Best Practice Research Project.

Cineliteracy and the Avio Editing Machine: an inductive study.

As a teacher of both English and Media Studies, I am interested in the dynamic of both subjects – one a core subject and one that the students have to opt for. It often seems that the mere unavoidability of English reduces its appeal to students. Interestingly, however, both subjects make explicit a skill we are programmed to be competent at from birth: our native language[1] and the new language of the moving image at which we have become so culturally adept. It is worth noting that already most students spend far more time engaging with the moving image than the written word but how many of them (or indeed the adult population) can articulate the basic rules of the language they are so competent at comprehending? More importantly, perhaps, how many are aware of, or understand, the mediation process which is so culturally invisible yet so influential in our understanding of the world?

As further evidence of our cultural shift away from the written word, the information currency is shifting from formal text on a page to a more informal oral account: transactions in our daily lives now often rely solely on oral skills: telephone call centres supply us with insurance, banking services, shopping facilities etc. In recognition of the central importance of oral skills, the English curriculum at both Key Stage 3 and 4 has Speaking and Listening as a significant and rigorous portion of the skills required to be taught. This poses something of a mixed blessing for students. Whilst it is evident that some of those who find writing difficult are advantaged by this oral assessment, it is also clear that it provides a different sort of pitfall for others.

The call for Media Studies to become a core subject is not the point of this research and, I concede, would potentially alter the positive dynamic mentioned above but, at very least, our academic engagement with moving image texts seems woefully underexploited. I want to maximise the ease with which students comprehend moving image texts and investigate whether the study of moving image

[1] In this rural Devon school there are no students that I am aware of for whom English is a second language.

can have an impact on speaking and listening skills. In other words, I want to exploit one linguistic skill in order to enhance another.

The national debate about boys' underachievement has addressed issues of student grouping, subject matter, teaching strategies and reward systems but there is, arguably, an inherent limitation within subjects which will always mete against a significant proportion of male students. Simply, sitting in a room dealing with written text is boring. Preferable though they may be, even moving image texts can lose their appeal - as anyone left with a cover lesson of simply watching a video will testify. Interactivity is key; students choose which moving image texts they watch in the social world. This inevitably makes the text more interesting than something deemed to be 'good for you'. Even worthy texts, however, can be made more interesting and relevant by offering the student something to do – perhaps watching with no sound and trying to work out what is going on purely from visual clues. How much more interactive, then, to be able to construct a moving image text. Might this not be an effective way of stimulating purposeful and meaningful talk that is rooted in the students' direct experience?

To begin the investigation I have chosen to observe a small group with the purpose of recording the learning dynamic the Avio editing equipment offers. Both boys (one year 7, one year 10), the pair was selected on the least rigorous of criteria – they were both sons of teachers in the school and were available after school! This non-scientific selection method is advantageous: I have no hidden agenda when observing; they do not suspect that I am testing or evaluating them. The younger boy has mild learning difficulties – his spelling is weak and his communication skills are well below his ability to understand the work he is doing. The older boy is almost the opposite – he is very quick to respond verbally and able to communicate clearly to his peer group. His written work, however, is less articulate and he can be frustrated that his knowledge and ambition for success are not always reflected in his grade for written work. For the purposes of record, the younger boy will be referred to as A and the older boy, B. To further reinforce the idea that they were not in a classroom situation I invited a sixth form student to join the group and teach A and B the basics of the Avio editing suite.

It is worth noting the dynamic created when students have the impression that they have a choice: both students were invited to take part rather than told to. The possibility for enjoyment was thus intrinsically bound up in the project. So, with

elevated self esteem (whatever the criteria, they were doing what few others in the school have had access to) and a sense of enjoyment, we began.

My rationale for this preliminary phase was to record the learning process and to look for evidence which might suggest that it was having, or offered the possibility of, an impact on speaking and listening. The first session proved problematic for technical reasons but a couple of useful observations were possible.

Firstly, B, being senior and more verbally confident, quickly assumed authority over the equipment. A was silent, passive and certainly gave the impression of feeling alienated from the process. However, on questioning him afterwards he had assimilated as much information as B had by actively doing the tasks.

Secondly, it was notable how the three students communicated entirely by reference to the equipment. Eyes were locked firmly on the screen and talk was aimed at the screen no matter who was addressing whom. Classroom experience shows that when students are not sure about something they usually glance to peer group members to check if they can pick up clues from their activity. It would seem that the equipment represented a puzzle but one that contained its own answer, rather than the usual puzzle in the classroom which students feel unable to resolve within the text they are working on.

The second session was more successful and this time A was invited to take control of the mouse. Again, no eye contact was made in the group but as the learning session progressed an interesting development occurred. A, the non-talkative one, began to contribute orally whilst B, usually so confident orally, was virtually silent.

The increasing IT-awareness of students afforded the first opportunities for meaningful communication. Because the Avio monitor shares features with a computer – mouse, screen layout, icons – the students were able to refer to unfamiliar objects using subject specific vocabulary:

“Right, you take the mouse and select edit on the menu.”

Furthermore, this de-personalisation of learning (the equipment serving as screen and focus for the three individuals) meant that the learners had an in-built success factor. In English it is notable how students seem to feel that they have no ownership of the written language. They apparently fail to recognise that their ability to speak and be understood is a transferable skill to being able to write and be articulate: writing is an elevated skill which, they are constantly reminded, they are

not expert at. The Avio, like much IT equipment, seems to offer a safeguard against personal fault – it's not exactly a poor workman blaming his tools but if your only tool is a pencil it's rather hard to do anything other than take full responsibility oneself! This dynamic offered both boys the opportunity to experiment and take risks.

The most significant effect of the equipment, however, lies in the tangible connection between thinking and task. English teachers will be familiar with the situation whereby a student is given a piece of writing to read and even the initial step of knowing that reading is the next and obvious progression cannot be assumed: 'What do I have to do, Miss?' This does not exist with the Avio. It is almost as if the equipment is in silent communication with the student and the conversation becomes appropriately directed at the screen: 'So, what do I have to do first? OK, check the settings first. Now then, I think the next thing is down here. Yes, edit, that's what I need, edit.' This is not the sort of thinking aloud learning strategy I imagine many teachers hear spontaneously in the classroom.

I get the feeling that the perceivable and logical progression suits the male mind; he is able both to retrace steps systematically and negotiate ways forward. Moreover, there is confirmation here of boys strong visual awareness and ability to conceptualise. Student A was able, very quickly, to hold a sequence in his head and think through how to modify it. He didn't need to restrict himself to chronology by trimming the opening and then the end - rather it was as if he could reflect on the sequence in its entirety and modify it in his mind with little need for visual confirmation of what he was doing. He seemed able to memorise content and duration far more readily than I would expect him to be able, for example, to remember a sentence of text.

To take the sentence/sequence comparison further, it was as if he was able to remember content, rhythm, punctuation, presentation. This 'three-dimensional' comprehension seems to be intrinsically embedded in a moving image text and, especially for boys, evidence of the students' articulate visual awareness. There is also a far more ready comparison that students can make between their moving image text and their experience of other such texts and the equivalent comparison between their writing and other written texts. Even the neatest handwriting bears no resemblance to written forms the student will aspire to emulate: books, comics, magazines or newspapers. Some confirmation of this can be noted in the tendency for

weak writers to favour using computers which mask their letter formation errors and blinker them to other surface errors because the text as a whole looks so much more presentable. By contrast, the moving image text is understood by its direct comparison with models in the real world; the pleasure derived from producing anything at all is mitigated by the latent disappointment that their own text looks amateur and clumsy. Far from discouraging them, however, this gap seems to act as stimulant for increased expertise.

It is this articulateness in moving image language and the aspirational quality it has that I want to further investigate to see whether it can impact on those areas of skill acquisition which students struggle with: linear language, whether in written or oral form.

Observation of first girl pair.

The two female students are both Year 9 and presented as a friendship pair. I have no experience of either of them in the classroom but they seemed articulate, confident and of higher than average academic ability. They both were taught the Avio by the technician and I arranged to meet them after school in order to observe them at work on the supplied footage.

From the moment the girls started there were notable differences in their approach. Unlike the boys, the girls were reticent about taking ownership of the equipment, neither wanting to take precedence over the other: "You do it first" (using the mouse). The student (I) who did take control of the mouse, actually stayed as the active participant for the duration of the observation but there was nothing about the body language of the second girl (F) to indicate that this was problematic. I remained upright, leaning in towards the screen whilst F, almost in managerial style, reclined comfortably, hands deep in pockets, whilst contributing orally to the task.

The second notable characteristic of their approach was the inclusive language:

"Why don't we start with the titles?"

"We haven't looked at all the clips yet."

Despite their relative unfamiliarity with the Avio, and the strangeness of being observed, both students were end-result led. It was not a case of questioning how to do something but rather recognising that a final product was desirable and therefore all decisions were made with that in mind. At these moments they both used the collective pronoun.

When there was the necessity to discuss the mechanics of the machine, the girls quite naturally slipped into a different discourse:

"I thought it would go there."

"No, I think you have to insert it there first."

"Yes, you're right. Got it."

It was at these times that eyes were averted from the screen and the girls made eye contact with each other. The use of questions seemed more rhetorical in the sense that

what they were doing was negotiating a way forward rather than really checking how to do something:

"Do you want to put it there?" not "How do I put it there?"

Even statements were about negotiation:

"If it goes wrong we can always remove it" rather than "Do you want this here then?"

The girls worked at a terrifically high speed, firing questions and suggestions at each other at the rate of about 6 a minute, so much so that whenever a feature needed to be rendered on the machine they faked yawns and moaned about the length of time the machine took. This attitude towards the Avio soon developed into a tangible 'us' and 'it' dialectic. As their competency grew and the technical demands on the machine increased it almost became a third party in the process:

"Why won't it let us do that?"

"Why does it keep doing that?"

"Look, it's getting the hang of it now, it's working quicker. So far we've done hardly anything but it'll be faster now."

In keeping with the competitiveness this discourse engendered, whenever the girls achieved something, seemingly in spite of the machine, they smiled broadly, cheered and gave each other 'high 5s' in celebration of their achievement. The engagement with the task was absolute and the team work, I would argue, was a result of existing good communication rather than a basis for improved oral communication.

Observation of first boy pair.

The boys, also Year 9 and also presenting as a friendship pair, had a very different approach to the task. From the beginning of the session, one boy in particular (referred to as A) seemed rather disaffected, restless and only mildly engaged with the task. E, who I had taught and was therefore more acquainted with, was rather more co-operative, but as I retreated to a backseat observational role he took his cues from A and also became rather fidgety. This was an entirely different response from the girls described above and, in truth, different from my expectation: both boys had seemed extremely keen to work with the Avio and had pestered me for information about when they would be able to do so rather than leaving it up to me to chase them

which has tended to be the case with the other students. I will return to this point later.

As with the girls, A and E had been shown how to use the Avio by the technician, so I set them the same task of producing a promotional film from footage already loaded onto the machine. Interestingly, the method they employed is best described as 'unthinking chronology', by which I mean that they seemed to unquestioningly work from left to right on the storyboard and selected images in the order they had been arranged in the storage section. Transitions were also added as each scene was, using a shopping list method – "Have we had this one? No, OK then, let's have this one."

There was virtually no debate or consideration given to the requirements of the task and the boys were fairly hostile to each other. A immediately grabbed the mouse and started work, leaving E to watch. Because there was no debate, E's interjections only took place when he thought A was doing something wrong:

"Trim it."

"Where?"

"There."

"That's too long."

"Do it there. No. There. There. It looks stupid like that."

"You do it then."

"No. Just do it."

"For God's sake. Ok. There. Happy?"

This aggressive and competitive style continued as the process developed and E began to realise that they could insert scenes into the storyboard.

"Go to skate."

"No."

"Go to skate."

"No. No. No."

"Yes. We'll have two scenes the same."

"No."

"Yes. It'll look better."

"No."

Sometimes this friction led to the mouse being thrown down in a gauntlet-style challenge and E would continue until such time as A found a way to re-possess it.

Whoever was not using the mouse would then assume the body language of the bored: laid back in the seat, turning to gaze out of the window even though it only offered a view of a darkened editing room, frequent time checking and attempts to distract the operator with idle chat unrelated to the task.

The boys seemed to remember how to use the machine less efficiently than the girls. Consequently, there were several occasions when they didn't know how to continue. At these times there was little discussion or evidence of trying to think the problem through in a logical way. Instead, they favoured the technique I employ myself when faced with some technical/mechanical task beyond my ability (i.e. almost anything!): guess, bully, desperately hope someone else will help, throw in the towel. It seemed that both students equated competence with personal pride and identity; to not know what to do was to be shown up. Frustration dominated a process characterised by guesswork.

This response was something of a surprise to me. As mentioned above, the boys had seemed very keen and interested in the project. Why, then, were they so hostile and incompetent? I think the answer lies in the nature of the task. When they realised that the filming had already been done, it was as if the main attraction had been denied them. They didn't say this directly but implied it through questions directed at me in the course of the process:

"Can you do your own filming in Year 10?"

"If you want to make a film, can you borrow the camera?"

"Is there only one camera?"

This feeling was confirmed when the boys were having trouble putting sound onto their finished film. Knowing I wouldn't be of much help, they turned to the Head of Department who was working quietly in the adjacent room. He suggested they record a voice-over on the video camera and use that. The emergence of the camera caused a major disturbance. Both boys were desperate to hold, investigate and experiment with the camera. Interestingly, both had a complete aversion to being recorded on it so nothing was actually achieved in terms of finishing the film. When E managed to acquire the camera A became completely unco-operative and sullen; the aggression between them intensified and the task ground to a halt. Neither student was the slightest bit interested in finishing the film and with relief they noted that only five minutes were left so it was not worth bothering anyway. It was the camera which

held status and inherent interest, not the editing process – at least, not the editing process with someone else's images.

When E left, I talked to A to try and discover why the process had been so unsuccessful. A few searching questions about the potential of the Avio and the nature of the task led to A recognising, for the first time, that there is creative potential even within the restraints of working with found footage. His hostility evaporated and he seemed to see that he had missed an opportunity. Instead of seeing a challenge, both boys had been so disappointed by the process and the lack of ownership that the Avio actually became a block to communication.

Observation of Second Girl Pair.

These girls also come from Year 9. It is worth, perhaps, considering why this year group seems to be the most motivated and curious about the possibility of working with moving image. It might be that Year 9 students are feeling more confident in the school, having dispensed with the early years and the feeling of being junior in the school. It might also be because GCSE choices are looming and they are beginning to think about possible subject choices. Again, the girls came as a friendship pair. I have taught one, – referred to as M – a quiet, studious girl who achieved level 4 at SATs. Her speaking and listening skills are better than her written work and she is an able artist.

Both girls approached the task in a very quiet and tentative way. Their initial attempts to work the machine seemed based on guesswork with little appreciation for the requirements of the task. Like the boys, the exercise started with an unformulated 'piecing together' strategy. With little apparent thought or purpose, they started to produce a sequence. It was once a couple of scenes had been selected and edited together that the really interesting interaction began.

The girls suddenly seemed to become aware of an aesthetic consideration which developed into the motivating force for their decisions. Initially, this was centred on the duration of each shot:

"That's too short."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It just looks a bit funny."

"How long do you think it should be then?"

"I don't know. Add a few seconds."

"Is that better?"

"Yeah. That looks more like it."

This affinity for the rhythms and pacing of moving image allowed considerations of content to be made:

"That's no good. Who wants to look at that?"

"That's better. It's got people. They're more interesting to look at."

"Yeah. Leave out those cars, too. They're boring."

From this appreciation of the aesthetic and functional merits of individual shots, the girls began to make decisions which demonstrated awareness of narrative and juxtaposition. It suddenly occurred to M that one of the shots had the same subject matter to one in their edited sequence. It was decided that this second shot should be inserted so that the two shots of the skateboarders followed each other. Suddenly a narrative flow began which triggered a more conscious shaping of material and selection based on some sense of an overall plan.

"Look there's flowers in this one too."

"Well, we could add that in after."

"I think you might have to trim it a bit 'cause the end bit doesn't really fit."

"There. That's really nice. Is there any more with flowers?"

Like the boys, the girls' means of deciding on transitions seemed to be governed principally by the shopping list method – one of each. Now that their aesthetic appreciation was sharpened they began to look for transitions which matched the content of the shots. For example, the turned page transition was used for a shot which had a dramatic sunbeam effect – the angle of the page turn perfectly complimenting the arc of light. Another shot which tilted to take in the height of a clock tower was preceded by a transition which similarly started at the bottom of the frame and wiped vertically.

As the girls became more confident and purposeful, they seemed to develop a similar relationship to the Avio as the first girl pair. It was almost as if the machine became another member of the team: sometimes doing their bidding, sometimes throwing in little surprises.

"What's that?"

"We didn't put that there did we?"

"I don't think so."

"It looks OK though. Leave it?"

"Yeah."

Or:

"Did you want it to do that?"

"No, not really."

"Do you want to change it?"

"No, it's OK."

The final aesthetic consideration was the use of music. Although they didn't actually manage to complete this in the time, it was an obvious source of irritation that the sound levels in the sequence were so varied and unattractive.

These girls, like the first girl pair, overcame technical difficulties in pursuit of an aesthetic goal, unlike the boys whose interest in the process was hampered by the nature of the task itself. This pair clearly thought along the same lines and were totally cooperative with each other: social skills rather than linguistic ones. Indeed, the requirement for clear, productive talk was minimised due to their empathic way of working. Whoever had the mouse used a consultation mode of address – Shall we do that?…Do you agree?…Is that OK?…etc. The girl without a hands-on role assumed the job of offering suggestions or decision-making: Yes…OK…If you like…Try it and see…etc.

The problem of who operated the mouse was also overcome through fairness. Each girl seemed to have a sense of the time she had been using the mouse and gave the other a go when it seemed that she had been 'hogging it' long enough. As the technical control was compensated for by the linguistic control, it seemed that the mouse-operator still held higher perceived status within the pair, after all neither of them said "I've spoken enough. You can have a go now."

Interestingly, I don't think the girls' oral communication was particularly challenged or enhanced by this process. What did seem to be going on, though, was an in increased efficiency of communication. By which I mean, had the task been writing based, or stills images, it is hard to imagine that they could have achieved a comparably sophisticated end-result. The interactive nature of the process seemed to release them from some of the problems of communication and comprehension which I have certainly seen M exhibit in the classroom. Even though the talk was not complex, the engagement with, and control over, a dynamic resource led to the language itself becoming dynamic and productive.

Observation of second boy pair.

These boys are in Year 10. One, W, is unknown to me but the other, S, is a Media Studies student. S is very quiet in class and needs to follow the initiative of others – he seems engaged with the subject but is very hesitant about voicing his opinions. His work is generally grade D.

Predictably, W took control of the mouse and S assumed an entirely passive role; his sole function seemed to be to confirm for W what he was doing. Even when W did his best to include his partner, S avoided responsibility:

"Where do you want to start?"

"Don't mind."

"This one? Do you think that's a good one?"

"Yeah."

"Which next?"

(Turned to me.)

"Which one S?"

"I can't really see them properly." (Peered closely at screen and when the silence became difficult, pointed.) "That one?"

Not unnaturally, W began to make unilateral decisions. The boys were beginning to merely assemble shots in a purposeless way like the first boys and the atmosphere was tense as both seemed to be feeling awkward about the method of working. Despite all my assurances that I was not judging them and that my observational role meant that they should try and ignore my presence, I felt that S, especially, couldn't help but feel he was under the spotlight. I decided to intervene and give them a helpful nudge in a more productive direction. I asked them how they might assemble a photograph album. After discussing briefly how this might work, we discussed the idea of themes and purpose for the moving image texts and they started again. Now, suddenly, W grasped the essence of duration and began a process of evaluation and selection or rejection. Because S had been so passive, W became reflective rather than communicative and his thought processes were internalised apart from the odd aside which he seemed to feel obliged to make due to the 'teamwork' situation:

"Mmm, no. That doesn't go. Um. Mmm…"

The storyboard began to take some shape but, by now, there was virtual silence. However, as W's sense of purpose increased it seemed to help S feel more comfortable, too. It seemed to be this more conducive atmosphere which enabled S to become involved. He offered a suggestion which neither I nor W heard properly. W immediately said "Don't be afraid of expressing your opinion," and the way was paved for a much more collaborative effort. Although still very quiet and happy to take the backseat (he certainly never showed any desire to operate the mouse), S had clearly been thinking at quite a deep level about the workings of the Avio. As W's aesthetic ambitions increased it was S who was able to solve the technical problems of how to make things actually happen.

Between them they seemed to have negotiated roles with which they were comfortable and creativity became much more dynamic. A narrative began to emerge in the selection of images and sequences were moved around within the storyboard to maximise this. It even became clear that the boys had an understanding of a process within the task. With only a few minutes of the appointed time left I was aware that they had sequenced shots effectively but that no transitions had been inserted, so I asked them when they thought they were due to finish. They replied that they thought there was still about half an hour to go so I asked them if they needed all that time.

"Oh yes. There's still all the things between the scenes to sort out yet."

"And the music."

"Yes, the music. I've brought in a CD."

Neither of these elements had been discussed so far so I can only assume that they had discussed them before or that they had both internalised the process in a similarly methodical way: sequence, transitions, music, as in the layout of the Avio screen. They continued until the piece was finished and actually produced the most accomplished end product of the four groups.

It might be tempting to believe that W could have just as effectively worked on his own, or indeed that he was working alone even in the presence of S, but I think this does a disservice to S's role in the pair. In some ways it struck me that S and the Avio performed similar functions. They were both the prompt for W to question his own working methods. His internal thinking processes, even when there was very little communication going on at times, needed to be made vocal and external as he tried to include S by prompt questions or narrating what he was doing. Both S and the Avio offered answers to technical problems: S's point to the correct instruction on the

screen was short-cutting W's arrival at the answer the machine inherently held. Interestingly, this was confirmed when S left and W wanted to put a few polishing touches to the finished video and record it on to tape to keep. The 'conversation' transferred to the machine as he negotiated his way through the stages of this new task. Again, I'm not sure that the machine triggered more meaningful talk in either boy but it did appear to create a dynamic that encouraged persistence with a project that might otherwise have ground to a halt.

I began this investigation by asking whether the Avio offered a different way of learning which might have an impact on oral and/or written language. Unfortunately, time restraint has made investigation into written language impossible. There are some useful pointers, however, to the effectiveness of editing as a learning process.

My initial expectation was that talk would become more purposeful and productive when students worked together in a dynamic medium. There was little evidence that this was the case. What did seem to be happening, though, was that the machine offered the opportunity to experiment and experimentation in pairs requires negotiation. The aspirational quality of the task seemed to ensure that students wanted to be involved so, whilst some may have been relatively subordinate in the pair, they did sufficient to maintain some sort of ownership of the process.

Another interesting dynamic which the Avio seems to have is the facility for encouraging thinking. Students in the classroom often find silences and problem solving intimidating; it's easier for someone to explain to you what to do than find out for yourself. The students familiarity with, and unconscious understanding of, moving image texts, seemed to encourage an engagement with task that is all too often absent when students use written texts. Talking may not have been as enhanced as I had anticipated, but productive thinking within a minimal (but effective) mode of discourse, certainly did.