

## Example 4 Pupils in Print

*This is a more ambitious project which is written up as a **process** rather than a single lesson or series of lessons. The Newspapers in Science Education group at Queen's University Belfast are developing a '**Pupils in Print**' programme and this report represents work in progress. We are very grateful to the staff and pupils of Priory College in Holywood. Despite knowing that the project was in its infancy, they nonetheless welcomed us into their school to work with a Key Stage 3 group (fourteen-year-olds). The young people themselves co-operated well in what is a challenging task.*

*The account below suggests a possible approach to engaging pupils in writing a science-related article for a newspaper, informed by our early experiences of working in this way.*

*The Newspapers in Science Education group plans to explore a range of contexts in which young people write for their local or regional papers.*

In this example, with the agreement of the local community newspaper, pupils were given the opportunity to write up a science-based news story for publication. There were a number of noteworthy features of the work. Unlike activities where, for example, all pupils write an article for homework or for a competition we tried to encourage the class to work as a team to produce the news story. In addition there was collaboration with the newspaper; the journalist visited the science class and talked with the pupils about how to approach the task.

### Anticipated learning gains

It is the intention that, through this experience, pupils would gain confidence as they communicate, in a real-life setting, science which has local interest and impact. They learn how to collect information and to present it as accurately as possible in a clear and interesting way. It is hoped the young people would take pride in seeing their work in print. In a very direct way, the experience opens a window on the process of newspaper reporting of science-related stories.

### Identifying the science news story

Clearly, the identification of a science-related news story is a prerequisite of this approach. The issue should, of course, be newsworthy. It should be a story which can catch the interest of the young people involved. Furthermore, it should be one with which the school is content to be associated. Many socio-scientific issues are controversial, and this needs to be considered at the outset.

In this example, the story was quite straightforward and it was easy for the pupils to source all the information necessary to write the article. It is the case that Northern Ireland has a significant problem with waste. In response, a group of local councils in the eastern region of the province are working together to develop a sub-regional 'Waste Management Plan'. As part of this process, a questionnaire devised to address

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the key decision making points which involve the public was distributed to every household. Such public consultation is itself newsworthy and its conduct was covered quite widely in the media.

After the closing date for consultation, officers of the local council were contacted and asked if they would be prepared to discuss with the pupils the survey results for the town in which the school was located with the intention that the young people would write this up for the Community Telegraph. They agreed so to do.

That these figures were released first in the school made the story something of a scoop!

This is a well-defined story with readily accessible background information. Those most immediately concerned were prepared to visit the school and talk to the pupils. As such, it serves as a good starting point for such a project. With experience, perhaps, and taking account of the age and ability of the pupils, more complex issues involving more investigative interviewing and in-depth research could be tackled.

### The local community newspaper

The co-operation of a local (or regional or national) newspaper is a second prerequisite of this approach

In this example, staff of the Community Telegraph serving the area in which the school is situated were very positive about and very supportive of the project. Through the good offices of a journalist, the editor of the paper was contacted and the 'Pupils in Print' project was outlined. We were gratified to find he showed considerable interest in the approach and agreed readily to meet us, along with our contact journalist.

The journalist agreed to visit the school and speak with the class, giving guidance, in simple terms, as to how to proceed with research, writing, headline composition and graphic design. Subsequently, she responded to the pupils' early work offering further advice.

This story was not written to a tight deadline. The Community Telegraph is a weekly paper and the topic was not particularly 'time-dependent'. This, again, is a good starting point for working in this way. It offers the opportunity, and this was considered very important, for those involved in the story to see the copy before it was finalised.

### Working in the classroom

This project involves a number of activities and represents work which could be completed over a period of time. It would be expected to develop during several science lessons and would allow for, and indeed would benefit from, collaborative work with other departments in the school, **most particularly the English department.**

### **Stage 1. Getting started**

This introduces the class to the project. It has two functions. Firstly it is intended to be inspirational, aiming to catch the pupils' attention and generate interest and enthusiasm for the task. This is done by focusing on the importance of the topic, the local interest and crucially the opportunity for pupils to use their science knowledge along with other skills to communicate with a wider audience through the local paper. The second function is to outline the stages of the project and what it is anticipated the young people will learn through the activity. Pupils need to know the answers to two questions at this stage: what are we doing? and why are we doing it?

Finally pupils are given individual copies of a basic resource pack for the project. In this case, this contained the pupil's '**press pass**', a '**reporters' notebook**' and some general background information.

### **Stage 2. Gathering information**

In this example, the talk by representatives from the council was a key element. This was the source of the core information on which the newspaper report was to be based. The local council officers providing the information gave two perspectives. The first dealt with general issues relating to waste management and the place of recycling within that. This provided pupils with an information base in the topic, and also aimed to engage them personally by exploring their own attitudes and practices in relation to recycling. The second officer provided the specific information on which the news story was to focus; the proposed Waste Management Plan, the consultation process involving survey leaflets targeting every home in the borough and the local responses to key questions in the questionnaire. Pupils were also provided with an information pack and a '**press release**' - as we asked the visiting speakers to entitle their handout. In addition they had access to the campaign website and opportunities to question the experts as additional sources of information. It should be noted the pupils need time to absorb this material before they proceed.

### **Stage 3 Working with a journalist.**

The aim of this stage is to provide guidance for pupils as they approach the task of producing the news article. In this example, input from a professional journalist supported a number of activities designed to highlight key stages in the creation of a news story. The focus was on four key elements behind the final news story as it appears in print:

- ❖ research
- ❖ graphics
- ❖ writing
- ❖ headline composition.

From this, pupils learn sources of information for research, how graphs and images can be presented attractively, important points to bear in mind when writing for a newspaper audience and the purpose and composition of headlines.

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At this stage there is value in a whole class discussion, brainstorming possible ideas for inclusion in the newspaper articles. This is important, as the pupils tend quickly to narrow the focus and need to be encouraged to consider as wide a range of points as possible. The young people can then select and agree two, three or four key ideas which they consider essential to their news story and the particular direction, or 'angle' they wish the story to take. This provides the focus for future small group work. Furthermore, since this is to be a whole class effort rather than individuals writing separate stories, potentially the process contributes to 'whole class ownership' of the final product.

After the whole class discussion, the young people divide into four 'specialist groups' one for each of the elements - research, graphics, writing and headline composition. Through self-selection or prior selection by the teacher, pupils can be directed to tasks which match their strengths and interests. Supporting activities for each group can be designed to consolidate key ideas before pupils set about their task.

### **Stage 4      Drafting the article.**

At this point the class efforts are moving concurrently to produce a single news story. The research group consults the press release, support material, web site, science books and their own notes to list the key 'facts' associated with the key ideas selected for the story. The graphics group considers the different types of graph which could be used to display data and how these could be presented. The writing group drafts the article. The headline group produces numerous ideas to catch the attention of the reader. All groups need to focus firmly on their audience. The article as a whole should be presented in such a way that it appears **interesting** and **accessible** to the readers. As our journalist constantly stressed to the pupils 'Only write what you understand' and 'Keep it Simple'!

The process also requires considerable inter-group consultation. This can be further facilitated by the distribution of early drafts from the writing group. It should be also be noted that the writing group will almost certainly need more time than the others to tackle their task and arrangements may need to be made to accommodate this.

### **Stage 5      Completing the task.**

The final draft article is checked for 'factual accuracy' by the research group. It is discussed with the agencies involved in the story. The article, together with suggestions for headlines and suggestions for graphics are then ready for final review and revision by the journalist and editor of the newspaper concerned.