Animating Shakespeare: Engaging Students through Embodied and Virtual Learning

Eilis Flanagan

National University of Ireland, Ireland

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Abstract

This paper investigates the potential of combining animation and ensemble approaches to learning to encourage students to personally engage with and critically analyse Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Ensemble is an approach to drama that encourages cast members to co-rehearse a script and this paper examines its potential to encourage students to explore and connect with a text. Shakespearean drama is used as a medium for this investigation because as a ubiquitous script it allows students to analyse timeless and universal stories in an emotional and physical manner. The paper addresses current concerns regarding disengagement and underdevelopment of critical literacy skills of second level students. It considers the myth of the digital native, focusing on the issue of young people as passive consumers of technology rather than innovative creators of content who learn from its use. Consequently, it evaluates the effectiveness of a coordinated use of new media and ensemble to deepen student engagement in education.

Participants comprised male and female transition year students from two second level schools in the West of Ireland. An ensemble workshop exploring the text preceded an animation workshop where student undertook collaborative animation projects using I Can Animate and iMovie software. Both the process itself and the product were used as assessments. Participant feedback was obtained via focus groups.

This study is the first and second iteration of a Design-Based Research (DBR) project exploring the impact of a technology-enhanced ensemble model (TEEM) of English education on student engagement. The paper will discuss implications for future iterations of the intervention.

TOPIC

This study is part of a doctoral project to investigate the potential of combining narrative technology and ensemble approaches to English education to help students engage with texts on a deeper level. The study explored the extent to which technology-enhanced ensemble approaches to English education at post-primary, senior level maximise student engagement with texts and encourage the development of students' critical literacy skills. To this end, it also considered what intervention design is most successful for the combined use of ensemble approaches and narrative technology. The preliminary conceptual design of the intervention was informed by the literature and initial interviews with students and teachers of English. Once tested, the intervention was evaluated in accordance with participant feedback and redesigned. Thus, the specific objective of this study is to develop a framework that documents how narrative technology can be used to enhance the teaching and learning of English literature. The study will have implications for all curricular learning since the product, the technology-enhance ensemble model (TEEM) approach, has wider implications for engaging students in a range of curricular lessons and is by no means limited to English education.

The Hyland Report deduced that there is "an increasing number of students entering third level education [who] exhibit serious deficiencies in basic literacy and analytical skills [and there is] a growing concern about the Leaving Certificate across the third-level sector – particularly its failure to foster problem-solving and independent learning"(Hyland, 2011, p.8). Therefore, this study used Shakespearean drama as a base for exploring the potential of ensemble approaches to learning because it is a script that calls for student engagement, independent learning and analytical skills in order to explore timeless and universal problems in both an emotional and a physical manner. A script allows for active, abstract and imaginative exploration of a text since it enables meaning to be "brought to life by acting out. A text makes no such demand" (Gibson, 1998, pp 7-8). The ensemble acting approach involves cast members collaboratively exploring the script, rather than emphasising individual performances (Royal Shapespeare Company, 2013). For that reason, this practice is valuable in English education to support student engagement with text. Using various acting techniques such as the whoosh storytelling or Grandma's footsteps[1], an ensemble approach allows students to concentrate on the task collectively without feeling self-conscious. Geoff Petty asserts that "[d]rama raises self-esteem and self-confidence, often allowing hitherto unremarkable members of your class to shine. For all students it encourages empathetic understanding and identification with the characters portrayed. It is a very powerful method for affective education"(Petty, 2009, p. 206). Therefore, by using ensemble students can engage socially with each other and with the text while channelling their creativity into their group performance and diversifying the opportunity for achievement.

Once students have explored the text through ensemble, they imparted the story of their learning using their choice of narrative technologies. Narrative technology refers to digital media that caters for storytelling in a range of formats. Examples include Windows Movie

[1] *Whoosh storytelling*: Students make a circle. They are invited to participate in narrating a story by becoming its various characters or objects as they are called upon (or volunteer) to do so. They begin by embodying a still image and then they act out the story as the narrative progresses. If the word "whoosh" is uttered, they return to their original positions in the circle and the narrative can proceed or a new one can commence.
Grandma's footsteps: One student faces the wall. The rest of the cohort begin at the back of the room and try to sneak up on "Grandma" without being heard. If Grandma is reached, that student takes over the role. If a student is caught sneaking up on Grandma then Grandma asks him/her a question in relation to the text (for example, describe a hope or fear that *Macbeth* has in Act1 sc(i). That student must then recommence at the other end of the room.

Maker, iMovie, I Can Animate, Comic Life and Audacity. This “synergy of storytelling and computing” combines the ubiquitous nature of narrative and timeless need for autobiography with new developments in educational technology to “enhance learners’ achievement and confidence, their intra- and inter-personal learning (Hall, 2012, pp 96-97). The study combined narrative technology and ensemble with a view to encourage students to integrate their knowledge and learning in a meaningful context. This blended approach to English education is innovative and allows for productive, aesthetic use of technology to bring learning to life. The EU Kids Online: Final Report dispelled many important myths about our young people’s use of technology. The chiefs misnomers were that the “[d]igital natives know it all” and “[e]veryone is creating their own content now”(Livingstone and Haddon, 2009, p.42). It seems that most teenagers require more support now in developing their digital skills because they tend to use technology in a passive manner. Consequently, this study will encourage creativity on the educational side of the digital humanities in order to explore new “[t]eaching and learning approaches directed towards building students’ capacity to respond personally to texts [and this] would benefit examination performance”(Chief Examiner's Report, 2008, p. 42). This model of English education provides students with a portal to channel their learning and experiences into an assessable output. Ensemble activities allow students to be engaged and fully realised in the moment. This echoes the teachings of Heinrich Pestalozzi who, over a century ago, argued that young people ought to be engaged in education and should arrive at the answers themselves by having their heads, hearts and hands all occupied by the learning (Pestalozzi, 1894). Therefore, supporting the ensemble exercise with a technology-enhanced activity ensures that the senses are still engaged in this aesthetic process. Storytelling can be used to explore Lev Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is more concerned with the buds of learning rather than the fruits of development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). This concept concerns itself with the zone that spans a child’s actual and potential development level. Its understanding within education is vital for matching teaching strategies to student capabilities. Since the higher mental functions of the potential development level of a child have their origins in social relations, it would stand to reason that storytelling can therefore play a mediating role in the ZDP of a child and unlock their potential for engagement and critical thinking.

This research will be the first of its kind to develop a user-friendly framework for combining ensemble approaches and narrative technology in English education to enhance student engagement with texts and develop their critical literacy skills. With regards to ensemble approaches to English education, Professor Jonathan Neelands has researched the area of drama as creative learning and its potential for English education (Neelands, 2009). Prof. Neelands suggests that drama education should concern the process of experiencing the social and artistic engagement with the drama rather than the outcomes of studying it and this is something I will build upon in my research. Rex Gibson suggests that the scholastic model of teaching Shakespeare has perhaps caused our young people to disengage with text and is sustaining a de-motivating effect on students (Gibson, 1998). This makes sense, as Shakespeare ought to be an aesthetic experience and as such using ensemble to engage students with the text can awaken their senses and inspire their learning. There has been a significant improvement in the performative strategies used to teach Shakespeare in the United Kingdom. A study to this effect concluded that a more dynamic approach to teaching Shakespeare is crucial as “Shakespeare's texts were written to be performed on stage; even though they have to prepare for the examination, students should learn the plays as his stage craft intended them to be experienced. We surmised that desk-bound and active methods of teaching are effective in combination when applied in the secondary English class” (Aoki, 2012, p. 91).The outlook is concrete: students must be more active in order to be more

engaged in learning. There have been studies undertaken in drama and technology in terms of teacher attitudes towards its use and the uses of technology in English education (Flintoff, 2005, Young and (Eds.), 2013). However, research in combining ensemble and narrative technology to encourage student engagement with text is novel. In the Irish post-primary context, the LCVP Electronic Portfolio simply serves its purposes. In the UK, the eVIVA for KS3, by the QCA and Ultralab, concluded that students' motivation and confidence improved while teachers marvelled at its ease of access (Ultralab, 2005). These examples of ICT in education are not making effective use of technology to develop student engagement or critical literacy skills, which is something this study attempts to address. The area of engagement and achievement seems to be more of an issue in recent times because there are additional interruptions to learning. Cultural diversity, along with a host of distractions, makes it more difficult for teachers to engage students in learning and for students to avoid the monotony of school tasks and to set about to achieve all that is asked of them while maintaining self respect and succeeding in school (Newmann, 1989). Studies have focused on how technology can enhance student engagement in virtual learning environments (VLEs) or with primary sources online (Lindquist and Long, 2011). However, as evident, the area of technology-enhanced ensemble education to encourage engagement with texts within post primary senior cycle English is an entirely new field of exploration. I will learn from the successes and failures of past and current ICT initiatives in post-primary curriculum and assessment in order to develop this technology-enhanced ensemble model (TEEM) of English education.

This study used a Design-Based Research (DBR) approach. This is an iterative process whereby interventions are conceptually designed, tested and then redesigned and retested. It is naturalistic in its setting, which means it is practical and adaptable and is responsive to the emergent, experimental nature of things. Since DBR entails designing exemplar processes (the interventions) and products (models for best practice), its transitive nature is why it is so suited to educational research. It amounts to intelligent experimentation (Dewey, 1938). "Prototypically, design experiments entail both "engineering" particular forms of learning and systematically studying those forms of learning within the context defined by the means of supporting them. This designed context is subject to test and revision, and the successive iterations that result play a role similar to that of systematic variation in experiment" (Cobb et al., 2003, p. 9). DBR's adaptable and adaptive nature provides validity to the findings, which means that they have the potential to inform practice and therefore policy in this area. A successful intervention "should be able to migrate from our experimental classroom to average classrooms operated by and for average students and teachers, supported by realistic technological and personal support"(Brown, 1992, p.143). The iterative nature of a DBR study can be taxing on resources and this is something I had to consider and clarify with all participants (Anderson and Shattuck, 2012 , p.21).

Participants were comprised of 42 post-primary, senior level English students, both male and female; teachers of English and principals, selected on a voluntary basis. Participating schools were two schools in the West of Ireland selected on a random basis by reply to invitation. Research methods included focus groups and workshops. Ensemble workshops were facilitated in the school research site where ensemble-based activities were used to explore Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Participating teachers of English collaborated on these workshops to breed familiarity with the students and to support curricular needs. The narrative technology workshop took place in NUIG[2] School of Education Apple iPedagogy

[2] National University of Ireland, Galway

suite and focused on the use of technology to enhance the ensemble approach. Focus groups were held with the participants during the pre-visit stage. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with participating teachers of English as well as with the each Principal (2) before and after the entire process to gain their viewpoint of teaching opportunities and logistical pitfalls. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.

During the first iteration student participants animated Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The iteration emphasised digital humanities education and endeavoured to encourage student participants to use technology productively rather than in a passive manner. The students were unfamiliar with the text and the technology used. The process centred on student engagement with text and involved a pre-visit to the school, a workshop facilitated in the NUIG School of Education Apple iPedagogy suite and a post-visit to the school. Students were introduced to Shakespearean language during the pre-visit. The workshops comprised an ensemble section and a narrative technology section. During the ensemble segment of the workshop students engaged in ensemble acting techniques as warm up and ice breaker activities. Then, they were introduced to the story of *Macbeth* using the BBC animation, which is 30 minutes duration (BBC, 1992). Upon viewing this students responded to the plot and characters using the 32-second *Macbeth* ensemble process (Folger, 2007)[3]. Other ensemble methods used included tableau, cross cutting, hot seating and marking the moment[4]. The purpose of the ensemble segment of the workshop was to provide students with opportunities, through embodied learning, to explore, personally engage with and respond to the text and to each other's interpretations of it. The second part of the workshop using narrative technology ensued. First, students were introduced to two pieces of technology: I Can Animate, to facilitate stop frame animation, and iMovie, which allows postproduction of the animation. Students were asked to animate Act1 sc(i) of the play from any one particular character's perspective. Play dough was provided for them to fashion their own characters and props from and they were given a free scope in terms of the direction of the animation. That completed the workshop part of the first iteration. The post-visit entailed a focus group feedback sessions involving both student and teacher participants. The researcher facilitated this.

Student participant feedback suggested that they enjoyed the ensemble activities, once the warm up activities were completed and students reported enjoying using technology in a productive way. However, they did suggest that the content was too vast and deep to cope with in such a short space of time. While some students believed that the play dough was a very creative way to embody the characters and the plot others suggested that having to fashion your own scene prior to animating it was too time consuming for them and nearly overshadowed the purpose. While several students described frustrations with using iMacs, suggesting it hindered their productivity, others detailed improvements in ICT skills and their use of iMacs following the workshops. Students reported that a basic knowledge of the texts was enhanced by the ensemble activities and then built upon by using narrative technology to tell their story. Teacher participant feedback was generally positive with teachers requesting resources and guidelines from the workshops to use in their own classroom. They reported feeling excited about the next workshop series and expressed a desire to be involved again. They found that ensemble was a very useful way to encourage students to broaden their learning and understanding of a text and to engage on a deeper, more personal level. They

[3] An abridged version of *Macbeth* in 21 quotes summarising the play's action and involving nine actors.
[4] *Tableau*: students themselves make still images to represent a scene; *cross cutting*: interweaving two or more scenes to establish continuity; *hot seating*: a character is questioned by the cohort to establish their feelings, thoughts or motives; *marking the moment*: highlighting key moments using freeze frame, slow motion etc.

also thought that the combined use of embodied learning and virtual learning was innovative and exciting.

The workshops were an extremely active and engaging environment and the ensemble did work well to explore character, plot and imagery within a text. Students were unfamiliar with how to use the technology productively. Workshops such as these necessitate well-timed breaks for two reasons: first, students are accustomed to working in 30-40 minute intervals in schools and their attention does wane; second, when students are given a task, be it the ensemble or narrative technology task, well timed breaks are needed because such assignments can take up to 90 minutes to complete. It is important therefore, to help students maintain their concentration on the task to facilitate deeper engagement where possible. Once the sense of workflow was interrupted by a break, students did find it difficult to build up the momentum again. Students were provided with structured designed briefs for animating Act1 sc(i). Students benefited from this and they appreciated its sense of organisation. Therefore, this is certainly something that will be incorporated into the next iteration.

In accordance with the feedback, the first iteration was redesigned to form the second iteration. This assumed a more structured focus towards the animations with a (i) performative, (ii) comparative and (iii) reflective level being implemented. First, the student participants were given a choice of extract, from either Shakespearean drama or poem, in order to encourage students to connect personally with the text and to make an informed decision about which text they would like to work with. This was employed with a view to enhancing engagement in the academic work. Then there followed the pre-visit, the workshop and the post-visit as with the first iteration. In the pre-visit, the student participants explored their various texts using ensemble; this was their performative level. The workshop took place again in the NUIG School of Education iPedagogy suite where ensemble acting methods encouraged students to review the previous visit and to explore comparative elements either within their chosen text or between two or three texts; this was their comparative level. In addition, students were tasked with choosing how to animate their piece. Students were furnished with storyboards for all assignments as well as a design brief, which clearly outlined completion requirements. Students were given ample scope for animation. Once the story of their text was animated, using the same technologies as before, students then progressed to a more analytical level of the workshops. They used Comic Life to reflect both on the process itself and on their learning; this was the reflective level. The post-visit again involved focus groups to obtain general feedback and a confidential online survey for individual feedback.

Student participant feedback for the second iteration was much more positive. Students said that they felt that they had a deeper knowledge of the text following the intervention. They reported an understanding of how to analyse imagery in particular within texts. They also welcomed the socialising opportunities as well as the occasion to work with peers they ordinarily would not have since each aspect of the tasks were designed to encourage collaborative work. Participating teachers reported that the students' overall responses to subsequent assessments on the texts were on a much deeper level than it had been previously. Teachers felt that their students were better equipped to engage with and analyse text following the intervention than they had previously demonstrated. Students offered more personal responses to questions following the second iteration of the intervention. It did take longer to complete tasks but on average students connected more with the various elements of texts on a deeper level than they had before the first iteration of the intervention. Their answers to particular questions on the text were less generic and more specific. Students also

tended to use quotes in their answers and oral personal responses to texts despite not being prompted for them.

Since these iterations are part of a doctoral study on student engagement with text, subsequent iterations focus on the issues surrounding measurement of engagement. To this end, it is important to maintain comparisons with control groups and national averages. Providing students with choice concerning the texts and technology they use seems to be of paramount importance in this study in terms of pre and post intervention analysis. Future iterations will draw on wider concepts of animating literacies with a broader, more robust framework in terms of embodying narratives to investigate the full potential of a technology-enhanced ensemble model (TEEM) of English education for student engagement.

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