Boys, Ballads and Glogster: Techno-poetry in Year 7

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ABSTRACT

The new literacies are a change agent for the way in which we teach creating greater opportunities for collaborative student centred learning. This article focuses on the use of Glogster, an interactive poster display, in an all boys Year 7 English class room, in which we were exploring poetry, specifically ballads and the Australian identity. Most of the boys in this class have rich technologically literate lives outside of school and we wanted to begin with the students’ areas of strength to build self confidence, motivation and resilience in literacy learning and to overcome some negative stereotypes the boys held around poetry. We found that through the use of the interactive medium that Glogster provided the boys were motivated and engaged; they were able to exercise a wide variety of choice to express their understandings of their poem and that meaning making occurred through collaboration and engaged interaction with digital texts.

Introduction

‘Oh no, not poetry!’ The groan went up around the Year 7 classroom, ‘and we have to do what?’

The focus of this article is on boys’ literacy and the use of technology in the English classroom. The boys in this class were aged 12 or 13 years. Research and NAPLAN (National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy) data point to boys achieving lower scores in literacy than girls in Australia. Researchers such as Maynard and Lowe (1999) conducted teacher interviews and confirmed many of the stereotypes about boys’ attitudes and achievement regarding writing. Boys were considered less likely to enjoy writing activities than girls, exhibit greater reluctance to write and use descriptive and figurative language less creatively than girls. Millard found that boys do not place as high a value and importance on reading as do girls, and once boys could read, many felt they no longer needed to practice (Warrington & Younger, 2006).

Computers are a tool through which we may build an increasingly rich implicit understanding of the world and facilitate the constantly changing interactions that arise from the context in which we are learning and teaching English (Winch, Johnston, March, Llungdahl & Holliday, 2010). Indeed many literacy practices are being transformed by the widespread practice of using computers to read and write, as evidenced by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) identifying ICT as one of the ten general capabilities that will be specifically covered in the Australian Curriculum. The Internet has ushered in a wide array of new social practices, ways of communicating and of being in the world (Leu, 2001). Literacy is embedded in the social practices in which they are acquired and as such cannot be separated from the values, gestures, contexts and tools provided by the Internet (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

The English Curriculum needs to include new forms of digital texts and redefine conventional views of reading and writing which are no longer adequate to describe new digital texts and computer literacy practices (Mills, in Harris 2011, p. 40).
The context in which this series of lessons took place was in one Year 7 English classroom in an all-boys’ school in Canberra, Australian Capital Territory. This is a mixed ability class and the boys had been studying poetry and in particular the structure and nature of ballads during the second term.

So the reaction we received when we coupled a ballad with a mural was not unexpected. This representing task required the boys to:

1. Imagine they lived in a small town from which emerged a well-known ballad, which all Year 7 students of the town are required to study at school. This year, the town mayor has created a competition seeking the best entry for a mural honouring the ballad. The winning mural will be exhibited as an interactive digital display in the town centre. Carefully consider the ideas, settings and character/s in the ballad and how these might be valuable to the town.

2. Design a mural that captures the essence of its narrative. For best marks, you must also include images that show a connection between aspects of the ballad and the town, townspeople or Year 7 students who study it.

3. Write one paragraph explaining what you were trying to convey through your mural.

You will be marked on your ability to:

1. Use appropriate processes for planning and composing
2. Explore ideas, settings and characters of the text through visual language
3. Use principles of design to compose an effective mural
4. Comment on the relationship between text and society

Instead of asking the boys to complete this task using traditional pen and paper, we introduced them to Glogster® (www.glogster.com). Glogster is an interactive poster display, which facilitates students representing their thoughts and ideas creatively using online tools. Glogster EDU is a Web 2.0 platform that allows teachers and students to easily upload photographs, videos, text, audio and more to create an interactive online poster in a secure, safe and private web environment. We found the benefits to include security, easy teacher control over all the students’ online activities in Glogster, the creation of individual student portfolios, easy to mark assessments and provision of timely feedback. From the students’ point of view we discovered high engagement, interactive, imaginative and creative expression; positive peer relationships as boys helped and mentored each other and motivated learners who were able to express themselves and their choice of ballad in a multisensory way. There were many comments along the lines of ‘Glogster is so cool, how did you do that?’ and ‘The background you chose really represents the setting’.

We provided the boys with the opportunity to complete their Glog in three English lessons. The first lesson involved playing with Glogster and finalising their choice of ballad. Once the boys had decided on their ballad, they were given two lessons to complete their Glog. These lessons took place in the computer lab in the English Department. The original assessment task which required boys to complete a paper copy mural provided a marking rubric. Because we had used Glogster we needed to create a marking rubric which reflected the new medium required for this assessment task. We identified that the English outcomes (2, 6, 9 and 10) remained valid; however we needed to incorporate the interactive digital nature of Glogster to reflect more comprehensively the boys’ learning. The boys were also assessed on correct spelling, punctuation and grammar. The following is the rubric we designed to assess the Glogs:
### Marking rubric for Glogs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual appeal</th>
<th>1–4</th>
<th>5–8</th>
<th>9–12</th>
<th>13–16</th>
<th>17–20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poorly set out; only one or two items in the glog.</td>
<td>Design is confused and busy; little relevance to ballad.</td>
<td>Visual design creates some impact; some links to setting, ideas and character depicted in the ballad.</td>
<td>Visually pleasing with a wide range of well chosen images, text, and video that represent the setting, characters and ideas portrayed.</td>
<td>Excellent, balanced and impactful visual appeal. All elements support and enhance the viewer’s understanding.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Appropriateness of images | No correlation to chosen text. | Poorly chosen images and text which do not represent the ballad clearly. | Images presented are clear and appropriate, which adds to the understanding of the ballad. | Most images support the visual imagery of the ballad. Effective composition adds to understanding of most aspects of the ballad. | All images support, enhance and create cohesive meaning and demonstrate thoughtful comment on the chosen ballad. |

The creation of a Glog facilitated real time achievement for the boys and the provision of a rubric ensured any hidden inquiry processes were made apparent and clearly defined the purpose of the activity (Brozo & Flynt, 2008; Wilhelm, 2010). All aspects of the representing task were addressed through the Glogs and the level of engagement, excitement and achievement was markedly different to other paper based assessments we had used to date. This may well be attributed to the discovery of a new interactive tool, which none of the boys had used before and may well not have the same impact in subsequent uses. We did find entering a nickname for every student in the class was time consuming, but worth the effort as their security and privacy is now assured for further Glog portfolio work. Our school ICT system worked effectively during this series of lessons, so we did not have to deal with some of the difficulties teachers can face when incorporating and relying on computers for classroom use.

The engagement with multimedia to explore this element of poetry, apart from meeting Australian Curriculum guidelines, was as enjoyable and interesting to the boys as it was to us as teachers. We took on the role of co-learners or ‘guides-on-the-sides’ rather than positioning ourselves as the ‘sage-on-the-stage’ (Leu, 2001). We had little experience of using a Glog ourselves and we learnt along with the boys, some of whom seemed to intuitively know how to embed complex items to make their Glogs interactive. We were amazed at the boys’ creativity and insight in visually representing their ballad. Their understanding of the emotional impact, their choice of image, colours and words portrayed were truly remarkable. What began as an experiment to incorporate technology into our English lessons has effectively reflected the social practices that our students are so familiar with in their home lives. Using Glogs has expanded our understanding, added to our teaching practice and given our students the opportunity to demonstrate their creativity and understanding to an aspect of poetry they did not value at first. We encourage you to have a look at www.glogster.com and try it for yourself.
References


