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**A critical investigation, using approaches drawn from case-study research, into how dramatic techniques and the use of media might enhance Year 10 students' understanding of character in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men***

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### **Abstract**

*This investigation examines how dramatic techniques and the use of media might enhance a class of Year 10 students' understanding of character in 'Of Mice and Men'. It explores ways in which to facilitate these students' understanding of literature that they may otherwise find inaccessible. I learnt that it is useful to combine students' preferences for particular teaching styles with other activities that may yield the best results from them. Furthermore, from this research, I suggest that using a combination of activities, both drama and media centred, to support students' learning is important as one single activity will not suit all students at the same time. I would argue that the activities used complement one another by constantly reinforcing students' understanding as well as engendering empathy with the characters in the novel.*

## **A critical investigation, using approaches drawn from case-study research, into how dramatic techniques and the use of media might enhance Year 10 students' understanding of character in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men***

### **Introduction**

The following essay seeks to investigate how students' understanding of character in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* might be enhanced by dramatic techniques and use of media. The new National Curriculum for English outlines the importance for studying literature within the subject: "Through reading in particular, pupils have a chance to develop culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development" (2013, p.2). With this focus on literature in the new curriculum I felt it was important to explore and discover ways to facilitate students' understanding of literature that they may otherwise find inaccessible.

The class this essay focuses on is from my second professional placement school: a mixed 11-16 comprehensive situated in a rural village in Cambridgeshire. The student demographic is largely mono-cultural with very few EAL learners. In the school, Drama is offered as a subject at GCSE (General Certificate in Secondary Education), but Media is not. For this investigation I focused on a single Year 10 class studying *Of Mice and Men* for their GCSE English Literature exam. I selected this class as they are mixed ability (with a range of students working at grade A level being the highest to grade C being the lowest) and I was interested in tracking what effects changing the teaching style would have upon individual students' learning and examining how the students would respond to new techniques and ways to learn. Before I carried out the investigation I was aware that the students rarely used dramatic techniques to aid their learning in English lessons. For these reasons the investigation is small-scale and based on approaches drawn from case-study research.

I began working with this class in January 2014 at my second professional placement and conducted my research in March. Before I taught my lessons for this investigation I had already taught the class several times and built up relationships with many of the students through working with them in focus groups and offering one-to-one assistance. I felt that this was important before

embarking on the research to ensure that the class felt confident and comfortable in expressing their opinions to me.

My topic reflects my desire to craft studying literature into both an accessible and memorable experience for students. I wanted to help the students to be able to 'inhabit' characters from *Of Mice and Men* in order to increase their understanding of and empathy with the figures in the book. Therefore, I was interested to see whether the outcome of my activities would yield a positive response from the students' understanding of character.

## **Literature Review**

### **Views on teaching English literature**

Booth argues: "we search for teaching methods that externalise the interior world of reading" (cited in Grainger, 1998, p.29), emphasising the importance of teachers bringing the written text to life for students. From his use of the verb "search" we can infer that Booth does not consider there to be any single method that can illuminate all literature to students, but rather methods are constantly sought after and discovered. The word holds connotations of exploring and trialling teaching methods and subsequently measuring and responding to the students' reactions towards being taught in different ways. In light of this, I wish to explore, with reference in particular to work by Beach, Appleman, Hynds and Wilhelm (2011), Britton (1987), Chambers (1991) and that of Yandell (2008), how teaching literature is regarded and approached by a range of teachers and educational researchers.

In the opening chapter of *Teaching Literature to Adolescents* Beach et al. (2011) explore what it means to teach literature to students in secondary school. Each chapter begins with a case-study or "narrative", practice-based example of research that is then referred to in the more theoretical information that follows. This presentation of different combinations of research in the book creates a rich experience for the reader to see how different types of research can support and extend one another. All of the contributors to the book are American based educators using research carried out in American schools. I found that references to the American educational system did not prevent the information and findings from being relevant to me, despite currently working in a school in England. However, it is important to note that certain key systems, such as examination grading,

would be different between the two countries, resulting in possible disparity between the focus of certain elements within the curriculum and education as a whole.

According to Beach et al. learning is inherently social and we learn through participation in social contexts or communities (2011, p.7). This statement challenges a student-centred theory of learning that leaves the responsibility of learning solely up to the students. Beach et al. emphasise the importance for learning to be a two-way, interactive experience for both students and teachers. They write: “As a literature teacher, you are socialising students into what could be called a literary community of practice” (p.8). It would not be possible to engage students with a literary community without exploring texts through open dialogue and interaction. This is a view that is supported by both Vygotsky and Chambers. In the article: ‘Vygotsky’s Contribution to Pedagogical Theory’ Britton disseminates Vygotsky’s ideas in relation to English teaching. Despite the article being published in 1987, its relevance to English teaching is still apparent. Britton writes: “If speech in childhood lays the foundations for a life-time of thinking how can we continue to prize a silent classroom?” (1987, p.25). The shift in focus away from the “silent classroom” is evident in many, more recent, educational publications such as Alexander’s *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk* (2008). Britton expands his point further with a reference to Bruner stating: “most learning in most settings is a communal activity” (as cited by Britton, 1987, p.25). This emphasis on learning as a socially interactive experience encouraged me to devise teaching methods for literature in which I could facilitate an “interactive learning community” within my classroom (1987, p.26). Furthermore, Chambers, who taught for three years, writes of the positive effect reading aloud to a class can have on students. He states: “One of the most notable aspects of reading aloud is its socially binding effect. Those who read together feel they belong together as a community...” (1991, p.57). From this assertion we can deduce that reading a novel together with a class would create a group feeling of belonging in a classroom. From reading these texts I was interested to see how possible it would be to create a “socially binding effect” in a class and how this would influence the students’ ability to interact and learn from one another through participation and discussion.

A key problem identified by Beach et al. with teaching literature is the difficulty for early adolescents to identify and empathise with “complex psychological character motivations” (2011, p.9). I would argue that, whilst this is a valid point, it cannot be said that all adolescents have difficulty in empathising with complex social and emotional motivations, due to the variance in

students' life experiences. However, Elkind supports their view by describing adolescents' difficulty to adopt differing perspectives as "adolescent egocentricity" (as cited by Beach et al. 2011, p.11). To develop this point further, Yandell writes of the importance for students to be able comprehend matters of common interest and multicultural importance (2008, p.39). He quotes from *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

Atticus stood up and walked to the end of the porch. When he had completed his examination of the wisteria vein he strolled back to me.

'First of all,' he said, 'if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view - '

'Sir?'

'- until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.'

(Lee, 1960, p.36)

Yandell emphasises the importance for students to be able to feel empathy with those whose perspectives they may initially struggle to see. Beach et al. suggest that one way of tackling this issue is to allow students to encompass or inhabit the lives of the characters they are reading about and thus experience participation in a social context and activity. It is important to encourage students to adopt the voices of those whose perspectives they do not share in order to extend and challenge their thinking to assume the race, class, gender, age and historical period of their newly allocated role (2011, p.12). After reading about these ideas I felt keen to try out similar activities with my Year 10 class to see if they would help them to identify with the characters depicted in the 1930s American context of *Of Mice and Men*.

## **Dramatic techniques**

In this section I will examine attitudes towards using drama in the classroom to augment the teaching of literature and teaching drama exclusively as a subject in isolation. I will be making reference to work explicitly by Grainger, Fleming, Kempe and Warner and that of Beach et al. Combined, their work would suggest that the use of drama in schools has an overall positive effect on students' understanding of textual implications and facts as well as allowing the exploration of both characters' and students' emotions and feelings.

In the article 'Drama and Reading: Illuminating their Interaction' Grainger, a principal lecturer in Education at Canterbury Christ Church College, examines the relationship between reading and drama in learning (1998). She explores the potential for drama as a tool for learning about reading and engages with the idea that these two components are reliant on one another to facilitate learning. Grainger writes: "Drama needs the world of fiction for its vast resources: its situations, characters, problems, moods and themes. Reading needs the world of drama for its techniques and conventions which facilitate children's engagement in, and response to, texts" (1998, p.29). The reciprocal relationship between drama and reading suggested in her writing allows students to learn in an imaginative, social and interactive way. She develops McLeod's concept 'intertextuality of thinking' writing: "drama and literature engage children's imaginations and help them make connections" (McLeod cited in Grainger, 1998, p.32). It would seem that using dramatic techniques to illuminate literature helps students to explore ambiguity and examine complicated dynamics within texts. However, Grainger's ideas do not take into consideration students who may be unable to join in with dramatic activities due to issues such as disability or shyness.

Grainger's ideas work in conjunction with Vygotsky's theory that learning is an innately social experience. She states: "Children need to be invited to talk about texts, to make sense of them, to create and interrogate them and to make explicit the processes they engage in when reading" (1998, p.35). If we examine the verbs used in the above sentence to describe studying literature: 'talk', 'create', 'interrogate', it is clear that students must be made to feel confident and independent in order to learn in this way. I would argue, and subsequently agree with Grainger, that drama provides students with the opportunity to learn in a confident, independent and successful manner. By interacting with a written text in a way that requires them to deconstruct it, students are being challenged to critically engage with their class novel. Furthermore, by having to construct a new text, be it in dramatic form or not, students are being given the opportunity to nurture their subjective response to the text and be involved in an activity with a high degree of social interaction, exploration and discussion.

In contrast to Grainger's article, Fleming outlines some of the practical issues with using and teaching drama (2001). *Teaching Drama in Primary and Secondary Schools* is focused entirely on teaching drama as an individual and separate subject, rather than as a tool to enhance the study of English literature. However, Fleming offers illuminating ideas drawn from his own practice-based research. He writes: "If the teacher has a highly directive role there is a danger of removing from

the pupils any sense of ownership” (2001, p.27). This point is interesting as it stresses the independent nature of students in relation to drama. The construction of a text, or a response to a text, is a personal and evolving experience and Fleming’s statement suggests that students must be allowed to feel involved in the process as well as the end result. I feel that this point applies when using drama activities such as role-plays as well as to drama productions of entire plays.

Fleming also warns that “without any real commitment to the drama ... the pupils may either be bored and disengaged or unable to apply themselves to the work with any level of seriousness” (2001, p.27). Fleming indicates that students may not be aware of or simply not want the opportunities that drama creates for their learning and thus behave in an obstructive way. From this statement it was clear to me that the students involved in my research would need to understand clearly why drama was being used in their lessons to support their learning about *Of Mice and Men*. However, despite Fleming’s statements on the potential difficulties with teaching drama, he does emphasise that having to inhabit a character affects students’ understanding of that character (2001, p.94). Dramatic activity forces students to consider characters’ thoughts, actions and intentions in a medium separate from their own lives and opinions.

Building on this argument further, Kempe and Warner write: “a play’s characters are open to interpretation” (2002, p.xi) conveying the idea that characters can be explored, interpreted and presented in many opposing, diverse and different ways. I feel that this statement can also be applied to characters in novels, although I would agree that plays, through the nature of the genre, do allow the reader/audience/actor/director more freedom in creating its characters. This freedom to engage with the written word in a creative, imaginative and potentially disruptive way is something that is absent from many students’ relationship with literature.

Beach et al. offer practical techniques to use in the classroom that encompass the above ideas. They list criteria that dramatic activities should fulfil in order to be deemed fitting for aiding students’ learning. Of these, I have selected one to examine in detail. They write that the activity “should require students to evoke the world of the text” (2011, p.165). This statement stresses that the context of the text, historical and social details, should be inferred in the students’ response to the activity. Dramatic activities are a way of visualising the text in a physical space and allow students to imagine events outside of their minds’ eye. They go on to write: “Drama is a way of bringing a story into action” (p.166) with the word ‘action’ holding connotations of physicality, movement,

excitement and spectators. It is clear from surveying the above writers that they regard drama as a way to enliven reading and extend students' imaginations into the world around them. By actively interacting with a text students are able both to visualise and take part in the action of the literature they are reading and thus encompass the thoughts and feelings of the characters to whom they may have initially felt completely separate.

### **The use of media in the classroom**

In this section I will draw upon research carried out by Durran and Morrison, Oldham and Beach et al. I hope to explore methods and research carried out in classrooms to support students' understanding of character through the use of media.

Beach et al. comment that students are highly engaged in the use of digital media (2011, p.97). This is obvious from the extent to which students are surrounded by technology, ranging from their mobile phones to the television and radio, and it is important to harness this interest and engagement in the classroom. Beach et al. write that texts, including 'literary' texts, are being "redefined as digital" (2011, p.97). The phrase 'redefined as digital' indicates that texts are evolving in line with technological advances. This demonstrates both the timeless capacities of literary texts and the importance of flexibility in updating such texts to remain accessible and engaging.

Durran and Morrison have recognised the importance of using digital media in the classroom and outline their experiences with working with film versions of Shakespearean texts in 'From Page to Screen and Back Again' (2004). Durran is an Advanced Skills Teacher in English and Media and Morrison is Head of English and Drama at the same school in Cambridge. Their collaboration is suggestive that English, Drama and Media are areas that complement one another in students' learning and the fact that their research was carried out in a school in Cambridge indicated to me that their findings and advice could be more relevant to my purposes than that of Beach et al. whose work is based in America.

They carried out practice-based research on a group of Year 9 students working on *Macbeth*. The article emphasises that the use of film informs learning about literature and that the use of literature informs learning about film. This is evident from the strap line at the beginning of the article: "Teaching Literature through Moving Image – Teaching Moving Image through Literature" and the frequent references to "explicit connections between this language of literature and the language of



film” (2004, p.16). This reciprocal relationship is reminiscent of Grainger’s idea that drama and reading inform and complement one another when studied side by side. By embedding their article with these references Durran and Morrison convey the importance that using film and media in class is regarded as rigorous and relevant. Furthermore, with the use of media, students are less likely to experience issues of shyness or disengagement that Grainger’s research ideas could create.

Durran and Morrison’s approach to teaching literature and film presents the two different mediums as equals. They write: “we have experimented with radical approaches to Shakespeare, which abandon the presumed centrality of the printed text and use film as a starting point. To some extent, this has been a pragmatic approach in a crowded curriculum” (2004, p.26). It is telling that watching a production of Shakespeare, albeit in film form, has become a ‘radical approach’ to teaching and learning about Shakespeare. However, if we explore some of the practical ways in which Durran and Morrison use film and media to support their teaching we can see that this ‘radical approach’ still remains in partnership with students’ reading and writing.

They describe stills from film versions of the play text being carefully selected as “visual quotations”. Students then are asked to do a close reading of these images in order to develop analytical skills that can then be applied elsewhere. In being offered the opportunity to recognise and comment on imagery, mood, setting and action as seen in a visual medium, students are able to transfer these skills to inform their reading of a written text. Durran and Morrison go on to argue that the initial, subjective, responses to a visual representation of a text can lead organically to sophisticated discussion and deep critical thinking (2004, p.18). In this way, their use of media in the classroom can be seen as creating opportunities for both analytical and imaginative work for their students. However, there are clear disadvantages to this approach to teaching literature. The focus on a single film interpretation of a text could cloud students’ judgement to regard that production as the definitive representation of the text. Furthermore, whilst comparing several different media texts with one another could counter-act this effect, some students could still struggle to separate their critical reading from simply supporting whatever version of the text they find the most accessible and engaging. From this I would deduce the importance of showing students short, concentrated clips from films in order to use media in the classroom effectively. Its benefits are evident in helping students both understand and comment in a detailed way on how texts, film or written, are crafted. However, it is important that this focus is not lost through being swamped watching a film interpretation of a text with little or no focus on reading it as a text.

The idea of ‘reading’ digital media is iterated by Oldham (1999, p.45). She emphasises that there is no definitive film version of a written text and indicates that the use of moving image media in the classroom can be counter-productive. Her opening statement: “It [the article] examines productive ways of using moving image media with literary texts” suggests that there are unproductive ways of using moving image media that do not advance or support students’ learning. Her article includes reference to empirical, practice-based research for which she compared control and experimental groups’ responses to learning about *Oliver Twist* with and without the use of media. Her research depicted the immediate advantage students had, who were allowed to watch the film of *Oliver Twist*, on understanding the context of the novel (1999, p.37). Further advantages of using media were listed as allowing students access to the whole text, assisting lower ability students in remembering the events of the plot and clarifying the contextual detail for all students (1999, p.44). I regard these advantages as transferable to all film versions of text set in contexts different to students’ own personal life experiences.

Interestingly, Oldham did find that watching the film version of a written text had the potential to frustrate, or even hinder, the imaginative expression of high ability students taking part in her study. These students found that they could imagine the events of *Oliver Twist* for themselves, stating: “In the book, you imagine for yourself” (1999, p.44). This statement raises the issue that using media in the classroom can remove creative expression and independence from students by forcing them to abide by a premeditated version of the text.

From these findings I would suggest that there is no one method appropriate to allow all students to highly engage with written texts. However, the literature would suggest that a combination of using creativity and imagination in drama activities with more analytical and critical skills when examining media texts could lead to yielding a positive effect on students’ learning about literary texts. My following research will attempt to outline whether, in one case-study instance, this effect was in fact positive.

## **Research Questions**

I devised the following research questions in order to hone the focus of my investigation. This narrowing of focus allowed more in-depth analysis and evaluation of the topic, rather than a brief and general overview of ‘dramatic techniques and media’. For the purposes of the assignment I

deployed 'dramatic techniques' to mean: hot-seating, conscience/thought alley and role plays and 'media' to mean use of a film version of the novel (director: Gary Sinise). Hot-seating is a dramatic technique where students endeavour to inhabit a character and answer questions in role as that character while sitting in the 'hot' seat. Thought alley is a further extension exercise developed from hot seating. Students must encompass a character's thoughts and understand how they feel in a situation taken from the novel. Students are then nominated to walk down an 'alley' made of up two rows of the other students who each repeat a different word explaining how the character feels. The student walking down the alley is bombarded by the thoughts and emotions that are running through that character's mind, thus developing their understanding for the nominated character. For each research question I focused particularly on measuring both what understanding of character the students demonstrated and how and when this knowledge manifested itself.

1. What role did 'hot-seating' have in students' understanding of character?
2. What role did 'thought alley' have in students' understanding of character?
3. What role did watching short clips from the DVD have in students' understanding of character?
4. What role did 'role-play' have in students' understanding of character?

## **Teaching Sequence**

The unit of work on *Of Mice and Men* was begun immediately after February half term. I taught four lessons specifically for this investigation and each lesson was interspersed with more 'traditional' lessons on *Of Mice and Men*, with the exception of lessons three and four. Furthermore, before I began planning and teaching my sequence of lessons specifically for the investigation I taught a lesson on the theme of dreams in the novel. This was important to demonstrate to the class that I had a thorough knowledge of the text and what they would be expected to answer on in their exam. This ensured that the class felt confident that my teaching would help them work towards their exam and not impede their learning. Due to the case study nature of my investigation, I needed the lessons to proceed like normal, without introducing any radical or artificial changes.

I began my sequence of lessons by employing a hot-seating exercise. In the previous lesson students had been moved into groups and allocated a particular character to explore. I then asked one student

from each group to be nominated to “become” their group’s character. By giving students the choice of who would be in the ‘hot seat’ I ensured that all students felt comfortable with participating in the task. The nominated students were required to rotate round the other groups and answer questions on their dreams for the future, impressions of other characters and when they felt happy. Students were encouraged to use body language and facial expression to convey their character’s thoughts and feelings in a more emphatic manner. Students then had to write an extended paragraph on the character they had identified at the beginning of the lesson as the one they were least confident writing about.

My next lesson focused on using the film of the novel as a tool to enhance and develop students’ understanding of character. Students were shown two short and contrasting clips from the film that matched the section of the novel which had been read the previous day. For each clip students tracked a different character and made notes under the following headings: body language, actions, facial expressions and film effects. After this activity, I wanted to emphasise further the contrasts at the end of Chapter Three in the novel. To do this I split the class in half and carried out a ‘Thought Alley’ exercise comparing the character of George’s thoughts when he was talking about his dreams for the future and then after his companion, Lennie, fought with their boss’ son.

The third lesson took place a week after the second. At the beginning of this lesson students had to walk around the classroom and write adjectives to describe each of the characters whose names were stuck up on posters. We then read together half of Chapter 5 and stopped after Curley’s Wife is murdered. It was at this point in the lesson I introduced the idea of role play. By introducing a drama activity I was deviating from the normal style of teaching that these students experienced. However, in order to observe the effect this had on their learning I had to incorporate some practised innovations to the investigation. Students had to work in groups and imagine how the murder scene would be altered if another character had entered the barn while Lennie was attacking Curley’s Wife. I was keen for them to explore the relationships between characters’ interactions in a physical way. For certain groups I allocated two additional characters, e.g. Curley and Crooks, to their role plays so that they could explore how they would work together, or not, as well as how they would respond to Lennie in this situation.

I held the final lesson in my teaching sequence in the school assembly hall and this immediately impacted upon the students’ behaviour. Several students seemed less confident in practising and

then performing their role plays than they had done so in the previous lesson. During the performances the students had to make written comments on the characters being portrayed which I then collected in order to measure their understanding and engagement with the task. After all of the role plays had been seen the students filled in the final questionnaire for the assignment. I wanted to ensure that they had a sufficient period of time to answer the questions in detail which is why the questionnaire was not the last activity. For the final section of the lesson students worked in teams, girls against boys, to devise four separate Thought Alleys for characters that the opposite team then had to guess. The students asked to join together and form a Thought Alley that I had to walk down and guess the character they were talking about. I interpreted this initiative as them being receptive and engaged with the lesson and its teaching styles.

## **Ethical Issues**

Before starting my research I completed an ethical checklist and considered any ethical implications that might arise from the project. I read the guidelines outlined by BERA regarding educational research and sought permission from the school and sent a letter to the students' parents regarding the collection of data. This system ensured that all participants were aware of their involvement in my research and the processes that I would be employing to gather data. The issuing of a letter gave some students the opportunity to opt out of taking part in the study which was important as the BERA guidelines state that all researchers should "operate within an ethic of respect for any persons involved in research" (BERA, 2011). This meant that the size of my case-study is made up of eighteen students. I was fortunate that the class I chose to carry out my research on was my mentor's class and it was straightforward to inform her of the activities I had planned, ensuring that none of them would be detrimental to the students' progress or learning.

## **Methodology and Research Methods**

In my investigations for this assignment I employed approaches drawing from case-study research. I was attracted to this approach to research due to its focus on in-depth, holistic study rather than a more superficial approach. Denscombe writes: "The case study approach works well here because it offers more chance than the survey approach of going into sufficient detail to unravel the complexities of a given situation" (2010, p.53). He goes on to explain "the real value of the case

study is that it offers the opportunity to explain *why* certain outcomes might happen” (*Ibid.*) I was aware that although the case-study approach to lessons should be that they proceed without any radical or artificial changes, I would need to introduce certain teaching techniques that the class was unfamiliar with. Taber states: “The case study may be of an innovation, where that innovation is introduced by the teacher as part of the normal process of trying out new approaches in teaching” (2013 p.158) and I was interested in combining innovation with a holistic approach to my research. For these reasons I wanted to explore both how and, if possible, why my Year 10 class would react to different teaching methods in order to evaluate effectively the best and most productive ways in which they learn.

I used a wide range of methods to gather data, including questionnaires, interviews, observation and written tasks. The variety in my methods allowed me to gather a rich and diverse range of both quantitative and qualitative data to examine and from which to draw information.

Initially I trialled my questionnaire with the eight KS4 students in my form group in keeping with Oppenheim (1991, p.341) who states: “everything about the questionnaire should be piloted”. I had decided to feature a Likert scale of ten statements in the questionnaire to elicit a range of students’ attitudes. The Likert scale allows for responses to be measured against a broader set of statements than the responses that one question would generate. My results from the pilot questionnaire suggested that featuring solely a Likert scale would produce data that was difficult to interpret past a “crude statistic” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p.324). I decided to re-draft the questionnaire to include a combination of open-ended questions, rank order questions and a shortened set of statements for the Likert scale. I found that this model of questionnaire yielded information that was much more stimulating and illuminating for me, the researcher. This decision was also influenced by the statement: “It is the open-ended responses that might contain the ‘gems’ of information that otherwise might not be caught in the questionnaire.” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p.330). Therefore the final draft of my questionnaire began with a ranking question, followed by a Likert scale, made up of five statements, and ended with an open-ended question. I began with a simple ranking question in order to engage students and encourage them that the rest of the questionnaire would be straight forward to complete. I ended with an open-ended question in order to counter the prescriptive nature of the Likert scale. The combination of different questioning styles in the questionnaire ensured that it generated data that was rich and personal to individuals in the class, but also measurable and comparable.

After the second lesson I interviewed four students, two boys and two girls, together in a semi-formal setting. Cohen, Manion and Morrison state: “Group interviewing can be useful with children as it encourages interaction between the group rather than simply a response to an adult’s question” (2007, p.374). I selected students who would reflect a cross-section of the mixed ability class, with their target grades ranging from A to C. Furthermore, one of the girls being interviewed studied drama for GCSE and I hoped her opinions on using drama to illuminate English lessons would be pertinent to my investigation. I chose to hold a group interview so that the students would have opportunities to think and bounce ideas off one another during the interview context. I recorded the interview so that I could listen back and transcribe sections of the students’ responses so that they could be regarded as a reliable source of data.

In all of the lessons I taught for this investigation their own class teacher and I endeavoured to record field notes of the students’ progress and responses to the classroom activities. I decided not to create an observation schedule for the class teacher to follow as I felt it would curtail the recording of any activity that I had not considered and would therefore be outside its framework. It was a challenge of the assignment to be able to measure students’ responses during the lessons as these situations provided the most accurate and immediate responses to the different teaching styles. Denscombe notes: “we cannot possibly remember each and every detail of the events and situations we observe” (2007, p.208) and I endeavoured to write detailed lessons evaluations immediately after each lesson I taught. However, these notes are dependent upon the strength of my memory and invariably certain details were lost through my involvement in teaching the class rather than solely observing them.

## **Generated Data and Analysis**

### **Initial questionnaire**

I began gathering data in the form of a questionnaire prior to my first lesson for the assignment (see Appendix 1). The first question asked students to rank how difficult they found studying certain aspects of novels. This was to help me gauge students’ confidence levels in answering questions on characterisation. Results are shown in Table 1 below.

It is important to bear in mind when examining these results that the novel, *Of Mice and Men*, is the first prose literature text that the class has studied at GCSE. It is impossible for me to know to what extent the students based their responses to this question on their experiences of studying *Of Mice and Men* or their experiences of studying other novels at Key Stage Three or when reading for pleasure. However, the category of characterisation yielded the highest number of responses that students found it difficult. Furthermore, overall the category of characterisation displayed the widest range of students' responses indicating that it is an area for which there is the greater diversity of confidence levels. From these results I could deduce that characterisation contained an element of insecurity for students that meant that my research was appropriately tailored to the needs of the class.

	<b>Easy</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Hard</b>
<b>Plot</b>	12	6	0
<b>Themes</b>	2	15	1
<b>Characterisation</b>	7	9	2
<b>Other</b>	0	0	0

**Table 1: Responses to: “When studying a novel what do you find the easiest to understand? Rank the following options”**

From examining the responses to the Likert Scale question I was able to gather rich quantitative data. When asked if they found watching others act as characters, in class or in the film, improved their understanding of those characters, 94% of the class ticked ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’. Interestingly, the statement: “Acting as a character helps me to understand that character’s actions in the novel better” created results ranging across the entire spectrum, from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’. Students were split along the entire range of options as seen in the table below.



It is a disadvantage of the Likert Scale model that these numerical values do not provide us with the information of why students agreed or disagreed with this statement. However, one respondent, who ticked the uncertain option, wrote beside it: “I don’t like acting in front of the class but I’m in the middle”. From this comment we can deduce the benefit in providing opportunities for respondents to explain their responses, although many choose not to. This comment also enabled me to take the students’ confidence in acting into consideration when planning my lessons. It was clear from the range of results that the class was divided over whether they found the use of dramatic techniques helpful to their learning. This was something that I was keen to re-examine throughout teaching my research lessons to investigate whether the students’ attitudes changed.

	<b><u>Strongly Disagree</u></b>	<b><u>Disagree</u></b>	<b><u>Uncertain</u> Please state why</b>	<b><u>Agree</u></b>	<b><u>Strongly Agree</u></b>
<b>Acting as a character helps me to understand that character’s actions in the novel better.</b>	11%	33%	5.5%	33%	16%

**Table 2: Percentage results for one statement on questionnaire**

The last question in the questionnaire was open-ended in order to allow students to explain their responses in more detail. Cohen, Manion and Morrison state: “open-ended questions make it difficult for the researcher to make comparisons between respondents, as there may be little in common to compare” (2007, p.331). However, I found that many students selected ideas raised in the Likert scale to inform their responses to the third question: “What do you find the most helpful to understand characters’ motives, thoughts and actions?” Responses were centred round the themes of: “watching the movie”, “acting it out” and “talking in groups and acting”. It could perhaps be a flaw of the questionnaire that I had ‘planted’ these ideas in the students’ minds for the completion of the final question. One response read: “I think taking up that role and becoming that character makes it a lot easier to understand what their motives, thought and actions are”. This response supports Grainger’s statement that acting “enables them (children) to imaginatively inhabit the

world they are creating and become more conscious of the artistic process in which they are engaged” (1998, p.32). After analysing these results I was interested to see if the students would respond to my activities in practice in the same ways that they had indicated they would in the questionnaires.

### **Lesson 1 – hot seating**

During the hot seating exercise I relied on observation by myself and the class teacher as a way to gather data. Interestingly, we each noticed that one particular student, who is normally quiet in class discussions, embraced his role with great enthusiasm and made use of body language, for example pretending to preen his hair, while being in role as Curley’s Wife. Our joint awareness of this student’s progress demonstrated the effectiveness of the task on his learning. However, it was impossible between us to be able to measure the effect that the task had on every student simply through observation alone.

After my initial hot-seating exercise the students were asked to write a paragraph about a character that they had previously selected as difficult to write about or understand. This task was completed individually and in silence so I could measure how much each student had discovered through the hot-seating exercise. It would appear that the exercise had benefitted students who had felt unsure writing about particular characters at the beginning of the lesson because each student submitted a paragraph about their selected character. Furthermore, when moderating the marks of each response with the class teacher it became clear that six out of the eighteen students making up my case-study group achieved a grading above their target level. By being able to moderate my marking with the class teacher I was able to compare the students’ newly generated responses to the standard of work they had previously produced. However, one, C grade, student’s response was particularly brief indicating that the exercise had not helped her sufficiently to be able to complete the written task. She wrote: “In the book ‘Mice and Men’ Candy is described as ‘the old man’ which may also imply he is very stress free and careless. The book also tells us that he has a very weak dog who he cares about”. Both sentences written by this student begin with reference to ‘the book’ indicating that her thoughts were focused on what happens in the book, rather than what she had heard and seen other students say and act like while answering questions in role as characters.

## **Lesson 2 – use of media and ‘thought alley’**

From the results generated by the hot seating exercise I was eager to see how the class would respond to watching clips from a film version of *Of Mice and Men*. My main sources of data for this lesson were field notes written by myself and the observations of the class teacher as I felt that relying solely on written data produced by the students would constrict the nature of my research. In order to ensure that the use of media in the classroom was focused and suitably challenging I selected two contrasting clips depicting events that take place in the third chapter of the novel. From the use of Socratic questioning I was able to gauge the class’ understanding of the differences in the characters’ moods depicted in the two clips. The class were then split into two groups, each responsible for thinking of adjectives to describe the mood of their character in an allocated section of the novel, to form a ‘Thought’ or ‘Conscience Alley’. From personal classroom observation and notes made by the class teacher, I was able to see that the students were comfortable in recognising and describing different characters’ thoughts, feelings and motivations.

The blending of media and drama in this lesson was a departure from the more traditional lessons these students usually participate in. Interestingly, I observed that the dramatic activity resulted in students being more creative and imaginative in their interpretations of characters than when discussing their representations in film. The group I observed extended the ‘Thought Alley’ task to order their words in such a way that reflected the shifting feelings of their character during their allocated section. This perceptive idea conveys the subtlety with which these students were analysing their character. Despite the task’s purpose to demonstrate the difference in mood between the two contrasting sections, this group was able to recognise that their character could be presented in an even more nuanced and complex way.

## **Interview carried out between lessons 2 and 3**

The interview provided me with information about how unused the class was to employing dramatic techniques in English lessons. The students informed me that they rarely did so, but enjoyed role plays as long as they knew what they were meant to be doing. This admission indicated to me that the students felt slightly uncomfortable about having the freedom to create a role play by themselves and make decisions about character portrayal independently from a teacher.

When questioned on the popularity of watching media clips of the novel the students explained that it helped them to “visualise what you can’t see in the book”. This quotation indicates that the film is a powerful tool in shaping the students’ imagined interpretations of characters and context. One, high ability, male student admitted that he prefers to stick with his own original portrayal of the characters despite seeing them portrayed in a film. This area is something I would like to examine further in the future with reference to Oldham’s findings (1999).

Finally, out of the entire class, only the student who also studied drama at GCSE admitted to finding the Thought Alley exercise useful. She described it as “words chucked at you” making the characters’ emotions easy to remember. Perhaps this receptiveness to the exercise was due to her studying drama and therefore being more used to alternative learning styles than the other members of the class.

### **Lesson 3 – use of role play**

This lesson was perhaps the most interesting I observed. The students initially seemed cautious and reluctant to partake in creating a role play which was evident through their quiet study and note taking of the relevant section of the novel. However, discussion and prompting and support from myself to specific groups began to lead into more dynamic and expressive work. Many groups opted to write scripts for their role plays conveying their insecurity on relying on facial expressions and body language to depict their characters. Instead they felt bound to the language spoken by the characters in the novel itself, despite the departure from the text that the task required.

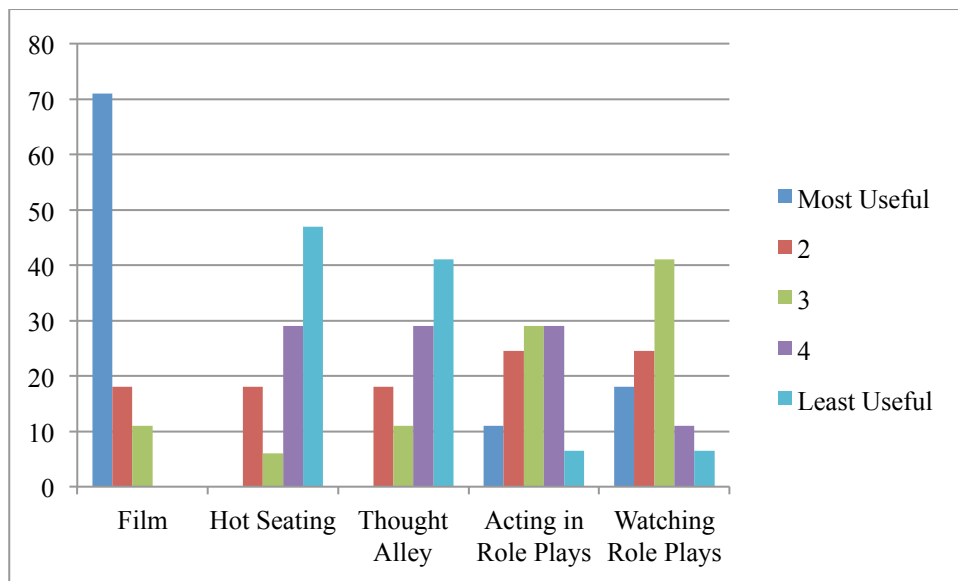
However, as the lesson progressed, the increased noise of other groups discussing and practising their role plays seemed to encourage all of the students to embrace the task and approach it in a less stilted way than at the beginning of the lesson. The class teacher and I observed several examples of the task allowing students to use their imaginative and creative capabilities. One boy used his school jumper to make a sling in order to convey the character of Candy. Another student used a bundled up jumper as a prop to represent Lennie’s dead puppy at the beginning of Chapter 5. These two examples demonstrate the students’ resourcefulness when attempting to portray aspects integral to their character.

#### **Lesson 4 – viewing of role plays and final questionnaire**

In this lesson I was able to gather three different forms of data. I was able to continue my observation of the students more explicitly during the performances of their role plays. This observation was aided by the students recording written answers to questions about each performance and finally filling in the last questionnaire of the project (see Appendix 2). From these different approaches I was able to gather data that was rich to interpret and compare.

The student feedback on the performances was helpful in providing a record of qualitative data about each group rather than relying simply upon my memory. Furthermore, from the responses to the second and third questions, “What part was the best actor in the group playing” and “what did they do which made you know which character they were portraying?”, I was able to deduce that the students in the audience were able to interpret their peers’ portrayal of whatever character they were acting. Some students wrote down words that were spoken which revealed who each student was in the role play e.g. “You killed my wife” would have to be spoken by the character of Curley. This example demonstrates a student’s understanding of character that would appear to be focused solely on words spoken by that character. However, other students’ comments on how Curley was portrayed in the role plays include: “fought for her”, “cruel when wife dead” and “very aggressive like his character”. These quotations concur on the theme of aggression and violence and reveal a more developed understanding of key characteristics that describe Curley.

Figure 1 displays results from a question asking the students to rank in order of usefulness the five techniques they had used to learn about characters. From the graph we can see that over 70% of the class ranked the use of film as the most helpful when learning about characters in the novel. Interestingly, compared to the results quoted above in the initial questionnaire on students’ responses to acting in role plays, the class remained almost evenly split over whether they found this activity useful or not. It would appear that my lessons had no effect on the attitude of students towards this activity. The graph also shows that students were almost evenly split over those who found hot seating or Thought Alley the least helpful in learning about characters. These two categories are also the only two to receive 0% of votes as the most useful technique for learning indicating that no one in the class found them particularly helpful. This result is an interesting representation of the overall class’ learning preferences and one that I will respond to when planning future lessons for them.



**Figure 1: Bar chart of percentage results for third question on final questionnaire**

The final question asked students to explain why the activity they ranked as most useful was helpful to them. I was eager to explore students’ responses to this question as it provided their raw quantitative data with more detail and explanation. I have selected to record here three responses from students who ranked the work we did with the film as the most helpful to them. They wrote: “I could see their emotions and hear them”, “could see it acted professionally and accurately” and “it gave us more understanding of the scene”. This final response would seem to support Oldham’s view that the film immediately and effortlessly immerses the students in the context of the novel (1999). However, the phrase “acted professionally and accurately” by one student indicates to me that perhaps they view the film as a definitive representation of the novel rather than as a single interpretation. This student seems to suggest that a professional film is more ‘accurate’ than a role play devised by his peers. His point is reinforced by the first response: “I could see their emotions” emphasising that perhaps the professional actors in the film are able to depict characters in a more convincing way than the students. However, if there had been time I would like to have challenged this reliance on the film’s representation of character by showing the class another film version of the novel and asking them to compare the two, as outlined by Durran and Morrison (2004).

## **Conclusion**

From these findings I have gained a much greater knowledge of the class' preferred learning styles. However, my research title was to investigate how dramatic techniques and the use of media might enhance Year 10 students' understanding of character in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. My data analysis would suggest that despite over 75% students regarding the activity of hot seating as not helpful in their learning it was after this activity the class produced written work to a high standard about characters they had previously struggled with. By examining each of my research questions systematically in this way I have become aware of having to compare the students' preferences in teaching with other activities that may yield the best results from them.

Furthermore, I would suggest that using a combination of activities, both drama and media centred, to support students' learning is important as not one activity will suit all students at the same time. To what extent having to 'inhabit' characters through dramatic activities affected the class' learning is hard to measure. I would argue that the activities complemented one another by constantly reinforcing students' understanding and empathy with the characters in the book. They also provided students with an opportunity and space to use their imagination and have their creativity valued in a time when emphasis on exam results often pushes such aspects of learning aside.

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## **Appendix 1:**

### **Initial Questionnaire**

This questionnaire is to investigate what you find helpful in English lessons.

It is confidential and the results will be made anonymous.

Please answer **all** of the questions honestly.

**1. When studying a novel what do you find the easiest to understand?**

**Rank the following options 1 -3 (1= confident 3 = difficult).**

Plot

Themes

Characterisation

Other  please state \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Please complete the following table by placing a tick in one space only after each statement:**

	<u>Strongly Disagree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Uncertain</u> Please state why	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Strongly Agree</u>
When reading a novel, I find it hard to think about things from the characters' point of view.					
I find it hard to write from a character's point of view.					
Acting as a character helps me to understand that character's actions in the novel better.					
I find watching others act as characters, in class or in the film, improves my understanding of those characters.					
I like to discuss characters in groups.					

**3. What do you find the most helpful to understand characters' motives, thoughts and actions?**

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## **Appendix 2:**

### **Final Questionnaire**

- 1. How confident do you feel talking about the following characters? Rate from 1-5 (1 = really confident, 5 = have no idea).**

George \_\_\_\_\_

Crooks \_\_\_\_\_

Candy \_\_\_\_\_

Lennie \_\_\_\_\_

Slim \_\_\_\_\_

Curley \_\_\_\_\_

Curley's Wife \_\_\_\_\_

- 2. How important do you think it is to explore characters in different ways? Why?**

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- 3. Which of the following did you find the most helpful for learning about the characters in *Of Mice and Men*? (Rank in order 1 = most useful, 5 = least useful).**

Hot-seating

Thought Alley

Film Clips

Acting in role plays

Watching role plays

**4. Why was the activity that you ranked as most useful helpful to you? Give details:**

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