

The Boy Who Would Be Good: understanding ADHD through a film-making project

An art teacher with a science degree? **Karen Findlay** put this unusual combination to good use with an ambitious film project.

Art meets science

As an art teacher with a science degree, I'm predisposed towards thinking up exciting problem-based projects that draw together these two areas. I'm also the G&T co-ordinator at my school, which doesn't mean that I'm in charge of the cocktail cabinet in the staffroom. Instead, I have the responsibility of dreaming up unusual activities, involving complex concepts and principles, for gifted and talented (G&T) students. One of my recent ideas led to me making a successful fund-

ing bid through Big Screen Science, part of the UK Film Council's First Light initiative which provides funding for filmmakers up to 18 years old, which was produced as a collaborative venture involving Ridgeway School in Plymouth and the Suited and Booted Film Company.

Although it was a lot of hard work, it's really satisfying to reflect upon a project that, while mainly student-led, covered important issues of science and ethics in an accessible manner, allowing schools across the UK to engage in this particular aspect of the debate.



Image courtesy of Karen Findlay

A dramatic approach to dealing with ADHD

Securing the funding and support of a top-quality production company for this project gave G&T students at Ridgeway School the opportunity to research and produce a short film tackling the fraught field of bioethics. We chose the topic of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This is a condition characterised by inattention, hyperactivity and impulsive behaviour; it is also the subject of a great deal of attention in UK secondary schools and a condition about which many of our students already had some (mostly anecdotal and incorrect) knowledge. The aim of the production was to stimulate debate and discussion among school children in general, prompting greater understanding of a condition that may affect others around them.



Image courtesy of Karen Findlay

Image courtesy of Karen Findlay



Image courtesy of Karen Findlay



Those involved were a core of 15 Year-9 students (ages 13-14), with others drafted in to perform roles such as extras. The students were remarkably mature in their approach to sharing the workload, operating as a single group for the most part but allocating specific tasks as they arose, in accordance with each other's strengths. All of the students worked on the storyboarding (the scene sequence), for example, but would research in pairs when a particular focus was needed. Students nat-

urally gravitated towards their own areas of interest, such as camera-work, organisation, or script-writing.

We discussed possible topics for the project but decided on ADHD because it was relevant to the group, several of whom had family members and fellow students suffering from the condition. ADHD is a topical subject in UK schools and there is considerable debate about whether it is a real medical condition or simply a belief system. Nonetheless, the prescription of Ritalin, the most common drug used to control the condition, has increased 20-fold between 2001 and 2006.

The scientific literature relating to ADHD doesn't provide conclusive evidence of its cause, though studies have identified factors such as genetic influences, abnormalities in brain structure and chemical imbalances in the brain as being potential contributors.

Environmental factors and prenatal influences such as smoking and the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy have also been linked to the condition.

Although Ritalin can help to control the symptoms, side-effects can include sleep disturbance, weight loss and reduced growth rate. In addition, the use of Ritalin increasingly carries a stigma among UK school children and it is this that the project set out to address through promoting a better understanding of ADHD.

The Boy Who Would be Good is a drama in which the central character is an ADHD sufferer. To those around him, staff and students alike, his behaviour is irritating, anti-social and distracting; although he has been prescribed medication to alleviate the symptoms, he rarely takes it. Following a confrontation on the school bus, however, he goes back to taking his pills but begins to question whether they are changing his identity.



The practicalities

Getting a project like this off the ground involves jumping through a lot of hoops and it's a major undertaking for already-stressed teachers. It certainly has a significant 'wow' factor though, and can engage everyone at a level that is difficult to achieve in more prosaic ways. All that's needed (aside from your own blood, sweat and tears) is support from your school management team in collapsing the timetable for a week or so, some keen students, and of course a grant from relevant funding bodies.

The project took approximately three days to write, one day of acting master class and four days of filming, although the work was spread over several months. My time was mainly devoted to organisation, not forgetting the all-important risk assessments – which at one point involved us wearing hard hats and armed with sticks to fend off aggressive seagulls whilst filming on a high roof!

A cheaper and less stressful version of this project could be to get a group of students to produce a two-minute news item on an equally cerebral topic. This can be tackled in a day with the minimum of equipment but would still give a meaningful outcome. You will need a few basics – kids, video camera and editing software, which can now be acquired very cheaply, though it takes some practice to use well.

Bringing in experts (such as a cameraman, sound engineer and editor) may not be as expensive as you think. Looking close to home may bear fruit in this respect: for example, tutors on media or broadcast technology courses at your local college or university will jump at the chance to get their students involved in this kind of project; indeed, your own school may have older students who could be involved. Consider bringing in

the English (or German, French, etc., depending on your home country) department for help with the script-writing, the art department for the story boarding and the drama department for the acting. Bear in mind that film-making professionals do not have to be involved all the way through. Naturally, the services of a professional film-making outfit will produce a superior finished product and since it could be used for years as a teaching resource and in school promotion, there may be funding available from your own school or departmental budget.

Once the expertise and hardware are in place, the task of choosing students arises. The key is to try to be as inclusive as possible, drawing upon individual strengths and abilities. Naturally, you want a degree of commitment so why not start with after-school clubs or 'gifted and talented' groups? The project opens up possibilities for those with initial interest to investigate related areas they may not have considered and that aren't part of the school curriculum; we had one girl who started off with an initial interest in acting but now wants to be a sound engineer.

I can't say that we encountered any insurmountable problems, though it's clear that scheduling the work could be difficult. I was fortunate to have an enlightened headmaster, who was very supportive throughout and gave me permission to take students out of lessons so they could attend workshops. The administration associated with the project was a large undertaking – there were forms to complete for just about everything: photographic release, permission slips, rotas, letters home, risk assessments, to name but a few. It can also be something of a challenge to organise locations but if you've managed to sort out everything else, this bit should be well within your capabilities.

BACKGROUND

This bioethical dilemma is the focus of a set of questions that accompany the film for use in classroom debates.

The students themselves came up with the storyline, drawing on expert help only when absolutely necessary and generally to solve practicalities rather than to provide content. The ending is quite controversial (the main character throws his

medication away) and as a teacher I would have perhaps gone for a more 'classic' ending, but this was the students' work and it poses a question at the end in a very effective way. The funding allowed us to engage three professional actors who gave master classes to the students acting in the film. There were of course natural actors among the students, but

others, having been exposed to different elements of the film-making process, (editing, for example) developed new career aspirations. Two of the students even went on to run a media workshop for young people in south-west England.

Although I was the main teacher involved, other members of staff were drafted in to help as needed. These

Image courtesy of Karen Findlay



REVIEW

Anyone who has ever attempted to teach knows how difficult it is to make it fun and interesting, while at the same time securing a high educational value. In this article, Karen Findlay describes her attempt to combine art and science by making a film about a medical condition (attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, ADHD), for which her students were mostly responsible.

Apart from the fact that the film production (and the film itself) promotes interdisciplinarity and active student involvement, it also achieves several other educational goals, including awareness of a common medical condition, debate and discussion, and collaboration among teachers from different disciplines. Furthermore, this is a wonderful opportunity to give students the satisfaction of creating the kind of work that is normally done by adult professionals.

Teachers of either science or social science/humanities can benefit from the film introduced in this article, by using it as a source of information about ADHD and to stimulate debate regarding the ethical issues that arise from the application of specific medical practices.

The article could inspire other teachers to undertake similar projects with their students. Alternatives to film-making could be theatrical plays, songs and other art-oriented activities. Those who just don't have the time for something like this can take advantage of the work of others and use it to make their teaching more fun and productive. For example, there are many films involving science topics (such as natural disasters and disease outbreaks) that can easily be incorporated into the teaching schedule.

Michalis Hadjimarcou, Cyprus

included teachers from science and drama departments. There was the obvious direct link to drama, but a more subtle though equally important link to science: how to use research, which points are relevant, or how to express a scientific idea.

The film project was researched by reviewing the scientific literature, interviewing parents whose children are ADHD sufferers and discussing the condition with the local self-help group. In addition, Dr Julian Partridge, a scientist from Bristol University, was assigned to work with the students on the project. Dr Partridge has considerable experience in the field of bioethics and has worked with the BBC on a number of TV productions, including the highly successful series, *Blue Planet*. He commented, “the students were very imaginative – they came up with ideas that I would never have thought of.”

Time for a film review....

Film is a medium that students can relate to very well, of course, but the idea of using it as a powerful tool for educating and prompting debate, rather than for simple passive observation, was an education in itself for most of the students involved. The making of the film covered

many disciplines and technical skills and each student involved was able to find his or her area of strength within the team. It was particularly encouraging to see students who had previously declared themselves to be ‘no good at science’ immersing themselves in scientific literature or trying to understand the physics of light and sound as they relate to film-making.

In effect, the students were able to complete a mini-apprenticeship; operating the camera, and working out the best angles, lighting and different takes necessary to create one simple scene. They also gained experience of taking sound recordings, how blue screen works, and even the intricacies of film editing.

The finished ten-minute film can now be used in both science and citizenship lessons, with students being given a set of cards, each describing one effect of ADHD medication. Both the film and the cards are available to download from the school website^{w1}. Students should sort the cards into reasons for and against taking the medication. Ultimately, individual students should assess the pros and cons of using chemicals to alter a person’s behaviour and arrive at a conclusion, providing advice to a hypothetical person who has been diagnosed as suffering from ADHD.

This project was intended to help students appreciate how science is inextricably linked with their day-to-day lives and further, that it rarely produces totally conclusive answers. In pursuing the project and during the subsequent use of the film in class, students begin to understand how scientific knowledge and its application needs to be tempered by the application of moral and ethical judgement. The film also prompts consideration of the differences that may exist between medical interventions intended to benefit the individual and those designed for society at large.

Web references

w1 – Both the film and additional material can be downloaded from the Ridgeway School website:
www.ridgeway.plymouth.sch.uk

Resources

For more information about ADHD, see: National Institute of Mental Health website:

www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/adhd.cfm

Netdoctor.co.uk website:

<http://premium.netdoktor.com/uk/adhd/childhood/index.jsp>

Adders.org, a website to promote awareness of ADHD: www.adders.org

Image courtesy of Karen Findlay



Karen Findlay teaches at Ridgeway School in Plymouth, UK.

