



Teacher **John West** uses animation as part of his creative media lessons to engage students in a variety of different ways



## Animating the classroom

**A**S A creative media teacher I am always on the look-out for new ways of creating or displaying content in the classroom. Whether it is music composition software or a new type of presentation tool, anything that makes learning more compelling and more interactive for pupils is going to benefit my teaching.

One of the most important areas that I look at is video. Video has been in the classroom for years, but for much of that time it has been a pretty "dumb" tool. For years classroom video has been about sticking on a ready-made VHS or DVD for pupils to passively consume. This "broadcast" approach to using video in the classroom has its uses – a television-like experience can engage pupils in a way that a whiteboard cannot and it can also show content that would be impossible in any other format.

However, like all media, video is becoming interactive in a whole host of ways. Most obviously, we are now all able to access a world of video content from the internet, either from general video sites or specialist educational resources such as TrueTube. This has massively increased the choice of what we can offer, but it has not changed the broadcast paradigm.

More interestingly, the rise of cheap video cameras, video-capable mobile phones and affordable video-editing software has meant that the medium is now more interactive. Pupils and teachers can now create and edit their own video for classroom consumption. This fundamentally changes the nature of video from a broadcast tool into an interactive media.

However, filmed content still has its limitations. When you are shooting on a camera you are constrained by practical considerations – cost, weather, scenery, actors and even the laws of physics.

It was precisely these limitations that led me to look for an alternative way of enabling video content creation in the classroom. I found an answer in animation software.

First and foremost, it removes some of the limitations on creativity. If I am creating an animated video then I do not have to worry about the cost, the actors or the weather, it is just a matter of a few mouse clicks and I can create any scenario, character or special effect that I want. If I want to set a movie on a spaceship, underwater or in zero gravity it is no problem – there are no props, no health and safety, and no cast who could fall sick or get embarrassed!

Furthermore, using animation, video creation becomes more interactive. While camera-based video creation is essentially a linear process of shoot, edit, view, using animation software you can create a basic animation, edit it, review it and then, if you do not like anything about it, you can go back and change it.

What has made all of this possible is the rise of a new generation of animation software tools. Previous software has been primarily aimed at the professional market and, as well as being prohibitively expensive, can also be hideously complex to use. The new generation, however, comes out of the world of computer games and is targeted at the non-professional market.

The system I use has an interface that is familiar to anyone who uses computer games (and so is perfect for the majority of kids) and it also comes with a content library to form that basis of your animation. This means that creating an animation is simply a matter of choosing the characters, sets and props that you want to use and then manipulating them on-screen to create the action that you want.

You can also deploy quite advanced film-making techniques – as well as basic action there are also options for emotions, camera angles and lenses, lighting effects and moods.

### Using animation

Once you have got used to the tool of your choice, the only real issue is working out what you are going to do first. I found that once I sat down and thought about it, there were hundreds of applications for animation in the classroom.

For example, with my music class I set them a task to score music for an animated film. Giving them an existing asset around which to compose music fired their creativity and opened the door to composition in a way that a blank piece of paper simply could not.

In the future I want to make this a cross-curricular activity, with film students creating the movies and music students scoring them.

Another place where I have used animation has been during our regular citizenship days. We all know how hard it can be to stand up in front of a class to talk through a difficult PSHE topic but animation can help. When I had to do a class on drugs and alcohol I created a video where an on-screen character talked the students through some video content displayed within the animation.

As well as engaging the pupils with a difficult topic, this approach also let me structure the rest of the lesson around a fixed length asset which helped with overall approach.

I have even used animation with my media studies classes for their filmed coursework. I checked with the examination board whether it would accept animated content and, once we had approval, a whole swathe of students went down this route. The fact that the software can handle advanced techniques such as camera angles, lenses, colour palettes and moods mean that the pupils can still display the requisite skill-sets, but without the limitations of filmed content.

I am still exploring what can be done with animation in the classroom. The applications in music and media studies are obvious but it is the work I have done outside these areas that I find really exciting. The PSHE example shows that non-media subjects can be enhanced by this approach in a whole new way.

For example, what is to stop kids who are revising for a language oral from creating an animated exam scenario? They could then add dialogue and correct it as necessary, facilitating an interactive and iterative learning process? Why can't an English teacher create a template animation off a Shakespeare scene and then let kids reinterpret it with their own language, characters or scenery?

The many possibilities that animation opens up are its greatest opportunity but also its greatest challenge.

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• John West is a teacher of creative media at Faringdon Community College in Oxfordshire which uses the animation software Moviestorm.

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