Using email to assist reading

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> Aims

1) To see if computer-mediated communication between boys at two different schools can enhance the reading ability and interest of Year 9 boys with low reading levels.

2) To make use of the opportunities for anonymity which email offers in order to allow teachers to assume multiple roles in the teaching of literature.

> Dimensions of this Case Study

Eight boys in Year 9 at Primrose High School in Leeds, West Yorkshire, communicated via email with a partner from The Hatters Lane School in High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire over a period of five months.

The pupils were encouraged to share their reading experience of the novel, 'Animal Farm' by George Orwell, and their work based on the text. The boys of Primrose High School were the subjects of three case studies examining their emails and their work, while the boys of The Hatters Lane School were used as 'facilitators' for the project.

> Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- Despite poor reading levels and generally low motivation, the boys were enthusiastic about sharing their reading with other boys via email.

- The boys showed the confidence to read and write and to exercise authority rather than working as novices.

- The boys extended the range and purpose of their reading by sharing reading experiences with their email partners.

- Responding to emails from teachers, who assumed multiple roles, provided the boys with opportunities to engage emotionally and speculatively with a literary text.

- The potential for role-play offered by the use of email created opportunities for purposeful and imaginative strategies for the teaching of literary texts and for formative assessment.

- Email proved effective in breaking down geographical and social barriers between the two schools and between the schools and the university involved in the project.

Background

"James spent all lesson changing books, talking or flipping through the pages of an illustrated reference book." This description of one pupil's behaviour during a library lesson will strike a chord with any English teacher who has ever worried about the lack of interest in reading demonstrated by many poorly motivated boys.

I wanted to see whether Information and Communications Technology could encourage boys with low reading and motivational levels to read more, to enjoy and to be more motivated in their reading. Would boys be able to support each other's learning by sharing their reading experience through email? Could the use of email provide teachers of literature with innovative and imaginative strategies for helping poorly motivated pupils to engage with texts?

The project

Eight under-achieving Year 9 boys at Primrose High School, Leeds, West Yorkshire, were given email partners of the same age from The Hatters Lane School, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. The boys studied the same novel, George Orwell's 'Animal Farm', and were encouraged to share their thoughts about the novel and their work on it by exchanging emails. In order to investigate how teachers could use the medium of email as a tool in the teaching of literature, a teacher from one school sent an email to the pupils, posing as a character in the novel. A university lecturer sent an email requesting help as a publisher bringing out a new version of the novel. The boys were also encouraged to write about their progress and to evaluate their own work.

For three of the eight boys involved in the case studies, English was not the home language. At the end of Year 8, just before this study, teacher assessment placed them at Level 2 or Level 3 in the National Curriculum attainment levels for English. The boys' ages ranged from 13 years 1 month to 14 years. Their reading ages were much lower. They ranged from 7.9 to 9.6 years. The boys were matched by interests and, in two instances by ethnicity, but not by reading ability. Generally, the reading ability of the Hatters Lane pupils was higher, with reading ages ranging from 9.0 to 14.0 years.

The boys from Primrose High also worked as a group with four girls for whom comparative data was collected.

Outcomes from the research project

(In the sections which follow, quotations from the boys are reproduced exactly as written).

Enthusiastic response

The boys' initial responses to the idea of sharing their reading with an email partner were optimistic. Zeshan's comment was typical:

"I think this project is going to be about reading and writing. I will get thoughts of someone and we will be helping each other."

Darren endorsed this view:

"I think this project will be quite fun. But I think it will be about reading and writing and helping each other. And it helps us make more friends. And learn us how to email."

James wrote in September 1998:

"I dont know how a email could help me".

Within a month his attitude had changed:

"I think it's good. You're starting to get to know each other and you're helping each other with your work."

The emails provided reluctant learners with an incentive to write for a real audience and a real purpose. Some months into the project, Andrew commented in his project journal:

"The project is now getting good. I like my partner Adam."

Reading and responding with authority

The brevity of the email form reinforced the need for the boys to be focused and concise in what they said. It allowed them to write in a factual way when they told each other what point in the story they had reached. Writing *to* a peer rather than *for* a teacher shifted the balance of power normally associated with written communication in the

classroom. Some of the boys took the opportunity to assume the mantle of expertise, normally associated with the teacher, by endorsing their partner's work, for example, or by questioning him about the text:

"Who do you think is better to lead Animal farm, Snowball or Napoleon?"

Extending range and purpose for reading

Reading the same novel as their partners encouraged the boys to read and then write about the text. However, it was often in terms of linear movement like a journey: *"..where are you up to in animal farm we are up to the beginning of chapter eight"*,

or factual statements about things done and tasks accomplished:

"I have finished my leaflet about Napoleon and I got some pictures from the internet on the leaflet."

They also were actively involved in reading and appraising their own writing based on the novel:

"My best work so far is Mr Jones speach."

as well as their partner's:

"I like your speech in the style of sqealer."

When we analysed the first examples of the boys' writing, we discovered that the following were rarely used:

- adjectives, which are necessary, for example, for character analysis;

- adverbs, which would be used to qualify statements about characters and themes;
- complex connectors, needed for consideration of cause and effect and hypothesis;
- verbs suggesting speculation about the characters and events; and
- questions, to invite their partners to share ideas about the novel.

This seemed to lend support to the growing suspicion that, while willing to tell the story of 'Animal Farm' and even express enthusiasm for it, the boys were either reluctant or unable to engage emotionally or speculatively with the text when writing to their peers. I wondered whether this was because they felt uneasy about not appearing 'cool'. Might the opportunity to communicate with a different audience release them from this pressure? I used the relative anonymity afforded by

the email form to create two different contexts for reading and writing. In the first, the boys had to respond to a plea for help from 'Snowball', one of the main characters in 'Animal Farm'. In the second, they were invited to write a letter to a publisher, offering advice on a new edition of the novel, designed for students of their own age.

Emotional and speculative responses

Widening the range of context, purpose and audience in this way did provide the boys with opportunities to show that they could read and write with engagement, sensitivity and thoughtfulness. (An analysis of the language used in these two pieces of writing showed increased use of abstract nouns and adjectives in most cases).

I intervened as little as possible when the boys emailed their replies, directing the boys to respond to what Snowball required of them. My main input was in the creation of the email, in which had been embedded three learning outcomes:

- narrative recall;
- understanding of character; and
- personal engagement.

The boys willingly entered into the role-play. They responded to 'Snowball' as though he were a close friend, and made emotional statements such as:

"Boxer your dear friend died."

When asked to help Snowball work out a plan to return, some were able to speculate about possible plot developments based on their knowledge of characters and events:

"There is only you that can help them animal's by going to other Farm's and telling them about this... they will get very angry they will join you to get you to kill Napoleon and his other pig friends and everything would be equal to all the animals."

The students offered the 'publisher' polite advice which provided evidence of reasoned speculation and of a desire to be helpful and constructive:

"I think people will find it difficult to read the book. After a chapter give some question because people could understand."

Strategies for teaching and assessment

Writing in role as 'Snowball' provided me with a refreshing alternative to more conventional means of setting tasks on literary texts. It allowed me to express emotional engagement with the novel and at the same time offer the boys opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of what they had read, in ways which were at once playful and yet – within the terms of the role-play – purposeful and authentic.

The brevity of the email form, however, limited the assessment potential of the exercise. At best, it could offer no more than a 'snap-shot' of pupil learning. While the email replies were being written, discussion between teacher and pupil seemed inappropriate, since to maintain the suspension of disbelief, the responses had to be personal. A series of emails, forming a dialogue between the pupils and Snowball might have allowed more developed responses and greater possibilities for teacher assessment. During that time, I could also come out of role and follow up through discussion and more conventional means of response, thus allowing a more teacher – led development of ideas and understanding.

Breaking down barriers

The email project proved effective in breaking down physical and social barriers to create a network of learners. Football created an immediate and lasting bond between the two groups of boys. They quickly decided to challenge each other to a match. The project concluded with a visit from the Primrose High boys to their partners at Hatters Lane, when the long-anticipated game was duly played. This provided a literal and unexpected example of the way in which email can break down geographical barriers!

The Primrose High students communicated with a range of audiences: peers in a school several hundred miles away; a lecturer from a local university which none of them had ever visited; and a character who existed only in the fictional 'space' created fifty years ago by George Orwell.

Evidence to support findings

The following evidence was collected:
- questionnaires at the beginning and end of the project;
- reading tests;
- journals;
- taped interviews;
- emails to partners;
- other communication with email partners;
- emails to 'Snowball'; and
- work produced based on study of the novel.

"I have enjoyed doing this project because it's made me read more than before." – Zeshan

Issues arising from the research project

*Far fewer emails were sent from Hatters Lane school than from Primrose High School because of problems in the newly installed technology, leading to frustration and disappointment for the boys involved in the project. Regular email contact could have enhanced our findings.

*Better typing skills would also have affected the length and quality of the emails.

*The emails and work of the more able pupils of Hatters Lane School suggest that this approach to literature could be a valuable tool for pupils of average and above average ability, for example, pupils working at Level 5 and above.

*There was no hard evidence of improvement in achievement: only one of the boys involved in the case study showed a significant increase in reading age by the end of the project; however, attitudes to reading did change for the better.

*The girls' emails were very different in content and style from the boys' and analysis of their emails would provide useful evidence for research into girls' attitudes to reading, to ICT in general and to email in particular.

*Much of the boys' communication combined on-task response, personal news, shared interests such as computer games and "macho" posing about the football match. The language of this social side to the email project would also merit further research.

Methodology

We supplemented the background information provided by the data collection methods outlined above by focusing intensively upon four pieces of work written by the Primrose High students:

- two emails sent near the start of the project;
- the email response to a character from 'Animal Farm'; and
- a letter written in response to an email from a 'publisher', asking for advice on a new edition of 'Animal Farm'.

The four pieces of writing were analysed according to the following criteria:

1. number of words;
2. most frequently used parts of speech;
3. least frequently used parts of speech;
4. verb and verb phrases suggesting speculation; and
5. use of questions.

Acknowledgements

Further reading

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