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ANIMATIONS: ENGAGING ENGLISH, LITERACY, MEDIA AND ART CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Abstract
Animation is a powerful mode of storytelling. As a moving image, animations engage audiences and offer marvellous avenues to explore. When Finn Cragg Animation Studio worked with WA schools during 2005 and 2006 many progressive outcomes were achieved. New methods to inspire student inquiry, interpretation and creative thinking were generated using short dialogue-free animations and tailored multimedia resources. These case studies indicate the role of new media in laying the foundations for young story tellers, artists and producers, whilst achieving multiple learning outcomes in a range of classroom contexts.

Background
After presenting a series of short (3-5 minute) animations during a workshop at the state ALEA conference in WA in May 2005, Finn Cragg directors Martin Davidson and Lyn Hawkins invited teachers to undertake in-class research to determine the effectiveness of animations in supporting learning outcomes. Twenty teachers offered their input and seven schools were chosen to undertake the next stage of research involving students in the classroom.

The sample represented diverse student needs, including an ESL class (16-21 yrs olds), a metropolitan private girls junior school (Year 5), a remote co-educational primary school with a majority of aboriginal students (two combined classes of Year 2-3’s and Year 4-6’s), an outer-suburban government co-educational primary school (Year 4’s and Year 6’s), a secondary private school (years 8-12’s), a secondary government school (Y 9’s) and a co-educational secondary catholic school (yr 8-10’s).

General Results
The animations were highly engaging for viewing and elicited wide ranging discussions demonstrating individual student’s level of visual and critical literacy across all ages and levels. They provided support for a large number of English, Media Analysis and Production and Arts Curriculum outcomes.
Many students showed a high level of existing knowledge about animations and multimedia. Teachers built upon this knowledge and helped them develop new insights, understandings and skills.

Setting the animated story to a soundtrack (with no character speaking) created interpretative possibilities for the students. This enabled them to understand how variations exist within audiences as viewers interpret the same production differently.

Using a storyboard with the animation promoted writing and narrative construction. Students wrote their own back-story, gave the characters names, and wrote prequels and new conclusions.

Utilising visual files, (on DVD-ROM) created by Finn Cragg to develop the animation, enabled students with access to computers the ability to create their own resequenced slideshows, animations and rescored videos. These multimedia resources were used with software such as Microsoft Word, Photo Story 3, Power Point and Microsoft Moviemaker and the iLife suite for Apple Macintosh computers.

The DVD includes a short animation, storyboards and stills as well as a DVD-ROM with stills and video footage for repurposing.

Younger classes were able to experience viewing, speaking and writing (laying foundations for early visual literacy development), while the progressive developmental stages engaged in deeper text analysis, repurposing the resources and constructing their own oral, written and visual texts whilst exploring the physical and textual aspects of media production and analysis.

**Outcomes Achieved**

The classroom trials indicated numerous uses of animations and multimedia resources while integrating ICTs in the curriculum.
In the primary setting, teachers used the resources for achieving viewing outcomes; to inspire creative and descriptive writing, and/or to generate discussion on themes such as seniors, life, death, trust, personalities and relationships. While most lesson plans focused on English or Media production and Analysis areas, there were crossovers to Art and Technology.

Used for developing visual literacy, the four resources model incorporating code breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst (Freebody and Luke 1990) enabled a balanced approach.

There were numerous opportunities for developing listening skills and audio analysis exercises. The classroom talk generated about the animation, the oral presentations and drama productions of scripts also developed multiple outcomes and critical skills.

For reluctant learners the animations were an effective way to engage students and hold their interest, generating new areas of discussion. The storyboards were a non-confrontational approach to facilitate writing and computing skills.

The focus of all the trials was on curriculum learning outcomes. The use of the computers and multimedia was to facilitate this outcome, rather than being the single focus of the lesson.

For upper primary and secondary students, the use of DVD-ROM visual files (jpegs and .wmv and .mov) created by Finn Cragg animators enabled resequencing and repurposing activities. This usually followed class discussion, group or individual text analysis and planning of projects. In some cases, schools established teams of students across different subject areas where English students developed a new narrative inspired by the images on the DVD-ROM. Media production students then produced a new movie with the images and music students developed the soundtrack. Through this holistic approach students experienced the technical aspects of new media text productions as well as the human dynamics that occur in artistic and commercial projects. Setting the students to the task of developing marketing material for their new movie exposes them to the skills required to produce posters, flyers, media releases, short television commercials and print/radio advertising.

Video footage from the animation was critically analysed, resequenced and edited in Microsoft and Apple Mac software.
CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: A team approach
Secondary students at a Perth private school were given the task of repurposing the visual text in a 4 minute animation titled ‘Caravan.’ The 3D CGI animation depicts an elderly couple who challenge their fears and venture beyond the confines of their caravan and revel in the freedom of space. The use of animation as a text was analysed and students developed contextual understanding (exploring attitudes, values and beliefs). Immersion activities in the processes and strategies utilised in the editing process occurred with repurposing the text by using the .wmv files made available by Finn Cragg to create a new story for a selected audience. Teams of students worked together to develop their own written, visual and audio texts. These projects provided learning opportunities not only in the textual and physical aspects of media production, but also the realities of working with production teams.

Using free and proprietary software packages for video editing, students were able to change sequences, soundtracks, do voice overs and create new productions with the images available.

Case Study 2: Covering the Literacy Curriculum
Over a number of Language programme lessons focusing on the curriculum areas of Viewing and Writing, year six students from government primary school were shown the animation “Caravan” and as a class, discussed their initial and deeper impressions of the story. Their teacher described the identification of physical
and non-physical clues within the animation in order to explore the variety of literacy and communication tools used by the animator-storyteller. The background music enhanced the context and provided an avenue for discussion and an example when looking at the role and function of music in society. The students worked in groups to discuss their interpretations in order to flesh out, plan and develop their own story using storyboards.

Learning the differences between developing narrative and character scripts assisted students to creatively explore writing from these different perspectives. Each member of the group was then responsible for 4 final sequences, carefully considering the justification for their sequence development.

The students were able to be creative and ‘think outside the square’ due to the open ended nature of the text. They role played the character and narrator parts of their storyboards. These lessons introduced new vocabulary to students e.g. animation, dialogue, realism, fantasy, representation, codes, scripts, sequences, stereotypes, special effects, soundtrack and storyboards. Students learnt about the importance of sequencing and storyboards, the role of animation as a text, fantasy as a genre, distinguishing between first and third person accounts, using expressive versus figurative language, and used their imaginations to create their own stories. Even though the teacher’s main focus was on the Viewing and Writing outcomes, over these lessons additional curriculum outcomes were evidenced including those in the areas of Listening, Speaking and Reading.

Storyboards were used by Yr 6 students to interpret the animation,"Caravan."
Storyboard files on the DVD-ROM can be copied into Power Point using text boxes to write the character dialogue/thought scripts and narration if computers are available.

**Case study 3: Engaging Reluctant Writers**
An ESL teacher with a class of sixteen-to-twenty-one-year-olds found that using the animation engaged students who had
previously been reluctant speakers and writers. Initial discussions involved all the students at new levels and developed their spoken vocabulary. The lessons covered Narratives as a genre for ESL, Speaking, Viewing and Writing outcomes (including vocabulary development, spelling and grammar). Without being confronted by a blank page, the Storyboard activity was found to sustain concentration, facilitate a wider use of new vocabulary and a greater exploration of ideas and thoughts. By establishing pairs of students to work together (a strong student with a weaker student), the class dynamics improved and the resulting enthusiasm for more lessons of this kind indicated that in addition to achieving relevant learning outcomes, the students thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

In a subsequent lesson, students repurposed the texts by using Photo Story 3 selecting still images of the Finn Cragg’s animation (from DVD-ROM) to create a story book for a young audience. Many students developed new “personalities” for the characters. A back story was created and simple narratives written. The selection of an appropriate soundtrack for the intended audience developed audio literacy skills. Students enjoyed reviewing each others story books as a completion task.

![Developing new conclusions and prequels using storyboards: Year 4 class](image)

**Case Study 4: Developing Narrative Structure.**

With a class of eight-and-nine-year-olds, the five-minute Caravan animation was used to initiate work on narrative structure and story sequencing, focusing on opening and closing of stories. A range of texts were explored during the term with the theme of “grandparents”. By exposing students to this range of written and visual texts the teacher challenged stereotypes. Students were asked to identify and discuss their own experiences with seniors and use their imagination in a number of creative writing exercises. The animation “Caravan” was shown and discussed at various levels, with the teacher guiding the process. One student enquired about the significance of using classical piano music. The response from another showed an insight into use of sound in communicating narrative. “The reason the piano was used is to
show soft and loud, according to the emotions of the grandparents” was this young critic’s response. Students used storyboards to develop their own conclusions, planning their sequenced endings to create a new narrative. Further to this, students wrote reviews of the “Caravan” animation (three things they liked, three things they disliked and what they would improve). In art they created portraits of grandparents and as an incursion the animator, Martin Davidson, answered their prepared open-ended questions about the animation.

**Case Study 5: Engaging Aboriginal Students**

A class of six-to-seven-year-olds from a remote government school with a significant Aboriginal student population found the ‘Caravan’ animation challenging and thought provoking. The teacher asked the children what they believed was happening in the animation. Many of their responses indicated confusion about the content (how can they be in space?) and the characters (are they real?). The opportunity for these young students to explore fact and fantasy enabled them to learn about the role of moving images and in particular, animations, in presenting stories and ideas that are not necessarily real nor based in fact. These lessons highlight the importance of challenging student’s held beliefs about reality and developing a foundation upon which to build their awareness and understanding (critical literacy) about the use of moving images through the media, particularly in advertising of products.

A second animation was used to determine the effectiveness of an Australian/familiar setting – a context that students relate more intimately with. This 3 minute animation tells a story about an emu in the outback that falls and breaks a leg, is healed by a flying doctor and is treated to experience flight. This animation is also set to a soundtrack and has no dialogue. It required interpretative work and generated rich classroom talk, oral expression and new vocabulary. Exposing students to these animations improved understanding of the nature of these texts, as well as preparing students for exploring these avenues for their own storytelling and developing their emerging critical skills.

The Emu and the Flying Doctor presented a familiar setting for Aboriginal students to engage with.
Case Study 6: Visual Literacy – A Critical Approach

Year five students at a WA private girl’s school used the Caravan animation as a culminating lesson to assist with visual literacy learning objectives. Various exercises tapped into students existing knowledge about the stereotypes and symbolism that are embedded in cartoons and comics. Symbol Scavenger Hunts, cartoon analysis and the development of on-screen cartoons and flip books (exploring onomatopoeia) enabled an emergent understanding of visual language and the techniques used in communicating through visual images. Working in groups, students then deconstructed Caravan from the perspective of four roles:-

1. The Director: Utilising an analysis framework focusing on production elements of the animation, including shot types, camera angles, lighting, colour, body language, costumes, location setting and sound track.
2. The Film Critic: Using the discussion manager framework.
4. The Producer: Students created their own narrative, corresponding storyboards and produced their own cartoons or animations.

About Finn Cragg

Finn Cragg is a small Perth animation studio captained by Martin Davidson and his business partner Lyn Hawkins. They produce specifically tailored 3D animations and multimedia resources for K-12 and adult learners. Finn Cragg continues to generate feedback and direction from teachers, literacy consultants, curriculum resource developers, teacher associations, school principals, and the students themselves. Lyn and Martin are experienced presenters and workshop facilitators who have a pragmatic and fun approach to their sessions.

For more information about on-going class research, a preview of Finn Cragg animations and details of Finn Cragg’s multimedia resources; see www.finncragg.com.

References


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