

Video Poetry

with Joc Mack, Martin Sercombe and Britta Pollmuller

The students who had worked with Andy Craven Griffiths took their poems to a two hour video poetry workshop led by Joc Mack, Martin Sercombe and Britta Pollmuller. Their brief was to adapt their creative writing to the video screen, whilst further developing the performance skills they would need to deliver their poems to camera.

The Circle Game

This is a great warm up game to play as it gets everyone moving and sharing the space. An extension of the well-known 'Oranges and Lemons' game, it focuses participants on stage presence and gives them a visualisation tool to help with voice projection.

Ask the participants to sit in a circle on chairs. The group leader stands in the circle. There is no chair in the circle for him / her. The group leader says: "My name isHands up, if you have ever eaten breakfast". Participants put their hands up, with big and bold drama commitment. When hands are still and the room is quiet, the group leader claps his/her hands and calls out "Change places". All participants have to run across the circle to a new chair i.e. there are no planned or close swaps. The group leader also runs, getting a chair and leaving a new actor in the middle.

Ask the participants to visualise their voice reaching all four corners of the space you are in and point from head to all four corners to reinforce this. Focus actor in middle on standing upright and open i.e. no crossing of arms or legs or hiding behind hair or hands.



Eye Lines

This simple and effective whole group game promotes positive eye contact among participants and focuses the group on the importance of consciously using their eyes during a performance to camera.

Method: Everyone stands in a circle. The group leader asks the group to stand relaxed, neutral and centred, with weight evenly on two feet, hands relaxed by sides and head up and shoulders relaxed and lowered. There are two softly spoken instructions:

1. Look Down
2. Look Up

For 'Look Down' the participants fix their gaze on a spot on the floor one and a half meters in front of them.

For 'Look Up' the participants look straight up at someone else.

Make definite, clear and controlled eye movements with no eye rolling or eye wobbling. Avoid negative stares and facial expressions. Think gently positive. (The group leader should demonstrate before the group plays.)

If the other person is looking back at you, both smile at each other and sit down in the circle. If the other person is not looking back at you, continue to hold your eye position until you hear the next instruction to 'Look down'.

The group leader gently guides the group until all are sitting. (If there is an odd number of participants, the group leader stands up again to ensure that no-one is left without a smile.)

Play twice. Ask participants to move to a different place before the second game. (Some people find making eye contact very uncomfortable. Suggest they look at the bridge of the nose rather than directly at eyes.)

Developing a Video Treatment for the Poems

Working in groups of four, the participants made initial decisions about presenting their poems. Is the poem for one voice and one presenter or does the narrative require a group of performers? Who will be the performers and what are their roles?

We offered the team a range of environments to film in, including a dance studio, the school grounds and a blue screen studio (where a background could be added in post production.) With the poems in mind, participants made choices about the atmosphere and environment that might fit each poem: light or dark? realistic or virtual? Some wrote their poems to fit chosen locations (such as the dance studio) whilst others specified background images such as a video game environment.

Blocking the Action

Throughout the festival, one team of students adopted the role of video crew, tasked with documenting the workshops and filming the poems under the direction of the authors.



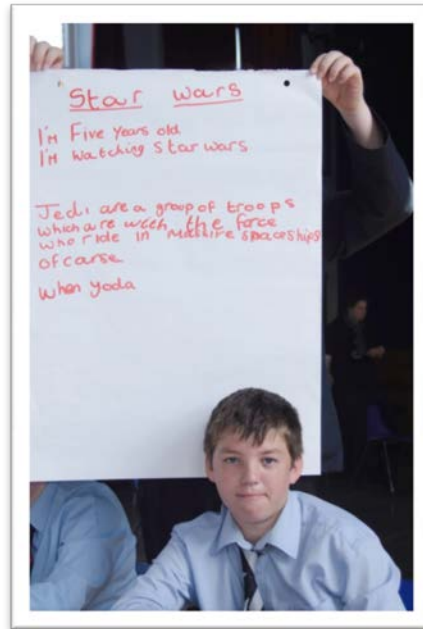
To begin developing this creative relationship, we invited the crew to demonstrate a range of options for framing the performers as they recited their work. They introduced close ups, medium and wide shots, worms eye and birds eye shots, pans, tracks and zooms and discussed with the performers which they might use and why. The poets were then invited to block out their performances shot by shot. Some drew up storyboards to map their decisions. For the more complex scenes, we asked the group to devise a freeze frame to represent each new shot in the sequence and make clear and bold tableaux for each. Each freeze frame then defined the positions of the actors in frame, and the type of camera shot to be used.

Some of the poems required drawn backgrounds which the poets then went on to design prior to working with the film crew.



Rehearsals

Each poet then wrote up their work on a large sheet of paper and taped it to a wall. This allowed them to rehearse their delivery to a imaginary camera whilst a "peer mentor" observed and gave critical feedback on the style and effectiveness of the vocal delivery.



The poets then rehearsed their video poems within their chosen environments, this time focusing on the complete performance. Due to time constraints, some had to rehearse without the assistance of the film crew. On these occasions, a peer mentor adopted the role of film director and used his or her mobile phone to check framing, composition and performance, then replay this to the actor. This proved an excellent opportunity to troubleshoot technical problems and refine the performances, considering details such as facial expression, use of eyes and vocal delivery.

Some of the poems required several actors who worked as a team, following the same process.

Filming the Poems

The video crew received a training session in camerawork, sound recording and directing at the start of the festival. This allowed the poets and film makers to work effectively together under considerable time pressure. The video crew first took advice from the poets as to their artistic intentions, and studied storyboards where available. Then, on a shot by shot basis, the video team also made suggestions on the performance and composition until a consensus was reached.

Because of the numbers of students involved, each production had to be shot in around 10 minutes.

Learning Progressions

Given more time, each piece could have been reviewed critically then further refined. However, working to a very tight time frame gave the students an insight into real world television production, where artistic compromises must be constantly made to complete a piece of work on schedule and budget!

The entire experience could never be more than a brief glimpse of the potential challenges of a career in the creative industries. However, it proved sufficiently stimulating to encourage several students to consider such options as school leavers.

