

Using a visualiser to shine a light on poetry

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Overview

Phil Grosset is a teacher of English and Media Studies, and an AST for ICT across the curriculum. He teaches at Easingwold School, a broad intake mixed 11-18 comprehensive school of about 1300 students in North Yorkshire. In this case study he explains how a visualiser works and provides a number of practical examples of its advantages for rapid text analysis and feedback in the classroom. Its particular advantages, he concludes, are spontaneity, interactivity, variety and its contribution to classroom management. His lively study makes a convincing case for adding a visualiser to an English department's inventory.

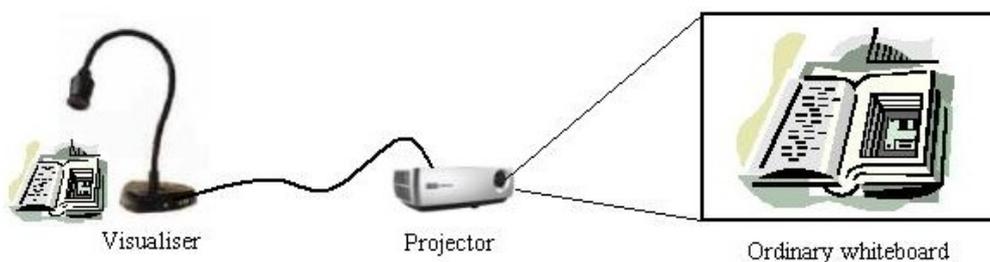
Introduction

In this case study, I will be writing about the use of a visualiser in the English classroom. For those readers who have not yet come across visualisers, I will apologise in advance: there is always a twinge of disappointment when you discover that the visualiser is not in fact some advanced brain projection device. It is often also referred to as a document camera, which is sadly a much more accurate term. Or, as one of my Year 10s put it when I arrived excitedly with my new gadget, 'a camera on a stick'.

Compared with the latest interactive white board, pre-loaded with enough software to run a mission to Mars, it may seem a little low tech. However, the ability to project pupils' exercise books, colour texts, or 3D objects quickly and easily is a very powerful tool. Having used a visualiser for two years now, I will try to share some techniques, and point out a few pitfalls.

How does the visualiser work?

The following illustration shows the most straightforward set up, as used in this case study.



More advanced (and expensive!) machines will allow you to connect to a laptop or PC, or to integrate with a particular model of interactive whiteboard. This allows you to save still images or video for later use: a potentially useful addition. However, simple is sometimes best, requiring less equipment, training

and of course plugging in time at the start of the lesson. More expensive models have a built in zoom, a light, and even a microscope. I haven't thought of a use for the latter yet, but why should scientists have all the fun? As for cost, visualisers start at around £200, which should buy you a model which will plug into either a projector or a computer. The model I have used is the attractively named Ken-a-Vision Vision Viewer 7890U. Think of it as the Ford Fiesta of visualisers: how much do you actually need?

The hard-to-teach topic

A visualiser can help with one of the fundamental challenges in English: sharing texts interactively and spontaneously with students. It can also be used to unlock the process of writing: either through more effective teacher modelling, or by the group sharing of pupils' own work in progress.

I have integrated the use of a visualiser into the teaching of a Year 7 unit on writing poetry. These particular Year 7s are a bright bunch, with most of them being at Level 5 or above. However, I have successfully used similar techniques with classes of all abilities. In the past, I have struggled to scaffold pupils' own efforts in writing poetry, perhaps presenting them with a completed model to 'get them started'. Instinctively, we know that the most important interventions often come during the early drafting and planning stages. We might have an important discussion with one pupil, which we can later tell has made a big difference to the final outcome, or which has helped that pupil overcome an obstacle. If we are having a really good day, we might do this several times in a lesson and perhaps read out one or two examples of good work. The challenge for the visualiser is to help pupils and teachers engage in the thinking and tinkering process collaboratively, at the same time. I will now outline a few activities that can help in this process.

Method: Activity one: rearranging the lines

Start with a simple task: cut up the lines from a limerick and mix them up. Project them onto the board, and ask pupils to help you put them into the original order. You can quickly try out a few combinations, and discuss the merits of each. In their feedback, pupils should discuss the clues they have used to arrive at their decisions, including syntax, punctuation, rhyme and sense.

Next, give small groups of pupils some cut up lines from a poem (it doesn't have to be the whole poem, and it doesn't matter if the lines are taken from the same section). With my group, I used 'Blessing' by Imtiaz Dharker. Ask the pupils to arrange the lines into an order that they can justify, using the same clues as the previous activity. Stress that it doesn't have to 'make sense' and that it doesn't matter if the lines are in the order of the original poem. They are trying to create something new, and explain their choices and effects.

Now ask pupils to come to the front and present their ideas, using the visualiser. You should find that there are several orders, which create different effects. The visualiser is key here in allowing the pupils and teacher to feed back, and to quickly experiment with alternatives. As an addition, you might model the effects of adding or deleting punctuation to affect meaning, and ask the pupils to do the same.

Method: Activity two: prose to poetry

Initially, my group felt more comfortable writing creatively in prose rather than poetry. I set them a brief writing task (one hundred words) to describe an extreme environment, such as a desert or Arctic

wilderness. Descriptions had to include some imagery, and reference to the senses. Here's an example of the kind of thing:

As I drew back the tent flaps and stepped out onto the ice, I was hit by an icy heat. The temperature had dropped below minus thirty: even today, on the first day of Summer. The cold clawed at my face like a provoked tiger, and spread through the layers of my clothing like a virus.

Using the visualiser, you can pick up the exercise book of any pupil: no scanning, photocopying or acetates required! You can then, with the help of the class, highlight the sections of prose which 'seem more like poetry' – a deliberately vague instruction to allow for a bit of creative interpretation. You might end up with something like this:

As I drew back the tent flaps and stepped out onto the ice, I was hit by **an icy heat**. The temperature had dropped below minus thirty: even today, on the first day of Summer. The **cold clawed** at my face **like a provoked tiger**, and **spread** through the layers of my clothing like a virus.

Next, use the visualiser to model the extraction of words from the prose to create a brief, enigmatic poem:

An icy heat
cold-clawed like a provoked tiger,
spread.
Like a virus.

This is a good time to discuss the merits of different line breaks, punctuation, compound words etc. When pupils are completing their own efforts, they might add any additional words or punctuation they see fit, but they *should not* try to make it rhyme.

Finally, pupils can present their work. The beauty of the visualiser here, is that it allows pupils to feed back on the writing *process*, not just the finished, polished article. Hopefully, their work will be scruffy, full of crossing out and amendments, with nuggets of gold flashing amongst the mud. This is what real writing looks like! My class were able to give much better feedback on their language choices because it was still fresh and immediate.

Activity three: 'If, My Darling', Philip Larkin

I am indebted here to Chris Warren of NATE, who provided the idea for this activity, based on his model technique, a summary of which I have included as [Appendix B](#).

'If, My Darling' is not an 'easy' poem, but it is important to stress to pupils that poems are not like crossword puzzles: they don't have a single, neat solution. Once freed from the expectation of having to make perfect sense of it, my pupils enjoyed using it as a starting point for their own writing. I adapted the delivery of the lesson to take advantage of the visualiser while pupils were drafting their own versions of the poem. Pupils drew two sets of mind maps: containing the things that someone would and would not find inside their minds. These were a great visual presentation tool for pupils to explore and share their initial ideas.

Then, during the drafting process, the visualiser was used extensively to share work in progress, and to give feedback. Feedback took the form of comments from the teacher and the pupils, as well as annotation and alternative word choices (contributed by the whole class). Of course, not every pupil can have their work shown, but they can all take part and benefit from the discussion. It is really important to give this process time: it is not a five minute plenary activity. In a fifty-minute lesson, up to half the time was given over to sharing and feeding back. Once you have established sharing work as part of the culture of the classroom, you will find the challenge is to stop pupils critiquing each other's work once they have started! Of course, students need to understand the importance of balancing criticism with positive comments so that student confidence isn't undermined; this is best learned through the teacher modelling this with the class.

Although throughout I have stressed the importance of the visualiser in aiding the *process* of writing, it is worth including a few samples of pupils' finished poems. No doubt the success of this activity is in large part due to the strength of the idea and the original poem, but I do believe the visualiser helped to raise the status of the drafting process, and make explicit the amount of tinkering that is required to produce an interesting poem. I have included a few examples as [Appendix C](#).

Key findings: strengths and weaknesses

Like any technology, visualisers have their strengths and weaknesses, and it is important to be aware of both. First, the good news:

- **Spontaneity** You can project a text quickly and easily, without forward planning. This can be a real motivation to pupils, who know their exercise books might at any moment be projected four feet high. Not having to make special plans or resources is also a great bonus for the teacher.
- **Interactivity** Almost any text can be an interactive text. Over time, pupils can be trained to look forward to having their work shared, critiqued and annotated.
- **Variety** A wider range of texts can be shared with a group. Try photocopying a Mars Bar or can of Coke when you're looking at branding and packaging.
- **Classroom management** The visualiser is a great tool for focussing the attention of the whole class. It also allows the teacher to spend most of the time looking at the class, rather than facing the board.

As for pitfalls, these are some of the ones I have come across:

- **Size limits** Not all paper sizes or fonts work equally well. A4 is about the limit for viewing a whole text, though of course you can work your way around the sections of a larger text. Fonts below around point 12 are also hard to read.
- **Lighting** For visualisers without a built in light, dim images can be a problem. On a sunny day, you might struggle to see the board with the curtains open, and struggle to make out the image with them closed. A small torch and a piece of Sellotape is a suitable Heath Robinson solution.
- **A computer is sometimes better** True, a class set of computers and an interactive whiteboard might sometimes be preferable, but we don't all operate in a perfect environment. On the other hand, computers all too often hide the drafting process, which can be the point at which pupils learn the most.
- **Orifices** Inevitably, pupils will want to use the visualiser to share the insides of their ears, nostrils or mouths. For some, the temptation to share a giant sized projection of their inner ear is just too great. You have been warned.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, visualisers are a little used resource in English teaching: hopefully this will change as more people see the potential that they offer. No technology is a panacea, but I believe that relative ease of use, spontaneity and pupil engagement are serious reasons for considering one.

To finish, here are a few links to manufacturers' websites:

- www.ken-a-vision.com
- www.avervision.com/UK/
- www.elmoussa.com
- www.lumensuk.com

Appendices

- A 15 things to do with a visualiser...
- B 'If, My Darling': classroom activities
- C 'If, My Darling': examples of pupils' work

Appendix A: 15 things to do with a visualiser...

1. Show examples of pupil work (it is especially useful for spontaneous sampling of exercise books).
2. Show images from posters, leaflets etc as a way of demonstrating presentational devices.
3. Demonstrate types of shots (close up, medium, close up, etc) to media students, or in media units of work at KS3 and 4.
4. Share a novel or a short story with a class when there aren't enough for a class set.
5. Use it to allow pupils to make presentations to the rest of the class. One example from a recent lesson was to display mock-ups of adverts for an advertising campaign in an advertising agency pitch.
6. Create and share mind maps for a new topic.
7. Create and share designs for a web page (without the need for ICT access or expertise).
8. Share an image with a class. You could ask pupils to bring in an image which they feel matches a line in a poem.
9. Display your lesson objectives and learning outcomes!
10. Display instructions for a task (to save time writing on the board).
11. Record a class discussion (and return to it later).
12. Present a model answer.
13. Teacher- or student-led text annotation
14. Teacher modelling of marking a piece of work.
15. Save time for pupils with writing difficulties. After you have written notes on paper and projected them, give them to a pupil you know who struggles to copy from the board. This has worked well with a visually impaired pupil in Year 10.



Appendix B: 'If, My Darling' (classroom activities)

Using 'If my Darling' (Philip Larkin) as a model for writing: a lesson plan

Read the poem. Put emphasis on the argument, as you read it, stressing 'not', 'no' and 'nor', then stress 'would find', 'she would also'.

Ask class to investigate the basic structure of the poem – what is it about?

Draw as many responses as you can.

Finally try to direct the students' attention to:

- a) the images and what they imply;
- b) the positive and negative definitions of personality, based on misguided expectations.

Ask the class to write a poem about another person entering their minds – mother, brother, sister, beloved, father etc:

- The first part of the poem will be about what that person will not find, the second part will be about what the person will find (and some things in the dream-like world of the mind will be distinctly strange)!
- Stress that the approach should be through images and metaphors (look at the original).
- Stress that the lines should not rhyme.
- The first part of the poem will be determined by the other person's mistaken vision – what they are expecting to find, but cannot.
- The poem's conclusion might be a guess at the visitor's reaction to discovering the truth (as in Larkin's poem).

By demanding fairly rigorous adherence to the structure, you will encourage pupils to exert discipline over their material, and you will discover that a solid framework can release writers to write... eventually.

This lesson plan was suggested by Chris Warren.

Appendix C: Examples of pupils' work

If My Darling

If my darling you once decided,
To climb through the hole in my head, ← Caitlin
You would discover a whole new world.

There would be no clocks or watches,
With their never-ending tick or ← Hazy
Large dusty novels left at the back of the bookshelf,
Their mysterious life forgotten.
None of the noisy new technology would be there to ← Caitlin
Confuse my brain.

You would find no fluffy pillow
On a creaseless bed,
The shiny wooden floorboards would not be polished to perfection, ← Hazy
Nor the glass chandelier hanging above the mahogany table.

Instead you would find, ← Caitlin
A tatty doormat sat at the entrance, trampled on so many times.
A soft comfy chair would sit by the warm blazing fire
And much loved old teddies would sit on a lonely shelf, ← Hazy
Waiting to be loved again.

Worn out trainers and a neatly pressed sports kit would lie on my bed
waiting to be used once again. ← Caitlin
A bottle of memories bob along lost in the empty ocean.
And the waterfall of dreams would flow into the endless river of nightmares.

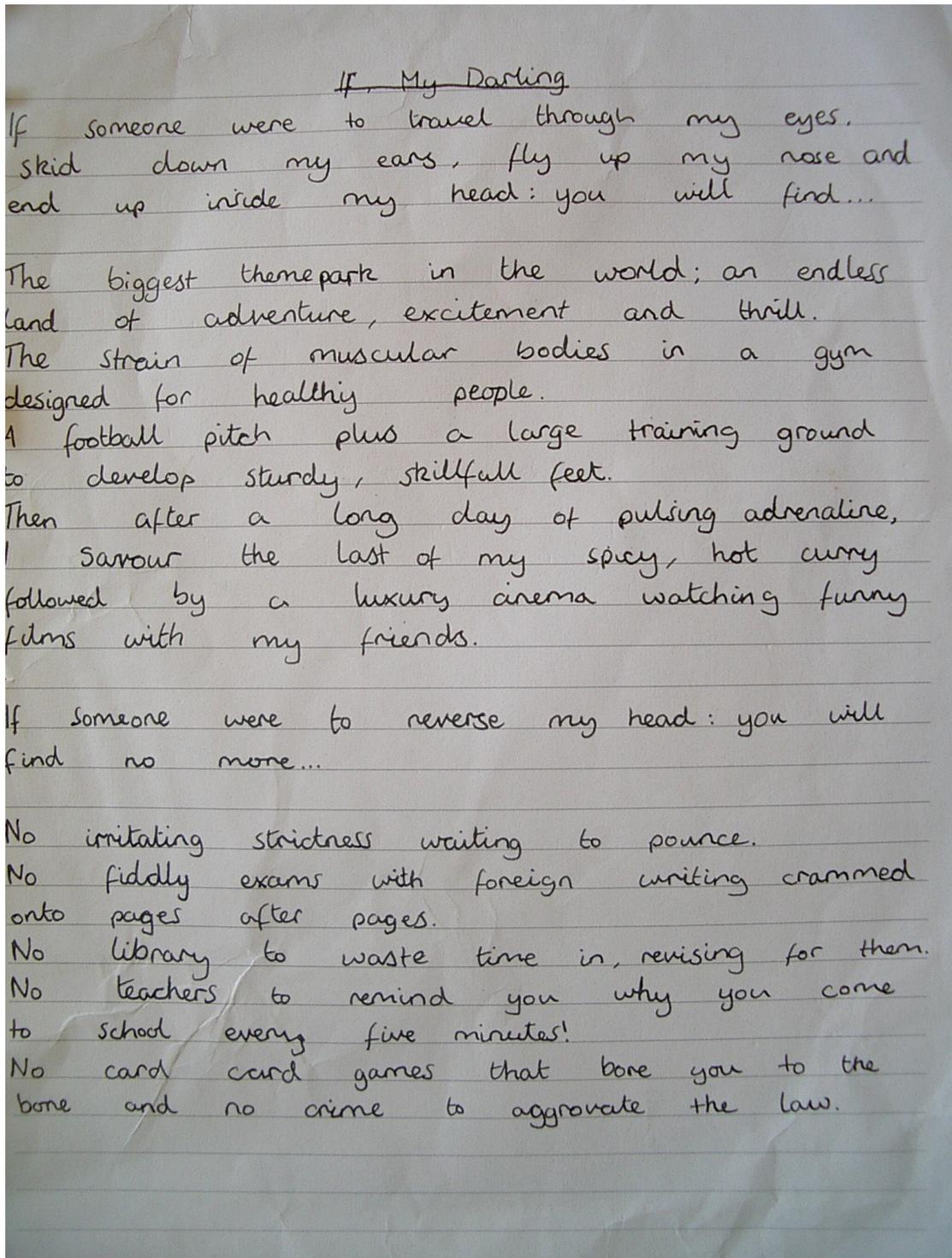
But most of all, ← Hazy
You would be stopping your eyes at the sight of reality.
Realizing that the words that never made sense now do,
And yet the words that had a meaning are no longer understandable.
Too much confusion and the monsters will jump out completely unpredicted,
pushing you out from the tunnel of my mind.

Caitlin 7B1

If my Darling

The ocean of knowledge deep and blue
homes many strange creatures of my mind.
Plankton of punctuation float in the sapphire ocean
The consumed by the misty grey literary whales
adding more to my dictionary
The river of unknown spills into my ocean.
My ever flowing questions answered. &
Upstream a water fall of thoughts falls into another flow of water
that passes through the valley of many emotions
and climbs up the mountain of my greatest desires and dream
No icy pathway freezing the happiness of my world
No time consuming technology buzzing in my ear.
Nor a clock with its never ending tick
NO sense of time.

With a sense of calm my peaceful world
Occasionally disturbed with excitement
would welcome visitors
In its own unique way
That would fill my darling with a rush of happiness



I, my darling...

Vague, dusky, memories: - scattered in an ocean of dreams;
A jigsaw never complete.
In a stale corner, a rusty lap: Dipping
With hope and ambition.

No hate scattered :-
Like pencil shavings.
No grudges: Stained
On a ragged canvas.

A maze of treasured books;
Their ancient secrets untold.
Silver lined clouds -
Portraying optimism.

No distorting anger :-
Enveloping the silent air.
No echoing, suffocating corridors:
Crammed with violence and cruelty.

An old wooden cabinet:
Spelling out secrets
A faded rag-doll, battered yet fondly loved
Her glass blue eyes; searching deep into my soul.

I watch you grow: then I watch you smile
As you sit on the rocking chair; That creaks softly.

(Page 1 of 2)

If, My Darling

*If my darling you were to find,
The glorious entrance to my mind;
Pull back the twigs, pull back the moss,
As now at the end of this narrow passage are all my
secrets and all my memories.
Open this door with the small golden key and there
you shall not find:*

*Any terrible crimes, like a buzzing wasp stuck in a
house,
Or unbearable blank walls too dull for words.
No pongy smells will crawl up your nose: and
nothing so cold will give you the shivers.*

*You wouldn't find any taste-bud stinging creamy
sauces making the good food beneath go soggy.
There will be no bone fizzing insults, taking my
head to pieces;
And no dreadful loneliness, lurking behind a sharp
corner.
But most of all, no blackness isolating you from the
good things in life.*

*However there are good things coming next, so
don't get too depressed.
As they are as beautiful as the golden key you may
remember from the beginning;
So now enjoy yourself in this wonderful mind of
mine.*

*Shooting stars shall wizz in front of your every eyes
gleaming and smiling at you warmly.*



(Page 2 of 2)

Happiness will fill you up like a balloon full to the
brim of helium:
A delicate little box will sit in a dusty corner where
I place all my worries, never to bother me again.

Metallic bubbles will float across luscious, green
woodland and shimmering, blue oceans.
A couple of bookshelves shall stick out from the
ceiling will cradle interesting books full of bright
pictures and large print,
Near by somewhere a few cuddly cushions will be
laid out and comfortably lounging on them will be
my very own guinea pig and rabbit happily
munching on grass and vegetables.

This may send your mind in a muddle; it may be
too much to take in. Your feet might be numb
from walking or brain may feel like it's going to
explode. Remember though that the words of this
poem are the words of my mind, and some day the
words of your mind will turn into a poem to read.

You have stayed in here too long now,
So don't be afraid when the floor beneath you turns
to dust and you fall.

Down

Down

Down

Down

To the safety of your home.

However don't tell anyone.

It's a secret!