs, like Yahoo, can be moderated/co-moderated to stop unwanted emails and to control users. This type of technology is excellent for schools with limited access. This type of technology is better for high users of technology. Another issue is the limit on storage space. This is particularly relevant, as you can post PowerPoint presentations, files, pictures for example for student use.

New media learning centres

Portals such as Kids on the Net, from The trAce Online Writing Centre, which is unfortunately now defunct, provide opportunities for students to create nonlinear stories and post them on the website. These stories allow students to develop their writing in different directions. Students begin to start the story on the site and go back to school to continue writing in a collaborative fashion. Students volunteer their work as they want to be heard by the world in a safe environment. Once students have posted their stories, they get instant feedback from other students around the world. In this way they are helping each other improve the quality of their work.

The implications for this type of writing are the need for a highly organized system and plagiarism. Any student can send feedback to the students who have posted their writing, but this needs to be edited by the moderator. This can be overwhelming for the moderator, and time and money are obviously huge issues. It is suggested that teachers supporting the students contributing to the website need to be diligent about plagiarism, as does the moderator of the portal. However, the moderator always has control and can decide to not publish a student's work that is possibly plagiarised.



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