

THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL REALITY ON CREATIVE WRITING AT PENYBONT PRIMARY SCHOOL

My name is Anna Alford and I am a teacher at Penybont Primary. Over the last 12 years I have taught in all year groups, but I am currently in Year 5/6. At Penybont, we're proud to be a ClassVR Pioneer School and in the short time we've had the virtual reality headsets, they've had a big impact on learning.



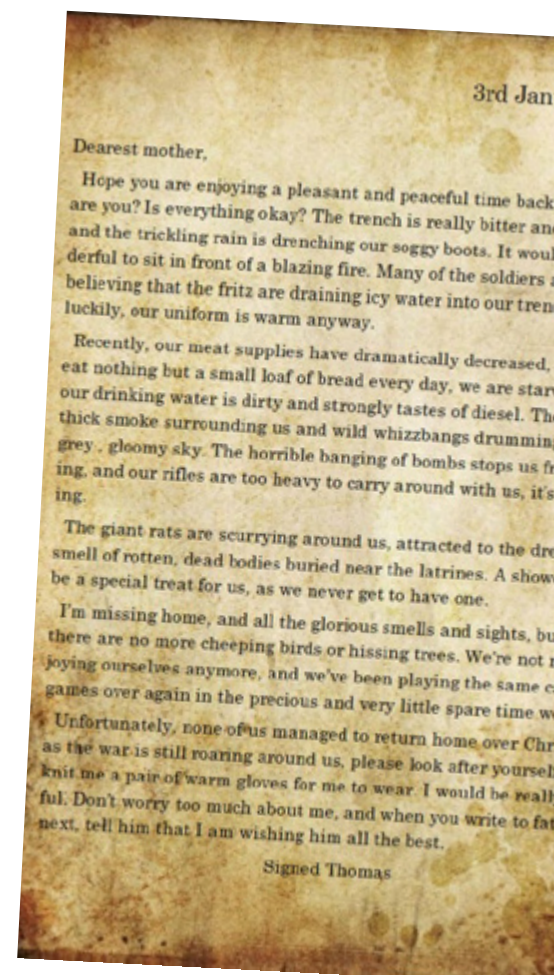
The headsets came with some pre-loaded experiences and teaching ideas that were a great jumping-off point for us to start planning our own ideas, linked to the curriculum we're already teaching in school.

IN THE TRENCHES (WW1)

During our topic on WW1, year 5/6 pupils used the VR headsets to experience life in the trenches. Pupils had previously researched WW1 and trench life using books and the internet but the prospect of using virtual reality really excited them. Right from the start pupils were engaged, focused and eager to 'experience' the trench.

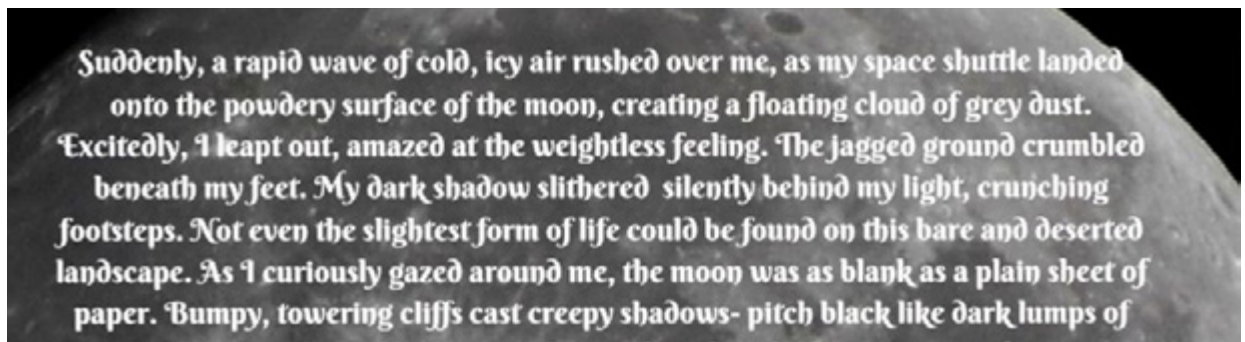
The children were given one headset between two. The idea behind this was encourage the partner without the headset to ask questions about the experience, such as 'What can you see?', 'What can you hear?', 'What colours are there?'. This child would be curious because they could not see what their partner was experiencing and would need to build an image in their mind purely from their partner's description. With added prompting, the child with the headset on was also encouraged to think more deeply about the experience by being asked 'How would you feel?' 'What would you be thinking about?' Whilst one partner experienced the trench, their talk partner scribed ideas and vocabulary, and then roles were swapped. This enabled the children to create a bank of rich vocabulary, focusing on sights and sounds of the trench and considering soldiers' thoughts and feelings.

As class teacher, I was able to guide the children to different sights and ask them to focus on different sounds. It was far easier for children to describe these real sights and sounds and having their partner there to record their responses, children were encouraged



to use figurative language to help create an image in their partner's mind. As various points, we stopped and discussed ideas and thoughts. The vocabulary the children generated was absolutely incredible- including superb examples of similes and metaphors- and they could really get a feel of what the trench life was like. Using the VR headsets meant they were able to better empathise with soldiers and this was reflected in the standard of their final letters home from the trench. The children all loved the task and agreed that actually experiencing the trench really helped them to visualise and imagine life in those conditions.

MOON LANDING



For this piece of work we used a CGI virtual reality image of a rover on the surface of the moon. Now that the children are more familiar with using the headsets, they slipped instantly into their roles as talk partners (these are mixed-ability partnerships, so each student's strengths and weaknesses were complemented). One partner wore the headset and described everything they could see on the moon's surface, while the other partner acted as a scribe. This approach is particularly helpful for those students who find writing difficult – they could practise their verbal skills and really get creative with vocabulary, while their partner listened and noted down key words and ideas. Difficulty in recording ideas can really put some children off writing, creating a huge barrier to learning. The combination of an exciting stimulus, which they instinctively want to talk about great detail, and a partner to write down ideas is extremely powerful and managed to engage even our most reluctant writers.

Later on, these notes were invaluable when it came time for the writing session. Students wrote poetry from the perspective of an astronaut on the moon. Their virtual reality experience had given them all sorts of details about textures and colours which emerged in their writing; it allowed them to consider what objects or senses reminded them of. The ability to use their beautiful words and ideas, in combination with visualising that striking experience they'd had earlier, had a noticeable impact on the quality of writing.

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