University Learning in Schools: taking PhD Research into the Classroom

Katie Clemmey and Dr Mary Henes

Introduction
The Brilliant Club is an award winning education charity that recruits, trains and places doctoral and post-doctoral researchers in non-selective state schools to work with small groups of high performing pupils in order to equip them with the knowledge, skills and ambition to secure places at highly selective universities. The pedagogues at The Brilliant Club became aware of two significant trends within secondary education in England: GCSE reform which aims to assess pupils across more challenging content; and efforts to engage further with research across the profession, as epitomised by initiatives such as ResearchED.

With these developments in mind, and their expertise in working with doctoral and post-doctoral researchers, The Brilliant Club sought a research project which would address the question: would a partnership between researchers (who possess exceptional subject knowledge) and teachers (who possess the pedagogical experience), help improve student outcomes?

A collaboration between The Brilliant Club, Achievement for All, Lampton School and Haberdashers’ Aske’s, therefore put forward a proposal to the Greater London Authority’s London Schools Excellence Fund. The research project paired five researchers with five KS3 teachers, and sought to explore ways of enhancing KS3 teachers’ subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. The teacher-researcher pairs created academic units of work which were then delivered in school, revised and refined, and disseminated at a free CPD event for KS3 teachers in July 2014 involving lectures and workshops.
This article outlines the experience of two of the researchers: Katie Clemmey, a doctoral researcher from King’s College London who examines the use of social media applications to encourage and extend dialogue in the classroom; and Dr Mary Henes, who completed her PhD on British travel-writing on Iran from 1890-1940, also undertaken at King’s College London, in 2012.

The English Language Project—Katie Clemmey

Background

The English Language module of the project centred around ‘talk’ in the classroom. My own MA and PhD reading on this topic had revealed some interesting research into the effectiveness of student discussion in the classroom. In particular, I’d become interested in the concept of ‘exploratory talk’ as identified by Neil Mercer in his analysis of student discussions in classroom situations. This type of talk goes beyond students simply stating their positions or agreeing with each other which we so often see when students are asked to ‘discuss’ in paired or group work. When students are engaged in exploratory talk they demonstrate ‘thinking aloud’ through asking questions, challenging ideas and building on each others’ positions to come up with more developed reasoning, exploring new ways of thinking about an issue or topic. When engaged in exploratory talk, students transform their thinking and learning happens; their ‘talk’ is truly productive. Analysis (and anecdotal evidence) suggests that such talk can be seen in classrooms but is sporadic. Finding ways to encourage and stimulate more sustained exploratory talk was, and is, for me something I am keen to investigate. However, whilst I might be interested in talk in an abstract sense, in terms of taking research into the classroom in order for it to have some impact, I needed to find some content around which to base classroom discussions. As a part of the ULiS project, I was partnered with an English teacher and together we devised a unit of work into which the development of exploratory talk was embedded within a subject focus on World War 1 poetry.

The Unit of Work

Having settled on a topic area we set out to plan and deliver a unit which combined content (learning about and analysing World War 1 poetry) with skills (learning to identify and engage in more productive forms of talk).

The focus of the first few lessons was on content. The year 9 students that had been chosen for the project were given a series of lessons to
introduce them to the context of the First World War. The class teacher was keen to try more ‘University style’ lectures with the students as a way to cover the required content efficiently and to tie in with the project aims, so these lessons were planned to follow that format. When introduced to the first poems, students were asked to analyse them in order to identify word level and text level techniques used by the writers. These lessons effectively provided the content around which discussion could then take place.

The next series of lessons began to introduce the research on ‘talk’. To set this in context, students were asked to consider whether talking was useful in lessons—why do we engage in so much talk in class? They were given some examples of discussions to analyse and provided with 3 classifications of ‘talk’—disputational, cumulative and exploratory. These lessons established both the features of, and possible benefits of, exploratory talk.

In the sessions that followed, students were provided with further examples of WW1 poems and asked to discuss them, unpacking the techniques used and attempting to engage in more exploratory talk. Students were encouraged to use their smartphones to record their discussions to enable them to recognise the exploratory features of their conversations.

It was at this point that a new element was added to the lessons in the form of the opportunity to try ‘discussing’ online. My own research investigates the potential for the use of online chat to supplement face to face discussion and aid learning. The students were given secure online accounts and asked to try ‘talking’ about the poetry they had studied online. Just as in class, students were allocated into groups and the teacher was able to ‘move’ between groups monitoring and guiding discussions, adding questions and prompting new lines of thought. Students were asked to review their online discussions in the same way as they had analysed their classroom discussions to see whether they felt they were able to more effectively discuss via either talk or text.

The final lessons in the unit of work were devoted to assessment. Students were asked to evaluate the relative importance of talking for learning. The question they were asked was ‘Is talk better than text?’ They were given the choice of completing the assessment via ‘talk’—an audio recorded response either solo or in discussion; or via ‘text’—as a written response. The last session drew the class together in a debate to try to gauge the whole class’ conclusions.
Findings

This unit of work was very much a ‘pilot project’ and both we and the students learned a lot along the way. In this section I illustrate some reflections on the project making use of examples of the students’ discussions to give a flavour of what was achieved.

My overall impression, backed up by that of my partner teacher is that the unit was a success. Students gained useful knowledge of the subject content and applied skills that will aid them not only in their English Language studies but also in other subject fields. In particular the students gained experience in:

- Modelling and practising effective exploratory talk
- Analysing new poems and tackling new English language content
- Extending talk effectively into an online context
- Synthesising their learning to reach an evaluative conclusion on the use of talk

Despite some concerns at the planning stage over the more academic content relating to the types of ‘talk’, the students were quick to apply these ideas and seemed to immediately grasp what made for ‘exploratory discussions’. In both the classroom and online, students demonstrated their newfound understanding of this technique as can be seen in the following extract from one online conversation between 3 students:

**Student K:** Why did the writer use religious language at the end of the poem?

**Student E:** No(t) sure but I think it’s because they wanted to show how people back in those days were religious but weren’t religious... (the) truth about where the soldiers went and what really happened when they were there. You know they came up with like horses and the opposition had like sniper rifles.

**Student K:** Yea maybe also if they talk about religion they are more likely to listen to them.

**Student A:** It’s because people were more religious back then and it was a good way to get through to the people.

The extract shows the students engaging in ‘real’ conversation, asking questions of each other, giving a reasonable level of detail in their answers and building on each other’s points to develop their understanding.
The next 2 extracts (from different conversations) present examples of tentative suggestions being made online:

*Student E:* I might be wrong here but could the poem also be praising the soldiers whilst showing how bad they were treated during their ordeal at war.

*Student S:* This might mean the soldiers are expendable as everyone’s attitudes did not seem to change

These cautious suggestions show students thinking carefully, but bravely making their points in the open and ‘thinking aloud’ quite clearly.

There were some good examples of students encouraging each other to expand on their ideas e.g. *Student R:* why do you think that? This is another feature of exploratory talk that moves beyond more commonplace classroom discussion. The students almost begin to ask ‘teacher style’ questions of each other.

In interviews conducted to evaluate the project and in more informal conversations around the classroom it was edifying to see students equally enthused by the content, the skills and the new technologies they were encouraged to use in the project.

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**The English Literature Project—Dr Mary Henes**

**Background**

The English literature module centred on travel writing, seeking to introduce pupils to a branch of life-writing which is increasingly subject of academic study in university literature departments. My PhD research looked at British travel-writing on Iran from 1890 to 1940, exploring the writings of soldiers, journalists, politicians, diplomats and tourists who visited the country during that half-century. My thesis was particularly interested in men’s and women’s travel writing, the similarities and differences between the two, as well as European descriptions of Persia as orientalist texts. The thesis raised some striking connections between Anglo-Iranian relations and travelogues of the era, as well as the concept of Persia as a liminal space within the British imperialist geo-political discourse of the time. These discussions draw on the four key texts which Tim Youngs believes have resulted in the study of travel-writing being ‘concerned largely with exposing the genre’s rootedness in mercantile, colonial, and imperial expansion, as well as with its gendered discourses.’ These texts are Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), Hulme’s *Colonial Encounters* (1986), Sara Mills’ *Discourses of Difference* (1991), and Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* (1992).
In an introduction to travel-writing, therefore, I sought to introduce pupils to key approaches to travel writing: the genre as a subsection of life-writing; gender and travel; and depictions of other countries, through both buildings and the people encountered. In order to make this engaging and accessible, I selected a variety of famous incidents from exploration and travel writing. These extracts would provide a dramatic entry point for pupils to some of the themes of greatest interest to academics working in the field, thus providing some university learning in the classroom.

**The Unit of Work**

Each extract sought to introduce pupils to new content—an unfamiliar text from an unfamiliar context—and also to facilitate discussion around key questions such as gender, representation of foreign countries and peoples, the value of exploration, and how travelogues are crafted to be informative and entertaining. Through ongoing discussions with my teacher partner, we came to the realisation that each lesson could also contribute to pupils’ development of core skills for literary analysis and creative writing.

A lesson on Mary Kingsley—one of the most widely analysed British women travel-writers of the nineteenth century—introduced pupils to this impressive Victorian spinster who set off through the West African jungle with no other Europeans, to gain cartographic, ethnographic, and botanical understanding of the region. The lesson also offered the opportunity to practise giving advice, as pupils considered the warnings Kingsley received and what they might say to a Victorian traveller and a contemporary traveller setting off to the jungle. The extract in question presents Kingsley falling into a game pit in the jungle, only to be saved from the ebony spikes by the thick Victorian skirts she persisted in wearing abroad when their cultural meaning was irrelevant and their convenience dubious at best; nonetheless, they proved life-saving, and pupils responded well to the tension between this intrepid explorer and her conformity of dress even in the most unlikely of places. Photographs and another extract from Kingsley showed pupils how she described the landscape she encountered and indigenous practices such as cannibalism—revealed through the discovery of human remains in her sleeping hut—through the power of sensory writing. Using Kingsley’s writing as a model, pupils were then invited to practise their own descriptive writing of landscapes.

Continuing this theme of descriptive writing, pupils were introduced to one of the most widely quoted extracts of inter-war British travel writing:
the description of an ancient tower in Iran by Robert Byron from his 1937 text *The Road to Oxiana*. Through analysing the text for descriptive techniques, and then sketching their own interpretation of the tower, pupils were able to recognise the extraordinary density of his prose which marks out Byron’s writing, as well as consider techniques they might use in their own descriptive writing on buildings. It was really rewarding to see pupils unpack the description, breaking down each element of Byron’s prose before reconstructing their understanding of the extract through their own sketches—all extremely accurate as the unveiling of photographs of the tower proved.

Again seeking some continuity between the various extracts considered in the scheme of work, pupils considered some of Byron’s humorous passages, developing their understanding of the multifaceted nature of his work and also the potential for danger in travel-writing to be approached with dry wit. While Byron depicts relatively minor incidents, the next extract presented one of the most dangerous undertakings of exploration even today: the ascent of Everest. Taking Edmund Hillary’s autobiography as a starting point, and considering ascents of Everest in the twenty-first century, pupils discussed the appeal of exploration and whether all travel should be allowed. Hillary’s unassuming writing style surprised students given the enormity of his achievement, and there were some really interesting conversations about who should be entitled to climb Everest today, particularly in the light of the recent avalanche. As the module progressed, pupils were increasingly aware of connections between the texts and their understanding of the world today. Hillary’s ascent of Everest and stories of contemporary climbers were one example, but they could also bring increasingly sophisticated analysis to the depiction of foreigners in travel writing, contrasting Hillary’s depiction of Tenzing Norgay with Kingsley’s depiction of her African guides. The relatively swift movement of the scheme of work from late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century works did not prove problematic, but instead brought increasing understanding of shifts in attitude.

The final extract sought to challenge pupils’ understanding of what travel writing might be—the carefully constructed narrative of a usually successful journey—through the figure of Captain Scott and his final diary entries. The scheme of work thus brought pupils back to the question of life-writing, and travel writing’s connections with other forms including diaries, memoirs, letters, postcards, blogs and so on. Pupils were therefore invited to consider questions of narrator, audience and perspective, and how these interplay in all the texts they had considered throughout the module.
Findings
The pilot scheme of the travel writing programme seemed to go well: pupils responded with interest to the characters of all travellers considered, and were able to recall key facts of their lives and journeys without prompting. This suggests that the biographical interest of travellers is a useful entry point for pupils. Furthermore pupils developed their understanding of key areas of critical debate regarding travel writing, and having become familiar with each extract under discussion were willing to consider its further implications in these broad areas of debate including gender and presentation of the ‘Other’. While initially there was some discussion about the possibility or even necessity of developing skills alongside new subject knowledge in each lesson of the programme, having key writing or communication skills as an area of consideration in each lesson helped to focus the discussions on the writers’ techniques. Moreover, such literary analysis helped to sharpen pupils’ understanding of the characteristics of the genre of travel writing, perhaps encouraging them to consider it an accessible, engaging, exciting and thought-provoking genre of literature they might like to read in more depth.

What next?
As a part of the wider ULiS project a collection of units of work have been developed with the aim of bringing PhD research into classrooms across a selection of subjects. These have been brought together and unified into a suite of ready-to-use (or adapt) resources. They were initially presented at the event held in London in July 2014 with an aim of providing attendees with the inspiration and confidence to trial the units in their own classrooms from Autumn 2014. The project continues to undergo evaluation and a second phase encompassing new subjects and topic areas is underway. Should you wish to get involved in the project or to explore the units yourself please make contact using the details below.

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References