Case Study 5: Secondary School, Norwich, Norfolk

Key Stage 3 (Year 9) Breakthrough Boys (under achievers)

Techniques: flipbook, thaumatrope, drawn animation

For this study we worked with twenty Year 9 boys on a 'Breakthrough Programme' and their teacher. The mixed secondary school is located in a middle class housing estate, five miles outside Norwich. The group attended one animation cineliteracy day at Norwich School of Art and Design, followed by two days workshops supported by three professional practitioners and the class teacher. (The latter two days are not described in this case study). Observation by video recording and interviews was made during all activities to analyse the boys' motivation, learning practice, and achievements. The evaluation below combines practitioners' and pupils' observations of how successful each activity was.

Animation Cineliteracy Day

For this cineliteracy day we wanted the pupils to explore different animation techniques in visual communication, this is to 'teach a grammar of language alongside a grammar of images' so pupils can find the language to talk about animation. (Burns, Digi-teens, 1999)

Pupils watched different types of animated products, were given an introduction to the animation industry and explored and developed a basic level of understanding in their sketchbook. It was important to for pupils to develop knowledge and literacy of animation, process and principles. We hoped they would use this information to develop their ideas, taking account of purpose and audience when developing their own animation briefs.

The boys were shy and inarticulate at the start of the day, giving short, reluctant answers to questions about their favorite animations. Most commented or repeated what the previous classmate said, e.g. 'haven't got one..' , Futurama ('..it's funny..'), 'Simpsons', 'South Park', 'Robot Chicken' (..'because it is funny and violent..'), 'Wallace and Gromit' ('..it is original..').

The room layout with three sets of tables immediate created three diverse groups of boys. Table one, to the left of the room, established a noisy, provocative and rebellious attitude. Table two, in the centre, demonstrated a more interested, engaged, and alert attitude. Table three hosted the slow, unsure, shy and less capable group.

The practitioner used a very energetic teaching style to respond to boys' general active/fast learning styles. Students were also set a professional brief to create an 'infomotion' to promote positive school life. We wanted to engage the pupils with a real world brief, introducing the professional creative industry. They would experience working under pressure, in collaboration with others, within a realistic art school environment. Pupils were given a personal sketchbook to collect their work during the project.

Selected animated clips were used during the day from Futurama, The Corpse Bride, Catch Me if You Can, The Adventures of Prince Achmed, Tom Tom Club, The Incredibles, etc. Discussion of clips was intercut with fast, practical exercises, to help keep the pupils' focus.

Activity: Persistence of vision.

This activity aimed to explain why animation works. Why do we see these static images as moving? The group was asked to wave their hand in front of your eyes very fast, so they are able to see several hands. Each pupil was shown a thaumatrope, zoetrope and flipbook to help them understand the principal of persistence of vision.

The group was asked to make their own thaumatrope, a task undertaken with interest and enthusiasm. The drawing skills were of low standard, but pupils were eager to get it right. The exercise did not require a high level of draughtsmanship, so confidence grew rapidly. All enjoyed the activity and showing the illusion to the camera and each other. Sketchbooks were used to develop ideas.
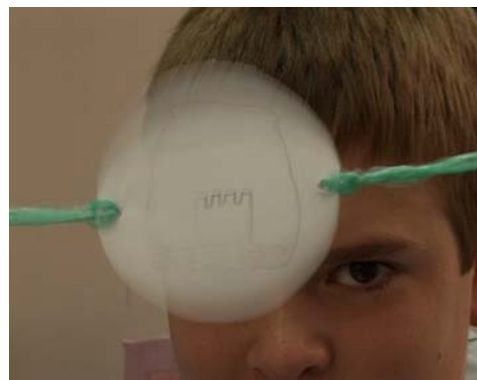
Understanding the language of animation

A variety of short animations were used to lead pupils into a discussion of production, language, representation and audience. (These are the four key concepts identified by David Buckingham in 'Media Education'.)

Here the practitioner followed Buckingham's example and used The Simpsons as a case study. In considering production, we discussed the method of producing this style of drawn animation. In analysing the language, we invited the pupils to tell us what we can learn about the main characters from observing the title sequence. "Who else can you see apart from the family, and why?" "How about Homer, what kind of person is he", etc. Pupils were given time to sketch out a character sheet, including a biography, likes, dislikes, friends, hobbies, etc. This activity worked better orally than in writing as all pupils were keen to engage in an open discussion about The Simpsons. The process also allowed the pupils to think about representation, by considering images of family and stereotyping. Finally, they talked about the target audiences for the Simpsons, and why they thought it worked so well for children and adults.

For the next exercise, the soundtrack from the animated title sequence from the feature film Catch Me if You Can was played, without visuals. The pupils were asked to identify its genre and intended audience, and to predict its content, message and style of animation. Questions were asked such as "Do you think this is a cinema film or TV programme?" "Who do you think would watch this?" "Who is it for?" "What can you hear?" "What instruments?" "Can you tell what the film is about?" "Why was this style of music chosen?" "Does it have a message? If so, what is it?"

About half of the pupils were engaged by this exercise and provided thoughtful responses. Listening skills varied enormously in this group, and most found it extremely difficult to listen for longer than two minutes. (This exercise was previous tested with Year 10 Media Studies pupils and all were engaged in an exciting, open discussion on sound and meaning.)

Taking notes and developing written skills

Most of the pupils were able to follow and engage in the short discussion on the elements of an animation. They analysed and evaluated what is needed to make an animated film (idea, script, story, character development, character sheets, storyboarding, key framing). Notes were taken with general interest and without protest. The more able learners showed a greater capacity for recording information in notebooks.

The practitioner used many questions to extend and reinforce listening as well as understanding; this clearly promoted and developed pupils' oral skills. The activity was used to elicit responses and engage pupils in their current learning.

Practical activities
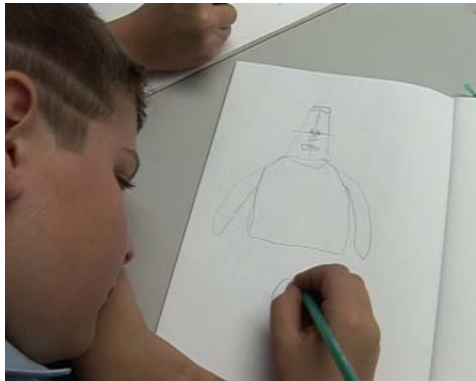
Drawing exercises were used to keep pupils engaged:
- Character design
- Changing shapes into something else (metamorphosis)
- Flipbooks
- Facial expression using minimal lines
- Movement

Activity: Movements

Now act out the following movements while others in your class or group try to draw the positions you are in.

- Kicking a football (four positions).
- Walking (four positions).
- Picking up a cup and drinking from it (six positions).
- Hammering a nail (three positions).
- Putting on a hat (four positions).
- Being frightened by a ghost (four positions).
- A cowboy with a lasso trying to catch cattle (four positions).
- A dog scratching his ear (four positions).

What did the boys think about the animation day?

'It was good as you could draw and make things. I enjoyed just being out of school, it is fun, when you get out of school. It is not every day you get out and do one subject all day. In school you have five subjects a day.'

'You do remember it… Flipbook was different than what we do in art…different to school. The fact that you did not keep writing stuff … ask questions about it, showed us some films varied lots.'

'There would not be many teachers would let you flip through pictures, you let us do things that are more fun, not just stick to writing or drawing. I learnt through this as I understood how little changes make movement in time.'

'Lots of making things, more practical work, actually more work than in school. She (Karina, animator) explained it very quickly and let us get on with it she helped us out and treated us more what we are; like teenagers. Some teachers are very strict and that is bad sometimes…We would like other to see our animations.

About the practitioners:

'Teachers get so much stressed. Teachers, kind off sit there and get on with their work. They help the people who are not so good, but kind of leave people who are good with their hands up for a while. At art school, you two just helped everyone equally. What often happens in school is teachers just tell you what the work is and then only help you if you put your hand up, they expect you to be able to do it.'

'At the art school you came around and asked what are you doing, what is this about? You helped develop our problems. This does not happen very often in class. Teachers only help if you ask for help.'

'At the art school you came over and ask us do you think it is a good idea if you could do this or that? When we were with you asked 'could you do it better? A teacher will just say do it better, make it better, neater, they don't ask you. Or they let you copy out of a page out of a text book.'

'There would not be many teachers you would let you flip through pictures, you let us do things that are more fun, not just stick to writing or drawing.'

What was learned?

It is important to bear in mind that the breakthrough boys were identified as underachievers because they were either disaffected, disruptive or having other behaviour difficulties. They were not necessarily of low ability.

'I am underachieving because I was not paying attention I was not behaving as well as I could, put off work. In maths last year, the teachers did this time thing, 5, 10, 15, I got five lunchtime detentions in a week. I sit, and I get bored. I kept talking, shouting, can't keep my mouth shut, now I have a mentoring session.'

The same boy (who hates drawing, because he thinks he just cannot draw) commented on the cineliteracy day:

'It was good, it was different, it was different like the flipbook and the things in out sketchbook were different than the things we are doing in art. We did different activities and exercises, but in art we do one thing for two lessons or more. It just goes on'

The pupils learned that there is an industry, and institutions where artists can train. Pupils asked several time during the day about art school life and study, how long it takes, and how good you have to be to study. Pupils understood that animation involves different job descriptions, such as storyboard artists, character designer, director etc.

Pupils made clear connections to what they have seen on TV, and engaged immediately with The Simpsons, Futurama and The Incredibles, but not to any critical depth. In analysing The Simpsons title sequence, pupils were able to analyse character well, but stopped short of identifying the genre as that of *dysfunctional* family sitcom. This particular group lacked the communication and literacy skills needed to fully deconstruct the study piece, in the ways suggested by Buckingham.

They learned how long it takes to make an animated blockbuster and also how many people are involved. The gained a basic understanding of the skills involved, such as drawing, script writing, communicating through presentation and talking skills. They also discivered that the industry is not male dominated! The boys responded well to the recently graduated animator who led the day, and found it easy to express their admiration of her work.

Pupils worked in a small room, close together on a very hot and humid day in August. Despite these conditions, the cineliteracy day offered a variety of learning models, and multisensory learning approaches in order to engage disaffected learners. These can be divided up as:

- verbal/auditory (learning by hearing) listening to the title sequence of *Catch me if you Can*, discussing what they hear, listening to instructions
- reading/writing (learning by processing text) taking notes, using sketchbook, script and storyboarding
- kinesthetic or practical (learning by doing) making a thaumatrope, regular drawing exercise, pupils perform in front of the class

The rapid movement from one task to another worked well in addressing behaviour problems. Boys were less likely to become bored and disruptive.

Learning took place because:

- The activity was clearly explained, visually and audibly, e.g. thaumatrope, sketchbook exercises, facial expression and drawing from observation, movements.
- The practitioner used popular animations, such as the Simpsons to catch pupils' attention, then used them to introduce film language.

During the day new key words were introduced:

CGI: Computer Generated Imagery: Animated graphics produced by a computer
DV: Digital Video
Key Frame: Frames that show the extreme of an action or a principal movement in an animation Light Box: A glass/ perspex topped box with a powerfull light source. Used by animators to trace artwork
LipSync: The matching characters ' mouth shapes in time with recorded dialogue
Pixel(s): Derived from PICture ELement: The smallest unit of a digital image, mainly square in shape, a pixel is one of a multitude of squares of coloured light that together form a photographic image.
Pre-Production: the planning stage of a film or animation beofre shooting begins
Registration: The exact alignment of various levels of artwork in precise-relation to each other
Rotoscope: A device that projects live-action, film, 1 frame at a time, onto a glass surface below. When drawing paper is placed over the glass the animator can trace off the live action images in order to get realistic movement.
Showreel: A portfolio of moving image on videotape/DVD/CD.
Stop Action/Motion: Animation where a model is moved incrementally and photographed one frame at a time
Storyboard: A series of small consecutive drawings plotting key movements in an animation narrative and accompanied by caption-like descriptions of the action and sound.
Timeline: Part of software displaying events and times of an animation in terms of frames/time (seconds).
Shot types: close up, medium, wide, etc