

How does digital editing help children develop their understanding of narrative?

The study of narrative frequently draws on structuralist ideas that story structures are formulaic and comparable from culture to culture. There is a theory that these basic narrative structures are recognisable across cultures and similarly across generations. It should follow, therefore, that while children in the 21st Century classroom need knowledge and understanding of the classic examples of narrative schools teach, the Dickens and the Chaucer; teachers can also draw on the understanding of narrative children glean from more contemporary sources, such as films and computer games.

What Did I Want to Achieve?

Building on Prior Knowledge of Narrative

Children in high schools are frequently asked to compose stories, particularly at Key Stage Three when there is seen to be more time for creativity. National Literacy Strategy objectives for the task of story writing are commonly ones that assess the student's ability to structure sentences, spell accurately and use linguistic devices that engage the reader. The objectives also indicate that students must show some understanding of narrative structure; "a story with an arresting opening, a developing plot, a complication, a crisis and a satisfying resolution" (text level writing objective 5, Year 7 NLS) but the explicit teaching of this is something that can be overlooked in the classroom. By high school age many students arrive in the English classroom with a head full of narrative structures which have been imbibed through a variety of means, including teaching in primary schools, their private reading, stories they've been told and through their knowledge of film, television and computer games. When asked to write a story, by Key Stage Three most students have an implicit understanding of what a story, or narrative, should look like.

Film and Editing as a Narrative Model

I wanted to find out if the process of digital editing could help students achieve a more explicit understanding of story structures, by exploring the processes of a media they may feel more comfortable with. Initial experiments using film to inspire creative writing had been very successful. The writing of a Year 8 group during September 2001 had been proving too basic. They were writing Crime Stories, and weren't paragraphing properly. As a result, their stories often took the form of one paragraph of very basic writing, 'telling' the reader events rather than 'showing' them which failed to achieve any kind of mood for the reader. The children were able to identify how writers as varied as Arthur Conan Doyle and Ruth Rendall had created mood (as texts were used as models for their own writing as suggested in the National Literacy Strategy) but they were unable to emulate the narrative depth of these writers. When the students watched a six frame sequence from *The Maltese Falcon* and then had to write the story of that sequence in six paragraphs, their writing was transformed, and they included a depth of detail they hadn't considered before. When I began the digital editing project, then, I expected to find that the construction of a narrative sequence on film would help the students concerned develop a more thorough understanding of how to 'build stories'. The students had responded so well to film as stimulus for writing I wanted to show in this project that the manipulation

of film in an editing task would give them a more confident approach to manipulating narrative in their own writing.

The Students Involved

This digital editing project involved the participation of Roger and Marie, two Year Eight students who had recently performed particularly well on the genre writing project in class. They had been asked to write a crime story, having studied a selection of stories and films of that genre. Roger's story, while technically flawed, particularly with sentence construction, was engaging and dynamic with a sophisticated opening and structure. Marie's story was more accurate and more traditionally structured, and she had taken pains to include the elements necessary to the genre as discussed in class. These two students were invited to participate in the project as being representative of male and female more able students who had enjoyed the creative writing task, and who had shown an innate understanding of story structures.

Preparing for the Project

Before beginning the task with the students, I felt it was necessary to establish clearly my own expectations of narrative, particularly narrative structure within genre writing. Any student, teacher or simply reader of literature is pre-occupied with narrative, the age-old entertainment of telling, listening to and reading stories. The study of narrative is relatively young in comparison to the act of telling stories itself, but there is still a wealth of research done in this field, from modernists, formalists, structuralists, post-structuralists and post-modernists. The variety of opposing views on narrative; its content, structure and purpose, makes dizzying reading, especially as in recent years the accessibility of the Internet and multi-media technologies has opened up the realm of narrative into a whole new dimension.

One interesting and strangely satisfying theory of narrative is the idea that there are no longer any new plots. A variety of theorists have attempted to distil the sum total of narrative plots in the history of literature down to a specific number, most notably Rudyard Kipling's estimate of sixty-nine basic storylines and Borges' assertion that there are less than twelve (Murray, 1997 pg186). These plots are said to focus around the basic human preoccupations, which are themselves rather narrow, those of love, lust, power, adventure and fulfilment. Syntagmatic theorists emphasise that the making of narrative is a formulaic business, in which plot can be formed by working through any combination of human desires and preoccupations.

This idea is explored by the work of Russian formalist critic Vladimir Propp, whose work on the oral narrative of Russian folktales has continued to be influential. In The Morphology of the Folktale (1925) Propp, in advance of theorists like Borges, argued that the complete body of Russian folk narrative can be condensed into a set number of recognisable plots, which can be combined and interchanged with one another, but which are instantly recognisable. He argued that this body of narratives was composed of twenty-five basic plot structures or functions. These functions were vaguely stated, such as 'the hero leaves home', 'the hero is tested', 'the hero acquires a magical agent' (Murray, 1997 pg196). Propp maintained that though not all fairy tales will include all of the functions, there would still be a certain order maintained, so for

example the hero will always be tested after he has left home and the hero will have successfully completed his test before he marries and concludes the tale. This is a syntagmatic analysis of narrative; an analysis that seeks to understand the units of structure within a narrative and how they relate to one another.

This breaking down of narrative to a set number of interchangeable plot functions can be extremely useful when approaching narrative in a multi-media context, as we shall see later, but a large body of research by post-structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes disagreed with the nature of Propp's approach to the subject. Barthes noted in his essay 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives' from his influential Image, Music, Text (1977) that 'the narratives of the world are numberless' (Barthes, 1977, pg79). Although post-structuralists were in agreement that 'it is impossible to combine (to produce) a narrative without reference to an implicit system of units and rules', it was generally felt that Propp's strategy of reducing an entire body of oral narrative down to twenty-five functions was a damaging one. It was believed by these critics that Propp's system of functions would serve as a broad brush approach, but that narratives from specific genres and cultures would lose their distinctiveness when analysed in this very narrow context. For example, George Lucas' Star Wars films can be studied in Propp's context of 'hero leaves home', 'hero is tested', 'false hero is exposed and is punished' 'hero successfully completes the test'. The same analysis can also be arrived at with a structuralist approach to Charles Dickens' 'Great Expectations'. While in a post-modern culture it can be entertaining to view the classics in this way, to many critics there is a risk to be run in reducing the world's narratives down to a single story like this.

While in more recent study the formalist analysis of Propp has been mildly discredited, Umberto Eco moved on to produce a similar theory about the narratives of James Bond films and novels. Eco has reduced the key plot functions in James Bond films and novels to:

M moves and gives a task to Bond.
The villain moves and appears to Bond.
Bond moves and gives a first check to the villain or the villain gives first check to Bond.
Woman moves and shows herself to Bond.
Bond consumes woman: possesses her or begins her seduction.
The villain captures Bond.
The villain tortures Bond.
Bond conquers the villain.
Bond convalescing enjoys woman, whom he then loses.
(Eco 1966, 52)

This study is very reminiscent of Propp's plot functions, but begins to apply the discourse of narratology, the study of narrative, to a wider cultural context, including the analysis of film narrative. The semiotician Christian Metz noted that 'a narrative has a beginning and an ending, a fact that simultaneously distinguishes it from the rest of the world' (Metz 1974, pg17), an idea that echoes the multi-media artist Bill Viola's assertion that 'life without editing is just not that interesting' (Packer/Jordan 2001, pg289). While the formalists would argue that narrative is composed of a constant re-telling of the most basic human experiences, these ideas emphasise that when humans

are driven to turn their experiences into narrative, they find themselves 'editing' that experience, and shrinking it to fit the classic narrative structures that have been so successful and so fulfilling for centuries. These cosy formulaic narratives, with satisfying closure at the end, are of the type preferred by Hollywood since the early days of film.

Hollywood film narratives, even to present day, are often considered comfortable, unrealistic versions of narratives, the sort of formulaic storytelling that could arise from over-dependence on a formalist analysis of storytelling like Propp's. It is generally agreed that Hollywood narratives, with their structured sense of beginnings, middles and, of course, happy endings could never reflect real human experience in the way that narrative that was thought to. However, the way that Hollywood told its stories was to come under scrutiny by semioticians like Christian Metz, who produced an analysis of film narrative that was once again reminiscent of Propp's reductive list. Metz produced a syntagmatic analysis of film narrative, which reduced the structure of visual storytelling to these key elements:

- The autonomous shot (e.g. establishing shot, insert)
- The parallel syntagm (montage of motifs)
- The bracketing syntagm (montage of brief shots)
- The descriptive syntagm (sequence describing one moment)
- The alternating syntagm (two sequences alternating)
- The scene (shots implying temporal continuity)
- The episodic sequence (organized discontinuity of shots)
- The ordinary sequence (temporal with some compression)

(Chandler 2002)

These shot descriptors are instantly recognisable as commonly used shots that help directors tell stories through film. Just as earlier theorists commented that oral and written narratives could be broken down to common recognisable elements, more modern and populist critics point out that the same can be done with film.

Still more recently, narrative has moved on again, as Tofts and McKeich point out in Memory Trade – A Prehistory of Cyberculture (1998), the human desire to tell stories has moved on from oral storytelling, to the written word, to film media and now to multi-media technologies. The growing field of hypertext narrative exploits the ability of multi-media and the World Wide Web to more closely mimic the way our minds are supposed to work. Theorists, like Vannevar Bush who examined the connections between the way computers can work and the way the human mind works in his 1945 essay 'As We May Think', note that it is impossible for human thought patterns to conform to the strict ordered structure that conventional narratives have maintained. In the electronic domain the reader is free to choose the order in which he/she reads a piece of fiction and so electronic narrative structures are not as static and uniform as theorists like Propp found with oral and written narratives.

This 'multi-form' plot (Murray, 1997, pg188) places more emphasis upon the reader than previous narrative forms had, though modernist texts such as Ulysses and Finnegan's Wake by James Joyce experimented with 'hypertextual' structures long before the invention of the first personal computer, with structures that rely on the

reader's experience with texts to pull together various threads. Modern multi-media narratives also rely on experienced readers, as Janet Murray points out in her discussion of game playing as modern narrative. 'In a Western adventure I can be counted on to try to shoot at the bad guys, and in a horror story I will always enter the haunted house. I perform these actions not because I have read a rule book but because I have been prepared to do so by exposure to thousands of stories that follow these patterns.' (Murray, 1997, pg192)

It is not beyond the bounds of reason to state that multi-media narrative, in gaming and in emerging forms of hypertext fiction, will become as important a method of telling stories as the oral and written tradition, and of course film, are in present day.

To sum up, the history of the study of narrative appears to widely agree on the necessity of following structure and pattern. Our experiences cannot be told as they are, they must undergo a process of editing to allow them to fit into a recognisable structure. It can be seen, however, that as the format of narrative is changing throughout history, so is the structure narrative must fit into.

Organising the Project

Having established my own thinking around the subject of narrative, I set about organising the editing task. The logistics of the project involved Roger and Marie missing one lesson of English a week, a lesson normally reserved for private, silent reading. They went to a small office to work alone on a Casablanca AVIO digital editing machine which was set up with the television they were used to using in class. After initial instruction on how to use the machine, which took less than half an hour, they were given the task of constructing a coherent story from a selection of twenty-five clips of varying lengths from Humphrey Bogart films. These films had been chosen as 'The Maltese Falcon' had been successfully used as a stimulus for their earlier creative writing.

Restricting the clips to a selection from a very specific genre was intended to provide the students with a constraint that would lead to more efficient exploration of narrative structure. I was aware that the process of editing was new to the students and I felt it would be an unrealistic expectation to ask them to tackle a larger editing task, such as filming and editing their own crime film. I felt that, as Mike Sharples writes in How We Write: Writing as Creative Design (1999) "Constraint is not a barrier to creativity, but the context within which creativity can occur."

Data collection while the students were at work was to prove difficult, as I was unable to be with the students the entire time they worked on their film. As a result, I set a video camera and microphone to record the students whilst they worked. This obviously made them feel uncomfortable and it was not always easy to record their talk clearly. Most helpful to data collection of the students' responses to the task was through teacher questioning at the end, a form of 'assessment' students are far more familiar and comfortable with. While the Roger and Marie were more forthcoming in their responses in this context, I was aware too that their responses would inevitably be led by the tack of my questioning.

Outcomes – The Process and Evidence

Through these questioning sessions it became clear at first that Roger and Marie seemed overwhelmed by the task. I had decided not to employ my usual teaching strategies which involve a lot of modelling. After initially teaching each of them quickly the basic functions of the editing machine, I simply left the students to it. I told them that I had no clear idea myself of what the completed project may look like. I did this deliberately as I didn't want to lead their responses to the machine anymore than could be helped. More able children often wish to please the teacher and receive praise for giving the teacher what he/she wants. The point of the research was to see how useful the editing task was to the students themselves.

The AVIO machine was not daunting for them as they quickly adopted a 'click it and see' approach which served them well throughout the project. But they simply seemed at a loss as to where to start their narrative and required teacher input referring back to their work on crime stories to remind them of effective ways to begin a narrative. Soon after that they chose a standard opening shot, from the Maltese Falcon, of the Golden Gate Bridge and the city of San Francisco, with the city's name appearing in titles. When asked why they wanted this shot for their opening they responded that it "set the scene" which was language directly lifted from previous lessons they'd had on storytelling. The students themselves failed to make the link between storywriting and the editing process.

The students frequently needed reminding about their previous knowledge of story structures. The task set was similar to sequencing activities often used with texts which the students would most likely have approached with more confidence than they approached the editing task. Initially they had problems with planning and thinking through the activity. For the first few weeks they appeared to hit a brick wall at every sitting, practically starting afresh each time. Again teacher input was necessary to suggest that they may need to use pen and paper to plan their approach to the task. Roger and Marie both laughed when this was suggested and looked embarrassed at having missed something so obvious. When teachers ask them to construct a written narrative in class, they are always taught to plan the narrative first. When confronted with the editing activity, neither of them thought to transfer their pre-existing narrative skills to this new media. In future sessions both students arrived ready with their exercise books and pens.

On the fourth week of what was intended to be an eight week project, Roger and Marie asked to be allowed to miss the editing session in favour of the silent reading lesson. Marie said she preferred the reading to editing, while Roger said he was concerned that the class would be watching Baz Lurhmann's 'Romeo and Juliet' while he was out of the room. Both students were of course allowed to take a break from the editing session, though as seen in the Appendix, there were obviously other reasons why they wished to forego the session.

When editing resumed the students made faster progress. Roger continued to have problems handling the 'trim' function ("I keep trimming the big bit off I wanted!") which made Marie the expert for that task, when normally she preferred Roger to handle the mouse. Roger also gave the mouse to Marie when a shot had to be added to

the timeline at the top of the screen. He found the prompts confusing when 'Add' asked him if he wanted to add the shot 'in front' or 'behind'. It was interesting that technical details, a real weakness in his writing, also proved problematic when editing. However, Roger took control of the mouse happily when work began on transitions and special effects, enjoying experimenting with possible 'looks' for the piece, possibly a more 'creative' activity.

It was also at this stage that the students made an important discovery which helped them feel more satisfied with the narrative they constructed. Throughout the project they were bothered by the lack of perfection in their film narrative. Because of the nature of the task the film was jerky and brief, with obvious continuity problems between the different films used as source material. While a clear crime story narrative emerged from their choices, the discontinuity frustrated them. They were delighted to discover later that they could add shots of text to their narrative which would help them establish each scene more clearly in the viewer's mind. They set about adding text before each new film source appeared, thus masking, in a way, the discontinuity. After an opening shot of San Francisco in daylight from 'The Maltese Falcon' they included text claiming "At Lord John's Ball" before a shot of Lauren Bacall at night from 'The Big Sleep'. Before a shot of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall clearly in different clothes and settings from 'Key Largo' they added text stating 'Two Years Later'. At one point they had even added text reading 'Meanwhile, in Outer Space' which showed them at last having some fun with project, though they quickly deleted this.

Their use of text in this way at first suggested a reliance on written narrative, a dependency on text to tell stories. When asked once how they could show on film a narrative idea they had Roger said "you could write a thing (a text sub-title) to show it", rather than thinking of how they could show it visually. However as work progressed on the finishing touches to the editing, the students insisted the text additions were there just to overcome the discontinuity of the film sources. It suggested in the long run that the students were used to seeing polished pieces of film of high quality, and would not be satisfied with an end-product of their own that lacked visual polish as well as narrative fluidity.

The outcomes for the process of digital editing seemed to be that students themselves were unable to make the connections between writing narratives and editing narratives, and that students who suffered from technical problems in their writing would not necessarily be entirely freed from technical problems when working with film. The 'fine-tuning' for some students will always be a problem, just as the creativity will be a problem for others.

What I Learned

On completion of the project, the students were asked for their opinions on the usefulness of the editing task. When asked where they normally get their ideas from when asked to write stories, Roger immediately said "films" extending this by saying "some bits from books, some bits from computer games and some bits from films" showing an awareness of narrative value in all of these forms. Marie also got ideas from films but said she most often got her ideas from fiction she'd read. When talking about narratives, or stories, from this point onwards both students veered between

film and books as their reference points, suggesting that film is an important source of narrative education for them, even if they themselves are not always aware of this. When asked initially about good beginnings and ends to stories, they both responded with pat, clichéd answers, such as the beginning of the story should “set the scene” and the end should be “happy”. When pressed they both acknowledged that films they’d seen that did do this, particularly happy endings, were unsatisfactory. When asked to name books or films that didn’t have a happy ending but still had a satisfactory ending, Marie chose ‘Animal Farm’ and ‘Romeo and Juliet’, both texts she’d been studying in English that year. Roger agreed with Marie but showed more experience of film, suggesting that the ending to ‘Saving Private Ryan’ was both unhappy and satisfactory.

Marie and Roger both continued to express dissatisfaction with their finished project, still worrying about its dissimilarity in appearance to the polished films they were used to seeing at the cinema. They were used to the strictly structured Hollywood product analysed by theorists like Christian Metz, and found it difficult to see what they had produced as a film. They appeared to have set themselves very high standards for the project and Roger particularly expressed unhappiness at the constraints placed on them, having to work with images that were not shot by themselves. Both agreed that they would have liked to have had more ownership of the project, devising a story and filming it, rather than simply working on an editing task. In this context the students found the constraint a frustration to their creativity, as even if it did help them produce a film within eight weeks, it was not a film they felt proud of.

By the end of the project however, both students were talking in more abstract terms about narratives and what is satisfactory in a narrative. When talking about what was unsatisfactory in their film it was obvious the students had a very clear idea of the film’s narrative in their minds. Marie said it was “not like a film” and it needed “better scenes for our story”, “like a car chase” Roger suggested. He commented that it felt “like a trailer, the best bits” of a bigger film they both had in mind. When asked what was missing from theirs that made it simply a trailer and not the main feature, Roger indicated that it needed “the connecting bits”, showing an understanding of the different elements films use to tell stories; the ‘syntagms’ that directors use to build stories, and the climactic events they result in. Both students were aware that their film contained some elements of the crime genre they had studied, like “the midnight phone call” and “violence” (Roger) but Marie commented it wasn’t entirely like a crime film should be because there was a romance element to it. “It’s a Cromance,” Roger said.

In summing up, Marie admitted that she hadn’t really enjoyed the project at all, saying that she would “rather have been in English”. Roger showed more enthusiasm for editing, imagining conditions in which he would do such a project again. He expressed a wish to film his “own stuff” suggesting he had ideas for a more satisfying film. Both students said that the task wasn’t ‘English’ to them, seeing the type of work they were doing as more like ICT than English, despite the emphasis on narrative. Marie said she could imagine the AVIO being used in the Drama classroom, while Roger said he saw it as more of a ‘new thing’ that didn’t fit in any one subject area. The students’ learning from this project was not explicit to them.

Neither felt they were 'doing English' during the project, though both felt pleased that they now knew how to edit well enough to teach someone else.

But throughout the project some learning relevant to the English curriculum was taking place. The students were continually discussing narrative structures in more abstract terms, talking about the elements and plot functions that comprise narrative. They were also made more explicitly aware of the connections between the ways films are structured, something Roger certainly was very familiar with, and the way narratives are structured. To make the most of this learning it would then be the job of the English teacher to exploit the potential behind the interest of many children like Roger in film and computer game narrative.

As an English teacher it is this last point that has become the most valuable learning experience of this project. The National Literacy Strategy has emphasised the importance of using texts as models for children's writing, but for me this research has flagged up the need for us to widen the 'canon' of texts we teach to include the new media texts our children are now so familiar with.

Appendix

Using the AVIO Casablanca Digital Editing Machine

Both students were pleased with the ease with which they learned to use the AVIO editing machine. Roger admitted to more difficulties than Marie did, but he was pleased to be able to teach some of his friends how to use the machine, which he did while Marie was absent on a school trip. Marie emphasised the need to experiment with the various tools and said they became more confident when they stopped worrying about "losing" their work as they did in ICT lessons, though she complained that the thumbnail images of each scene were too small to work from.

Throughout the project Marie had seemed to be getting less enjoyment out of the task than Roger. When asked how they'd felt when first set the task, Marie responded that she had thought it sounded like "fun" and was "really looking forward to it" but quickly added that it "wasn't as fun as I first thought". When pressed she admitted part of the reason for her lack of enthusiasm was the research set-up. When asked if she'd been sent to work with Millie, who was often her partner in class, she admitted it would have been 'more fun'. Roger appeared more focussed on the task than his partner, saying he didn't find working with Marie a problem so much as working with black and white film.

Marie also said that a main reason she'd lost enthusiasm was that she "had to think" so much whilst editing. She said "You have to think what you're going to do, when you see them all (the clips)" She is an able student with no concentration problems in class but found the level of concentration during editing off-putting. Roger agreed with this, though it was Marie who initially brought it up. To Marie, an able and meticulous worker, the editing process was something of a lonely and unrewarding activity. To Roger however, a writer with flair but technical flaws, using the machine

for this task flagged up other possibilities in his mind and it's conceivable that he will want to be involved in other, more creative, projects in future.

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