

New Generation Story Tellers: An Animated Approach

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With an emphasis on animations as narrative, digital storytelling and introductory media production Finn Cragg is helping Australian schools introduce new methods to inspire student inquiry, interpretation and creativity from using animations and multimedia. Following classroom trials using animation-focused resources and gathering feedback from curriculum advisors, teachers and students, Finn Cragg now develops tailored educational resources. "Caravan: 3D Animation and Multimedia Resources" was produced to help teachers engage students and generate cross-curricular outcomes by using existing software such as Microsoft's Power Point, Photo Story 3 for Windows and Movie Maker (and the iLife suite in Apple Mac schools) storyboards, 3D animated stills and video clip. Finn Cragg's Executive Director, Lyn Hawkins, shares how different immersion activities enable students to explore the physical and textual aspects of media production and analysis and build the foundations for digital storytelling. The learning generated in these approaches relate not only to media production and analysis, but to allied subjects such as English, languages, the arts and the use of ICT in harnessing student creativity.

It started with a song...

Teachers across Australia who have come across Finn Cragg's **Caravan** 3D animated resources since we first launched in late March this year are using these resources in very different ways to introduce students to the foundations of storytelling and media production. We made the decision to produce Caravan as a DVD-based resource to make it accessible to all schools no matter what computer access they had. The DVD pack contains a range of interesting multimedia resources that can be used to scaffold learning across multiple levels, starting with basic viewing and storyboards through to media production tasks.

The focal point of the Caravan DVD is a five minute animation set to a soundtrack. It is an engaging story about an elderly couple who challenge their fears and frailty and venture beyond the confines of their Caravan to revel in the freedom of space. My business partner in Finn Cragg is digital author and animator Martin Davidson. He created this animated production entirely himself from concept through to production. Martin's inspiration for the Caravan story came to him from Jethro Tull's 'Wondrin' Aloud.' However, when he first produced the prototype animation that we used in our schools trials we incorporated the BBC's 'Christabel' by Stanley Myers and his orchestra as the animation lent itself to this piece of classical music. Martin set about developing a soundtrack especially for the final, commercial version of Caravan so we wouldn't have any copyright restrictions, as we wanted to allow students to be able to access and edit the music.

Caravan, the story, explores a range of themes including aging, relationships, personalities, trust, fantasy, adventure, the past, present and the future (all this, and more, in just five minutes). Because the animated story is dialogue free, and set to an emotionally-driven cinematic soundtrack it is open to interpretation and can be studied from the aspects of the narrative construction through to the physical construction of the animation.

When I first met Martin Davidson, I was impressed with his mix of talents. His ability to design and develop all aspects of an animated production reveals a new breed of story teller; one who has the new generation skills that enable a story to be conceived, developed, created and told as an engaging self-contained 3D animation. Digital authors like Martin will become more prevalent as students graduate with this mix of talents that combine engineering and scientific process thinking with artistic expression. Martin synthesises the talents of story writing, design, 3D CGI animation and sound track production into a cohesive, charming narrative.

While new generation self-publishers have ready avenues to screen their mini-productions through the ever-growing internet video sites where short home-made videos are submitted and watched by millions every day, most of these home baked productions reflect poorly conceived themes, few storylines and substandard production skills. Nevertheless they obviously amuse and certainly attract attention due to their novelty and the desire for young producers to "show and tell." How long this fascination will hold is anyone's guess. The sheer effort it takes to wade through the rubbish to find a glimmer of brilliance is definitely not for the time poor. More importantly is the fact that our youth are busily making these expressions which means that teachers need to take heed.

The challenge for educators who do exert some influence over new talent is to harness this evident love of production and provide the necessary learning foundations that will ultimately improve the output, starting with a focus on how to engage an audience and enable a message to move, educate and entertain. By arming students with good quality learning experiences, strong literacy foundations and critical skills their productions will reflect this increased knowledge and strength in storytelling.

Having worked closely with Martin Davidson, a man who many have described as the consummate story teller, I have experienced first-hand how one person can tell a simple story that is visually powerful, even without dialogue. The powerful soundtrack created for Caravan is being used by teachers to expose students to the role of sound in enhancing a narrative and connecting audiences.

In addition to the five minute feature animation, the Caravan DVD includes storyboards and inspirational ideas for teachers to help students understand how meaning is created in this form of narrative through interpretation, discussion, critical analysis, editing and repurposing activities. We made the decision to provide all the Caravan footage created to make the animation, plus two minutes we didn't use in the final animation - all up there is seven minutes of video footage to play with. We wanted to give student's the freedom to change the sequence of the animated video clips or use the still images to create their own productions in text innovation and literacy activities. The best way to learn is always through hands-on experience.

THE ROLE OF ANIMATIONS

Students need exposure to all forms of media ideas and production techniques in order to understand the similarities and differences between them. As reflected in our Australian curriculum, students are expected to develop critical skills by reflecting upon and evaluating various production forms and investigating the role these have in society. Animation is a valid and popular media form to study. Every single component of an animation is a construct – far more so than live action footage.

Every element has been thought about, designed, modelled and manipulated in order to produce the final moving images. The animator does not have the luxury of 'ready-made' real people, settings, props or even light to play with. This opens up enormous possibilities to consider and critically view.

During our class research, Finn Cragg's animations were found to be highly engaging for viewing and elicited wide ranging discussions that demonstrated a well developed level of visual and critical literacy. The majority of students were able to readily share their first impressions of the animation. Discussing these thoughts in a group dramatically demonstrated the diversity of interpretations and the role we play as an individual member of an audience where our perceptions can be very different from those of the person right by our side. Because the story was free of dialogue it was very open to different interpretations. This helps students see how each of us connects with very different aspects of a story and identify with characters in varied ways. Not surprisingly, students showed a high level of existing knowledge about animations and multimedia in these sessions. Teachers built upon this knowledge by challenging stereotypes and assumptions, often using traditional texts to highlight alternative points of view and other characterisations of seniors.

The study of animation as a text is similar in some ways to the study of live-action film. However it is useful to encourage students to explore the ways ideas are presented in animations and contrast these with methods used in film, picture books, novels (including graphic novels), plays and comics. Students can deconstruct various elements of the story and analyse how the digital author develops the narrative and positions the viewer. Students can analyse both central characters in the Caravan story and explore how they interact with each other. A careful replay of frames to check facial expressions and body language, considering how they behave through the various scenes of the story helps students to look more closely at the text and develop contextual understanding (exploring attitudes, values and beliefs).

Teachers using the interpretative storyboard with the animation have promoted creative writing and narrative construction. In some cases during the class trials, students wrote their own back-story, gave the characters names, and wrote prequels and new conclusions. Interestingly, when we used story versions with text included, we found that this channelled student's thoughts and influenced their creativity by limiting potential story interpretations. It was a case of less is more, so we stripped out the text and left the story totally open for students to develop their own narratives.

LANGUAGE AND LOOKING FOR CLUES

Over a number of Language programme lessons year six students from a 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. This teacher was particularly impressed with the background music as she believed it enhanced the context and provided an avenue for discussion, being 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. While the storyboard files on the DVD-ROM could be completed on computers using text boxes to write in the character dialogue/thought scripts and narration text, in this case they were completed as pencil and paper exercises and the student's coloured their storyboard frames. 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 four 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 also illustrated images in the storyboard frames to depict these four final scenes. In conclusion, 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 the course of these lessons additional curriculum outcomes were evidenced including those in the areas of Listening and Speaking and Reading.

VIEWING, STORYBOARDS AND WRITING

Animation can be used in a scaffolding approach to teaching, starting in the early years of schooling. Younger classes can experience viewing, speaking and writing (in the context of early visual literacy development), while the progressive developmental stages can engage in deeper text analysis, repurposing, editing and constructing their own oral, written and visual texts whilst exploring the physical and textual aspects of media production and analysis.

In the primary setting, teachers are using the CARAVAN resources for achieving viewing outcomes; others to inspire creative and descriptive writing, while others are generating discussions on topics such as life, death, trust, personalities and relationships. For reluctant learners and students at risk Caravan has been an effective way to engage these students and hold their interest, generating new areas of discussion and inventive activity. The storyboards, which are designed in a cartoon-like format, are a non-confrontational method to facilitate creative writing skills, whether used as a pencil and paper exercise, or copied into programmes like PowerPoint and completed on computers.

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. Using a thematic approach throughout the term, a range of texts explored the topic of grandparents. The teacher challenged stereotypes by exposing students to a range of written and visual texts. They were asked to identify and discuss their own experiences with seniors and use their imagination in a number of creative writing exercises. Caravan was shown and discussed at various levels, with

the teacher guiding the process. One student enquired about the significance of using 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.

VISUAL LITERACY AND CRITICAL SKILLS

Year five students at a Perth private girl's school used the Caravan animation in a culminating lesson to assist with visual literacy learning objectives. By tapping into students existing knowledge about the stereotypes and symbolism that are embedded in cartoons and comics, a scaffolding approach to learning was achieved. 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.
3. The Casting Agent: Focusing on the analysis of the characters (characterisation).
4. The Producer: Students create their own narrative, corresponding storyboards and produced their own cartoon or animation.

REPURPOSING AND TEXT INNOVATIONS

There is nothing more powerful than hands-on experience. After trialling our animations we soon realised that by giving students editing experience with our high quality footage they would develop an affinity with strong visuals and settings that work. In theory this should improve their media production awareness and skills. In practice, this is exactly what happens. Opportunities to analyse and identify good production techniques will increase the learning curve about when and where to use these techniques. To achieve this we have given students access to the video and still footage created to make Caravan so they can produce their own resequenced slideshows, animations and rescored videos.

One primary school in Western Australian is involving students as young as Grade One's (six year olds) in simple digital story production and editing by using the freely downloadable Microsoft Photo Story 3 for Windows with our resources. When I have any reluctant teachers letting their own fears get in the way of using these resources I tell them about these kids and turn on the closest PC to show them just how easy it is. I love those amazed faces after just one hour when they have made their own digital story!

For middle and secondary students, similar experiences are occurring except that the output is generally at a deeper level of analysis and extrapolation. The use of Finn Cragg's Caravan DVD-ROM visual files (jpegs and .wmv and .mov) has enabled

students to participate in resequencing and repurposing activities. Some teachers have shown the students these files without first showing the animated story. This means that they view the visuals completely free of any preconception or prior experience of narrative. We have seen stories generated that range from a choice of scenes that depict the story of an old lady in her decaying home, to an alien couple from outer space who discover "more earth space junk", to a magic couple who communicate through mental telepathy. Any concerns teachers may have had about the limitations of 70 stills or 61 video clips of an old couple inside a Caravan and frolicking in space have been clearly put to bed by the multitude of different ideas that have been creatively produced as final stories, poems and short video clips.

With the Caravan footage media students have produced some outstanding short video clips that are of a commercial quality using the editing software available to them. Instead of utilising existing music tracks students are also given the task to develop an appropriate soundtrack for these short video productions.

A FINAL WORD...ICTS IN THE CURRICULUM

One interesting aspect about our experiences with schools is that we have been exposed to the numerous ways teachers are utilising ICTs in the curriculum. There appears to be a huge discrepancy between teacher's confidence and skills at incorporating computers into their class activities, depending on the subject and class level they teach. The use of the computers and multimedia should be to facilitate curriculum learning outcomes, rather than being the single focus of a lesson. We now run teacher workshops helping teachers embrace these ideals by learning basic editing programmes and digital story creation. We have found that most teachers are keen to make use of the programmes currently available to them on their school's network so they are very pleased that Finn Cragg's multimedia can be utilised without requiring the school to invest in another programme.

See www.finncragg.com for more details about Finn Cragg case studies, ideas, multimedia and animation.