

Putting technology in the picture

William Davis talks to the creators of a piece of innovative new eLearning software from the UK that demonstrates how technology can be successfully put to use at the chalk face

The inspiration for a unique piece of eLearning software currently captivating both pupils and teachers in UK schools came from a rather unusual source. Standing in front of his inner city London class, teacher Philip Davis would sometimes notice his primary school charges getting bored and slowly switching off.

Instead of reprimands, detentions and other traditional sanctions, however, Davis would simply place a bongo drum between his knees and pound out a

his lessons - not to teach musicality as such (although it may inspire interest), but simply as a means to focus the small minds he was teaching and inspiring them to think creatively and calmly.

And so the seeds of the idea for his software package Picture The Music were sown. From the simple idea of projecting images on to a screen and playing music before asking the pupils to write a story based on what they saw and heard, there emerged a sophisticated, fully interactive

that they bring has opened up the possibilities of how the computer can be used in the classroom. Before the whiteboard, eLearning was generally done on the computer screen and either everyone had to crowd round the small screen or pupils had to work independently on individual workstations.

"Everyone can now see the whiteboard," said programmer Daniel Webb. "And you interact with that in a very different way. So, right from the start, we developed Picture the Music with this interaction in mind and the end result really is in the first wave of tools specifically designed to be used on the wall."

Another aspect of the development of this software is the collaborative partnership between the teacher and programmer.

"We started off by working with Davis and his was a very creative and artistic vision," continued Webb. "We then had to turn that into software, which is all bits and bites and not that creative. We had to convert the essence of what he does as a teacher and turn it into something that could be put on to a CD for people to use and add value to their own lessons."

He likens this process to being a little like a sculptor working with a big block of wood. "Davis was the wood," he explains. "We had to chop it, squeeze it and shape it until we had something

The introduction of whiteboards and the interactivity that they bring has opened up the possibilities of how the computer can be used in the classroom

furious and rhythmic beat. The children would then rise from their desks and perform a series of movements in time to the beat designed to hone hand-eye co-ordination as well as loosening up tired limbs.

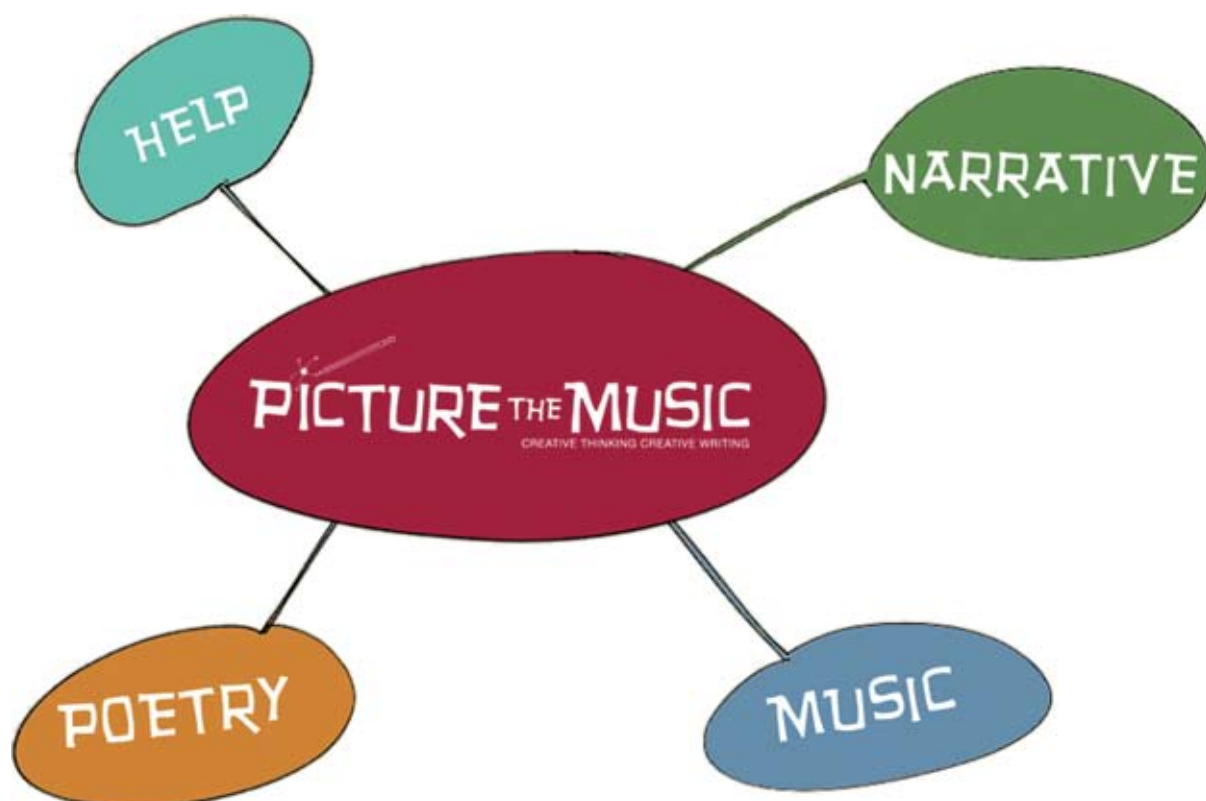
And this exercise worked. Pupils would return to their desks, refreshed and alert, happy to continue with their learning. Of course, this exercise could be used in many different contexts, but for Davis it merely enhanced the importance of music in any form of learning context.

From there, he developed the idea of using music as a learning aid in many of

eLearning programme that is now used to develop creative thinking, writing skills and the use of language that's relevant across the world.

The software itself was developed by UK-based Moopic Ltd and programmed by Cobwebb Communication Ltd. It's release in 2006 followed months of collaboration between the creative and scientific elements to the project. Both agreed, however, that there was one significant technological advance in the classroom that acted as a springboard to make it all possible.

The widespread introduction of whiteboards and the interactivity



that worked for us but that he was also happy with. We were then constantly going back and forwards designing and modifying it.

“All the time, we wanted this to be something that he recognised as his own. There was a lot of talking to him about how he taught and what he was trying to achieve and then trying to direct him on how we could achieve that in the software. This was like going from a horizontal train of thought into a vertical train of thought - or the other way around! They don't fit very well, so we were constantly breaking ideas down into things that were realistic for us to implement.

“With software, you often get worried about looking back from what people want with the programme at the end, and whether or not you are going to be able to deliver that. Often, you have to minimise what people want from the outset. WithPicture the Music we decided to be a lot more bold from the start.”

The software package works in a very simple way. Teachers use it to plan their lessons and then project that on to the whiteboard. Pupils are then engaged using a series of thought maps that take

them through the creative thinking and writing process, from the opening and setting of the story, through to the use of metaphor and similies. Each direction on the map they take, leads them to the pre-planned piece of music and a picture, where they formulate the ideas they need for their writing using the images and sounds as inspiration.

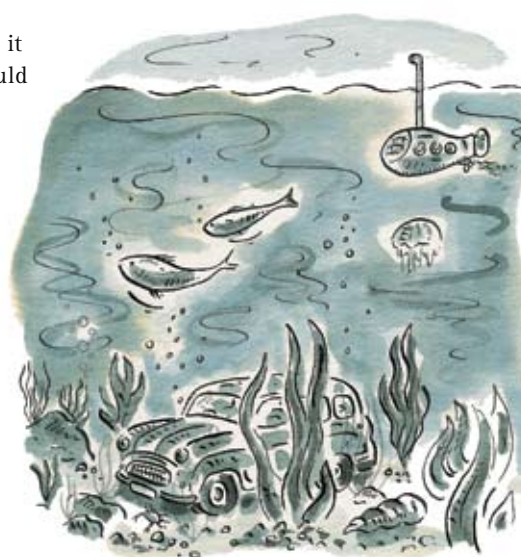
The thought maps are critical to the creative nature of this software and replace the traditional menu system we're all so familiar with on computers. A menu system is simply a list and, as this was a creative learning tool, it was decided that thought maps should act in the same way as a menu, but would be unique every time they were used. Each time they are used, they lead the pupils in different and creative directions.

“We're all very used to menus and tool bars driving our software, but thought maps are so much more natural for people to use. You can navigate a lot quicker using them than using lists.

“One of the important things about thought maps is that each one is unique. All the maps are hand-drawn and then digitised and

then converted into something we could use as linking and with that you get the individuality that triggers the memory of where you want to press stuff. So you can navigate without really reading or engaging that part of the brain,” explained Webb.

Although the application of the thought map into other software or for use on browsers or operating systems like Windows is limited, due to the unique nature of each



one, Webb is positive about the development of the Picture the Music software through content.

"We intend to grow this by changing the content of the software," explained Webb. "So we can develop it by giving the content different themes, like a Middle East theme or a European theme with new features and new benefits.

"The application framework behind this software is Mozilla, the application behind Firefox and Thunderbird," he continued. "This is an excellent application for us as it enables us to do all these crazy things and the licence is very generous so you can use everybody else's genius, getting a massive leg-up using those tools.

"And, because it comes from that side of things, it's very web-savvy so although the software is sold as a CD in a box with a licence, we are able to

the different countries through this creative process.

"The language on the software can easily be changed, as can the music to reflect the relevant country. If you're teaching about France, for example, this will be greatly enhanced by using traditional French music and images."

This is one aspect of the business in which Moopic will be using the Web as a means of distribution of this additional content and they will allow other places to upload content to their server, which could then be distributed through the Picture the Music front end.


With this in mind, Europe is seen as a key market for the ambitious company, where both Davis and Webb are convinced of a real enthusiasm for creative learning software.

"We are looking to expand into areas in the EU and into Central and Eastern

software can be applied to different areas of the curriculum, advice on ICT related topics and video case studies of how all these resources are applied in the classroom.

The investment is paying off, and there has been a rapid uptake of ICT in UK classrooms over the past three years, the impact of which is seen to be having a positive effect across the board. Pupils who make frequent use of computers either in or out of school, for example, have been seen to enjoy a greater motivation to learn and higher levels of achievement.

Of course, it's not only in the UK where the benefits of ICT in the classroom can be seen. In a world already dominated by the computer and with increasing reliance in all sectors of society on technology, it helps prepare children for a more fulfilling life all over the world.

Multimedia resources in the classroom also help keep things fresh and interesting for both the pupil and teacher. Children have a natural interest in technology and enjoy using it, while the same technology offers teachers the chance to develop new skills and offer a fresh perspective on familiar subjects. 

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put up tutorials and other interactive features on our website that essentially offer a very similar experience.

"But we've looked around the software market at the moment and we feel that there is very little that we as a software company can offer that can't be offered for a much cheaper price around the world.

"We've looked at what advantages we do have, however, and one of the keys is our Britishness - and that's something we can sell because we work here and others can't offer because they don't.

"So we will develop this along those lines, both for teaching English and for exposing England to the world. The pictures are of England, while the illustrations are largely based on English history and mythology.

"We can develop this further to include other countries - particularly in Europe, where the teaching of English is so important - building up to a pack that will cover many different cultures through which pupils can learn about

Europe, where there is a tremendous appetite for eLearning and a real willingness to utilise technology in the classroom," said Webb.

The software is currently available to schools through the UK government's innovative eLearning Credits Scheme in which cash is given to schools to spend specifically on multimedia resources that support teaching and learning.

In the year ending April 2006, UK schools received £330million in eLC money, with each school receiving £1,000 and £9.73 per pupil. The money is allocated through the Local Education Authorities and is available to all statefunded primary and secondary schools and most nursery schools.

Another example of how the UK government has embraced eLearning is with the rapid development of its Curriculum Online service (www.curriculumonline.gov.uk) which not only acts as a catalogue for multimedia resources for use in the classroom, but also as a guide to how different

For more information about Picture the Music, contact Barny Webb on: 00 44 1732 8122 02 or visit www.picturethemusic.com.

