The Vampire Project – an investigation into the use of ICT in English.

Researcher: The research was carried out by Pam Stephen between April and July 2001. Originally a joint project was to be carried out by a team of three teachers,working together. Work similar to that described here was to be carried out with an Upper Sixth group who would work with Year 7; this was abandoned because of timetable difficulties. Year 7 carried out the work at lunchtimes, whilst the work of the Sixth Form group as described by colleagues, Billy Zaidi and Jackie Kruse in their TiPS reports, took place in normal lesson time.

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Research Topic: Technology-integrated pedagogical strategies; Secondary English teaching and learning.

Geographical: England–Eastern region

Educational Sector of Participants: Secondary

Abstract: This small-scale study examined how the internet, word-processing, and other ICT-based packages used to create information texts, could support the teaching and learning of English at secondary school level, specifically the teaching of concepts of audience and purpose.

The approach used was based on the idea that a clear ICT-based focus could be created in which pupils could enhance their access to and read of texts from a range of sources. They would then evaluate the material's suitability for the set task, extracting useful information to transform ICT-based documents into one summarised, attractive text appropriate for a CD-ROM entry for a specified audience, their own peers
.
The study examined the use of this approach with texts on vampires, carried out with a small number of Year 7 pupils over two terms. Evidence about attitudes and motivation was gathered through the completion of questionnaires and logbooks. The main findings of the study were that:

i. the boys' groups remained highly motivated, and focused clearly on an end product. The groups found the topic to be very much to their taste, and were particularly appreciative of the opportunity to use computers without enforced sharing, and work in a group with a good ratio of staff to pupils.

ii. existing ICT skills were enhanced and developed by the work.

iii. oral and collaborative skills were also developed by the project

Findings

TEACHER OBSERVATION

Notes were taken of the working groups' discussions and behaviour during the sessions over the two terms. In summary, the nature of discussion was focused on reading/summarising material found on the web, leading to discussion about the usefulness of particular documents containing text and images.

In producing their own texts, pupils discussed choices of form, such as the balance between text and image, but paid more attention to selection from the range of texts available. Close attention to editing required additional teacher guidance.

Disagreements which took place in the groups tended to focus on those pupils perceived to be not pulling their weight.

One child was persistently off-task and frequently remonstrated with by his partner – he wandered the room, ate his lunch instead of completing the task, and roamed between groups.

The two core groups totalling 6 pupils maintained a high level of attendance. However, both of the girls (who had worked as a pair at the start) had dropped out by the halfway stage. From both of the groups that remained at the end, evidence was presented of additional work having been carried out outside of either the session, or normal lesson time, and in addition to the normal class homework tasks. The nature of this work was the gathering of additional unedited material for the group's consideration.

The pupils were keen to continue the project beyond the allocated time per session, and asked about next year!

LOGBOOKS

Pupils' logbooks commented on quite long periods of time spent waiting for material to download from the Internet. Several logs record that they were waiting for downloads throughout twenty-minute periods. This is unsurprising given the school's use of the Internet at lunchtimes every day, when a very popular IT club is on offer. Pupils' final comments for sessions remarked on pleasure at achieving or finding results.

QUESTIONNAIRES

In summarising the questionnaires, it must be borne in mind that they were completed by a very small number of pupils. Rather than recording statistics, it is simpler and ultimately more useful to record the fact that pupils (boys and girls) were very positive about their experience, recording their increased confidence in using computers and positive feelings about the work. A minority of negative responses was recorded; these suggested that some children's interest had waned on occasions. It is significant that speed of Internet download was frequently commented on by the children, as they waited for images and larger text files to appear.

QUALITY OF END RESULT

There were two separate end products for the project.

One group produced a series of PowerPoint generated screens on Vlad the Impaler which has been placed on the school's Intranet. The material demonstrates that the group has read, evaluated and extracted appropriate information for a peer-group audience on the subject, and presented it in a professional and attractive way.

Group Two chose to print out their selection of material, cutting and sticking extracts onto A3 paper, layering material in simulation of hypertext nodes linking material, based on the model they had been given (an entry on different kinds of frogs from a Resources Centre Encyclopaedia CD). Whilst this material looks much less slick than that produced by the first group, it clearly demonstrates that children have understood the way in which information can be presented in a helpful format, with due regard to audience and purpose.

Participant Information

A small mixed ability Year 7 group took part, ranging in number from 4 to 9 (7 boys, 2 girls.) Each session lasted 50 minutes. The variation in numbers occurred because the work was undertaken by children on a voluntary basis during lunchtimes, one session per week over two terms. The children of the study had been asked to volunteer on the basis that their ICT skills were already developed and that they would **not** need to be taught how to use the packages. The children who volunteered did so as small friendship groups. Parental permission was sought for children's participation because of the subject matter.

All Year 7 pupils have IT lessons at school and had been taught word-processing/desktop publishing skills; they had been introduced to web page authoring. They have also been focused during their English lessons on writing for specific audiences and purposes – e.g.

writing recipe instructions, writing to entertain their peers etc.

Equipment and Materials Used

Pupils had filtered access to the Internet in school. During the sessions, pupils also had unrestricted use of a computer suite comprising fifteen PCs with access to a black and white printer, a scanner and remote access to a colour laser printer. Pupils used 'schoolzone' to gain access to the Internet, and collated and wrote their material using Microsoft 'Word' and 'PowerPoint'. A number of texts on the subject of 'Vampires' were downloaded onto the school's intranet in order to speed up the search process, as it was anticipated that this would take a great deal of precious time.

Pupils also examined CD-ROM entries on the Natural World in order to model their texts effectively. See Appendix A)

Applied Method of Analysis

The research was carried out using:
Teacher perspective - observations of the groups as they worked.
Pupil Perspective - pupils' logs recording experience at ten-minute intervals.
Pupil questionnaires halfway through the project period.

Conclusion

Given the small-scale nature of this project and the factors which need to be borne in mind regarding the self-selecting nature of the groups and their make-up, the conclusions which can be drawn are naturally very limited. Nevertheless, the conclusion must be that this project has been a positive experience for the children, it has been enjoyed by them and has contributed to the consolidation of their reading and ICT skills in Year 7, and their ability to write in a highly focused way with regard to audience and purpose. Children demonstrated their familiarity and confidence in searching the Internet, using

Powerpoint and manipulate sections of text in a wordprocessed document.

Similarly it would be unwise to draw conclusions based on sex differences between the groups and further study of girls using ICT would seem to be logical.

Finally, it came as no surprise to see the frustration experienced by this most positive group of children when attempting to download quite long text and graphics files from the net. Whilst the material downloaded onto the school's intranet proved a useful starting-off point, the pupils very quickly felt that there was not enough material for their use, and were keen to do their own research. They were remarkably patient, but using this approach with a whole class of 30+ pupils would need care.

Recommendations

This kind of work clearly has enormous potential. With an emphasis on synthesising information, rather than slavish downloading and copying, pupils can appreciate that the Internet is a useful tool. They can also be shown the benefits of the high standard of presentation which can be achieved using ICT facilities, as well as the range of choices available to them in terms of software and presentational devices within particular packages.

This kind of activity would work well in a team-teaching situation, perhaps as an effective way of working with PGCE trainees and a class, or working with small groups of similar ability. Speed of Internet connection is a key factor as already mentioned, as is a realistic allocation of time to the activity.

In terms of further research, and as has already been suggested, ICT and its use by girls would seem to pose a number of interesting questions.

Research Evaluation

The findings of this particular case are hardly a surprise. Experienced teachers know that well-organised and planned ICT

lessons can enhance learning in English lessons, bringing a range of benefits to pupils of different abilities and interests. It is important to see ICT not merely as a secretarial tool for improving the appearance and accuracy of children's writing, but as an integral part of the wider English curriculum. Such an activity can be undertaken with confidence if suitable basic preparation takes place beforehand. The needs of the English curriculum in schools to adapt in style and emphasis for the new Framework can be addressed when using such activities, in terms of the development of ICT skills, the use of models of texts written for specific audiences and purposes. .), and the selection and extraction of information from databases. (See Appendix A – model of a professional CD-ROM

A similar study designed to achieve a greater level of security in the findings naturally needs to be carried out on a larger scale. A parallel group working with 'real' texts might offer interesting contrasts in terms of levels of motivation. Alternatively, a group of two classes from different year groups, working on identical source material as in our original plans, would be a challenging but fascinating study.

Pam Stephen
25th July 2001

Appendix A.

■ Chorus Frog
◄» Red-Eyed Leaf Frog

Tree Frog, common name used to describe any arboreal (tree-dwelling) frog but more correctly confined to a single family of frogs, the hylids. The family comprises more than 600 species in approximately 37 genera distributed throughout much of the tropical and subtropical world with the exception of central and southern Africa. A few species, such as the European and Mediterranean tree frogs, also inhabit more temperate regions. Not all species, however, live in trees.

Tree frogs are extremely variable in appearance, but most have a number of physical and behavioural characteristics in common. Many are either completely or partly a shade of green in colour, but with bright markings, and have a flattened body shape which better distributes their weight and greatly enhances their agility for life in a precarious habitat. The vast majority have adhesive sticky discs on the ends of their fingers and toes which enable them to climb on smooth and vertical surfaces. Some have a loose fold of skin on the belly which creates suction when pressed against a smooth surface such as a leaf; this stops them from falling out of their tree while they sleep. Most tree frogs are small, growing to between 1.5 and 12 cm ($\frac{1}{2}$ and 5 in). The majority lay their eggs in bodies of water, although some deposit their eggs in the water found between the leaves of plants. They eat insects and other small animals.

Probably the most familiar tree frogs are the European and Mediterranean species, the White's tree frog from Australia and Indonesia, and the famous red-eyed leaf frog from Central America.

Scientific classification: All true tree frogs belong in the family Hylidae. The European and Mediterranean tree frogs are classified in the genus *Hyla* as *Hyla arborea* and *Hyla meridionalis* respectively. The White's tree frog is in the genus *Litoria* and is classified as *Litoria caerulea* and the red-eyed leaf frog is classified as *Agalychnis callidryas*.

Contributed By:
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Chorus Frog

Larry Miller/Photo Researchers, Inc.