



## Developing best practice in mixed attainment English teaching



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# Developing best practice in mixed attainment English teaching

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# Introduction

## The aim of the Developing best practice in mixed attainment English project was threefold:

- To develop research-informed practice in secondary school English teaching, drawing on the award-winning project Best Practice in Mixed Attainment
- To create resources for use by and inspiration of English teachers to support mixed attainment teaching at Key Stage 3
- To strengthen the resources available to English teachers to argue in favour of evidence-based mixed attainment teaching practice.

In this resource we start by reviewing the research evidence context regarding mixed attainment grouping. We then offer some exercises for reflection, alongside student perspectives from the Best Practice in Grouping Students project.<sup>1</sup>

We describe the collaborative process that teachers who participated in the initial work engaged with and present a set of principles that emerged from our discussions. Finally we offer annotated lesson materials, created and developed by participating teachers over the course of the project. We hope that these will provoke and encourage thoughtful engagement with the development of mixed attainment teaching in English.

Accompanying this resource is a short film illustrating and reflecting on mixed attainment teaching practice. The film presents mixed attainment English teaching in action at one of our participating schools. We see excerpts from a Year 8 lesson and hear reflections on pedagogy from teachers and students.



<sup>1</sup> [www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/centres/groupingstudents](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/centres/groupingstudents)

# How to use this resource

**The information presented in this resource is intended for guidance and to stimulate thought, reflection and discussion. We are keen to avoid being prescriptive and believe that teaching professionals are best placed to decide how to organise teaching and learning.**

We believe that teachers' classroom practice can be improved by learning from research evidence and by reflection and review, especially in collaboration and dialogue with colleagues. We suggest that this resource may be most effective if used by groups of teachers, either as part of a departmental professional development programme, or in pairs or small groups such as professional learning communities. It could also be used in mentoring situations with student teachers and newly qualified English teachers.

## Session 1

### Background

- Complete Reflection Activity 1 (page 6)
- Watch the accompanying short film
- Read and discuss the evidence from research, completing the reflection activities (pages 8–9)

## Session 2

### Best practice in mixed attainment project

- Read and discuss the background to the best practice in mixed attainment project (page 10)
- Read and complete the reflection activities relating to student views on mixed attainment (pages 11–12)

## Session 3

### Emerging principles and lesson materials

- Read and discuss the emerging principles (page 18)
- Select one or more of the example lessons to focus on for discussion, using the reflection activities to help you.

In subsequent sessions you could explore further example lessons, or observe each other's lessons and reflect on your findings.



## Questions for discussion

### **Reflection on how students are grouped**

*What do you understand by mixed attainment teaching?*

*Do you currently teach students in sets or mixed attainment groups?*

*What other grouping practices have you encountered?*

*In your school/department, what is the rationale for the grouping practices that are currently in use?*





Mixed attainment grouping:  
research and practice

# Mixed attainment grouping: the evidence base

Research evidence suggests that students with lower prior attainment (often students from disadvantaged backgrounds) may do better if taught in mixed-attainment settings [1]. However, we know less about why this is, or what characterises successful practice in mixed-attainment classes.

Attainment-based grouping strategies such as setting and streaming predominate in English schools, with estimates of over 50% of students taught English in attainment groups [2]. Research suggests that while high-attaining students make slightly more progress in set groups, this is at the cost of lower-attaining students, who make less progress [3]. Setting has also been called into question in relation to differences in attainment by students from diverse social backgrounds [4], with students from lower socioeconomic and certain ethnic backgrounds having poorer educational outcomes.

As well as the impact on academic progress, attainment grouping is known to affect students' self-confidence, with students in lower-attaining groups having lower self-confidence than their higher-attaining peers [5, 6]. In a number of studies exploring the impact of setting and mixed-attainment grouping in mathematics, Jo Boaler and colleagues even found negative effects on the self-confidence of students in 'top' sets [7] and found evidence that moving to mixed attainment grouping could improve students' attitudes, behaviour and achievement [8].

Reviewing the literature relating to setting, we identified seven factors that may explain the poor outcomes of students in lower sets and streams [9]:

- Students are allocated to groups based on factors other than prior attainment
- Students do not move freely between sets
- Lower sets and streams receive poorer quality teaching than higher sets and streams
- Teacher expectations are lower for lower sets and streams
- Lower sets and streams receive an impoverished curriculum and qualifications
- Students in lower sets and streams are less engaged and have poorer attitudes to school
- These factors create a self-fulfilling prophecy of lower outcomes for members of lower sets.

**Research evidence suggests that students with lower prior attainment may do better if taught in mixed-attainment settings.**

Our proposal is that by teaching students in mixed attainment groups, many of these factors should disappear: students of all levels of prior attainment are taught together by the same teacher, teaching the same curriculum. There are no sets to be allocated to or moved between and so those opportunities for inequity are removed. We have been investigating this proposal through our Education Endowment Foundation-funded project Best Practice in Mixed Attainment.



## Questions for discussion

### **Reflection on experiences of mixed attainment teaching in English**

*What for you characterises successful mixed attainment teaching?*

*What challenges arise with mixed attainment teaching?*

# The Best Practice in Mixed Attainment project

We devised the Best Practice in Mixed Attainment intervention working in collaboration with English and mathematics teachers from three secondary schools identified as successful practitioners of mixed attainment teaching. Our intention was to create a research-informed intervention that would support schools participating in our study in developing their own models of mixed attainment teaching practice. Our hope was that the intervention would address some of the difficulties that arise in attainment grouped classrooms and so improve academic and social outcomes for students.

Our intervention is based around the following principles:

## Professional dialogue

Research suggests that there is a high level of positive impact on student learning when teachers focus their conversations on student learning rather than other issues [10].

**Organising teaching groups to include a broad range of prior attainment**, as measured by KS2 results: this is to ensure that groups cover the full attainment range as far as possible.

## High expectations of all students, regardless of prior attainment

We believe that there is benefit to students in having the same high expectations of all and providing models of high attainment for all students to aspire to.

## Flexible within-class grouping

Where students are grouped in the class, teachers should avoid fixed, attainment based groups. Students can be grouped for specific tasks or in mixed groups, but labelling students by prior attainment should be avoided.

## Differentiation

Give attention to providing differentiation in such a way that it does not limit students' potential attainment, but increases opportunities for all students to be included in the range of experiences in English lessons. We prefer differentiation by outcome and feedback to differentiation by task.

We worked with six secondary schools over a period of two school years, meeting with them six times for workshops. Each workshop addressed the research evidence underlying an aspect of the intervention, provided time for pedagogical reflection, and an opportunity to plan for activities where learning would be put into practice.

The study was constructed as a feasibility study evaluated by randomised controlled trial, such that academic and social outcomes for the intervention schools were compared with a control group of five schools who were carrying on with their usual practices. The results of the evaluation are due to be reported in 2018.

**Our intention was to support schools in developing their own research-informed models of mixed attainment teaching practice.**

In addition to the evaluation, we also conducted interviews with teachers and focus groups with students, as well as providing teachers and students with the opportunity to participate in online questionnaires. This enabled us to develop a rich picture of teachers' and students' experiences of mixed attainment teaching, among other themes.

## Student views on mixed attainment

We conducted focus groups with 58 students from five schools (three from the intervention group and two from the control group, with the control group schools selected because they had a reputation for outstanding mixed attainment practice).

In the following section we present a range of students' responses, selected to represent the range of views, positive and negative, that students hold about mixed attainment grouping.

All names are pseudonyms and we give the indicative prior attainment level of each child.

Students were asked questions such as: do you have any teachers who teach in such a way that nobody is struggling or that everybody enjoys lessons?

Students were asked a number of questions including:

- What do you think about mixed attainment teaching?
- Do you have any teachers who teach in such a way that nobody is struggling or that everybody enjoys lessons the same way?
- What do you think it's like for teachers to teach mixed attainment classes?



# Good things about mixed attainment

Students told us that they liked the following things about learning in mixed attainment groups:

- Higher attaining students offer inspiration and act as role models for their peers
- Successful work can be modelled or used as exemplars
- Students appreciate helping others and being helped themselves
- Classroom diversity is recognised as an advantage to students – experiencing working alongside people with different backgrounds, strengths and interests
- Students recognised that mixed attainment provides a situation of greater equity for all students
- Mixed attainment teaching was felt to encourage independence
- Teaching students of different levels of prior attainment together contributes to closing the attainment gap
- Students felt mixed attainment grouping was better for self-confidence and perseverance
- Diverse peer relationships were enjoyed and appreciated
- Teachers are able to communicate high expectations of all students, regardless of prior attainment
- Teachers know all the students in their group well

**Inspiration, diversity, equity, independence, dialogue, closing the attainment gap, high expectations, self-confidence.**

- Students enjoyed dialogue in the classroom
- Students liked differentiation by outcome
- The distinction between attainment and ability was identified
- Everyone gets a rich curriculum.



I think it's good for most people because say in like maths or English there would be the lower achieving people trying to become better by using the higher achieving people's work as a guide.

(Killian, high attainment)

In the world that we live in today, there are different people and people aren't always going to be on the same wave length as you... when you go into the real world, there are going to be people who don't like you and people who are different to you so you've got to get used to that at a young age so when you finish your GCSEs, you're just able to go into the wide world and think, "What should I do now?"

(Jeremy, high attainment)

Because you have the people to help you around you, but then you also have the people you can help, so it's easier.

(Joey, low attainment)

I think it's...I don't know how to put it but... it's like...I don't know...I think it's just, like, so people don't get upset because if someone finds out that they are in the lowest group, they might get sad or think, "Oh, I am so bad. I can't do anything right" but whereas if you are in a mixed group, no one thinks that way.

(Shami, middle attainment)

I don't think it's fair to like split people because of their ability because then some people won't learn the things that they need to learn to get to university and go pass their GCSEs and A Levels.

(Kian, middle attainment)

I find it helps me a lot with my dyslexia, people helping out, explaining it in a different way - the teachers can't explain to you like that. It's nice to learn some stuff off them as well and then write it down and then remember you've learnt something new off someone else.

(Nikita, low attainment)

# Challenges of mixed attainment

Students expressed the following concerns about mixed attainment:

- Sometimes work did not feel like it was at the right pace for everyone – either too fast or too slow
- Care was needed in getting the pitch of the lesson right – not too easy or too difficult
- Students recognised that in order to raise self-confidence, teachers needed to create a supportive classroom culture
- Some students had experienced peers 'freeloading' in group work and felt this was unfair
- Higher attaining students felt burdened when they were asked to help others too often, at the cost to their individual work
- Some students had experienced self-confidence difficulties where there were wide attainment ranges

**Pace, pitch, behaviour, classroom culture teacher workload.**

- Behaviour could sometimes be seen as a problem, in contrast to uniformly good behaviour in 'top' sets
- Students were concerned that teacher workload might be higher with mixed attainment.



## Questions for discussion

### Reflection on the challenges of mixed attainment

*Do you recognise or share any of these concerns?*

*What approaches have you found helpful in dealing with these?*

*In particular, how might you manage difficulties with:*

- *Differentiation*
- *Teacher workload*
- *Getting the pace and pitch of the lesson right*
- *Creating a positive classroom culture*
- *Balancing individual work and helping others*



At the start of the year it was huge. It was just, like, one person was, and kind of... it's still, kind of, like that now. The teacher gives us, like, a sheet to do. One person is finished in, like, let's say five minutes but the other people take ten or fifteen minutes but it doesn't affect us.

(Shami, middle attainment)

**Interviewer:** What do you think it's like for teachers to teach mixed attainment groups?

**Neil:** It can be quite annoying, I would say.

**Lochan:** Because then you have to have work for each set as well.

**Neil:** Yeah, you need to have work for, like, all...

**Lochan:** Work for the lowest. Work for the highest.

(Neil and Lochan, high attainment)

I think partner work is okay as long as your partner talks as well. A lot of the time like some people just have one person talking and like one person writing down when you have to write on a sheet.

(Maud, high attainment)

Because it's not really fair on the people who think like they can't do it, but then the teacher's like paying more attention to the people that have done it and just like, 'Oh yes, you've done really well.' When you like put your hand up and say, 'I don't really understand any of this,' and they're just like, 'You'll get the hang of it'.

(Kayla, low attainment)

I think there are but I think that some people would prefer, like, sometimes more the higher level or the lower level would prefer to be in classes with the people who are more at their stage so they don't feel like people are doing better than them.

(Edie, middle attainment)

Because they tell us as well at the start of the year. They're trying to get the higher students to teach the lower students as well as the teacher. They want to get the lower students up, but then again it's, like, bad for the top class students because then, like, they're slowing down as well in their learning.

(Lochan, high attainment)

# Some ways forward

## Differentiation

We recognise that a major concern with mixed attainment teaching is the potential impact on teacher workload. Some teachers find it difficult to imagine how students with a broad range of prior attainment could be taught in the same group without planning tasks at three separate 'ability' levels. However, as well as creating extra work for teachers, this approach also risks increasing the labelling of students in a mixed attainment group, especially if students come always to identify with the easier or harder tasks. Differentiation by resource or task can also result in spurious differentiation, e.g. all students will use at least one adjective, most will use three adjectives, some will use five... Differentiation by task can also mean that students do not all have the opportunity to achieve the same learning outcome from a lesson, for example a poster or oral task is unlikely to substitute effectively for a written task when the learning objective is about written communication.

Our preferred approach is to use differentiation by outcome and by feedback. We suggest that teachers plan activities that all students can access and that do not place a ceiling on the outcomes that can be achieved. This means that 'finishing' a task is about negotiating the optimum outcome for each student rather than completing tasks according to the teacher's pre-determined idea. Outcomes might vary in terms of quantity or quality, but might also vary in form. The suggested outcomes should meet two criteria: they should provide opportunities for rich feedback (from the teacher or peers) and they should allow all students to address the learning intention from the lesson.

## Pace and pitch

In a mixed attainment class, students may differ in how quickly they complete tasks and in how difficult they find the content and activities. The advice on differentiation by outcome and feedback above may assist with managing pace and pitch, but more may be needed.

Knowing the class well is the basis of getting pace and pitch right. We have now heard many teachers say that teaching mixed attainment classes has made them better, more conscientious teachers as they need very consciously to address these kinds of issues.

**Our preferred approach is to use differentiation by outcome and by feedback. Knowing the class well is the basis of getting pace and pitch right.**

Extension tasks can be helpful for students who complete their work quickly, but their use can also become problematic if the pace of task completion rather than the quality of learning becomes the focus of attention. Brief oral feedback can introduce more challenge to a high-ceiling activity for a student who needs to be moved on in depth or difficulty.

For students who may find it harder to access a task pre-teaching may be helpful, for example asking students to listen to an audio book before reading a text together in class. Support materials can be provided during the lesson, anticipating questions and difficulties that might arise, for example providing a glossary.

Students may sometimes appreciate being given a choice of activities, in order to feel in greater control of their learning, though teachers may want to keep a close eye to ensure that students' expectations of themselves are high.

# Working collaboratively on developing practice

The teachers' collaborative work on lesson evaluation and planning involved two distinct aspects.

## Collaborative review

The first was the opportunity for colleagues from the same department to review particular schemes of work that they had been teaching and to consider how they might be amended, both to ensure that the key concepts and content of the unit were accessible to all learners and to provide enhanced opportunities for students to engage in intellectually demanding, meaningful activities.

Colleagues from the same department to review particular schemes of work. Colleagues in dialogue across departments.

## Approaches and activities

The second aspect involved colleagues in dialogue across departments, exploring how English teachers in different schools were meeting the

challenges of the new curriculum and considering carefully the potential of different activities to contribute to students' learning and development.

The approaches and activities that were shared and collaboratively developed in the sessions included:

- The use of images and artefacts, as objects of close reading and analysis in their own right and as stimuli for discussion of texts and their contexts
- Active and dramatic approaches to text, such as role play and improvisation, hotseating, performance
- Recreative responses to text [11], drawing on students' knowledge and experience of a wide range of literacy practices and the affordances of new technologies of representation and communication
- Inquiry-led approaches to texts and concepts, with a strong emphasis on carefully-structured opportunities for different kinds of collaborative and exploratory talk.



## Some emerging principles of mixed attainment English teaching

The teachers participating in the workshops began the process of identifying some key principles they felt characterised mixed attainment English teaching. We offer their thoughts below, with some prompts for reflection.

- Learning: from the social to the individual
- Allow for different points of entry and for different prior knowledges to inform the lesson
- Have high expectations of all students – avoid limitations and maintain mixed attainment groupings within the class
- Big ideas/questions first (before feature-spotting); what/why before how
- Use of (re-)creative approaches (by work in role and other open-ended tasks that enable students to draw on a broader range of cultural resources)
- Question the notion of hierarchy of skills
- Avoid reductive and narrowly instrumental approaches/teacher control of knowledge
- Make space for many legitimate voices in the classroom; encourage student ownership and agency.



### Questions for discussion

#### Reflection on emerging principles of mixed attainment teaching

*What do each of the principles mean in your context?*

*Which do you think is/are particularly important? Why?*

*What would you add?*

*What would you remove?*



Lesson materials and  
commentary

# Lesson materials and commentary

We invited teachers to bring to our meetings at UCL Institute of Education examples of lessons they would soon be teaching. This enabled them to reflect on the lessons and develop their potential for use with mixed attainment groups.

Between the two meetings, teachers trialled the lessons with their classes and then reported back as to their experiences. In our second meeting, teachers then spent time developing these resources further. In some cases teachers wrote commentary or narratives explaining their pedagogical approaches.

In this section, we offer the fruit of this work. The lessons presented here are intended to prompt you to think about mixed-attainment teaching, to provide triggers for reflecting on your own lessons.

The lessons here are not presented as 'perfect' or 'model' lessons, but as evidence of a process of deliberation and development.

The annotated lessons presented here vary in style and have all been written by the teachers themselves to show their different approaches to and reflections on mixed attainment English teaching.

Each lesson description is accompanied by a PowerPoint file, which can be downloaded from the project website:

[www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe-mixedattainmentenglish](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe-mixedattainmentenglish)





## Example lesson 1

### Much Ado About Nothing

#### Athena Pitsillis and Amar Kang, Canons High School

We watched a two minute clip of Act 1 Scene 1 from the 1993 film of the play and discussed Beatrice's and Benedick's relationship as well as how the scene had been staged (in a circle, other characters observing, etc).

We then read the extract as a class and discussed basic meanings and intent.

As a whole class we then accessed the Globe Education 'Staging It' website<sup>2</sup> and students chose how they wanted each of the lines performed. We discussed why the characters would deliver the lines in each way and students voted for each before creating the whole scene and watching it back. There was interesting discussion around choices e.g. one of the options is 'affectionate' and students liked it because Beatrice kisses Benedick but then they had a bit of a debate because others said she wouldn't really do that at this stage of the play.

Students then worked in pairs/trios and were given a line to translate into modern 'text-speak' – told they could write it however they wanted

and the final outcome is on the slide (they had to translate some words for me – 'cuff' means 'like' or 'fancy' apparently!) Interestingly, the most vocal students at this point were some of the lower attaining boys.

At the end of the lesson students wrote a few sentences summarising the scene and the relationship between the characters.

I think overall we would say that in developing our pedagogy more specifically for mixed-attainment teaching our focus is around giving teachers the confidence to move away from traditional methods such as getting students to always complete a piece of writing e.g. an analytic paragraph and instead focus on how students can show understanding and comprehension (especially at Key Stage 3). Particularly in reference to Shakespeare we want to make sure that students feel comfortable in approaching texts and the lesson above was definitely successful in achieving this. All students left being able to explain the scene and the relationship confidently.

<sup>2</sup>[www.shakespearesglobe.com/discovery-space/staging-it](http://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discovery-space/staging-it)

## Example lesson 2

### Evaluating writers' viewpoints and perspectives using music texts

James Creamer, Alexandra Park School

#### Slide 1

I offered students choice in the type of text they could produce. Observation in lessons suggests that all students could access the task and they enjoyed the challenge of trying to use as many of the words as possible in their writing.

#### Slide 3

Explaining the integrity of learning how to evaluate in a methodical way. This stepped approach is 'chunked' for students and enables them to take a more systematic approach. I've found this approach clears up some misconceptions about what teachers/examining boards expect from evaluation (i.e. it's not about whether a text is simply 'boring' or 'bad'). It also clarifies for students that they should begin with the 'bigger picture' of the writer's purpose or message and then work towards explaining how writers have conveyed ideas and achieved effects. This is helpful for me as I've found students often begin by 'technique spotting' but then struggle to explain what they have set out to achieve!

#### Slide 4

Students apply evaluative skills to the text they created in the starter activity. They are positioned to evaluate the world view they have presented and to begin to think more consciously about how they have done this. Students verbally walk their partner through their writing to explain their choices – this warms them up to the main activity.

#### Slides 5-8

I introduce the main task. Students watch the music video with the subtitles on: I encourage them to watch it and get an overall feeling rather than writing any notes; this ensures they are fully focused on the text! Afterwards give them some thinking time and then discuss what they think the writer's message is and how they are positioned to feel.

Whole class dialogue should encourage responses to evaluate the language but also the visual language of the video. In spite of not being asked to, my students (especially lower-attaining students) were able to offer a range of richly perceptive critical responses to the video's symbolism, acting styles, choreography, settings etc. which deepened their critical responses to the writer's ideas.

After whole-class feedback I set students up for the analysis/annotation activity. I carefully instructed, then modelled with a couple of lines from the text, following the evaluative approach introduced in slide 3. Modelling clarifies expectations/successful annotation. I'm working on 'training' students to annotate effectively rather than

colouring in the text! (Some students could work on analysing interpreting images and how they support the writer's message/purpose?)

#### Slide 9

This sets groups up for working together to evaluate texts through annotation. I use mixed attainment groups, keeping groups to a maximum of three. I don't assign roles, e.g. scribe but set clear expectations. In future I may use a teaching assistant (if available) to model effective collaborative group work/annotation.

#### Slide 10-12

I've adapted a Youtube comment to show one type of evaluative viewpoint which students then respond to in writing.

Students collectively write responses<sup>3</sup> and prepare to present them next lesson. I've introduced a competitive element – the students responded enthusiastically; furthermore, it seems to be successful in getting them to critically reflect on their own and others' writing (i.e. give more meaningful feedback). In the following lesson I'll get groups to explain why their response is the best, explaining their choices. The class will set each group a target to improve their evaluative responses to texts. After the presentations students will work independently to complete a Focused Improvement Time (FIT) task to either improve the group paragraph or to write a whole new response. The FIT task will be marked by the teacher – it allows me to check what individuals have learnt by responding to their targets and streamlining responses.

(I mention using a PEE structure in the final slide; given some of the feedback provided by other teaching practitioners, I think I'll give them more freedom to write/respond how they wish rather than insist on a prescriptive structure such as PEE. Having said this, students were able to construct evaluative responses using the stepped approach introduced in slide 3.)

The group writing sets high expectations for all students, regardless of attainment level or perceived ability. Working collaboratively, students were encouraged to believe they can all achieve success. The activity also requires students to be interdependent and accountable to one another: less vocal students were encouraged to participate – the collaborative nature of working also provides an effective model for critically engaging with texts as an individual.

<sup>3</sup> The 'shared writing' approach is inspired by 'Talk for Writing', developed by Julia Strong and Pie Corbett. [www.talk4writing.co.uk](http://www.talk4writing.co.uk)



## Example lesson 3

### Faustus advice lesson

Frank Difusco, William Ellis School

The lesson uses *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, adapted by Geraldine McCaughrean (Oxford Playscripts).

#### Slide 1

Ask students to predict, using instances of prior knowledge to support their ideas. Class discussion to respond to each other's opinions – agree/disagree. In this way certain preconceptions/misconceptions can be challenged during the reading.

#### Slide 2

The talking task here is designed to generate an opinion without fear of right/wrong. It may benefit from speech/oracy starters e.g. "I bet you're thinking..."

#### Slide 3

In practice, these groups were threes and fours and I think that is for the best. Groups of six would alienate quieter students for the planning task.

#### Slide 4

Introducing these tasks as 'layers' means that students can still be working on the first task whilst other members of the group can start on the following tasks, encouraging more interaction. The third task was the most ambiguous and may have benefitted from modelling (e.g. questions, anecdotes, calmly, aggressively). Perhaps adding 'AND WHY' to the task would have encouraged more careful thinking.

#### Slide 5

I wanted this task to be dialogic to both show an understanding/empathy with Faustus' situation AND with Faustus himself. The idea of inhabiting his character is designed to help evaluate both how good your proposed advice is and direct how you manage the language/tone of your advice. Wagner is Faustus' servant, and in this scene, shows signs of anticipating his inheritance and worry for his master. He is ideally placed as a character to give advice to Faustus, but his internal conflict adds another challenging layer to the way students would manage his 'voice'.



## Example lesson 4

### Othello Act 1 Scene 1

Lorna Damms, William Ellis School

The PowerPoint slides show a sequence of activities that I began to work on with a Year 8 class for this project (usually 'Othello' is done in Year 9). My colleague and I had talked about how the opening scene had been something of a stumbling block when we began the play with the Year 9 classes earlier that year.

On the slides I have shown the final lesson activities, having modified my approach. I worked on the principle that what I think might have worked better for my Year 8 class would probably work better for all students in our Year 9 classes. In short, in the light of the Year 8s' work, I made it clearer than I first had that Iago and Roderigo's meeting in the streets is not just a chance encounter; I tried to broaden the discussion of what the feeling of being 'cheated' might involve, particularly in terms of 'promotion' and how it might involve a more public idea (rather than being linked solely to money). I also made it clearer to students that their talk was in role, to help them more easily inhabit their characters and worry less about their partner's role (four of my Year 8s have problems with working memory). This knowledge of my particular class also informed my choice of the second person voice in my instructions and how I split up the text.

The slides 'drip-feed' information to the students and originally I had decided to name their 'common enemy' as Othello. I took that out, asking them to use just pronouns, as Roderigo and Iago do. This helps to open up how Iago, and Roderigo to a lesser extent, present the audience with their reading of Othello. It also mimics how the play withholds that name and gives space to discuss why. I hope it would help to show how the audience then, because of this suspense, is tuned into rejecting Iago's take on Othello as when they

are presented with him on the stage, it is an Othello at odds with the one 'reported' on. The final slide, I think, tries to encourage a collecting of initial ideas that makes use of whatever the students have produced in their improvisations but also collects ideas that will resonate as the text proceeds. When used in my school, I illustrated the PowerPoint with photos of the students performing their role-plays.

Having offered this resource to department teachers of Year 9 two terms later, it seems that this approach to establishing the concerns and setting of the play did work better than last year's introduction to the play. Of course, as with any made resource, it needs to be seen as a way in designed with a particular class, or perhaps classes, in mind and the processes behind its construction need active (re)consideration. One colleague, teaching it in the recent cycle, said that he felt his class's discomfort with re-running Iago and Roderigo's conversation in the light of the new knowledge of racial types in the penultimate slide made him feel that the activity should be reframed – with a hypothetical slant that led, instead, to a discussion of how this would change their readings. Another teacher made use of that discomfort, the silences arising (without actually forcing the role-play to go ahead, of course). Running the lesson without fully considering what the point is, or what you want it to be, potentially results in compliant role-plays but not necessarily a growing and changing sense of what the play's opening might establish and how it works. With that in mind, this PowerPoint is purely an example of how an aspect of my reading of the play is embedded in an activity which could then shape a collaborative reading of the opening of 'Othello'

## Example lesson 5

### Romeo and Juliet: Ideas of masculinity

#### Lucy Strike, William Ellis School

This lesson was delivered to a mixed attainment, single sex male Year 10 class after reading 'Romeo and Juliet' for a few weeks. The lesson would, however, be equally appropriate for Year 9 classes, say, and Romeo and Juliet is widely studied at KS3.

I adapted resources, created collaboratively by colleagues, to suit the needs of the class. We had just read Act 3, scenes 1 and 2. We structure our lessons around key questions, because we feel that these lend themselves to critical thinking about bigger themes and ideas and support assessment. This key question on the first slide 'How do Shakespeare's characters challenge or support ideas of masculinity?' is wide ranging and intended as a question to facilitate deeper thinking across the reading of the whole text. I also decided it was a good time to stop and focus on the issues around gender because many of the boys reacted negatively towards the presentation of Mercutio in the Baz Luhrmann adaptation of the play.

#### Slide 1

My original slide has a full slide image of Romeo from the Luhrmann version, just before he kills Tybalt. This reminds students what they have just read and hopefully subtly suggests the concepts of loyalty and conflicted emotions. The starter quickly revealed different interpretations of what it means for a character to be 'masculine' in 'Romeo and Juliet' ranging from physical strength to confidence with emotions and power within a family. Interestingly, some of the students felt that the Prince was the least masculine character because he had not stayed true to his word to punish another fight in public with death. Students of a range of prior attainment were all able to express opinions, build on or challenge each other's views.

#### Slide 2

The second activity asked students to record how Shakespeare might define masculinity. It is supported by an image of a man sitting on a wall looking at the world with the question 'what makes a man?' This activity highlighted the complex nature of gender presentation in the play and what Shakespeare was perhaps challenging. Student responses demonstrated how thought-provoking an open key question can be for a range of different students and how much they benefit from hearing rich ideas in a mixed attainment class.

#### Slide 3

Students were asked to predict how Friar Lawrence might advise Romeo. The slide had an image of Friar Lawrence in the church to remind the students of his religious role. The short extract on the board allowed students to explore Romeo's reaction and gave us a moment to discuss why he feels so aggrieved and in turn gave me the chance to check all students' understanding of the plot. Some students were then able to link his response to the starter, predicting that the Friar might tell him to be 'more of a man', to be stronger and deal with his situation by finding a solution to staying married to Juliet. Other students were able to start thinking more carefully about the Friar and predict that he may feel helpless and guilty.

#### Slide 4

The fourth activity involved looking more closely at key vocabulary from the scene before reading longer quotations. There are a number of students with English as an additional language, working at different levels of English competence, who benefitted from this exercise. Interestingly it also gave some of the white British, under-performing students a boost because they were able to articulate quick, confident responses which showed a strong understanding not only of the words but of the concepts. This scaffolding then supported the next activity in which students were asked to work in groups to explore a range of quotations from Friar Lawrence's response to Romeo.

Breaking down the text supports the reading of the whole scene so students recognise and understand the character's attitude without having to read at two different levels at the same time, understanding what is being said and understanding the Friar's attitude towards masculinity. The last activity would have involved returning to the key question and asking students to discuss and then record their final thoughts on what Shakespeare is trying to get his audience to think about in terms of gender. In practice this lesson ended at the reading of the scene because the rich discussions earlier on took longer than anticipated.

## Example lesson 6

### The message of *An Inspector Calls* for today

Rosie Lunt, City of London Academy Islington

#### Slide 1

With this starting point to the lesson I am making use of recent events in a way which I hope the students will find striking. I am asking students to bring various kinds of their own knowledge into the classroom. Most likely all will have heard of the Grenfell disaster and should have ideas about the events that occurred. As young people growing up in London, the students will also have knowledge and experience of our troubled and unjust housing system and the inequalities that exist around them and of which they are a part. Appealing to students' lived experiences like this to me conveys the message to a mixed attainment class that all students in the room arrive with knowledge worth sharing; it is important that I encourage all students to make use of this.

#### Slide 2

This quote seems an important one as it relates to Priestley's central socialist message. At first, I am asking students to simply think about the meaning – this poses a challenge to all as the phrasing is rather ambiguous and open to interpretation. My aim would be to invite students to make links between the contemporary topic of Grenfell and the idea of collective responsibility/guilt in society. I am comfortable that not all students may get there in this lesson, or independently. However, I would be extremely unwilling to have pre-determined views about which students will or won't make certain connections. Grouping students by ability within the class or dictating who answers which 'level' of question may set artificial barriers.

#### Slide 3

Again, this is a key quote which clearly pushes Priestley's socialism. This activity is starting to direct students towards examining the writer's

methods. However, I am not asking them to identify a set list of techniques in the speech, but rather to bring the knowledge they have of persuasive strategies to their reading. I may interject/support students by directing them to certain techniques which will inform their arguments as I move around the class.

#### Slides 4

This task is simply worded but has complex implications as it asks students to do several things that will challenge those with a range of attainment levels: inhabit the persuasive voice of the Inspector; demonstrate understanding of the Inspector's and Priestley's attitudes; apply their knowledge and experience of current events in London; grapple with ideas of socialism in our modern world. I think that the open nature of this task makes it appropriate to a mixed attainment group as students may respond to the challenge here in a variety of different ways. Some responses may focus more on one of the above elements more than others. It would be interesting for students of all attainment levels to read and critique the responses of others, thinking about the ideas their peers communicate and the language they use to communicate them. This is making students aware of the deliberate choices that all make when they write.

#### Slide 5

These final discussion prompts make more explicit my agenda in connecting the plight of Eva Smith with the Grenfell Tower disaster. By this point in the lesson I would anticipate students having ideas to share about the concepts of guilt and injustice, both today and in the world of *An Inspector Calls*. For those who struggle to respond here, going back to the writing they have done and sharing some of this with the class would be a strategy to involve them in a debate about social responsibility.

## Example lesson 7

### A Christmas Carol: the relationship between Fred and Scrooge

Rosie Lunt, City of London Academy Islington

#### Slide 1

This should take place after reading the start of Stave 1 of 'A Christmas Carol' – the opening description of Scrooge. Students make predictions about Scrooge's behaviour towards his nephew, perhaps alone initially, then in pairs. Sharing of ideas between students allows for multiple interpretations. This task is designed to have almost 'universal appeal', to allow students to connect their reading with their own understanding and experience of family relationships.

#### Slide 2

Acting in role allows students to inhabit the characters, in preparation for writing. The text is made more accessible by isolating the dialogue and presenting in the form of a playscript, allowing students with lower attainment to participate in analysing a text of some complexity. This could also lead to discussion of the effect of form when we go on to read the prose version and compare. The 'sitting down' stage before standing up and rehearsing the dialogue provides structure and forces all students to engage with the emotions of the text specifically – they need this support to bring all of their inference skills to the drama activity. This also provides a space for discussion where students can learn from each other.

#### Slide 3

Evaluating other performances allows students to consider different ways of interpreting the relationship. Perhaps I could pause performances mid-action and study freeze-frames of particularly pertinent moments showing relationship, power dynamics, etc. The 'peer assessment' task, or reflection on others' performances here directs students

towards judgements around the uniqueness of that particular dramatic interpretation. They are not being asked to quantitatively assess or rank the performances they see. This is important, I think, because it reinforces the notion that multiple valid interpretations of the characters can exist. It seems dangerous in English lessons to set artificial hierarchies of success criteria which do not stand up to scrutiny and have the negative effect of causing students to locate their abilities in a false ranking.

#### Slide 4

Reading the extract and annotating in groups. Perhaps direct students towards considering who has the upper hand, e.g. Scrooge not being able to think of a reply except "bah humbug" so we see that Fred's views will eventually triumph. Students should have built confidence with the extract through the drama activity. I would seek to encourage them to make links or draw comparisons between the inferences they make when reading the prose text and the dramatic interpretations we have just seen.

#### Slide 5

The choice of task is designed to engage students with a range of abilities and skills, suited to a mixed attainment class. The drama task should prepare students for writing in role and taking on the language/attitudes of Scrooge or Fred. In the text/WhatsApp conversation students are being given permission to bring their own knowledge of how language and communication works for them in modern settings. This invites them to draw parallels between the communication of Scrooge and Fred and their own experience. This to me is vital for meaningful learning to take place.



## Questions for discussion

### **Reflecting on example lessons and mixed attainment teaching**

*Ask all your department colleagues to teach a lesson to a mixed-attainment class, then meet as a group to reflect on the teaching and learning.*

*What went well?*

*What challenges did you encounter?*

*In pairs, colleagues could observe each other's lessons. Pairs might like to keep a focus on one or more of the 'emerging principles' (see page 18).*





Further reading

## Recommended further reading

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Irish, T. (2011). Would you risk it for Shakespeare? A case study of using active approaches in the English classroom. *English in Education*, 45(1), 6-19.

Hart, S. and Dixon, A. (2004). *Learning without limits*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Hodgen, J. and Webb, M. (2008). Questioning, dialogue and feedback. In S. Swaffield (Ed.) *Unlocking Assessment*. 73-89. Oxford: Routledge.

Kress, G., et al. (2005). *English in urban classrooms : a multimodal perspective on teaching and learning*. London: RoutledgeFalmer (especially chapter 6, 'The pedagogic construction of "ability" in school English' (pp. 83-98).

Kutnick, P., et al. (2005). *The effects of pupil grouping: Literature review*. London, DFES.  
**<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402122244/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR688.pdf>**

Marshall, B. and Wiliam, D. (2006). *English inside the black box : assessment for learning in the English classroom*, London : GL Assessment.

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Yandell, J. (2011) English and Inclusion. In Davison, Daly & Moss (eds) *Debates in English Teaching*, London, Routledge.

English and Media Centre  
**[www.englishandmedia.co.uk](http://www.englishandmedia.co.uk)**



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3. Higgins, S., et al., *The Sutton Trust - Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit*. 2015, London: Education Endowment Foundation.
4. Shaw, B., et al., *Ethnicity, Gender and Social Mobility*. 2016, Social Mobility Commission: London.
5. Ireson, J. and S. Hallam, *Academic self-concepts in adolescence: Relations with achievement and ability grouping in schools*. Learning and Instruction, 2009. 19(3): p. 201-213.
6. Archer, L., et al., *The symbolic violence of setting: A Bourdieusian analysis of mixed methods data on secondary students' views about setting*. under review.
7. Boaler, J., *When even the winners are losers: Evaluating the experiences of top set' students*. Journal of Curriculum Studies, 1997. 29(2): p. 165-182.
8. Boaler, J., *Promoting 'relational equity' and high mathematics achievement through an innovative mixed-ability approach*. British Educational Research Journal, 2008. 34(2): p. 167-194.
9. Francis, B., et al., *Exploring the relative lack of impact of research on 'ability grouping' in England: a discourse analytic account*. Cambridge Journal of Education, 2016. 47(1): p. 1-17.
10. Hattie, J., *Visible learning for teachers : maximizing impact on learning*. 2012: Abingdon; New York, N.Y. : Routledge.
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This resource is also available on our website  
**[www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe-mixedattainmentenglish](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe-mixedattainmentenglish)**

Enquiries regarding this resource should be sent to  
**[IOE.groupingstudents@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:IOE.groupingstudents@ucl.ac.uk)**

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