

Learning through making radio programmes

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Abstract

Andrew Emms was a senior teacher in a primary school near Potters Bar when he developed the use of radio as a medium for his pupils' learning. In this article he describes how he developed the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), in the form of a radio programme, to enhance the curriculum and support children's learning. He reflects on how his role as a teacher changed in the course of the project.

All the children sat in my classroom as I pressed the green triangular icon on the whiteboard to play the radio show they had created. They sat attentively with signs of quiet excitement and slight embarrassment as they listened to their own voices. We were entertained by quizzes, phone-in shows, an interview with a teacher, an interview with an older child in Year 6 about what to expect at school camp, informative shows about healthy eating and keeping fit, and a quite brilliant play about Medusa. When the last show finished the children all seemed stunned by the quality of their work. One Year 5 boy commented: *That sounded so real, not like something we've done.*

My central aim with this development project was to enhance the learning experiences of children in school. I had begun with a concern about the depth of their learning. The children seemed happy; they behaved well, listened attentively and presented good quality work, but I was not sure how engaged they were with the learning process. Then another issue presented itself: judgements made by Ofsted in a recent inspection had suggested that we were not making enough use of ICT as a tool for learning. Subsequently, the development of ICT across the school became a school improvement focus. As a staff team we also wanted to address the problem of the passive way in which children seemed to be learning. We decided to combine these agendas and work together to see how we could develop the use of ICT to enhance the learning experience.

The development of a radio programme as a tool for learning emerged as a personal priority.

Developing my thinking

In the early stages of this project I took great encouragement from a statement from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). A paragraph in the Handbook for Primary teachers said this.

By providing rich and varied contexts for pupils to acquire, develop and apply knowledge, understanding and skills, the curriculum should enable pupils to think creatively and critically, to solve problems and to make a difference for the better. It should give them the opportunity to become creative, innovative, enterprising and capable of leadership to equip them for their lives as workers and citizens.

(QCA, 2000: 11-12)

I knew that my teaching fell short of the vision outlined in this statement and I was sure that we could do more to challenge children to develop their creativity by offering a richer learning experience.

I read widely on the subject of creativity; the term has many interpretations but there seem to be a few common threads. Creativity is about being imaginative and shaping something that is perceived as new. Creativity is an attitude or a way of looking at things rather than a particular activity; anything can be approached in a creative manner. Many creative pursuits result in a valuable product, such as paintings and music, but mostly it is about a creative journey. Integral to the creative process is the ability to take risks and to get things wrong (Fisher, 2004; Craft, Jeffrey and Leibling, 2001).

Another influential idea was Csikszentmihalyi's (1996; 2002) concept of 'flow'. For me, this resonates with an idea used in the context of sport: 'being in the zone'. Both involve a pleasurable experience of feeling focused and alert, while navigating a demanding environment. Although it is possible to experience flow whilst carrying out any activity, there are some activities that are particularly conducive to it such as making music, rock climbing, dancing, sailing and playing chess. All of these activities have rules that 'require the learning of new skills; they set up goals, they provide feedback, they make control possible' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002: 72). Flow activities provide a sense of discovery, transporting

a person to a creative new reality where they demand of themselves higher levels of performance. I thought that involvement in a radio programme might provide my pupils with the experience of flow.

Developing the radio project

My first step was to set up a radio club where a group of children from Year 5 and 6 (9-11 year olds) organised themselves into five production teams that would take responsibility for a daily radio show during the school lunch hour. Although this was primarily a music based show, the children developed a wide range of skills by including interviews, adverts and jingles in their shows.

Having gained this initial experience I wanted both to bring the project into the classroom and to involve my colleagues in the development work. I therefore held a planning meeting with the teaching and support staff in Year 5. We discussed how we might best develop a collaborative radio project which would involve all Year 5 children. We agreed that the children would be asked to make a short contribution to a radio show about any aspect of their learning so far in Year 5. I wanted the children to have as much control over the process as possible rather than feeling that this was just another instance where the teacher was telling them what to do and their role was to simply get on and do it.

The principle of choice is one which had been discussed and explored with colleagues throughout the Potters Bar Primary Learning Network and is echoed elsewhere in this volume (see the story about Elizabeth Edwards and Sophie Gilbert's development work on page 17). It was also highlighted in a research project commissioned by the GTC (General Teaching Council), the conclusions of which included the following.

By being given opportunities to make choices within the learning process pupils can exercise considerable influence and achieve a real sense of being in the driving seat of their own learning.

(MacBeath, Frost and Pedder, 2008: 49)

The children were therefore invited to choose their own groups, choose their own topics and choose how they would present their knowledge through the medium of radio.

Stage 1 – The children take the lead

And so it began. All of the children in Year 5 came into my classroom. I asked for a volunteer to come and help me at the front of the class. I recorded his voice on a digital voice recorder, imported the audio file to ‘Audacity’ (the software we used), together with some background music and a couple of sound effects. I then played the recording back to all the children. The children were excited by this new technology. I explained to them that they were going to be producing a radio show and that they would be in charge of many areas of their work: who they worked with, how they planned their work and the quality of the final product. The children then began their work with evident excitement and enthusiasm.

At the end of the afternoon session all of the children came back into my classroom. I asked them to report on the successes and difficulties they had experienced in the planning stage. Most of the discussion was about the dynamics of the groups they were working in. We decided that we needed to be analytical and weigh up the pros and cons of each idea. We discussed the idea of compromise and ‘give and take’ and how we needed to be able to recognise the best idea, even if it was not one of our own. We were, in essence, getting to the heart of what collaboration meant to them as they worked on their radio projects. I was excited by the degree of active engagement which children were already showing in this project.

Children across Year 5 worked on their radio project every Wednesday afternoon. By the third session, some of the groups were ready to start recording their work. One of the Year 5 classrooms was used as a recording studio, while in the other classroom children were completing their research and writing their scripts. Once the children’s contributions had been recorded, I loaded their MP3 files onto the school network ready for the editing stage. By the end of the sixth session, all of the children had finished their radio shows. Their reaction to hearing their work was exciting and sometimes led to nervous laughter as I described at the start of this article.

As I evaluated the project I had mixed feelings. The children had been very motivated and may well have experienced the flow I was hoping for. Using the radio had clearly enhanced their learning experience. The recording had gone smoothly, although importing music, balancing the volume of the voices against music and adding sound effects was quite challenging. I found myself overloaded with

technical problems from the children at one stage. The children describe this situation well.

Well, we did fine, but when it came to the end trying to decide the music, it went all wrong because we decided one, but the computer... what we tried to do didn't work. Everything went aaaahhh!!

(Year 5 girl)

Unfortunately I was the only person who understood how the software worked which meant that, because the children had to wait until I could intervene, momentum was being lost. There was no time available for this intervention, nor time to help colleagues develop the necessary expertise. I was forced to scale back the project and work with just my own class for the next stage of the project.

Stage 2 – Embedding the project in the curriculum

The children had learned how to write and produce a radio show that they could be proud of. I now wanted to see if they could use their new skills and understanding to support their learning in other areas of the curriculum. I decided that our radio work could support the development of 'persuasive writing' in literacy which could be linked with 'global issues' as part of our work in geography.

I invited the children to work in smaller groups of their own choosing. I gave them an article about protected species focusing on the plight of the orangutans as a result of deforestation in Malaysia. In the discussion that followed, the children explored the idea that the people who chop down the trees are not solely responsible and we have to think about the responsibility of the people buying the wood. The discussion progressed to the protection of other species such as whales and dolphins. We spoke about related issues such as recycling and eco-tourism. We considered various formations of informal, persuasive language such as: 'any right thinking person would...' or 'only a complete idiot would...' and 'the real truth is...'.

Once the children appeared to have understood the persuasive genre and the nature of some of the global issues, I asked the groups to decide on an issue they wanted to address and write a short radio report to inform people about it and argue a point of view persuasively. This first session lasted all morning, concluding with children sharing their plans and mind-maps. They worked with

sustained concentration and stayed on task for most of the morning. At break time, one girl asked me *'do we have to go outside?'* The global issues had really captured their imaginations.

In the second session, the following day, the children worked at turning their research into a script, making sure that they used the examples of informal persuasive language. Once their script was completed and the members of the group were happy with it, they were allowed to record it themselves in preparation for the next session.

I had set aside a morning for the children to complete the second cycle of the project. During this time the children were to import their voice recordings to Audacity – the software programme – edit out any mistakes, import a backing track and adjust the volume of the voices relative to that of the music. I was a little anxious at this stage because the children had found this part particularly difficult during the first cycle of the project. I modelled each step in this process on the interactive whiteboard, inviting children to come and help. The laptops were then distributed and the children started the editing process. After a couple of initial problems with groups not being able to log on to the network, I was heartened to see that the rather chaotic scene from the first cycle was not being repeated. Three children at one computer was not ideal, but each of them could see the screen and, using headphones, each of the children could hear what they were doing. After about 25 minutes of the children working at their computers editing their work it was clear to me that, in most cases, the children were experiencing a state of 'flow'.

It was not the quiet, focused work that my reading about flow suggested; the room was actually quite noisy, the children did not realise how loud their voices were becoming because of the headphones they were wearing, but they were, nonetheless, totally engrossed in what they were doing. Being more familiar with the software, they were able to work more independently, needing less adult support. The feedback was immediate as they played back their work to themselves. Their experience of the first cycle and apparent success here was driving them to improved levels of performance as they gained a greater understanding of persuasive writing and of the software they were using. In each of the groups the children were involved in an activity in which they had been required to learn new skills, set up goals and receive feedback. In

addition, they were certainly in control of the process they were engaged in. This surely was the ‘flow’ discussed earlier.

Reflections on the second cycle

At the end of the second cycle of the project, all of the children in my class completed their ‘emotional timelines’, adding comments to explain why they had placed themselves at a given point on the scale. They had done this at a previous stage and now each child had moved themselves further up towards the smiley face end of the scale. This indicated to me that they had improved perceptions of themselves as learners. Their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997) had been enhanced which has the potential to improve their learning capacity. Their comments illustrated how their engagement with the learning process had developed as this example shows.

I enjoyed the project as I got a bit better at teamwork and I really enjoyed doing the plays. At first we didn't do so well but eventually we worked it out.

(Year 5 girl)

The question of the extent to which the children were working as a team was crucial. It is clear that we had not yet reached an ideal state but at least it was part of the pupils’ consciousness about the activity as the following comment illustrates.

I enjoyed it but not everyone was working in a team.

(Year 5 boy)

What had I learned?

The principles of project-based learning had guided this project. A key driver of the children’s creativity was their sense of ownership of their learning. It really was up to them what they wanted to do and this had a very positive impact on the end result. Giving control of the process to the children is not without its risks however; I had proceeded on the assumption that all of the children could cope with the pressure of responsibility, but some could not and they needed support and a nudge in the right direction.

As a result of this project the children in Year 5 had developed a much better understanding of what it means to work collaboratively. They came to understand that collaboration goes beyond merely working with your friends and that it is characterised by communication, listening, choices, decisions, organisation and

compromise. Written communication skills were also developed as the children researched and wrote scripts for their shows. At the heart of the project was the development of ICT skills that were key in recording and editing their shows.

In the last five years we have seen the bringing together of many new technologies, accessible through the modern classroom computer. It is imperative that, as a profession, we explore ways in which these technologies can be used to enhance the teaching and learning process. I have seen, through my development work, that dialogue and communication are essential to learning. It has also become clear to me that, in order to develop practice, we need to engage in and contribute to a climate of reflection, building a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) which involves both children and teachers in critically examining what we do in the classroom. Dialogue and communication are also the key to curriculum development. When I reflect on the progress of my development work I realise that I was somewhat naïve in assuming that more colleagues would want to become involved and that the project would rapidly gain momentum. This did not happen as I hoped it would. If curriculum development and innovation are to become successfully embedded, dialogue and collective reflection are essential. The challenge is to build the collaborative force necessary for the sustained development of practice.

Throughout this project my role as a teacher gradually changed. At the start of the project I stood at the front of the class and gathered the pupils' views, recording them on the board; visibly leading the process. As the project developed, it felt more comfortable to take a step back. In essence, I moved from being the 'teacher as expert' and towards 'the teacher as facilitator' (Fisher, 2004). I had created an environment in which children could think for themselves and engage with their learning in a new way.

References

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