

Putting our Heads Together

Twenty-six participants from across England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland attended the English Subject Centre's networking day for Heads of Department held at Oxford Brookes University on 22nd April. Ben Knights' report of the discussions gives an insight into the issues currently preoccupying these key members of the discipline.

Summary

The object of the day as envisaged by the Subject Centre was above all to give heads of English departments the opportunity to talk to one another in a focused way about matters of common concern. For that reason there were no keynote speakers or research presentations. The hope was that structured discussion of the local management of academic units would stem from and return to questions of how we read and then act upon the condition of the subject. In the nature of the Learning and Teaching Support Network, the event concentrated on departments in their teaching role. Nevertheless, Heads of Department (HoDs) are responsible for communities of teachers and learners, and those communities are in turn elements within the larger subject community. My introduction suggested addressing the questions of how the policies adopted to cope with local circumstances confirmed or shaped the larger trends of subject and HE; what were our roles and duties as custodians of the discipline? What kind of community did we want to pass on to our successors? How do we promote or defend our subject within our institutions? The object of the day was not to produce answers, but to engage colleagues in the kind of conversation which is so often impossible amid the hurly-burly of professional life.

Four main themes had been identified in advance on the basis of the responses to the invitation, and these provided the subjects for group events which formed the centre of the day. These topics were

- The relation between teaching and research
- Working with larger student numbers
- The curriculum
- Staffing

Early in the day a group facilitator made a brief presentation on each topic with a view to refining the agenda ahead of the group sessions. These statements are summarised at the beginning of each section below.

The day generated rich discussion and there was strong support for repeating the event. There was also a suggestion that the Subject Centre organise an event specifically for newly appointed heads. Subject Centre staff undertook to summarise the discussion, though in the nature of the event much of what took place was networking and conversations between individuals and small groups.

Teaching and research – (Facilitator David Roberts, University of Central England)

In his introduction, David Roberts – representing a department teaching language, literature and writing – spoke of the relationship between specialisation and the common curriculum. He spoke of the need to communicate the value of research to students, and to understand how research practice connects with the need to describe progression between levels. Opportunities (or conversely lack of such opportunities) for research had a

major impact on the fulfilment and professional identity of staff and thus more or less directly on their teaching identities.

Participants in the session explained the extent to which undergraduates were exposed to research-led teaching in their institutions. The relationship between research input in teaching and curriculum development was also discussed. Some members of the group expressed the opinion that research could not reasonably be expected at the undergraduate level and should be reserved for Masters programmes. Christie Carson of the English Subject Centre pointed out that digital technology allowed for the integration of primary research at the undergraduate level in new ways. She pointed to the Case Study that had been developed by the ESC to illustrate the research-led teaching involved in the Text and Playhouse MA programme taught jointly by King's College London and the Globe Theatre. This Case Study made up the Subject Centre's contribution to a wider project sponsored by the Higher Education Academy Generic Centre on Linking Teaching and Research which aimed to show that the integration of these two areas is central to a range of disciplines.

There was applause for the Subject Centre's work on linking teaching and research, and a feeling that both the Subject Centre and HoDs could promote the value in pedagogic terms of research in our subject. But some also questioned whether excessive demands were made of undergraduates in terms of research, for example in the matter of level 3 dissertations (cf. institutional Learning Teaching and Assessment strategies). Participants also wanted to see more opportunities for fractional staff to be supported in their research, and wished to explore the validity of the teaching-oriented career.

Larger student numbers (Facilitator Susan Zlosnik, Manchester Metropolitan University)

In her introduction, Sue Zlosnik placed the discussion within the need to defend the discipline, and wanted to emphasise the implications for students themselves of being typically in larger groups. She reflected on the sense of institutional anonymity that could increasingly be part of the student experience, and the unreliable fit between student and staff expectation. Under such circumstances, norms generated by students themselves became particularly powerful, and there might sometimes be a

duty on staff to, so to speak, 'protect students from themselves'. At the same time it was important to emphasise that we could not simply identify changed expectations with the advent of larger numbers of 'widening participation' students. She noted the range of levels of institutional support, and the effects of Band D funding. Virtual Learning Environments were clearly becoming an important supplement to face-to-face teaching, but not a substitute for human interaction.

The group spent some time exploring Staff Student Ratios. It was clear that the idea of Staff Student Ratios (which at least one participant found to be a redundant notion) covered a variety of phenomena on the ground. Figures between 1:17 and 1:30+ were quoted. Inevitably, the discussion broadened out into a number of closely related matters, including the use of part-time teachers and graduate teaching assistants. Participants compared notes on the impact on staff load of varying degrees of formal or informal control over student choice. Several departments offered little or no choice at levels 1 and 2, but a 'free market' at level 3. The effects of perceived desire to study texts more slowly ('A-level pace') were noted. The discussion skirted issues about staff workload (which demonstrated the hazards of setting reliable figures on contact hours), on how learning was structured, and on the size of classes. The group speculated on whether there was an argument in favour of large classes (probably not – though that did not in itself mean tutorials of two or three were the ideal), and toyed with the idea of recommending a benchmark for group size (probably counter-productive). Nevertheless there was general support for the proposition that seminar groups much larger than 20 were not desirable, and a desire to collect evidence on the relation between academic failure and group size. Estate policies could also have a constraining effect on teaching patterns. A debate about peer assessment divided the group. Those in favour noted that (while it did not actually save staff time) the practice was formative only, and students could learn much about the criteria for valuable work – the widespread and beneficial practice of sharing drafts in writing workshops was cited. Those against felt strongly that academic staff would be abnegating their duties in giving students responsibility for any form of assessment. Opinion was clearly divided, too, over the desirability of training in academic skills and essay planning: a view was forcibly represented that English should be about un-programmed thinking, though on the whole the group was in favour of academic skills training, however delivered.

The curriculum (Facilitator Robert Hampson, Royal Holloway)

At the beginning, Robert Hampson alluded to the breadth and diversity of the English curriculum. To what extent were we the custodians of the discipline, or the guardians of 1000 years of cultural history? Was everything before 1800 in danger? What did the English department mean in the age of differential fees and customer contract? How could we insist on what students ought to read, or embody our own expectations in the curriculum? He examined curriculum in terms of the relation between core and options, and raised the problem posed by coherent choice – and how you dealt with a ‘reluctance for the unfamiliar’. Options in popular subjects were likely in turn to have implications for progression, for example for the choice of topics for Level 3 dissertations. Were we right to see our task as undoing expectations arising from the way the school curriculum was devised and taught? Whatever local expedients we adopted had implications for the recruitment of students (obviously), but also (less obviously) of staff.

Early in the discussion, a round-the-table consultation revealed a wide range of practices over the relation between core and options. One department reported an institutional move towards a US model of unfettered option choice, but this appeared to be against a trend of retreat from ‘high’ modularity towards much more structured degrees with a high proportion of compulsory elements. (This was combined in some institutions with a movement away from semesters and into larger credit blocks). That said, English existed in a variety of joint and combined honours formats which themselves raised concerns over coverage, progression and over the integration of the different elements in a programme. Some wondered whether the success of joint programmes with Film or Media Studies or Creative Writing was actually masking a relative decline in the numbers of single honours students. One participant spoke of a standard curriculum at levels 1 and 2, and a level 3 ‘where we really play’. While this was clearly one end of a spectrum, a trend was perceptible, and in any case most (all?) departments nursed a sense of responsibility to provide broad surveys, however defined. Some spoke of extreme optionality being a rod English made for its own back, though others noted the difficulty of getting colleagues – let alone students – to agree on what should constitute a curriculum: *laissez-faire* (at least at level 3 and to a lesser extent level 2) could sometimes be a way out of fruitless departmental meetings, and the enthusiasm deriving from teaching specialisms could more than compensate for the

scattered nature of the resulting programme. The pattern of core and options might also be seen as an issue of ‘brand distinctiveness’, though it was noted how many different audiences the makers of curricula were addressing. On this note a semi-serious suggestion was made that the Subject Centre should organise an event on how to run a successful Open Day.

Staffing (Facilitator Lis Jay, Oxford Brookes)

Differences of scale and degrees of support from institutional management were central to Lis Jay’s introduction. She noted how swiftly the shape and dynamic of a department might be changed by a couple of appointments or losses. Heads of Department were inevitably sensitive to the amount of support they received from management or colleagues. How did you represent to departmental colleagues (who were apt to regard you as ‘one of us’) what ‘they’ say? She spoke of the reliable hand of experienced part-time colleagues – who might be regarded as ‘teaching hacks’ by new post-holders. Similarly, there might often be tension between the self-consciously research active and others who had taught loyally over the years. She listed a group of linked questions which all bore on the maintenance of an ethos: how to manage career prospects for temporary lecturers; how to engage the person who didn’t get the readership and how to nurture those who had fallen behind current criteria for academic success.

There was a strong sense of a transitional phase as HEIs re-positioned (and in many cases re-structured) themselves. Examples were cited of universities ‘throwing money’ at the RAE, and this led to questions of how you rewarded those who had served loyally over the years. Much of the discussion revolved around the role of the Head of Department, who was frequently caught between a culture of academic democracy and colleagues’ more or less aggrieved sense that he or she had turned into an ‘imperial lackey’. Real power, it was agreed, rested on whether or not you had a staffing budget. Participants spoke of feeling humbled in the face of the qualifications and experience of new staff, but wondered how you were to keep older staff motivated. Providing an intellectually stimulating environment by organising research seminars, especially interdisciplinary or regional ones, was suggested as one way of motivating both ‘old-timers’ and new recruits. Strategic senior appointments were also seen as a way of lifting morale across a department, but there was also a sense that senior staff should assume more responsibility for mentoring junior staff and acting more entrepreneurially to develop projects that might involve younger colleagues.

General Points and Reflection

From the point of view of the Subject Centre the day was a considerable success, confirming and developing important strands in our work. Such events constitute one peculiarly vivid source for our sense of the community at work and put life into the findings of the Survey of the English Curriculum and Teaching in UK Higher Education¹ we published last year. Centre staff were struck by the way participants relished the opportunity to talk to each other. Many themes for development emerged, and will be noted in a moment, but it is important also to register the success of the day at the level of developing communication and a support network, and in disseminating detailed awareness of the diversity of institutional practices and habitats. Maintaining and developing internal communication was plainly a theme, as was the need for HoDs to foster contact with larger communities. Participants were sensitive to the often contradictory pressures under which they were placed, finding themselves attempting to practise academic democracy in an increasingly management-driven culture, while on many occasions sympathetic to the goals of management. The outcomes frequently left them feeling Janus-faced, painfully conscious of the impact of institutional policies on colleagues.

The variety of relations to institutional structures almost defied generalisation. Participants were aware of a tension between being colleagues and being competitors. Informally, there was a good deal of discussion about whether there should be a representative forum for HoDs (perhaps facilitated by the Subject Centre) complementing the role of CCUE. HoDs, it was pointed out, spent a lot of time fostering a sense of professional identity and self worth among their colleagues, but these were issues for them as well. The sense of the value of what English offered could not remain unchanged in the era of variable fees, and participants reflected on the shifting nature of the implicit contract between staff and students. Thus student working hours, increasingly meant that in some institutions (there were acknowledgedly wide variations) a degree was becoming almost ancillary. At the same time, students themselves were subject to contradictory pressures. (The paradoxical juvenility of being accompanied by parents to open days.)

The picture derived by the Subject Centre confirmed an intimation from departmental visits: HoDs and their colleagues frequently feel encumbered by obstacles standing in the way of doing the job they really wish to do. Yet to make this point too publicly is to risk portraying English as a subject too sensitive to be fit for the 'real world' – or demanding a level of resource which few institutions could justify. There is a strong sense that what keeps the subject going in higher education is the conscientiousness and commitment of colleagues, and their willingness to work hours that go way beyond their formal contracts. In these circumstances passion for the subject was the primary motivation, and the ability to practise scholarship a major underpinning for morale. Which in turn leads back to how HoDs safeguard colleagues' time for scholarship, and value different kinds of contribution to the collective task. Given the complexity of their current roles, there was understandably a discussion of the desirability of training for the professoriate, or for new HoDs, whether provided by the Subject Centre or by another body.

Above all, despite the many challenges summarised in these notes there was a marked sense of energy propelling the discussion among those gathered. Thus the diversity of the curriculum (while it poses intellectual and practical problems) was itself potentially a strength, and there was a recurrent theme concerning the nature of relatedness (on the part of a federal subject) to new and adjacent areas. Does the relation, for example, to Film Studies or to Creative Writing represent a dilution or an evolutionary strength, the possibility (as in the more traditional alliances with History or Drama) of hybridisations which are to the advantage of all? The jury is evidently out, but the mood of the day was generally optimistic. Once again, local invention may swell or indeed divert the stream of change. While institutional habitats differ markedly, it was striking how many issues and attempted solutions ran across conventional divides: old and new universities; research intensive / teaching-led; traditional and wider student constituencies. Heads of Department, to generalise, are deeply committed to supporting and developing their colleagues and to the fostering of academic communities of learning and research. When they are anxious, it is about how, in ever-changing and frequently exigent circumstances, to act for the best in achieving those ends.

1. Copies are available from the Subject Centre or <http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/reports.htm>

Work in Progress

Teaching the New English

This is a prestigious series of edited volumes produced through a collaboration between the publishers Palgrave and the Subject Centre. The object of the series is to promote dialogue between research scholarship and the practices and processes of the classroom. A number of proposals resulted from an initial trawl carried out in early 2002. Of these, two have now been contracted by Palgrave, and two more will be shortly. A further six proposals are at an advanced stage of preparation, with a further half dozen titles in the pipeline. Palgrave is enthusiastic about the series, which we hope will contribute to the lively interchange between research and teaching.

The Subject Centre Journal

The promotion of discipline-based scholarship of teaching will become a core role for the Subject Centres. Discussions have been taking place with a publisher over the establishment of a journal devoted to learning and teaching within the spectrum of Higher Education English – literature, language, and writing. Negotiations are temporarily in abeyance during a reorganisation of the publisher concerned, but we have every hope for a successful outcome soon.

Secondary and tertiary

Under the institutional pressures to which they have both been subject over recent years, the communities of those who teach English at secondary level, in colleges, and in higher education have tended to grow apart. As indicated in Newsletter 6 (February 2004), the Subject Centre takes very seriously the question of how to bridge these gaps. At a quite material level, the nature of curriculum and delivery in schools or on access courses has a direct impact on who goes on to read English at university, and on the nature of their preparation. But there is also the larger question of who defines and shapes the subject, a topic that was certainly to the fore in the ‘Condition of the Subject’ Conference in July 2003. The Subject Centre is working with a number of groups engaged in boundary crossing: PGCE lecturers, the English Association, the National Association for the Teaching of English, the Common English Forum and others, as well as interested individuals. We hope that further events and publications will stem from this group of initiatives.

Living Writers in the Curriculum

This project (which grew out of the ‘Teaching Poetry’ event in December 2003) concerns various considerations arising from the widespread involvement of writers within programmes as lecturers, as fellows, or as one-off visitors. These considerations range from the evolution of good practice in the briefing and support of writers in employment, through to the copyright and intellectual property issues arising from the use of recorded readings. Our intention is to publish the findings of this project in our series of ‘Good Practice Guides’ during the autumn of 2004.

Further good practice guides:

- Part-time teaching (nearing publication): aimed both at part-time lecturers and the departments which employ them, this guide reports research carried out with VLs and makes practical suggestions for their training and support.
- Online discussion: a contribution to the debate on how best to use Virtual Learning Environments to supplement and enhance the dialogues of the actual classroom.
- Making use of your library: the Subject Centre cannot interfere with institutional library budgets. But we are aware that many academic staff are concerned that too few students make full use of the resources available to them. We intend to produce materials which departments could use both to enhance staff awareness of library practice, and as a basis for instructing students in library use.
- Student preparation for HE: still at an early stage of preparation, this report will take up and explore widely-reported concerns over student preparedness and reading habits.

News and Information

Mini-Project Funding Available

The Subject Centre is pleased to announce that it has funding available to support mini-projects in the 2004/2005 academic year. Departments are invited to bid for up to £5,000 for projects in any one of the following areas:

- Developing academic staff
- The first year curriculum
- Student recruitment
- Assessment methods
- Linking teaching and research
- Teaching large groups
- Teaching a particular form, genre or period
- Involving the wider reading public

The output of the project should be a resource that will be of benefit to colleagues nationally as well as to the department concerned. Unlike our previous round of mini-projects, the project deliverable will not be a report but perhaps a good practice guide, a web-based resource, an event or events, or a set of case-studies. We are interested not so much in 'what you did' as the output itself. Further details and an application form are available from our website or contact Jane Gawthrop or Ben Knights (see panel). The closing date for applications is Friday 3rd September. Successful applicants will be notified by the end of September, and projects must be completed by December 2005.

English-ltsn@jiscmail.ac.uk

Is the email list for anyone interested in teaching English in higher education. To join go to www.jiscmail.ac.uk, type English-ltsn in the 'Find Lists' box and then follow the joining instructions.

New Staff at the Subject Centre

In July 2004 we welcome Dr Andrew Maunder and Dr Jonathan Gibson to the Subject Centre.

Andrew joins us on a half-time secondment from the University of Hertfordshire where he is currently Principal Lecturer, Subject Leader and Research Co-ordinator for English Literature. Andrew has extensive teaching experience and his research interests centre on the Victorian period. When he joins us Andrew will be leading our work on access and widening participation and postgraduate teaching. He will also be developing a web resource on teaching poetry, as well as leading a project on 'Living Writers in the Curriculum'.

Jonathan joins us from the University of Warwick where he was a Research Fellow on the Perdita project which will publish an online catalogue of manuscripts in English compiled and/or written by women between 1500 and 1700. Jonathan has also lectured at several institutions including Exeter and Durham and, most recently, at

Queen Mary, University of London where he was Lecturer in Renaissance Literature. His teaching interests include the integration of IT into English teaching, the application of problem-based learning and the place of interdisciplinarity in teaching.

Kaleem Ashraf also joins the Subject Centre this month as our part-time Administrative Assistant. Kaleem has recently completed an MA in Linguistics and hopes to start a PhD in the autumn.

At the end of May we said farewell to Dr Christie Carson who has been with us on secondment from the Drama Department at Royal Holloway, and leading our work on C & IT. Christie is taking up a new post in the English Department at Royal Holloway so we are pleased that she isn't departing entirely.

Encouraging Enterprise in the Cultural and Heritage Industries

Earlier this year the Subject Centre made a successful bid to the DfES for funding for a project to encourage English students to consider self-employment as a career option. The project, which runs from June 2004 to March 2005, aims to raise the profile of self-employment amongst English students, and to encourage them to think about developing initiatives in the cultural and heritage sector when they graduate.

Through this project we hope to demonstrate how English graduates can become successful entrepreneurs, especially if one thinks of enterprise in social and cultural contexts. We also want to demonstrate to students how freelancing can become a successful and rewarding lifestyle, and how the creative and critical skills they develop in their English studies are relevant to their future careers.

The project will deliver a workshop that inspires students and alerts them to the range of opportunities, partly through the contributions of English graduates who have pursued successful freelance careers in this sector. Students will also be given guidance on likely sources of funding from arts agencies and regional networks.

Dr Helen Cagney-Watts has just been appointed as Project Manager to gather case-studies, interviews and other materials for the workshops and to deliver them at several higher education institutions around the UK. If you are interested in this work or in hosting a workshop, please contact Helen (see panel).

Shakespeare Across Ages and Stages



Participants: Ben Knights and Stanley Wells



Cambridge Marlowe Society



Helen Nicholson, Carol Atherton & Sean McEvoy

On May 1st the English Subject Centre and the British Shakespeare Association together sponsored a one-day event at the Bloomsbury Theatre in London entitled *Shakespeare Across Ages and Stages* for Shakespeare teaching staff in and across higher and secondary education.

During a lively and varied day those involved in teaching Shakespeare had the opportunity to hear the views of other teachers and Shakespeare specialists, see live performances and network with professionals across several sectors.

Drawing on *Hamlet* and *Henry VIII* for inspiration, participants in the morning focused on teaching Shakespeare's plays from different perspectives, sharing experience and comparing approaches with a range of Shakespeare practitioners – actors, teachers, directors and researchers. In the afternoon there was a chance to debate educational issues currently affecting teaching staff. There was also an opportunity to meet representatives from the British Library, the Globe Theatre, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and the Royal

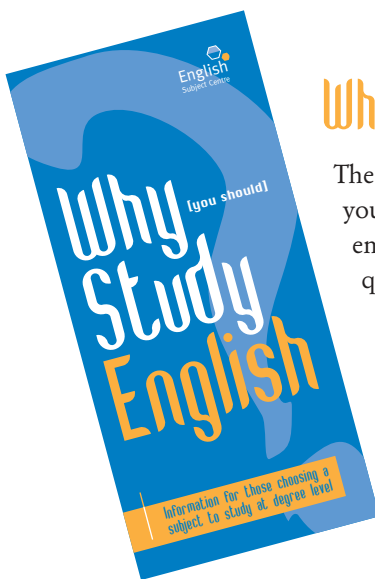
Shakespeare Company to find out about available teaching support and resources. The event ended with an impressive half hour *Hamlet* performed by students from Alderbrook School, Solihull and a series of Shakespeare scenes performed by members of the Cambridge Marlowe Society.

Speakers on the day include Helen Nicholson from Royal Holloway, author of *Learning to Teach Drama 11-18*, Ann Thompson from Kings College, editor of the Arden edition of *Hamlet*, Stephen Unwin, Artistic Director of the English Touring Theatre and Giles Block, Master of the Verse at the Globe Theatre.

Ben Knights, Director of the English Subject Centre says: "This was a great opportunity for all those interested in teaching Shakespeare to meet and exchange ideas in a lively and informal atmosphere, with a range of teaching colleagues and practitioners working in the same field. The day will provide a model for future events sponsored by both organisations".

Something to Share.... ? (especially external examining experience)

Do you have particular areas of teaching experience or interest? If so, please register them in our online Directory of Experience and Interests: until the end of June we are offering a £10 book token to each registrant. The Directory enables English teachers in HE to identify colleagues with particular areas of interest and experience. The menu-based form at <http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/expertise/register> is very easy to complete. You can also specify whether you have external examining experience, so we hope that the Directory will also become a tool for those seeking external examiners. However, if it is to enable identification of external examiners, we do need external examiners to register so do it now and claim that £10 token!



Why Study English?

The Subject Centre will shortly be printing copies of this leaflet, designed to encourage young people to study English at degree level. The text highlights the excellent employment prospects following an English degree, as well as the personal satisfaction, quality of teaching and range of learning opportunities available.

We will be sending a sample copy to each Department so that they can request copies for use at Open Days for example. If you would like to order copies (free of charge as long as supplies permit) please contact us (see panel). The leaflet will also be distributed to schools and colleges in the autumn.

NEW TRANSLATION PRIZE

The Times and the Stephen Spender Memorial Trust have launched The Times Stephen Spender Prize, an annual prize for poetry translation. Entrants, who must be 30 or under on 31 December 2004, may translate a poem from any language, classical or modern. The closing date for entries is 16 July 2004; there are cash prizes (with a separate category for those who are 18 or under) and the best entries will be published in The Times and a commemorative booklet. Download details and entry forms from www.stephen-spender.org or write enclosing a SAE to the Stephen Spender Memorial Trust, 20 Kimbolton Road, Bedford, MK40 2NR.



Farewell to the LTSN and welcome to the **The Higher Education Academy**

Since its inception in 2000, the English Subject Centre, along with 23 other discipline-based centres, has been part of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN). As of the 1st May 2004 the LTSN ceased to exist and was replaced by the Higher Education Academy (www.heacademy.ac.uk), which also includes the former Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILTHE) and the National Co-ordination Team (NCT).

Professor Paul Ramsden has been appointed Chief Executive of the Higher Education Academy and takes up his post in August. Cliff Allan, formerly Programme Director of the LTSN, has been appointed as Director of Programmes, and Victoria Eaton, formerly the ILTHE's Acting Director of Accreditation, has been appointed as Director of Registration and Accreditation.

Events

The Independent English Student: A Symposium

October 14th 2004

Sheffield Hallam University (*This event is free of charge*)

Readers of Professor Frank Furedi's articles in the Times Higher Education Supplement in recent years will know that some academics detect a sharp decline in the ability of undergraduates across disciplines to work independently. This problem is hardly established as a fact for degree level English, but it is noticeable that there are a number of ongoing projects concerned with studying and promoting independence in English students.

This event will provide an opportunity to discuss the status of independent study for contemporary undergraduates studying English, as well as to look at a number of ways in which English colleagues have developed learning strategies designed to promote independent learning. There will be opportunities for hands-on experience of learning resources, for discussion with project leaders in this area, and to explore our perceptions of what the main problems and issues of independence are for teachers and students of degree-level English.

Programme

10 am: coffee and registration

10.30 am: Introduction to the SHU Independent English Student project (Chris Hopkins, Dr Matthew Steggle, Phil Bannister)

11 am: Hands-on session with Project Independent Learning Resources in the Learning Centre IT Suite

12.30 pm Lunch

1.30–2.30 pm: Symposium: Resolution and Independence: How can we encourage the Independent English student? Case Studies by Dr Pamela Knights (University of Durham) and Dr Bill Hutchings (University of Manchester)

2.30–3.30 Open Discussion

3.30 Tea

4 pm Close

Please register online at:

<http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/events/future/index.htm>

Or contact the English Subject Centre (see panel)

Teaching Holocaust Writing and Film: 18th & 19th February 2005 in Central London.

The aim of this event will be to explore the problems and issues inherent in teaching Holocaust writing and film. The workshop will be structured around short informal papers and peer discussion.

The English Subject Centre's 2003 Survey of the English Curriculum and Teaching in UK Higher Education reveals, among other things, a rapid growth in the teaching of Holocaust writing (it lists around ten courses: the previous survey, undertaken by CCUE in 1997 lists no Holocaust writing courses, though some were extant at that time). Moreover, Holocaust writing plays a role in a range of other courses; there are Holocaust Writing courses in modern languages, and Holocaust and film is studied in Film, Cultural Studies and Media Arts departments.

In the light of this growth, the English Subject Centre, together with the Centre for Research in Holocaust and Twentieth Century History at Royal Holloway, is organizing this workshop to examine a range of issues that arise from teaching and learning in this field, including for

example: specific pedagogical questions; the question of a 'Holocaust canon'; issues of transference; using writing in other disciplines; Holocaust writing and theory; 'Holocaust piety'; and the Ethics of teaching Holocaust literature. There will also be a session on the position of postgraduate research and employment in this field.

The workshop will be made up of short papers which aim to stimulate wider exploratory discussion. Speakers and invited speakers include:

Sue Vice (Sheffield); Anne Whitehead (Newcastle); Robert Eaglestone (Royal Holloway); Tim Cole (Bristol); Ursula Tidd (Manchester) (tbc); Anthony Rowland and Jane Kilby (Salford) (tbc).

To register interest in attending go to www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/events/future/index.htm or contact the English Subject Centre. (See panel)

For more information about the programme or participation contact Dr Robert Eaglestone: r.eaglestone@rhul.ac.uk

Focusing on using C&IT in learning and teaching

Rebecca Eynon, an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow at City University, is looking for academic staff who are using C&IT in teaching to participate in a focus group.

Rebecca's PhD research explored how the web is being used in learning and teaching and the implications this has for staff and students, with one case study in English. The focus group, to be held on the 14th of June at City University, London, will consist of a presentation of

Rebecca's research, discussion amongst participants of how their experiences relate to the results and an opportunity for attendees to explore the usability of the new English Subject Centre website. Lunch and refreshments will be provided.

If you would like to know more about the research or participate in the focus group please contact Rebecca (r.e.eynon@city.ac.uk).

Development Day for New Academic Staff – Birmingham, 2nd and 3rd December 2004 (tbc)

The Subject Centre is organising a development day for new academic staff, designed to supplement the more generic teaching programmes offered at the institutional level. The programme is still under development, but we anticipate focusing on teaching and learning issues as they relate to English in particular, and giving plenty of opportunities to meet other colleagues who are starting their careers. The dates are yet to be confirmed, but the event is likely to run from the evening of Thursday 2nd December to late afternoon on Friday 3rd at a Birmingham venue.

If you wish to be notified when details are finalised, please email the Subject Centre (see panel).

Networking Event for Departmental Administrators

We have written recently to Departmental Administrators asking them to express interest in a networking event for those with administrative responsibilities in relation to English studies. This informal event would enable departmental administrators (and those with equivalent responsibilities) to establish a network and to share good practice. Topics discussed might include: working with students, departmental websites, admissions, examinations and finance. However, the agenda would be set by those attending expressing their preferences. If you have not received our letter but are interested in the event, please contact us (see panel).

Assessment and testing software freely available

TOIA (Technologies for Online Interoperable Assessment – www.toia.ac.uk) has released the beta version of its web-based assessment management system. The system allows teachers to create questions and tests, to deliver them to students for automated marking, and to monitor results. It can also be used for collecting assignments which require manual marking and for delivering and processing questionnaires.

This eagerly-awaited product has been under development for the past 18 months by key members of the UK online assessment community, world experts in question and test interoperability and a specialised software development team. Funded by the UK's Joint Information Systems Committee, and built by Excel-Soft India, the TOIA system will be freely available to all UK further and higher education institutions.

Writing Skills at the Learning and Teaching Workshop School of English: University of Kent

The School of English's annual Learning and Teaching Workshop (co-sponsored by the English Subject Centre) took place on 26th May 2004. The focus was on Writing Skills for 1st-year undergraduates in English. The School had identified a need to make more formal, systematic provision for its Stage 1 students, and its Learning and Teaching Committee had been discussing a range of possible module designs. The Workshop was an opportunity to hear about and assess the kinds of writing-skills support offered by other HE institutions, and to discuss recent developments in the area of student literacy. About 15 members of staff attended.

The Workshop invited two speakers, Katherine Pierpoint (currently at Kent on a Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellowship) and Derek Alsop (Teaching Fellow at Chester University College). Dr Alsop had run the 'Chester Writing Project' two years ago, funded by the English Subject Centre. His visit expenses and the general hospitality costs of the Workshop were supported by funding from the English Subject Centre.

Katherine Pierpoint spoke about her role in the School in fostering good writing practices. She saw students on a one-to-one voluntary basis, and underlined the value to such students of such undivided attention, especially for those unconfident about their writing skills. Her experience led her to want to encourage students to think more of writing as a process, and to counter their view of it as purely a functional pen-to-paper exercise – just to get something down on the page in order to secure a good grade. Students needed to learn how to study in terms of how to 'think safely', to enjoy the process of reflective exploration, to entertain uncertainties as a recognised part of the whole process of conceiving and expressing ideas, and to think of the play of often complex ideas as a positive and attractive challenge.

Derek Alsop outlined the Chester Writing Project and spoke about his survey across a number of HE institutions of attitudes to the problems of undergraduate writing skills. He drew attention to what he thought of as a fundamental problem in the increasingly divided culture between students and teachers – popular/demotic and highbrow/elite – and speculated on the extent to which this influenced any thoughts about support for writing skills and more generally the study of literature at HE level. His outline of the Chester Project followed and he elaborated on his published Report: the structure of the

Chester provision (voluntary Writing Class backed by Writing Tutorials). He highlighted the difficulty of establishing a sense of baseline writing skills from which 'value-added' Learning Outcomes from any assessed Skills course might be posited; the problems of knowing (or not knowing) the knowledge base of one's student-constituency; the merits of assessed vs non-assessed, and embedded (within a literature course) vs stand-alone Writing courses.

Questions afterwards raised a number of issues: the gap between A-Level pedagogic practices and HE expectations; the 'fear factor' in any student addressing directly problems arising from his/her capacity to write well; the issue for students as to whom or what one is writing for, and the extent to which they are writing only for grades; the questionable assumption that employers in the 'real world' are looking for an ability to write clear, elegant English, whereas that 'real world' seems increasingly to be adopting a jargonised official language in many areas; the desirability of (re)introducing close-reading practices, or even 'rhetoric' into the syllabus.

The Workshop was a valuable experience, as many unsolicited comments afterwards proved. It stimulated thinking not only about specific forms of support that might be devised, but more generally about problems in the current HE culture. It will help greatly in the discussions the School will be having about how to address what is generally recognised as an urgent issue in learning and teaching.

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Council for College and University English Annual General Meeting 2004

Some snapshots for those of you who missed the spring sunshine and warm welcome at St Anne's College, Oxford in April.



The Higher Education Academy

