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Best in Show
Case Studies in Higher Education English



About Seed Guides

English Subject Centre Seed Guides are short and practical guides especially written for those teaching English Language, English Literature and Creative Writing within Higher Education. They are intended to help early career lecturers or part-time tutors finding their feet, and also experienced lecturers looking for fresh ideas, or pointers in an unfamiliar area. The Guides are digests of key information and ideas designed to provide just enough information to 'get you going' and sow ideas from which, we hope, enhancements and initiatives can grow and develop.



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Contents

Introduction	2
In the Classroom	3
Turning the classroom into a debate hall: arguing about racism in <i>Heart of Darkness</i>	3
Emergence: a person-centred approach to oral rhetoric	7
Enhancing interactive learning in the classroom with 'Turning Point'	13
Teaching transitivity	17
Using wikis to support small group work	20
Student Writing and Research	22
Enabling undergraduate research – in search of 'The Angel in the House': women and domestic culture in the 19th century	22
Awareness into action: linking learning with research in Ecolinguistics	25
Scholarship projects for undergraduate researchers (SPUR)	27
English Online	29
Editing Lady Hester Pulter (1605 - 1678)	29
Plot-casting: using student-generated audiobooks for learning and teaching	32
Text.play.space: creative online activities in English Studies	34
Using online learning journals to enhance students' engagement with literary theory	38
Out and About: English in the Community	42
Creative writing in Cardiff Museum	42
Writing for social purpose – ideas for sustainable teaching and learning	43
Poetry and sustainability	46
Assessment and Feedback	48
Theatre programming as a problem-based assessment for use in teaching Scottish and Irish drama	48
Make your own: editing a Renaissance play	51
Using screen capture software in student feedback	53
Supporting non-traditional students preparing the final year undergraduate project in BA English Language Studies	56

Introduction

For the past five years, one of the most popular areas of the English Subject Centre website has been the collection of 'case studies' – detailed accounts by lecturers in English Literature, English Language and Creative Writing of innovative approaches to teaching their discipline. As well as opening an entertaining and instructive window onto seminar rooms and lecture halls across the country, the case studies area has provided lecturers at all stages of their careers with inspiring example of 'good practice' and fresh thinking.

This selection of case studies from the website displays, like its companion seed guide *Pick Your Own: Ideas for English Seminars* (English Subject Centre, 2011), the rude health of teaching in the English 'family' of disciplines. You will find here not just a wealth of exciting ideas but also enough detail for you to weigh up the pros and cons of putting any given idea into practice in your own modules.

Curriculum content and pedagogical technique vary widely. We have grouped the case studies in loose categories (only one of many possible methods of arrangement).

The first five case studies, **In the Classroom**, focus on ways of sharpening up student engagement in teaching sessions, both lectures and seminars. **Stella Bolaki's** account of 'Turning the Classroom into a Debate Hall' (3) very valuably describes one way of formalising perhaps the most common use of 'role play' in English Literature teaching. Formalisation of another type of oral performance – the student presentation – is the topic of **Arran Stibbe's** first case study (7). Presentations have been a mainstay of assessment in English for the past 20 years or so, yet can often prove alienating to students. Not everyone will want to run a module specifically on oral rhetoric, as Stibbe does, but the framework he provides can easily be slimmed down for use on less specialised modules. The other three case studies in this first section discuss different ways of heightening student involvement in class: **Nuria Yañez-Bouza** writes about the use of voting handsets in lectures (13), **Cris Yelland** about creative writing exercises as a means of acclimatising students to complex new concepts (17), and **Ruth Page** about the contribution in-class wikis can make to student discussion (20) – an exciting and innovative example of the integration of e-learning with face-to-face teaching.

One of the most striking developments in English Studies over the last decade has been the growth of research-oriented undergraduate modules, a by-product of the increasing availability of primary texts online, including early books, newspapers and manuscripts. Two of the case studies in the second section, **Student Writing and Research**, provide examples. **Ellen McWilliams** describes a research-oriented module on 19th-century culture, emphasising the boost it gave to students' self-confidence,

intellectual independence and academic skills, whilst **Arran Stibbe**, in his second case study, discusses an Ecolinguistics module involving student contributions to a scholarly journal (25). In the third case study in this section, **Samantha Lister** writes about an innovative scheme whereby students work with their lecturers on their research in the vacation (27).

Two of the case studies in the e-learning section, **English Online**, involve the collaborative creation of rich online resources: for **Alice Eardley's** students, an annotated electronic edition of poetry by the recently-discovered seventeenth-century writer Hester Pulter (29); for **Matthew Rubery's**, audio recordings of nineteenth-century fiction (32). Another important use of electronic media – as the basis for student reflection and discussion – is the focus of the other two case studies in this section: in one of the most frequently cited contributions to the Subject Centre website, **Rosie Miles** describes how creative use of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) discussion boards can help students engage with long texts (34); meanwhile, **Anouk Lang** showcases the equally potent use of online learning journals on a theory module (38).

That English Studies is no longer confined to the library, the study and university teaching rooms is emphatically shown by the three case studies under the heading **Out and About: English in the Community**. Visiting Cardiff Museum, **Shelagh Weeks** reports, proved an exciting catalyst for the work of Creative Writing students (42). The link between English Studies and social responsibility, meanwhile, is explored in the other two case studies in this section: Creative Writing projects rooted in the concerns of the local community in **Katy Shaw** and **Jess Moriarty's** contribution (43); the interface between poetry, the English countryside and the environmental crisis for **Hugh Dunkerley** (46).

The first two of the case studies grouped together under the heading of **Assessment and Feedback** both focus on drama, discussing two very different modes of assessment. **Barbara Bell** describes an innovative exercise involving the planning of a season for a commercial theatre (48), whilst **Lisa Hopkins** argues for the benefits for MA students of producing, from scratch, their own edition of a Renaissance play (51). In the third case study in this section, **Russell Stannard** describes a feedback method that harnesses technology to provide students with more personal attention than is often possible nowadays (53). The collection ends with a thoughtful re-examination by **Marion Colledge** and **Stephen Jones** of the best ways to support student work on final-year dissertations (56).

Role-play, field trips, textual editing, reading aloud, social engagement: there is something for everyone in these case studies. We hope you find them enjoyable and inspiring.

Jonathan Gibson

In the Classroom

Turning the classroom into a debate hall: arguing about racism in *Heart of Darkness*

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Summary

Second-year English Literature students were invited to debate the question of racism in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in the light of Chinua Achebe's well-known denunciation of Conrad in his 'An Image of Africa' (originally published in 1975, reprinted as Achebe 2001). The debate took the form of a trial with each side gathering evidence, arguing its case, and responding to the other side's objections. It was attended by people (not necessarily familiar with Conrad criticism) who functioned as a jury, voting for one or other side at the end. This case study describes the various stages in and outcomes of the debate and suggests ways in which debates can be used in teaching Modernism courses and in other areas of English studies.

Background

I teach 'English Literature 2' at the University of Edinburgh. This course for second-year students takes 'Writing and Revolution and Revolution in Writing' as a thematic focus and deals with texts from two key periods in literary and cultural history: 1760-1830 ('Romanticism') and 1890-1939 ('Modernism'). Lectures and tutorials encourage students to approach literature in its social and historical context and to develop their understanding of various theoretical approaches. The tutorials aim to bring theory, text, and context together, clarifying and exploring aspects of the lectures by grounding discussion in the examination of specific texts and by stimulating debate.

Chinua Achebe's 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' (Achebe 2001) denounces *Heart of Darkness* for its dehumanising representation of Africa and Africans, questioning 'whether a novel which ... depersonalises a portion of the human race can be called a great work of art' (Achebe 2001, 1790). Beginning with Conrad's inherent racism, Achebe moves to broader theoretical issues concerning the political or ethical value of literature and literary criticism and the extent to which these shape distinct understandings of the canon. The goals of our debate, therefore, were not merely to stimulate discussion of *Heart of Darkness* and to reflect upon concepts such as 'imperialism', 'colonialism', and 'civilizing mission', but also to open up the discussion to the consideration of the role of cultural interpretation in modernism and the scrutiny of the ahistorical notion of 'a great work of art'.

The exercise tied in well with the overall design of my modernism seminars. In survey courses on modernism, students often learn that the distinguishing feature of modernist writing is the various innovations in the style and structure of writing (a movement away from authorial omniscience; stream of consciousness technique; a break with linearity to embrace psychological time and discontinuity). This is partly reflected in the shift from 'Writing and Revolution' to 'Revolution in Writing' in the title of the second half of the English Literature 2 course at Edinburgh University. (This is not to suggest, however, that Romantic writing is not

formally interesting or, on the other hand, that modernist writing is pure experimentation without any wider social and historical context). Students had a balanced amount of lectures on modernism and style and on modernism and value / politics. I envisaged the debate as an opportunity to encourage students to examine the interaction and tensions between these two elements, which also underpin various theories of literature and art. The privileging of style over politics, according to Achebe, can have terrible consequences, and students were invited to reflect further on this idea using *Heart of Darkness* as a case study. In the concluding section of the case study, I provide examples of other texts which have been subjected to similar criticisms, and which could be used as the basis of similar debates.

Activities

For the preparation stage, I divided the students in my tutorials into two groups and gave each group separate instructions:

First group (Prosecution): Your mission is to demonstrate that Achebe is right.

Second group (Defence): Your mission is to defend Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* against Achebe's criticisms.

The way the two groups' mission is formulated does not prescribe the nature of the debate as I deliberately did not give very specific or narrow information. One of the things the first group had to decide was whether they were going to back up Achebe's argument that Conrad (or the text) is racist or whether they were going to concentrate on the broader question raised in his essay, namely how one can respond to classic works that exhibit racist views, and whether such works of art deserve to be part of the canon. Similarly, the second group had to plan their strategies of defence taking into account either possible criticisms or broader questions or a combination of the two.

The debate took the form of an interactive trial. I explained to students that they would have to meet outside class to plan their case and decide on matters such as the division of labour and the structure of their presentation. Because I have tried this exercise in the past, I have experimented with various formats. On the level of preparation, when I felt that students needed more concrete guidance about how to approach the task, I would produce handouts with detailed suggestions. The handouts drew students' attention to various points made by Achebe as well as to specific sections from *Heart of Darkness*, which they could mine further to illustrate their arguments or counter those of the other side. This was one way I encouraged them to do some close reading. I made the point of stressing that 'the jury' (the external referees I invited to attend the debate) might not be familiar with the debate or might have read the novel a long time ago, so they needed to ground their argument in specific examples from the text, as vague and general comments would not be sufficient. Another purpose of the handouts was to indicate 'virtual' witnesses each group could recruit, by which I meant a number of postcolonial critics and other commentators who have responded to Achebe's polemical article. Suggesting a few names and sources was one way I invited students to do further research, using theoretical work to validate and add authority to their argument. At the same time, I made it clear that they would have to apply these ideas, carefully connecting them to the text without being afraid to challenge the so-called experts' views.

Below are two sample extracts from the handouts I gave each group. Part of the fun in distributing this material a week before the debate is that because each handout is different, students take seriously the fact that evidence should not 'leak', as this would jeopardise their chances of winning the debate. In this way, the climate becomes prepared, and students start to look forward to the day of the debate.

First group (Prosecution)

Below are some points from Achebe's essay on which you could build up your case:

'...the desire in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest' (1784).

'For reasons which can certainly use close psychological inquiry, the West seems to suffer deep anxieties about the precariousness of its civilization and to have a need for constant reassurance by comparison with Africa' (1793).

'Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray – a carrier on to whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate' (1793).

You can illustrate Achebe's points with examples from the text. These will persuade the jury that Achebe is right. You can also use another witness, Edward Said. Said's approach to *Heart of Darkness* throughout *Culture and Imperialism* has been characterised as 'one of studied moderation; he does not neglect its imperialistic perspective (24-9, 32-4, 81-2, 197-201), and yet he stops well short of Chinua Achebe's indictment of Conrad as racist (200)' (Kennedy 2000, 102). Have a look at the relevant pages and see whether you can spot something in Said's response which you could use to argue your case. Said's *Orientalism* (Leitch 2001, 1990-9) can also prove very useful when it comes to analysing the quoted extracts from Achebe above.

Second group (Defence)

The other group has a potential witness you need to face up to, namely Edward Said, but his approach has been one of 'studied moderation', so you could use the ambivalence he expresses for your own argument. Read some excerpts from *Culture and Imperialism* (Leitch 2001, 24-9, 32-4, 81-2, 197-201) and from *Orientalism* (Leitch 2001, 1990-3).

Said suggests that most western texts produce the Orient in ways which reinforce the dichotomy between the Western and the Oriental. Dennis Porter criticises him for that: 'Said does not seem to envisage the possibility that more directly counter-hegemonic writings or an alternative canon may exist within the Western tradition. The feasibility of a textual dialogue between Western and non-western cultures needs to be considered, a dialogue that would cause subject / object relations to alternate, so that we might read ourselves as the others of our others and replace the notion of a place of truth with that of a knowledge which is always relative and provisional' (Porter 1994, 153).

How can you use Dennis Porter as a defence witness for your case?

As you can see, there is symmetry in the two handouts, which is one way balance is maintained, and ensuring group gets to receive a fair amount of support beforehand. Although I anticipated that students would mainly draw on the points of the handout, fearing that this would constrain them and dictate the terms of the debate, I was surprised to discover that the material had stimulated their appetite for more evidence and witnesses. Most students did further research, bringing into class evidence that the other team did not have in its possession, and of which they were very proud.

The debate which ran in the academic year 2007 included two brief presentations by both groups, a series of spontaneous confrontations between the two sides (one speaker responding to a specific point made by another), and finally some questions from the external referees before reaching their verdict. The external referees included colleagues in the English Literature department but also researchers and teachers working in different disciplines (Film Studies, Sociology, Anthropology), who were both interested in *Heart of Darkness* and in experimenting with a similar exercise in their own field of teaching.

Most students from the first group focused on Conrad's representation of Africans in the novel and the various racial stereotypes the novel promotes. Students read out extracts from the text, pointing out sections where racist language is most visible: the Africans are described as 'savage', 'the white of their eyes glistening', with 'faces like grotesque masks', and in place of speech they 'made a violent babble of uncouth sounds'. Conrad's defence argued that 'the differences visible in his descriptions of blacks and whites are fundamentally descriptive observations as perceived by a man (Marlow) who has not been exposed to such a different culture and, for this reason, cannot be proclaimed to be racist in the modern pejorative sense of the word'. At the same time, the attitudes towards Africans are not those of Conrad, but of the narrator's, and students suggested that the framing of the novel (the narrator behind a narrator, a favourite modernist technique) opens the text to an ironic reading.

A big portion of the debate focused on what the term 'racism' means and how understandings of it have changed since Conrad's time. The strongest argument of the defence was that the time Conrad wrote removes him from the allegations Achebe makes: 'Conrad actually tries to move away from the prevailing exploitative and racist views of his time, but of course it is understandable why he cannot transcend them altogether'. Conrad, they added, is equally, if not more, critical of his fellow Western characters. The discussion then turned to the ways in which the author resists dualistic thinking, undermining rigid distinctions between the West and the Orient: 'The river Thames and the Congo in the opening scene of the novel turn out to be pretty similar, and when Marlow enlists the twenty 'cannibals' as crewmen he describes them as 'fine fellows' or 'men one could work with' while he exposes the hypocrisy of the European Imperialist agents'.

The side arguing Achebe's case chose to focus more on the nuanced argument with which 'An Image of Africa' concludes, namely that 'Conrad saw and condemned the evil of imperial exploitation but was strangely unaware of the racism on which it sharpened its iron tooth' (Achebe 2001, 1794). They also based their critique on Achebe's argument that Africa functions merely as a setting or a prop for the 'disintegration of the mind of Mr Kurtz' (1789). The other group disagreed, arguing, through Said's view in *Culture*

and *Imperialism*, that the references to the darkness and 'the dark places and peoples' in the novel, and the insistence upon the inexpressible, not only manifest Conrad's modernist perception of the inadequacies of language, but also allude to a form of resistance, which both Marlow and Kurtz (and, as an extension, Conrad) cannot entirely see as such yet. The other point by Achebe that 'Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist' and that 'this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work ... due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked' (Achebe 2001, 1791) was rejected by the group who argued that nowadays the racism of the text could not be left unnoticed.

To the claim that Achebe's argument is extremely biased, the prosecution responded by showing why his argument is not based on personal preferences and questions of aesthetic taste. They cited Achebe's own acknowledgement that there were grounds on which his arguments could be contested: 'It is no concern of fiction to please people about whom it is written. I will go along with that. But I am not talking about pleasing people. I am talking about a book which parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today'. Conrad's defence, though agreeing that Achebe raises here a larger issue, which cannot be easily dismissed, drew attention to the polemical language of the article and Achebe's unequivocal indictment of Conrad, siding with Said's more moderate (read as less 'personal') approach to the text.

Before reaching their verdict, the external referees asked for a few clarifications, and some of them also found the chance to introduce their own points. For instance, one referee, who is a Film tutor, brought up Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*, which was inspired by *Heart of Darkness*: 'Could this adaptation perhaps help illuminate aspects of the debate?' Though American interventionism takes the place of European colonialism in the film, the group defending Conrad suggested that the film is a strong critique of imperialism and of ideas of civilization and progress, but it is not characterized by the complexity and ambivalence of *Heart of Darkness*, which makes it so hard to reach a definitive answer on the question of its inherent racism.

In 2007-8, three groups ran debates on *Heart of Darkness*. In two of these groups Conrad's defence won. In all cases, the external referees congratulated the losing team for their passion and conviction, and for the rhetorical skills they demonstrated in pursuing their argument.

Conclusions

The debate kept the students talking for the full hour of the tutorial, and they clearly enjoyed themselves. One of the reasons I think Conrad's text stimulated such a vivid discussion partly had to do with the nature of Achebe's response to it. Students do not usually expect academic criticism to be so 'personal'. They are often advised to write their essays in a more objective and distanced way, and are afraid that 'polemical' writing will be considered biased and unsubstantiated. The strong language of Achebe's article fueled the competitive atmosphere of the debate and made students more determined to win. Still, a couple of times, I found that the clash generated interesting points that went beyond the respective 'missions' of the two groups. This

could be seen as undermining the spirit of the debate as students ended up agreeing with one another. However, as one external referee put it, it is the moment the debate 'dissolves' that interesting and original arguments come up. In this case, the discussion raised important questions as to whether art should be accountable to politics and as to how texts that seem to propagate racist or sexist views should be taught. Rather than adopting Achebe's radical position, which they saw as narrow, both groups suggested at the end of the session, when the debate was over and they could take off their 'masks', that by revisiting 'classic' works of art through contemporary criticism, they could put them to new uses, acknowledging both their achievements and limitations. Other examples of texts which were mentioned in relation to this argument were Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Rudyard Kipling's poetry.

The feedback I got about the debate from students, mainly through questionnaires, was very positive. Below are some indicative responses from my 2007 groups who commented on various aspects of the exercise:

That's a good exercise in moving into a more academic sphere where rigour in argument is called for.

Any way of stimulating open and honest debate is helpful as I, for one, see the argument as part of your own process of understanding, allowing you to concede fixed early positions as a debate progresses.

Preparation for a debate like this is not always easy. Time management, allocation of ideas, balance of argument and innovative elements weren't straightforward in a group situation. For this reason, though, I think it was really useful exercise in compromise, organization and understanding.

Introducing external referees was such a good idea. It throws us students slightly outside our comfort zone and really stimulated heated discussion and a desire to impress!

Surprisingly, it was really easy to defend a side you might disagree with. Once some research has been done, it's very tempting to get seduced by your own power of argument and believe what you've formally contested. I really liked this aspect of the debate. It was less about opinion and more about forming a case and proposing ideas effectively.

Similarly, the feedback I got from external referees showed that they found the whole experience useful. Some of them decided to adapt it for use with their own students.

As noted in the introduction, the debate fitted well with my overall conception and delivery of the seminar. Exercises in the first week of the semester paved the way for the debate by encouraging students to think critically about labels and definitions. In my introductory session on modernism, for instance, I divided the group into pairs and asked them to read a few stories which illustrate the fluid and contradictory meanings that terms like 'modern' have had for different people at different times and in different places, using Susan Stanford Friedman's very useful essay 'Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern / Modernity / Modernism' (Friedman 2001). Later in the semester, we did something similar, though not as formalised, with Virginia Woolf. We looked at Elaine Showalter's criticism of *A Room of One's Own* and Toril Moi's

attempt to 'rescue Woolf for feminist politics' (Moi 1987, 9). In the case of Bertolt Brecht, also included in the course, I asked students to write an imaginary dialogue between Marxist critic György Lukács and Brecht. Their conversation had to focus on the meanings of realism and formalism and on what constitutes revolutionary art, highlighting the two writers' different views on the subject. Students did that in pairs, writing and performing the dialogue in class, showing both critical understanding and imaginative thinking. Clearly, then, debates can be extended to include a more creative aspect, and, of course, as Rosie Miles's case study in this Guide illustrates, 'creative-critical' debates can be transferred online with many promising results (34). Finally, the debate can move outside the narrow confines of the classroom and involve more students, especially from different subjects, and, even, student societies. This requires more organisation, but can be a very rewarding experience. A recent example in Edinburgh, covered by the *Student* paper (Ellingworth 2008, 4), was a public debate on the question of whether the NHS should treat those who bring their health problems upon themselves (such as smokers, drinkers, and the obese). The debate was organized by two University of Edinburgh societies: the Debates Union and Universities Allied for Essential Medicine, and was attended by a big audience. The Debates Union plans to stage more similar events together with other societies.

Debates encourage students to see literary texts as open to multiple and diverse readings rather than as closed systems. At the same time, staging a formalized debate in the classroom gives them opportunities to work together through various stages towards a common cause. It thus promotes group work and team spirit. Finally, since such situations require students to put aside their own beliefs and argue in one way or another, they provide a perfect occasion to exercise rhetorical skills and gain public speaking experience in a competitive, but friendly, environment.

Note: I would like to thank the tutorial groups at Edinburgh University who have participated in this exercise since 2005, when I first introduced it, and especially the three English Literature 2 groups from the academic year 2007 who provided feedback and extensive comments on the debate, and who agreed to have their photos taken for the Subject Centre website. Many thanks as well to the external referees: Georgia Axiotou, Nikos Kourampas, Penny Travlou, Antonios Kaniadakis, Vangelis Makrigiannakis, and Tony McKibbin.

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Emergence: a person-centred approach to oral rhetoric

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Summary

'I feel so much more confident speaking in front of an audience, I never thought I would be able to do it'

This case study describes an approach to teaching practical oral rhetoric based on peer evaluation and small group work. Speaking in front of a group can be intimidating for students - as one student puts it, 'I personally detest giving presentations, I find them extremely terrifying'. The ability to put oral rhetoric into practice is therefore as much an emotional skill as an intellectual one. This case study describes an approach based on person-centred counselling theory which proved successful in addressing both emotional and intellectual aspects of oral rhetoric, building students' confidence and improving their ability to put the knowledge of rhetoric into practice for effective presentations. As the conclusion explains, the techniques used in the skills-based module described here can be adapted for use on content-based modules.

Background

There is a widespread, but probably untrue, piece of urban folklore which claims that people are more afraid of public speaking than they are of death. Yet whatever the relative magnitude of the fears, students do indicate extreme discomfort about speaking to an audience, describing their recollections of past class presentations with expressions such as 'detest', 'extremely terrifying', 'incredibly nervous', 'flustered', 'worried', and 'sickened'. Skills in public speaking are clearly important in a world battered by monotonous bullet-point presentations, but students graduating from university often lack the necessary rhetorical skills to express themselves orally. The problem is partly related to the overwhelming priority that university education places on reading and writing to the detriment of oral skills. The problem runs deeper still, however, since the primary barriers preventing students from engaging confidently in public speaking are emotional ones, and universities have traditionally defined themselves as places dedicated to intellectual development with little or no consideration given to emotional development.

This case study describes a module which was designed to contribute to both intellectual and emotional development, to both writing and speaking. The module in question, 'Rhetoric in Practice', is a third-year module taught in the English Language programme of the University of Gloucestershire. This is one of the last modules that students take before graduating, hence the title of this case study, 'Emergence'.

After three years of study, students will have gained the ability to critically analyse the language which surrounds them and shapes the society they are part of; they will have had opportunities to reflect on ethical frameworks for living and working in the changing world of the 21st century; and they will have gained the writing skills necessary to participate

effectively in the workplace and in the wider society. The final step before emergence from university is for students to develop the confidence to overcome nervousness or even terror, and be able to express themselves clearly in oral presentations. At another level, oral presentation itself is a form of emergence, an emergence of self, where students can allow deeply held beliefs, values, ideas and opinions – ones which they previously lacked confidence to express publicly – to emerge.

The design of the emotional development side of the module was based on the assumption that the nervousness that students describe in expressing themselves orally in front of a group is a fear of negative reaction from the audience. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the fear of negative reaction can decrease the quality of the presentation and make it more likely that the audience's reaction will be negative, leading to more fear. Gaining confidence, then, requires breaking this vicious circle. There are a great variety of psychoanalytic theories and self-help materials which offer help in breaking vicious circles, particularly those related to self-esteem and under-confidence in allowing the self to emerge. Some of these theories and techniques are more tried and tested than others, but there is one that stands out as being particularly well grounded and applicable to public speaking: person-centred counselling (1).

Person-centred counselling offers techniques for creating the kind of non-judgemental and encouraging atmosphere that is necessary for students to gain confidence in expressing themselves. According to the theory, there are three core conditions which need to be simultaneously applied by listeners in order to create the right kind of atmosphere: empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence (Rogers 2003). Empathy is something that fellow students are in the best position to provide since they are all 'in the same boat', as one student put it, hence the use of peer evaluation rather than evaluation by lecturing staff. Unconditional positive regard goes one step beyond non-judgementalism towards acceptance and appreciation of the place within the speaker that is the ultimate source of their words, rather than a narrow judgement of the outer forms of the words themselves. Expressions of positive regard are, on their own, insufficient unless the third condition, congruence, or genuineness, is met.

For any new module which is designed to facilitate emotional as well as intellectual development it is essential to monitor the impact on students very carefully (although it could be argued that it is just as important to consider the emotional impact of teaching in modules where the emotional factors are disregarded). The first run of 'Rhetoric in Practice' was therefore accompanied by informal pedagogic research on the student experience, involving two questionnaires, a learning log, a focus group and an analysis of the actual performance of the students. This case study begins by giving enough information about practical arrangements for other practitioners to put the approach into practice. The conclusion weaves together the voices of the students themselves not only to demonstrate that the approach was highly successful, but also to help readers understand the factors which led to that success.

1 See Rogers 1961, 2003 for the original description of the theory and practice of person-centred counselling, Mearns and Thorne 2007 for a more up-to-date introduction which includes subsequent developments, or, for an excellent summary of the theory behind person-centred counselling, see Thorne 2007.

Activities

The main technique employed to help students develop their oral skills was the requirement that they give five carefully prepared speeches to a small group of their peers trained in active listening and appreciative criticism. The organisation of the groups adapted a technique used in business training, specifically in 'Toastmasters' speaking clubs (Toastmasters 2008), which has proven successful in developing oral ability. In these clubs, one person in a large audience acts as evaluator, one as timer and so on. However, the same style can be adapted to small groups with the following seven roles, which were explained to students as follows:

a. Facilitator – You are in charge of running the group smoothly. Start by asking everyone in the group if they have a speech to give, and write a list of names of people who will speak. Give a few words of welcome. Then introduce the first speaker. He / she will have five minutes to speak. You then ask for reports from the timer, the um-counter, the evaluator, the sub-evaluator, and then for general feedback. You then introduce the next speaker.

b. Speaker – You will need to prepare your speech in advance on the speech presentation form and bring this form along to act as notes while you give your speech. When the facilitator introduces you, find someone to temporarily fill your other role before starting to speak. Then stand at the front, pause for a little while, think about your first line and then launch into your speech. You have five minutes and will be told when to stop.

c. Evaluator – It's your job to make some brief helpful comments. This must be done sensitively and politely because the aim is to encourage and build confidence. Praise the good things, and if necessary make one or two suggestions for improvement (e.g. 'more eye contact would be useful'). Always make the comments positive and constructive (e.g. 'could be a bit slower' rather than 'it was too fast').

d. Sub-evaluator –The sub-evaluator spots all the rhetorical devices used by the speaker and reports them later to the group.

e. Timer – Start a stopwatch when speakers start talking. At four and a half minutes, clearly place a sign in front of the speaker which reads '30 seconds left, please wrap up now'. At five minutes place a sign saying 'stop now please' clearly in front of them. Write down exactly how long the speaker takes.

f. Um-counter - You will count the number of times that the speaker says 'ah', 'um', 'er' and write the total number down. If in doubt as to whether the speaker really did say 'ah', do not count it. Notice also obvious repetitions of verbal crutches like 'ok', 'right', 'well' and make a note of them.

g. Audience member – You will be an active, supportive listener. That means really listening to what the speaker is saying, with genuine interest. Imagine that what you are hearing is essential information that you must remember afterwards. Smile, give eye-contact and nod as appropriate for someone listening with interest. Nothing should be false - if you listen carefully to people who are expressing what they genuinely feel and believe, and keep an open mind, you'll find it almost certainly a pleasant and positive experience.

Students were given strict instructions on how to prepare speeches, including a preparation form which listed presentation aspects to focus on (eye contact, pacing, voice projection, etc.), and rhetorical devices to incorporate into the presentation (three part list, contrast, metaphor, etc.). The following example is of this preparation form filled out in an exaggerated way to illustrate rhetorical devices:

Sample Speech Preparation Form

Audience Analysis

This is where you say who is in your intended audience and whether they will be resistant to your message. (e.g., university students who probably detest stamp collectors).

Core Message

This is what you (privately!) hope to persuade your audience of (e.g., that stamp collecting is interesting and that I'm not a nerd).

Rhetorical Devices (circle relevant ones)

metaphor analogy simile anecdote three-part list
contrast: contradiction comparison opposite
puzzle / solution rhetorical-question repetition
alliteration other:

Presentation points to focus on (circle relevant ones)

pace eye-contact pauses voice-projection
breathing eliminating ums / ahs intonation
informality relaxation

Opening (write in full)

To create a catchy opening, try using a rhetorical question, an anecdote, or a puzzle / solution, (e.g., Puzzle: 'They may be small, but right, now at this very moment, there's hundreds of millions of them travelling around the world.' Solution: stamps!)

Introduction (bullet points)

You now need to let the audience know what your talk will cover (e.g., not exciting, glamorous, sexy but intriguing – will explain why).

Main Body (bullet points, but with some rhetorical devices written in full)

(e.g. Metaphor: 'The intrigue of stamps lies in the fact that they are sent out across the world [pause] as ambassadors. And each **one** [stress] has something to say about their home'. Three-part-list: Often the most **war** torn, **unstable** and poor countries have the largest, most colourful and proudest stamps. (Show examples on 'PowerPoint', explain where they're from). Rhetorical question: 'What does the humble British stamp say about our country?' Answer, three-part list: proud of monarchy, understated, no need to proclaim our greatness, etc.).

Conclusion

The conclusion is very important because it's what the audience will take away with them. Use a combination of metaphor, contrast, three-part-list, alliteration and / or repetition to close (e.g., 'Far from being boring, far from being dull, the world of stamps is interesting, intriguing and, ultimately, inspiring).

When the students gave speeches, they did not use a script but instead used the brief notes on the preparation form as hints. The evaluators used a matched form to provide constructive feedback on exactly those aspects that the speaker had prepared:

Sample Evaluation Form: Title of talk

What core message did you get from this talk?

What rhetorical devices did you notice? (circle)

metaphor analogy simile anecdote three-part-list contrast: contradiction comparison opposite
puzzle/solution rhetorical-question repetition alliteration other:

Place an X to show where you think the speaker is in the scale

pace: (perfect)(too fast) eye-contact: (perfect) (too little)
pauses: (perfect)(too few voice-projection: (perfect) (too soft)
formality: (perfect) (too formal) intonation: (perfect) (monotonous)
'PowerPoint': (perfect)(too much text) movement: (perfect)(too still)

Um-count and any comments from um-counter:

Timing and any comments from timer:

Aspects which were particularly good:

Aspects which could be improved:

The five presentations that students are required to give correspond to chapters of the excellent textbook *Lend Me Your Ears: All You Need to Know about Making Speeches and Presentations* (Atkinson 2003). Reading the required chapter of the textbook provides details about aspects of rhetoric which are particularly relevant to that speech, and the preparation and evaluations forms use the same terminology as the book. The students were given the following information about the content of each speech:

a. The opening speech: Think of this speech as a first step to speaking a language which is different from writing and different from conversation: the language of Rhetoric. For now, think of it as a language which is slow, with lots of pauses, is informal, requires eye contact with the audience, and only makes one main point. If you exaggerate these points you will find you end up sounding quite natural, so exaggerate away! Read chapters one to three of the textbook for tips.

b. The visual speech: This is a chance for you to give a speech which uses 'PowerPoint' well, i.e., in a way which enhances your speech rather than distracting from it. That means minimal use of text in your slides. Limit your slides to: blank slides for when the focus needs to be on you not the screen, highly relevant pictures/photographs, short quotes, short headings which come up one at a time in large font, or graphs / charts. Read chapters four and five for tips.

c. The persuasive speech: In this speech you will be putting Rhetoric into practice. Choose a topic which you feel strongly about – it could be capital punishment, the destruction of ecosystems, feminism, the treatment of animals in zoos, alienation, or any other contentious

issue that you have an opinion about. Your goal is to persuade the audience of your side of the argument. Pack your speech with rhetorical devices and combinations of devices and see what kind of impact it has on the audience. Read chapter six first.

d. The metaphoric speech: In this speech you will base the whole speech on a particular overarching metaphor, such as a journey. Set up the metaphor in the introduction (e.g. 'There is no room for pessimism because what we see before us is a landscape of opportunity'). Continue the metaphor in the main body of the speech 'There are many paths before us, but no maps'. And finish off with the metaphor in the conclusion (e.g. 'Once we have chosen our path we must follow it, and follow it, and follow it, realising every opportunity along the way'). Read chapter seven for tips.

e. The social speech: This is practice for making a wedding speech, an after-dinner speech, an acceptance of award speech, a speech of gratitude for a leaving colleague or a speech at a funeral. You'll have to think up a fictitious occasion and prepare an amusing or inspiring speech. See chapter 10 for advice.

The freedom these speeches give students allows them to choose topics that they believe in, that they think are important for the world. Several students chose consumerism, and other sustainability related issues, although inevitably there were also presentations about lighter subjects like beards, tattoos and snail racing. The following selection illustrates the range and type of topic chosen: Recycling, Fox hunting, Vegetarianism, Local produce, Traffic congestion, Tattoos, Capital punishment, Life, Fair-trade, Energy saving, Conserving water, Growing your own vegetables, Smoking, Gun violence, Aliens, Plastic bags, British pride, Snail racing, Global warming, Anti-consumerism, Organic produce, Fashion, Nature appreciation, Consumerism, *Lost* (TV programme), Individuality, Environmentalism, Healthy living, Materialism, Fur, Healthy lifestyle, Yorkshire terriers, Animal cruelty, Internet, Social pressure, Bullying, Ethical lifestyles, Countryside preservation.

Conclusion

This conclusion looks at evidence from questionnaires, learning logs and a focus group to evaluate the success of the course in terms of developing students' confidence and building their rhetorical skills, as well as investigating in some detail the factors behind the success.⁽²⁾ The case study concludes by looking at some ways in which the methodology used in 'Rhetoric in Practice' might be adapted for use on other, content-based (rather than skills-based) modules.

a. Confidence

All fifteen students indicated in response to a questionnaire that their confidence had increased as a result of taking the module. This was also confirmed by comments in the learning logs and focus group, the following being typical:

I have noticed a definite improvement in my public speaking and confidence.

I feel so much more confident speaking in front of an audience, I never thought I would be able to do it.

I feel more confident not just in lectures but in my working life too ... [job interviewers] commented on how natural and confident I appeared.

After speaking in groups only a couple of times I have noticed I no longer worry or feel sick having to speak publicly.

The module builds your confidence quickly and opens up new possibilities in future life.

Before I felt slightly sickened by the idea of giving a presentation to my peers ... I feel like I have overcome my fear.

Other modules at the university have not given me the practical groundwork for life the way this module has.

This is a remarkable finding, and the sections which follow attempt to discover what exactly it was about the class which led to such clear improvements in confidence.

b. Atmosphere

The atmosphere of the class certainly fostered the kind of non-judgemental atmosphere envisioned by person-centred counselling. In response to the question 'How did you find the overall atmosphere of the class?' students used the following adjectives: 'relaxed', 'accepting', 'comfortable', 'informal', 'positive', 'supportive', 'non-threatening', 'encouraging', 'friendly', 'casual', 'non-judgemental', and 'productive'. Certainly, the audience seemed to be skilled in active listening.

As one student commented 'I knew the experience I was gaining was invaluable because it seemed like people were really engaging with what I was saying'. The informality of the situation did not prevent students from engaging academically, however, as two students point out:

Informal but it was not like we didn't work – I found I actually wanted to participate and contribute

Casual ... but formal enough to discuss our presentations analytically

One of the factors which made the atmosphere so relaxed may have been the physical space that the module was carried out in – the Centre for Active Learning – which provided flexible and comfortable seating arrangements including sofas. As one student says, 'the Centre for Active Learning really helped create a more informal atmosphere'.

c. Empathy

Several students indicated that the involvement of peers to conduct evaluations created a more empathic atmosphere, and one student linked this directly to the improvement in confidence:

Having people my age and in the same circumstances give friendly criticism gave me more confidence each week.

The atmosphere was really relaxed. Having people who are in exactly the same position as you contributes to this.

The evaluations were really helpful because they were coming from people who were in exactly the same situation as me.

Other students know exactly what others are going through.

I felt they understood what I was going through as they were doing it too.

d. Unconditional positive regard

At the beginning of the module, students were trained in active listening: for example, mirroring the mood of the speaker in their expression (e.g., not smiling when the speaker is conveying something sad), looking at the speaker, smiling and nodding naturally when appropriate, listening carefully to what was being said, and looking beyond the words to appreciate the person who is speaking. This presumably contributed to creating what students described as a non-judgemental, positive atmosphere while speakers were giving their speeches. Following the speeches, however, students playing the role of evaluator conducted evaluations, something which is necessarily judgemental and conditional rather than unconditional. Discourse analysis of the way that students evaluated their

² There were 15 students on the module. All completed questionnaires and learning logs, and eight took part in a focus group. Students gave written permission for recordings to be made and anonymised extracts published.

peers, however, showed that the overwhelming majority of comments were positive, and that when giving suggestions for improvement, evaluators used linguistic techniques to hedge their comments, keeping them as positive as possible. This meant that the evaluations could be considered to be a form of appreciative enquiry rather than criticism, which came close to unconditional positive regard.

e. Congruence

The presence of negative comments is a very important part of the exercise, not only because it is central to improving performance, but also because it confirms to everyone that the exercise is a genuine one, and that the evaluators are being congruent (expressing what they feel genuinely). Indeed, only one student expressed doubts about the genuineness of the evaluations, feeling that they may be overly biased towards the positive, while a number of students mentioned that they felt they were genuine:

[Because the audience is peers] you are most likely to get an honest reaction and active criticism.

As the speaker you could receive honest and productive criticism.

People were very supportive during classes. They told you how to improve but very constructively and were very encouraging too.

They pinpointed things and offered improvement but without doubting you.

They were sympathetic to your shortfalls but weren't afraid to highlight them.

f. Peer assessment

There is a significant literature on peer assessment, including a number of studies which are particularly supportive of peer assessment in Higher Education (e.g., Falchikov 1995, Fry 1990, Hughes, 2001, Langan and Wheeler 2003, Magin and Helmore 2001, Wheeler et al. 2005). The findings of Fry (1990) and Hughes (2001) suggest that student performance improves after taking part in peer assessments, particularly since evaluation gives a new familiarity and awareness of assessment criteria. Wheeler et al. (2005) claim that peer assessment is particularly suitable for presentations, finding that 'there was high precision in the marks generated by peer-assessing presentations' (15).

The current study can add further weight to the growing evidence that peer assessment can improve performance. All 15 students explicitly indicated that their experience of being an evaluator had contributed to their learning. They identified several ways that this takes place:

By being critical of others, I have also cross-analysed myself and adopted techniques and style from others.

By evaluating other people's work you become more aware of what you need to do when doing your speech. You also think of better and more effective ways of doing things.

As you noticed shortfalls and things that didn't work in other people's speeches you would be alerted to them and make sure you didn't use them in your speeches.

Evaluating others develops critical evaluation skills which can be applied to your own work enabling you to evaluate yourself better.

Overall, the module required significant time to design, but once the students were trained in speaking techniques, active listening, constructive criticism and facilitation it was largely run by the students themselves. This was clearly welcomed by students, with one student commenting that 'I was the facilitator for my group and found this enjoyable as it gave me a sense of control, which boosted my confidence greatly.' The results of the module were surprisingly positive: students visibly overcame their fears, gained confidence in speaking, and by the end of the module produced dynamic and engaging presentations. As one student puts it 'I cannot stress enough how helpful I have found this module, how interesting and how directly positive it has been on me as a prospective employee and an efficient converser, debater and speaker'. In addition to improvements in speaking performance, students reported a number of side benefits:

I learned how to listen actively and give positive feedback.

My understanding of politics has grown immensely as a result of this course.

I feel better knowing that I may be able to persuade people into getting involved with activities to help the planet become a better place.

I have learned how to evaluate someone else's work effectively.

Not only have I gained useful skills for delivering speeches, but also from a social point of view, I can make conversations more interesting.

The only difficulty with the approach comes with the thorny problem of assessment. Recording or judging the presentations themselves could have potentially destroyed the supportive and non-judgemental atmosphere. It was therefore decided that students would be assessed on the completed preparation forms plus a reflective summary of their journey through the course. This approach to assessment, however, meant that some students did not engage deeply with secondary reading or provide detailed linguistic analysis – the main criteria for usually judging written assignments. Clearly students had gained something extremely valuable from the experience, but the question of how to translate this into a mark out of 100 is a difficult one which requires further research.

g. Using the technique for other courses

An important question is whether the techniques described above can work for presentations in other courses – ones where the focus is on content as much or more than on presentation style. As mentioned previously, several studies have shown that peer assessment of content work can be effective, so long as criteria are carefully spelled out for both evaluator and presenter. Adapting the peer-based assessment method described here for content courses could be as simple as having two evaluators, one looking at rhetorical features and presentation style, and the other looking at clearly spelled-out assessment content criteria. These extra criteria could be placed on (perhaps a simplified version of) both preparation and evaluations forms.

If rhetorical training is made the first thing that students do on coming to the university (rather than the last as in the current case study), then it might be structured as a sequence – starting with preparation forms focused mostly on rhetorical features and presentation style towards the

beginning of the degree, and gradually shifting towards focus on content criteria, as effective presentation becomes second nature. The experience of the current case study is that students manage to stop saying 'um' and 'ah' during presentations after about four practice speeches (even if they started with a very large number of hesitations). The um-counter could therefore be dropped from the roles after five presentations, as could, eventually, the presentation skills evaluator. That will leave the facilitator, timer, content evaluator and supportive audience members, which should be sufficient as students become increasingly adept at presentation. The general framework, then, of matched preparation and evaluation forms containing the same criteria, and groups of students with specific roles to play, could be employed in a number of courses across the curriculum and across the years, giving students a supportive and constructive atmosphere for presentations throughout their degree.

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Enhancing interactive learning in the classroom with 'Turning Point'

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Summary

One of the difficulties involved in engaging students in class discussion is that they feel reticent or not confident enough to openly express their personal views, especially in a module focused on prescriptive vs. descriptive attitudes to language. This case-study describes the use of an innovative resource which helps foster and enhance interactive teaching and learning by means of an electronic response system with voting pads, namely 'Turning Point'.

Background

This case-study is based on my experience in the module 'Attitudes to Language', a second-year course offered to students of English Language and / or Linguistics at the University of Manchester. The aim of the course is to show how attitudes to (English) language have changed since the Renaissance period (the inkhorn controversy) up to the present day (the place of 'grammar' in the National Curriculum), and to show the impact of the changing attitudes on actual language usage, especially around the debate of standard vs. non-standard English and descriptive vs. prescriptive approaches. The thematic focus is on 18th-century prescriptivism. By the end of the semester, through lecture and seminar discussion, students will have developed intellectual skills to critically evaluate people's attitudes to language and to hold debates maintaining arguments and counter-arguments. This being a course on *attitudes*, the challenge, inevitably, is how to engage students in the discussion so that they express *their own attitudes* and how to do so in an interactive way. This challenge is even greater when one teaches large-size groups. (The intake in this module adds up to 130-140 students.) The first year I taught this course (2007-8) I used the traditional hands-up method but it does not always do the trick: some students will not participate, some may fail to observe their peers' views, and overall peer-discussion may easily become limited to a few keen students.⁽¹⁾ With a view to enhancing the teaching and learning experience, I resorted to 'Turning Point' (TP).⁽²⁾

TP helps to overcome these difficulties by capturing group discussion effectively in an (inter)active and engaging environment. In a nutshell, it is an electronic response system which enables students to respond to quiz questions using voting pads. Designed as a simple add-in to 'PowerPoint', the software allows conversion of slides previously created in 'PowerPoint'. Students simply click the relevant numbered / lettered button on their voting pad and the signal is sent to the receiver attached to the computer (like a pen-drive). The responses are automatically collected and the results are displayed immediately on screen, for example a bar-graph displaying the distribution of Yes / No answers. To put it simply, it is like the audience wildcard in *Who wants to be a millionaire?*

Activities

The topic of the activity was 'Grammar Myths – 300 Years of Prescriptivism, and Counting' (Beal 2009). In previous lectures (this was week 11 of 12) we had discussed the roots of 18th- and 19th-century prescriptive rules and their impact on contemporary attitudes and usage, focusing on linguistic features that became stigmatised, such as double negation, end-placed prepositions or h-dropping. The aim now was to trace their legacy in the present day, late 20th and early 21st century, hence the reference to 'myths'.

Aitchinson, for instance, claims in the first edition of *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* that Linguistics today is 'descriptive, not prescriptive' (1981, 12-13). However, in the second edition she adds that 'we in the late 20th century are the direct *descendants* of the 18th-century puristic passion', that 'statements very like those of Bishop Lowth [1762] are *still* found in books and newspapers, [...] *still* being drummed into the heads of the younger generations by some parents and schoolteachers who misguidedly think they are handing over the essential prerequisites for speaking and writing good English' (1991, 12; italics added). This has been demonstrated by Joan Beal's recent research on a 'new prescriptivism' apparent in an increasing number of usage handbooks and advertisements (2008, 2009). In order to engage students in the topic, I decided to carry out a survey on *their* attitudes to language usage. TP serves a double function: it motivates students to take part in the survey without the fear of feeling embarrassed for expressing their views overtly, and it offers a means of better absorbing a number of 18th-century grammar myths drawing on reflection and personal experience rather than on the drilling method, in which they are expected to absorb slide after slide passively. Students often said that they were aware that you can say X or Y depending on context (e.g. formal / informal), but they hardly ever reflect on *why*. The (inter)active tasks of this activity helped develop their ability to approach the study of language from a critical perspective in its social and historical context: the why and wherefores of *their* language usage.

The survey was inspired by Mittins et al.'s (1970) *Attitudes to English Usage* survey carried out by members of the Institute of Education English Research Group at the University of Newcastle. Their aim was to investigate current attitudes to usage at a time when English grammar was (in) famously absent from the curriculum. Mirroring their subtitle *An Enquiry by the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne*, I introduced the survey to my students as 'Nuria et al. 2009 – An Enquiry by the University of Manchester' (the 'et al.' being my students in this module), as a way of integrating them further in the activity.

The goals were:

- To assess acceptability (not usage) of disputed usages in grammar in terms of formal vs. informal register, written vs. spoken medium;
- To analyse real-time change by setting the grammar myths in context in relation to the 18th-century rules discussed in previous lectures / seminars;
- To trace apparent-time change from 1970 to 2009, before and after the National Curriculum. (I tend to emphasise this last point, as it adds value to the students' contribution.)

1 Observation by Anna Verges, e-learning officer.

2 My greatest gratitude to the Faculty of Humanities e-learning team, especially to Anna Verges.

The activity involved:

- A live survey with TP in the lecture, consisting of a sample of disputed usages which students have to judge as acceptable / unacceptable. The lecture is thus (inter)active and thought-provoking, and provides the ground-work for the seminar task.
- A written take-home survey of the students' own attitudes and two interviewees' attitudes. Students are asked to jot down some comments on why they (don't) accept each usage, and are also expected to trace the origin of any two grammar myths. (The total number of disputed usages is reduced from 50 to 25.)
- The follow-up seminar / tutorial is devoted to critical and analytical discussion of the students' survey results: their attitudes, their interviewees', Mittins et al.'s (1970) and, ultimately, 18th-century grammar rules.
- A brief summary of the lecture and seminar findings is presented in the lecture after the seminars have taken place; this validates student work and provides a global conclusion to the three-fold activity.

What follows is an account of the lecture survey with TP.

'Turning Point' in Action

After one or two ice-breaking slides (3) the survey starts. I will explain the procedure in relation to the disputed usage of 'less / fewer', taking as an illustrative example a real situation: the controversy that arose in the summer of 2008 when the checkout counters of Tesco supermarkets read 'eight items or less'. Figure 1 displays a couple of screenshots from the lecture.

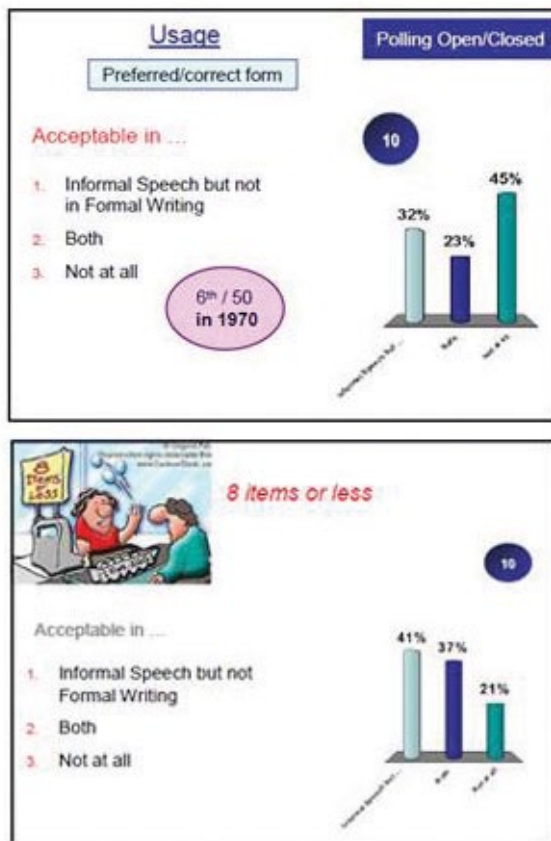


Figure 1. Explaining 'Turning Point' with the disputed usage of less vs. fewer.

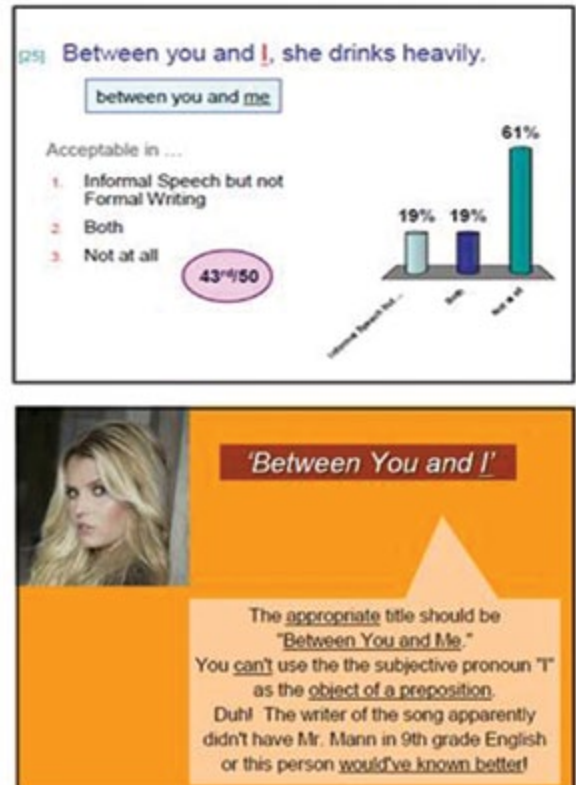


Figure 2. Enhancing feedback with 'Turning Point'

1. The title box in the slide shows the disputed usage X in red (e.g. 'eight items or less').
2. Students are asked to reflect on how 'acceptable' usage X is.
3. Three options are given: X is acceptable in (1) informal speech but not formal writing; (2) both informal speech and formal writing; (3) is not acceptable at all.
4. When the poll opens, indicated at the top right, students click on the key of the voting pad accordingly. The clock starts counting down, after which time votes will no longer be received. The clock and the number of seconds are optional and manually adjusted.
5. When the poll is closed, the group responses are displayed in a graph / table, tailored to the lecturer's preferences. Now the lecturer has to react on the spot and interpret the answers. For instance, the majority of my students (41%) were aware of stylistic differences between informal speech and formal writing, and 21% would not accept it at all; presumably this is because they were taught the rule in school. At the same time, a rather high percentage (37%) found nothing wrong with the use of 'less', which can derive either from their permissive attitude to prescriptive rules or, most likely, from their lack of awareness of such a rule.
6. The feedback provided for each linguistic feature is two-fold: real-time change and apparent-time change. Firstly, I show the preferred / correct usage in a (blue) box under the (red) incorrect usage and I explain the contention by tracing the prescriptive rule to its roots in the 18th / 19th century, i.e. the 'grammar myth'. In doing so I recall topics discussed in previous lectures, thus serving the purpose of revision too. For instance, the rule states

3 It is good practice to include one or two ice-breaking slides to motivate students, especially the first time TP is introduced to them. For this lecture, I had two: 'Do you care about language?', with the basic options Yes / No, and 'How much do you care about language?', where five options were given (slobs, yobs, snobs, pedants, doubters). The advantages of TP are readily confirmed: the category 'pedants' was voted by 29% of my students; I doubt (many of) these would have classified themselves in this way using the hands-up method.

that ‘fewer’ must be used with countable nouns whereas less is used with non-countable nouns. Since ‘items’ is countable, the use of less is incorrect. I emphasise here the prescriptive principle against variation: of two forms only one can be correct. I then link past and present-day attitudes and conclude whether and to what extent there has been a real-time change. In this case there is change in that acceptability in both contexts is as high as 37%, yet the legacy of the rule is still apparent in the 41% of option 1 and the 21% of absolute reluctance.

7. The next step is to evaluate apparent-time change. In a pink bubble I show the rate of acceptability amongst Mittins et al.’s 50 features, the 50th position being the least acceptable. In 1970 the acceptability of ‘less’ occupied the 30th position; therefore, there has not been much of a change in the last 40 years as far as my students are concerned. I take the opportunity here to encourage them to find out about their parents / grandparents so that they feel more engaged with the activity.
8. In addition to the critical evaluation of the data, I often add another bubble with explicit attitudinal comments on the disputed usage. For instance, Crystal quotes a letter of complaint written in the 1980s saying ‘It makes my blood boil – to read / hear LESS when it should be FEWER’ (1995:188; capitals in original). See Figure 2 with regard to the unacceptable use of ‘i’ in ‘between you and I’.

Figure 3 shows TP in action: a student using the voting pad and the results for the disputed usage of the preposition ‘to’ in ‘different to’ instead of ‘from’. This has been chosen as an example of real and apparent time change in attitudes, while figure 2 offers an example of no change, i.e. legacy from the 18th century.



Figure 3. Turning Point in action

The live survey consisted of seven or eight slides / usages only, approximately 15-20 minutes. (Otherwise it loses appeal (less is more!)) Other linguistic features discussed include the use of the subjunctive (‘if it was / were offered’), split infinitives (‘to successfully complete a degree’), the combination try and instead of try to (‘try and / to arrive on time’) and the lack of concord with data (‘data is / are’). The use of real examples such as the ‘less / fewer’ instance from Tesco or bad grammar in song lyrics will prompt reflection on / critical analysis of language the next time they find themselves in the same situation, e.g. in the supermarket or listening to music.

When the lecture is finished, you can save the session with the students’ responses (a pop-up window will remind you of it) in order to generate graphical and / or numerical reports, which can be then made available to students on any VLE platform. These reports, tailored to the lecturer’s purposes, are automatically exported to an ‘Excel’ spreadsheet with a high level of detailed information.

TP thus enabled me to capture the group discussion very effectively and to provide students with their responses beyond the lecture environment. Besides, it can be used in subsequent years. This gives added value to the exercise: students feel they have a say and are quite pleased that their responses will serve as a reference point for the coming students.

Conclusions

The activity described above, involving both lecture and seminar tasks, integrates descriptive, analytical, evaluative and critical skills in terms of attitudes to language usage, past and present. Carrying out the survey further provides students with basic transferable skills useful in sociolinguistic research, which they can put into practice in other modules. It is also a good illustrative example of how to integrate research with teaching in a mutually illuminating way: on the one hand, my research expertise in the topic of 18th-century grammatical tradition laid the foundations for the design of the lecture contents and the usage survey; on the other, the independent research which students carry out for the seminar (the survey) provided me with real data and fruitful insights for my ongoing work.

This case-study has shown the value of ‘Turning Point’ as an effective tool to foster and enhance class participation and discussion as well as to improve the quality of feedback provision in the face-to-face learning environment. TP enabled me to engage students to express their own attitudes towards specific linguistic features and to reflect on the disputed nature of language usage in general, rather than simply regurgitating 18th-century rules slide after slide (from ‘passive’ to ‘active’ teaching and learning). Instant feedback in graphs / tables, complemented with the lecturer’s explanations, helps students achieve a deeper conceptual understanding of the topic. Furthermore, the experience feeds back to the lecturer as it enables us to assess the students’ level of knowledge / understanding. (When I asked my students what was controversial about the example ‘eight items or less’, a large number of them admitted they did not know.) TP has the added value of giving students the opportunity to become aware of their peers’ attitudes, which triggers peer-discussion inside and outside the classroom. And all this is achieved in an interactive, stimulating way.

Other benefits and uses are summarised below:

Flexibility: one or two slides can be included (a) at the beginning of a lecture to check whether students have done the required preparation, (b) any time during the lecture to check understanding of key concepts, or (c) at the end of the lecture / unit / semester, for revision purposes.

Students' self-assessment: quizzes facilitate awareness of their own knowledge of a topic and retention of course materials.

Team competitions, as in the Linguistics Olympiad or the University Challenge contest, are also facilitated, thereby helping improve **team-work** skills.

Voting is by default **anonymous**, which increases / triggers participation successfully. Alternatively, it can be set up in advance to link student IDs to particular handsets, thereby enabling **automatic assessment**. For instance, using the layout of multiple choice questions one can set correct and incorrect answers, with the possibility of having more than one correct answer and of assigning different values to different answers / questions. Individual and group marks and statistics are automatically generated.

A **time-saver:** both in terms of exam marking and survey collection data. It has the added value of providing more accurate and scrutinised results.

A **user-friendly** tool that requires a low level of technical expertise. All students need to do is to press a key in the voting pad, even without pointing at the screen, and they can change their mind while polling is still open. For the lecturer, TP presents itself as a simple add-in to 'PowerPoint'. Slides and reports can be reused in subsequent years, are easily saveable and ready for display onto any VLE platform.

The only drawback I can see is that the actual lecture time is reduced because of the distribution and collection of the voting pads. Nonetheless, once students are familiarised with it it should not take up more than five minutes. Admittedly, it does require some extra time to master the software when using it for the first time but this is no more the case than with any other software such as 'Turnitin' or 'PowerPoint' itself.

The positive reaction of my students and the favourable reports by the e-learning officers who attended the session encouraged the Faculty of Humanities teaching and learning team to purchase its own set of voting pads. As the pioneer staff member in the School, I was invited to run a demonstration of TP in the school away day for innovation in teaching and learning (November 2009), after which a number of colleagues expressed their interest in adopting this method in their lectures / seminars. The use of TP for this particular topic also had an impact on my students' research interests: one of the students in this module is currently working on a large-scale survey of attitudes to usage for her BA dissertation.

All in all, TP helps to overcome the bridge between group discussion and individual learning, face-to-face and e-learning provision, lecture delivery and feedback provision, while achieving a deep(er) engagement of students with the topic, a better conceptual understanding and, overall, a more satisfactory teaching and learning experience.

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Using 'Turning Point'

'Turning Point' software downloadable from

www.turningtechnologies.com/response-system-support-downloads/

'Turning Point' website with tutorials and case studies:

www.turningtechnologies.com/student-response-systems/research-case-studies/

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Teaching transitivity

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Summary

One of the difficulties involved in Stylistics and Critical Discourse Analysis is the time it takes for students to become fluent and confident in handling a new vocabulary when discussing and describing texts. This case study describes a way of introducing students to a new technical vocabulary by way of an approach drawn from creative writing and 'textual intervention' (cf. Pope 1994).

Background

And where do you go from here? You've taken some poem or conveniently sized piece of prose. You've spent time and effort mastering a sensible descriptive grammar of English. You've meshed understanding and knowledge of both to produce a rigorous analysis of the language used to construct your text, together with a relevant 'sensitive' interpretation ... Very nice. Very satisfying. But what are you going to do with it? What now? (Burton 1982)

Burton's pugnacious account of the procedures and the limitations of Stylistics was directed towards making Stylistics more politically engaged, enabling students to 'unmask ideologies', as Carter put it. I am starting with it for a different purpose, one which is not necessarily based on the political ambitions and optimisms which were current in the early 1980s. It is the first two sentences of Burton's preamble which interest me. Presumably she did not mean that the choice of text to work with, and then the spending of time and effort on mastering a grammar, happen in that order, but even so, her two opening sentences raise in a very sharp form what is a persistent problem in the teaching of Stylistics. As teachers, we have mastered descriptive grammar, but our students, for the most part, have not. As teachers, we are committed to and excited by the hermeneutic and explanatory power of stylistics, but this is not necessarily true of our students either. Why should they spend time and effort (very substantial amounts of both) mastering a technical language in order to produce an account of some poem or conveniently sized piece of prose, when there are lots of easier ways of doing it? The question has especial force because Stylistics is a hybrid discipline, often embattled in terms of institutional tribes and territories, and consequently has sometimes had to confine itself to theory-checking rather than theory-building – producing, after great effort, results which are acceptable because they bear out what other ways of working would agree with.

This case study is an account of an experiment in the pedagogy of Stylistics, one which was addressed in particular to the relationship between the haves and the have-nots of technical 'mastery' (or at least fluency). It is an account of a way of working with a particular area of Stylistics, the area of transitivity in language, and trying to escape from a model of teaching in which expertise (derived from having mastered the grammar) flows from teacher to student. It draws especially on two recent developments in English: one is the rapid growth of creative writing, as a discipline in itself but also as a way of learning other things, and the other is the use of new technologies in learning, in this case the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and an interactive whiteboard. Both of these are changing English pedagogy in profound ways.

Transitivity

The analysis of transitivity is about the most powerful tool which Stylistics has, yet it is one which students often find difficult to grasp. Transitivity has the characteristics of what Meyer and Land call 'troublesome knowledge' (2006). It is to some extent counter-intuitive, and its relation to strictly grammatical or syntactical analysis is potentially confusing. To take one example (this one is from a James Bond novel, *From Russia With Love*), analysis of transitivity attaches importance to the fact that Bond's counterattack against an adversary begins 'Bond's body twisted up from the floor'. A different formulation, 'Bond twisted up from the floor' obviously describes the same event, and is a clause of the same syntactic type – so why all the fuss?

There are further problems too, in the shape of different theoretical models of transitivity. As teachers, we often feel bound by intellectual conscience to be rigorous and clear about these theoretical issues, but the consequence from the students' point of view is a lot of explication before there is any engagement with texts. The sequencing which begins with explication (of mastery) and then proceeds to application tends all too often to passive learning.

Activities

Starting with Writing

The first activity for a seminar is parody writing, a form of textual intervention. The extract below is from a non-canonical novel, in fact a Mills and Boon novel, *Without Knowing Why* by Jessica Steele. One point of using a text like this to work with is that students are unlikely to feel respectful of it, or intimidated by it.

'I've been kissed before,' she attempted, as she made to move around him – it seemed a good idea to head back to the bathroom.

'I'm sure you have,' he clipped, and panicked her wildly as he grated, a hand snaking out to manacle her upper arm. 'But you've never before responded quite like – this,' and before she could blink he had pulled her, none too gently, into his arms.

'No!' was about the full extent of any protest she had time to make – then his mouth was over hers.

No, she wanted to protest again, but she couldn't, and in less than seconds, as Dom crushed her to him she was losing any notion of why she should want to protest at all.

She was clinging to him when his kisses gentled, and all fight or any idea of fighting him had left her. She clutched on to him as, his mouth leaving hers, he traced tender kisses from her shoulder and along her throat, until he again claimed her mouth. When he gently hoisted her up in his arms and carried her the few steps to her bed, she had no objection to make.

She thrilled to his touch when he lay down on the mattress with her and looked deeply into her eyes.

'Erith, my sweet Erith,' he whispered, her name on his lips, the endearment alone sending her into ecstasies.

'Oh, Dom!' she sighed, and gently he kissed her. She felt his fingers caressing her face, her throat, and as his kiss deepened she pressed to get closer to him. She loved him, was in love with him, and as his fingers moved down to caress her, loving him was all that mattered.

'All right?' he whispered, his voice sounding slightly hoarse to her ears, but whether he was asking was she all right, or if what he was doing to her was all right, she did not know.

But 'Oh yes!' she breathed rapturously, and as he was able to touch her body she discovered a need in her to touch his (Steele 1991, 5).

This extract tends to give rise to some amusement; at any rate, it is fun to parody. And when students, either individually or in small groups, have written their versions of it, they are keyed as printed text either onto the flipchart application of an interactive whiteboard, or made into 'PowerPoint' slides, and so displayed to the whole group. The point of beginning with parody or pastiche writing is to work with students' intuitive knowledge of style, which is very much greater than their technical knowledge about it. The use of the whiteboard or the 'PowerPoint' has several advantages: it is typed text, and therefore more legible than handwriting; it gives more impact to the display of students' writing and the following discussion of it; it is easily saveable, and can be put onto the VLE site for the module.

Transitivity in the extract

There are a number of stylistic points of interest in the extract. Making them explicit is a process in which the tutor's possession of the technical language of transitivity is potentially inhibiting to students. This problem is overcome by providing students with 'prompt' questions in non-technical language; examples of these are in parentheses below. The main stylistic issues which can be described in terms of transitivity are:

a. The imbalance in agency between the man and the woman. (Who does things in the extract, and who has things done to them?) It is true of this extract, and of romantic fiction in general, that the man acts on the woman. This is manifested in the fact that at no point does Erith have the agent role in a transitive material process, whereas Dom (his name is Domingo de Zarmozza) has that role often. Erith has the agent role in intransitive processes, but not transitive ones; in other words, she can act, but not on anything or anyone else.

There are also a number of failed or abandoned processes on Erith's part – she 'attempted ... made to ... couldn't protest' and so on. Dom, by contrast, succeeds in all he does.

b. The distribution of material processes and mental / emotional ones. (Who acts, and who thinks or feels?)

Dom's emotional state is not directly given, only inferable from his actions and words. Erith's emotional state, by contrast, gets a lot of detailed attention – it is in fact the central issue of the extract.

c. Meronyms. (Do people act, or is it parts of them?)

Leaving aside the pleasing fact that 'meronym' sounds like the name of a Mills & Boon heroine, there is a lot of meronymic agency in the extract. This takes two characteristic forms in romance writing: one of them is the agency of the male's body parts, in this instance his mouth and fingers; the other is the importance of feelings on the female's part, like Erith's 'need' to touch him. The pattern is one in which the female is not only acted on by the male, but also acted on by her own emotions and physiological reactions.

d. Other points of stylistic interest.

The distribution of mental processes is describable in terms of psychological point of view – and this might connect the analysis of transitivity with more familiar concepts and terminology. There are other points of narratological interest too:

This kind of fiction persistently uses 'coloured' attributional verbs in the rendering of speech. Characters in romance writing do not simply 'speak': here, Dom clips, grates and whispers, while Erith sighs and breathes rapturously. There are lots more where those came from.

The syntactic cliché of persistent adverbial and participial clauses: '... she attempted, as she made to move round him ... panicked her wildly as he grated, a hand snaking out ... She was clinging to him when his kisses gentled ...' and so on.

All of the above characteristics are likely to be found in the students' parodies as well as in the original extract. Although Erith and Dom are in an extract and a style which is easy to parody, the process of writing parodies involves students in various ways. It makes them into writers, and in doing that it makes them into very close readers of their own writing and the other students' writing too. It also, given the nature of the genre being parodied, implicates them to an extent in the values and stereotypes of that genre.

Follow-up issues and activities

After the writing and discussion exercise, students are ready to make the transition to possession of the technical language of transitivity. And for subsequent sessions, there are various activities which the students can do. There are three different categories of reading suggested below, and all of them generate questions about transitivity, and also questions which are contentious in terms of methodology and ideology.

1. How does analysis of transitivity work? In terms specifically of transitivity, the Teesside VLE features some of the best and best-known studies and applications. Michael Halliday's study of *The Inheritors*, 'Linguistic Function and Literary Style' (Halliday 2008) and Deirdre Burton's 'Through Glass Darkly: Through Dark Glasses' (Burton 1982), are both very useful. Also of interest are Marie Hastert and Jean Jacques Weber's 'Power and Mutuality in *Middlemarch*', a study which uses analysis of transitivity to discuss Dorothea and Casaubon, and Kate Clark's 'The Linguistics of blame', which analyses the language used by The Sun to report sex crimes. There are well-explained and student-focused accounts of transitivity in Roger Fowler's *Language in the News* (Fowler 1991) and in Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress's *Language as Ideology* (Hodge and Kress 1979).
2. Does romance writing of this kind demean women? The supporting reading for this question includes material not just about textual questions, but about readerly communities and practices. Janet Radway's *Reading the Romance* (Radway 1991) argues very strongly that a uses and gratifications approach to Mills and Boon fiction produces a very different understanding of it from the account which is derived by textual analysis alone. A similar approach is taken in Linda Christian-Smith's *Becoming a Woman through Romance* (Christian-Smith 1990), and chapters from both these books can be put onto the VLE site or otherwise made available to students.

They contrast with the more textually-based and hostile account of romance writing in Walter Nash's *Language in Popular Fiction* (Nash 1990).

3. More widely than this extract and its accompanying parodies, how is romance writing done? Putting a link to the Mills and Boon website from the VLE site provides students with advice to prospective authors, including and emphasising the question of point of view, and there are a great many 'how-to' books about romance writing. One technical point of particular interest is that Mills and Boon's advice to authors stipulates that the story shall be told from the point of view of the heroine (with permissible brief excursions into PoV hero), but that it shall not be a first-person narrative. There are older examples, at least until the 1960s, of first-person narration in Mills and Boon novels – why should this now be proscribed?

The reading of canonical and fuller accounts and theorisations of transitivity, especially the ones by Halliday (2008) and Burton (1982), has the function of the explication which a more conventional approach would put first. In this case, it happens after the students' interest has been stimulated by the parody exercise and the fact that they have to some extent been implicated by that in a series of genuinely complex and contentious questions. Does this kind of writing demean women (and consequently men as well)? Do actual women readers read in the state of soporific false consciousness which the textual analysis would suggest? How do romance writers describe their craft, and themselves? The learning about transitivity is done in a context of rich questions about writers, readers and texts.

How the questions are best managed is a matter of judgement and choice. One way of managing them is to ask each group of students to prepare a poster presentation for the next session, using their own piece of writing, and discussing it in relation to the reading on the VLE, perhaps choosing one of the kinds of question and focusing on that, and in any case using the technical language of transitivity. Alternatively, the questions and the reading can form a handout giving the preparatory work for a more conventional seminar. In either case, students' learning the technical vocabulary of transitivity is 'functional' (to borrow the term from language teaching) not 'structural'. It does not understand transitivity as a discrete area of technicality, but as a set of interpretative tools-in-action.

Conclusions

The sequence of teaching sessions I have described comes from a year two module in Critical Discourse Analysis. For the last few years, I have been teaching technical material like this, and also a year one module about more basic narratology, using a creative writing approach. It is hugely effective, much more so than a traditional approach of tutor-led theoretical explication followed by examples and applications. Asking students to work as writers means involving them as readers with an especially intense focus on how texts are constructed. One result of this is that in other, more conventionally literary, modules, students retain the technical material better than they did when working with the older approach.

The choice of non-canonical material to work with has a number of benefits: it allows learning through play; it raises ideological questions very sharply; it works in an atmosphere free of desired or defined appropriate responses. The transition to literary material is not always easy – canonical texts are not always as ideologically blatant and as stylistically formulaic as Mills and Boon novels are.

New technologies like Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and interactive whiteboards allow and require teachers to differentiate between different kinds of learning activity. In this instance, there is a clear distinction between the use of seminar time for collective play, and the study which students need to do using material made available on the VLE. For some students, the contrast between the intuitive progress made in seminars and the rigour of academic material in their own time is daunting. Individual tutorials can ameliorate this problem, and so can dedicated time to discuss the technical material in further seminars.

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Using wikis to support small group work

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Summary

This case study describes the innovative use of wikis to support small group activities in the School of English at Birmingham City University. The wikis are used in class time (on laptops) so that students can access digital texts alongside more conventional offline media (worksheets, flipcharts, oral discussion). The wiki is primarily used to summarise their small group discussions, giving greater value to small group interaction and building an online archive of class activities. Importantly, this project integrates e-learning with face-to-face teaching situations, providing connections between the learning that takes place in the classroom with independent learning at home.

Background

The HEFCE e-learning strategy proposes that online resources should foster integration between learning within and beyond the classroom. Indeed, the familiar term 'blended learning' is often used to describe the place of e-learning within the curriculum, a metaphor which similarly suggests high degrees of connection and flexibility. However, students often encounter e-learning activities individually and outside the classroom while learning in face-to-face contexts (seminars, tutorials) need not make reference to online contributions in any great depth. This case study explores one means of bridging the potential gap between face-to-face teaching and e-learning with particular reference to enhancing the potential of small group discussions.

Working in a small group of between two and five individuals is a typical activity for many students in English Studies, even when seminar or workshop groups can consist of many more students. In a questionnaire circulated to staff in the School of English at Birmingham City University (11 returns) all staff reported using small group activities, with 70% using them for around a third of the teaching time. The benefits of small group work are underpinned by social constructivist principles, and at the start of 2007-8, focus groups from final year students on the module 'Narrative Analysis' recognised that working in groups was an important way of gaining 'feedback and input' from their peers. However, regardless of whether small group activities include discussion of texts or concepts, problem-solving activities or joint writing activities, gathering feedback in plenary sessions is not without its pitfalls. In the same student focus groups, a predictable pattern of plenary-style interaction across the students' learning experience was described. Typically, individual reporters would take it in turns to summarise the outcome of their group activity, usually verbally, to the rest of the class who would listen, take notes and then ask questions. The students pointed out the obvious disadvantages of this practice: 'no permanent record for the whole class, people don't always take in what is said' and 'not everyone gets to speak, you don't get to say everything'. Given the pedagogic value of small group work, there is clearly much that could be done to capture group discussions more effectively and enable students to make use of them after the face-to-face discussion itself has finished.

Activities

One means of addressing the ephemeral and partial quality of feedback in class is by use of collaborative software such as a wiki. The word 'wiki' derives from the Hawaiian meaning 'quickly', with perhaps the most well known example being Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia. Wiki pages can be read and edited by anyone, although access to do so can be controlled by password if required, and many open source packages are readily available. Wikis have been used successfully in many educational institutions as a means of facilitating online collaboration between students in the joint production of a final document or portfolio, usually where students did not need to physically meet (see for example Boulos, Maramba and Wheeler 2006). In this case, I wanted to bring wikis into the classroom so that students could produce summaries of the group work activities during their seminar time.

The use of a wiki alongside class discussion has been embedded in the module entitled 'Narrative Analysis', a final year class that blends both literary and linguistic approaches for teaching narrative theory. Typically, the module is taught as a workshop session, with a mini-lecture followed by a variety of small group tasks where students apply their knowledge to a range of texts. The kinds of texts students encounter include stories of many kinds (transcripts of conversations, short stories, film, and so on), and fully exploits the narratives freely available on the internet (hypertext, blogs, fanfiction and so on). Using a wiki in class time enabled me to link online resources so that the students could use them alongside more conventional forms of printed materials in their group activities, rather than waiting until they were outside class on their own to do so.

The students used laptops (one laptop between a group of four or five students), so that the dynamics of group discussion were minimally disrupted. Students usually took it in turns to be 'notetaker', while others contributed their opinions during the various groupwork activities. A summary of their discussions, as an image, diagram, list of bullet points or a summarising paragraph could be recorded and then projected for the whole group to see on the main screen during the plenary feedback at the end of the session.

The means of summarising the group activities varied week by week, and included writing paragraphs, producing 'PowerPoint' slides (the wiki software used in this case allows you to export wiki pages as 'PowerPoint' documents), presenting analysis in tables and producing mind maps, which were then photographed and added to the wiki. In this way, both verbal and visual styles of learning were accommodated, and students made more conscious of the different ways in which information might be presented. The multimodal nature of the wiki appealed to students who began to use colour to code their analysis, or inserted images or video to supplement the text-based emphasis of the course.

Two examples illustrate in detail the ways in which the wiki activities were interwoven with class and independent learning. Early in the module, the curriculum includes a class on Genette's narrative categories of time and order. The students began this topic with a short period during which they were introduced to the key terminology and concepts (through pre-class reading and a mini-lecture interspersed with short analytical activities to check understanding). This was followed by a group task designed to take up to an

hour where they used the narrative concepts of time, order and duration to interpret the structure and meaning of a short story, in this case, James Joyce's 'Eveline'. Students worked in groups of four to six on this task, writing up their discussion on a wiki page. After class they returned to their discussion pages, redrafting the analysis and adding links to the e-version of the short story available on Project Gutenberg and to relevant sections of Manfred Jahn's online 'Guide to Narratology'. The following week's class began with each group reading the analysis written by the other students, and using the commenting facility to provide constructive critique.

A later class covered a range of models used to analyse narrative voice, comparing structuralist, linguistic and feminist perspectives. Again, the learning process began with an initial period of conceptualisation (Kolb 1984), followed by a small group discussion activity. Students were asked to explore the connections between the three approaches to narration we had surveyed, illustrating their points with examples from a literary text of their choice (a range of sample excerpts had been provided as printed handouts) and presenting a visual summary of their conclusions. The mindmaps they created were photographed and then uploaded onto the wiki page for that week.

Students then returned to the wiki after class time, and used the mindmap as the basis for creating a list of headings that could be developed into an essay plan or as the stimulus for a reflective paragraph.

One of the advantages of preserving the class discussions in this way was that it enabled students to return to their work afterwards, whether that was in the time between classes or in our later class discussions. The editing work was particularly useful for encouraging writing skills, such as redrafting and planning essays. For example, transforming mindmaps into a skeleton essay plan helped students to move from a spatial representation of knowledge to a linear organisation of headings or paragraph points. The commenting facility within wikis enabled students to benefit from peer review, reflecting on assessment criteria as they constructively evaluated the pages that other students had written. By the end of the module, the group wiki acted as a large portfolio of many different kinds of summaries created by the students which represented their group work over the course of a semester.

Outcomes and evaluation

Students embraced the use of the wiki pages with great enthusiasm. Week by week they contributed to the wiki pages, not just within class but between sessions too. The result was that the learning process was strengthened, both within class, where discussions tended to be more focused and rigorous and in the student's independent learning, which was built directly on these discussion topics. The permanent but editable record of the discussions enabled me to engage with more students and in greater depth than face-to-face interaction in the seminars alone would have allowed. Instead, I was able to check their understanding and to suggest strategies for improving their writing as the course progressed, not just in relation to a final assignment. More importantly, the wiki exploited the potential of peer support. Students learnt from each other's discussion pages and comments at least as much, if not more than they did from me as the module tutor. Social constructivism was really put into practice where the

knowledge that the group gained as a whole was jointly constructed through their contributions summarised on the wiki.

At the end of the module, I asked students to complete a survey evaluating their use of the wiki. The results of the survey showed that the wiki brought benefits to both their interpersonal skills and subject knowledge. Without exception, all of the students recognised that the wiki enhanced their group work. In particular they described a sense of increased social cohesion ('It has pulled us more together') and a more equitable distribution of work ('Everyone does their fair contribution') which led to better understanding of the sometimes challenging technical concepts they were interrogating: 'Wiki meant more group work, so topics became better understood'. Asked what benefits they felt they had most gained from using the wiki, the most frequent response was peer support, for example, 'I was able to see what other people have done in more detail, as class discussions were restricted by time.' Clearly, the students' capacity to learn from each other was strengthened by a tool that enabled them to focus closely on a shared task face-to-face and to develop this with online collaborative work later.

The students' contributions to the wiki also led them to become much more reflective in their learning. For example, students stated that the wiki gave them 'A chance to review my own and other's ideas from our class work that we tend to forget sometimes', also encouraging a personally reflective stance: 'It makes me go away after class and still think about the topic we did because I was using the wiki to type my ideas up'. This was coupled with the opportunity for students to practise using the narratological concepts and to see how other students tackled the same problems but in different ways: 'I have gained better understanding of the models covered in class and know how to apply these to texts'. In summary, the wiki both consolidated the students' knowledge of their subject but also amplified the beneficial group dynamics resulting in an overall deeper engagement with their learning. One student put it this way: 'the wiki has encouraged us to engage with each topic wholly instead of just leaving it until we came to do our assignments in December'.

The ability to access the wiki online had additional benefits. Students appreciated that they could access their discussions at any point, and as often as they wanted to ('Work saved and always accessible to refresh knowledge on a certain area'). This promoted a more holistic learning experience. For example, within later classes, students could return to their work on earlier topics and formulate a comparative analysis or later critique. The ability to embed the wiki within the university Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and to link other online resources directly to the wiki pages impacted the students use of e-learning provision more generally. When asked how the wiki had changed their use of resources for the module, 89% of students reported an improved or more frequent use of the VLE. More significantly, students began to customise online resources for the benefit of the group as a whole. Examples of this included linking to useful online articles, or to example texts available in archives such as Project Gutenberg. In the case of online resources that might be rather unwieldy to manage as a whole (for example, Manfred Jahn's 'Guide to Narratology'), students selected particular information and used this as a form of online annotation to supplement their work.

In summary, the overall impact of using the wiki to bridge group discussion in class with independent work outside class is students' evaluations perhaps best described as a form of amplification. The students' evaluations suggested that this was true at many levels, including their engagement and sense of ownership of the module: 'The wiki made us be more hard working and responsible for the module'. Likewise, the level of detail and the depth of the discussions was increased, 'it has allowed us to work in groups and as a whole class which gives us more information and detail'. The links between conceptualising and applying knowledge were strengthened, particularly through reflection: 'the wiki helped to keep ideas in my mind'.

Further Application

This case study has described how wikis might be used in teaching narrative theory. However, wikis might be used to support discussions and joint work about any number of topics in English studies, whether they be literary or linguistic (or both) in nature. The optimum size for groups using wikis in the way I have described here has yet to be established. Certainly it seems plausible that even larger group contexts where students are required to work in smaller subgroups and then feed back to a plenary session would benefit from this kind of activity. However, it is worth noting that students felt that they should have had more laptops to use, with more than four students per machine being too many.

Of course, wikis can be used for many other purposes other than summarising group work. For example, they can be a platform to create e-portfolios (which might be individual or collaborative), or could be used to build a resource for a wider section of the academic community (Dence 2006). The decision as to whether or not to make the wiki publicly available on the internet is also worth consideration here. There is some evidence to suggest that wiki contributions improve when open to an audience beyond that of the class peers. No doubt the specific purpose for using a wiki will determine such decisions. In this case, the wiki contributions were not assessed, but students felt strongly that in the future this kind of formative work should be included in their grade for the module. The ability to view earlier revisions of wiki pages is a useful means of tracking individual student contributions, but clearly assessments using wiki technology should be carefully structured and designed. Based on the experience of these students, even when contributions to a wiki were not assessed, they still have the potential to build effective bridges between group discussion and individual learning, face-to-face and e-learning provision and to foster a deep engagement between students and their subject matter.

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March 2008

Student writing and research

Enabling undergraduate research – in search of 'The Angel in the House': women and domestic culture in the 19th century

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Summary

This case study offers an account of a research-based undergraduate option offered in the second year at Bath Spa University. The project introduces students to primary research in a number of different settings; under the guidance of a supervisor, students work in special collections and archives and develop an inquiry into a particular literary period or genre. The study focuses, in particular, on one strand of the module – 'In Search of 'The Angel in the House': Women and Domestic Culture in the Nineteenth Century' – which supports students in exploring representations of domestic life in literature and print culture in the period.

Background

The case study will explore the possibilities for supporting primary research at undergraduate level by examining one strand of an English Research Project option offered to second-year English students at Bath Spa University in 2008. The module introduces students to primary research via a range of literature and social history projects and supports them in identifying and defining their own research projects. Given the recent rise of interest in the place of research activities on the undergraduate curriculum, as reflected in Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins's report for the Higher Education Academy 'Developing Undergraduate Research and Inquiry' (2009), this account of undergraduate research in action foregrounds how the English student can develop research competencies that enable independent learning and encourage students to see themselves as part of a larger academic and scholarly community. Looking mainly at North American models, Healey and Jenkins offer a full account of the value of research at undergraduate level and the different forms that it can take. Their work is built on the premise 'that all undergraduate students in all higher education institutions should experience learning through, and about, research and inquiry. In undergraduate research, students learn and are assessed in ways that come as close as possible to the experience of academic staff carrying out their disciplinary research' (Healey and Jenkins 2009, 3). A number of recent studies promote the value of integrating first hand experience of primary research into the undergraduate curriculum. In *Research and Teaching: Beyond the Divide*, Angela Brew suggests that while research-based learning enriches students' engagement with the discipline it also has a value that extends to life after graduation in that it raises confidence and fosters professionalism amongst participating students; she makes the point that 'as they learn what is involved in doing research and learn how to do it, they must learn how to do it ethically and responsibly; that is, professionally' (Brew 2006, 57). While most analyses of undergraduate research to date have been based on North American case studies, the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research at the University of Warwick supports undergraduate research

in the UK. As well as publishing pedagogical studies and reports, it hosts a journal of undergraduate research, which is double-blind peer reviewed and, according to the journal's call for papers, publishes work 'based in any subject or discipline as long as the author(s) are undergraduate students'.

Activities

It was with these pedagogically valuable points of contact between academic research and student learning in mind, that the second-year English Research Project at Bath Spa University came into being. The module gives students an opportunity to work in areas of special interest to academic staff in the English department and particular emphasis is placed on working with primary sources. It includes strands such as '18th- and 19th-Century Women's Writing', 'Mapping London', 'Working in Archives: London Life, 1057-2006', and 'Collating and Cataloguing Early Printed Books'.

'In search of 'The Angel in the House': women and domestic culture in the 19th century'

On the strand in question – 'In search of 'The Angel in the House': women and domestic culture in the 19th century' – students research the roles and responsibilities of women in nineteenth-century domestic life using a combination of primary and secondary sources. A bibliography of secondary reading is provided, which introduces students to relevant theoretical and critical debates about private and public life in the 19th century, and this offers a starting point for the development of the student's own interest in a particular area or topic. Students are also encouraged to forge links to their own knowledge of 19th century literary texts and, where appropriate, integrate readings of the same. In setting the parameters of their research project, students are encouraged to examine and, where necessary, challenge popular conceptions about gender roles and family life in the 19th century and address questions relating to courtship, marriage, household management, sexuality, child rearing, female education, fashion, manners, and etiquette. Where the course differs from conventional undergraduate teaching is that students are also required to work closely with popular magazines, conduct manuals, and letters and diaries from the period, many of which are available from online resources such as 'Defining Gender, 1450-1910' and '19th-Century British Newspapers. Defining Gender' contains extracts from issues of popular publications such as *The Lady's Magazine* and can be searched to seek out references to specific aspects of domestic life at particular moments in the 19th century. As well as using online resources, participating students are directed to mainstream guides to the successful management of the middle class home such as Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861) and well-known tracts on femininity such as John Ruskin's 'Of Queens' Gardens' (1865). As with all of the strands on the English Research Project, students have to develop an idea for a project independently and, based on the feedback of their supervisor, refine it as necessary.

Student Research: Strategy and Support

A key feature of this module generally, and of this option strand in particular, is the way in which it introduces students to primary research and to working independently in research libraries and archives, both local and national. Students across the various strands of the module attend a series of seminars and workshops that are integral to getting the projects underway, to identifying relevant research archives, and to working with materials from those collections. In addition to sessions on advanced literature searching, students are also given an introduction to working with early or rare books and manuscripts. Having been given an induction to working in archives, using the Bath Spa University Special Collections as a case study, students set about identifying archives and libraries most useful to their project. Students work variously at the British Library, the Guildhall Library, and the London Metropolitan Library. Students working on the 'Angel in the House' strand in 2008 also spent time at the Women's Library in London and at the Victoria and Albert Museum. In addition, they were provided with guidance specific to the strand under discussion about how to investigate and make the most of local archival material, such as the collection of Victoriana at Bath Central Library and resources at the Bath Fashion Museum (which has a permanent exhibition of 19th-century dress). Bath Central Library has a substantial collection of ephemera and manuscript material that relates to etiquette and manners in the period and also houses a number of early editions of conduct manuals and guides in the Local History Collection, many of which proved to be of interests to students on this strand.

Assessment

In the early stages of the project, working within a set of guidelines, students negotiate the written form of assessment with their supervising tutor and also negotiate the learning outcomes. These outcomes are discussed with and approved by individual supervisors and referred to in the marking and assessment of the project. As a final assessment, students present their findings in the form of a written project offering a full account of their research; this might usefully be backed-up by relevant artefacts, images, exhibition catalogues and so on. In 2008-9 projects included a study of the representations of domestic servants in 19th-century literature and journalism, an illustrated and annotated portfolio on attitudes to fashion and dress in Victorian periodicals, a study of courtship etiquette in the Victorian period, and a report on the 'Corset Controversy' and cultural and literary responses to the same. The latter project consisted of a chronicle of the material production of corsets from the early 19th century onwards as well as an analysis of medical reporting on the corset and what this reveals about literary and cultural discourses of the female body in the 19th century. The second part of the assessment takes the form of a mini-conference in which students present the findings of their research to their peers and to members of staff supervising projects on the module. As well as outlining their key lines of inquiry and surveying their findings, students present a reflective account of the research methods used and skills gained or honed. This latter dimension of the project enables research-based learning to underpin personal development planning, and to do so in ways that are meaningful to the subject.

Conclusions

In encouraging students to think of themselves as researchers, the module supports a different kind of working relationship between student and tutor compared to the typical taught option. Research-based learning of this kind is most meaningful when it is linked to the research interests of supervising staff but is driven by the student's independent inquiry. It encourages students to break new ground in their developing interests in the subject, but also has a practical developmental value. In foregrounding a number of skills that might fall under the employability umbrella, educational theorist Carolin Kreber goes some way towards making the potentially alien aspects of the employability agenda in Higher Education compatible with student achievement in the humanities; her list includes: 'self-management, critical analysis, creativity, ethical sensitivity, and the capacity to act morally, solve problems, resolve conflict, make decisions, negotiate, work in teams, and to work cross-culturally' (Kreber 2009, 7). This was very clearly reflected in the experience of students on the Research Project as time management, working to deadlines, planning research visits and consulting with archivists and librarians were central to student progress. Being given the opportunity to present their findings in an environment that emulated the academic conference gave students the opportunity to engage in reflective discussion with their peers as well as with academic staff teaching on the module. All of these results resonate with the benefits of exploring the relationship between teaching and research, a number of which are outlined by Andrew Castley:

It raises students' awareness of the research-oriented ways in which they are learning (referred to as meta-learning); it makes students feel part of a community, in which research and teaching are seen as part and parcel of the same endeavour; it increases motivation of students through active or, inquiry-based, learning; it increases staff motivation by achieving synergies between their teaching and learning. (Castley 2006, 26)

A major benefit of this module is that it serves as valuable preparation for the final-year dissertation as it involves a similar process of forward planning and working independently under the guidance of a supervisor; also, it helps students to develop their interests in new and original areas and to identify research fields of particular interest to them, and so can serve as a valuable precursor to postgraduate study. Research-based options of this kind, then, have both the capacity to foster students' confidence and independent thinking and to aid the development of academic-related skills in ways that harmonise with the primary interests and concerns of the subject.

The Student Experience

Representative student comments:

In summary, this project was an enjoyable and beneficial experience and it has uncovered areas of interest that I would like to revisit. I have learned the lessons required for my dissertation with regard to reducing the content and providing quality and not quantity!

Having to get in touch with an institution outside of the University seemed daunting at first but the staff were really helpful at putting you in touch with people that could help with the project.

The module was very challenging as the project outcome was different to the standard essay that English students are used to and using different types of software to achieve the final product was also quite daunting. But it was very satisfying to overcome such issues and have a concrete artefact or piece of work to show for the project at the end.

The project as a whole made me think a lot more about the amount of information and the type of information it is possible to access. I'd not used microfilm before I went to Bristol Central Library, and although my trip to the British Library was not as successful as I had hoped, it was a learning experience which has prepared me well for the research I'm doing in my third year, especially for my dissertation.

Thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to conduct a research project on a smaller scale than the final dissertation.

There was a good balance of supervision and contact time – enough to keep us on track and remind us that we were part of a group who were all attempting a similar piece of work.

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March 2010

Awareness into action: linking learning with research in Ecolinguistics

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Summary

This case study describes the close linkages made between teaching and research in the *Language and Ecology* module at the University of Gloucestershire, a module which was highly commended in the 2006 Green Gown awards. As part of the module, students become involved in the international *Language and Ecology Research Forum*, contributing insights from their own research and reflection at a variety of levels from short comment to full articles. Some students who took the module went on to publish papers in an online journal, publish book chapters, and be offered funding to attend conferences, all in their first year at university. Establishing a forum such as the *Language and Ecology Research Forum* and working with students to make their contributions of a high enough quality to contribute to the research community requires a significant time commitment but is valuable in engaging students and stimulating new directions and ideas for research.

Background

Students arriving at university for the first time, whatever subject they have chosen, embark on a journey of critical discovery of the world around them, developing skills which will ultimately help them shape that world for future generations. In the English Language programme at the University of Gloucestershire, one of the first modules that students take is 'Language and Ecology', a module designed to help them develop the kind of systems thinking and critical awareness skills necessary to function effectively within an interdependent, rapidly changing, and fragile world. The module is based on the premise that through discourse analysis, students can interrogate social and cultural constructs which have a potential impact on the ecosystems which support life, including constructions of consumerism, progress, economic growth, success, and convenience, as well as constructions of nature and human relationships with other organisms. At a personal level, interrogation of such discourses can help students make informed choices about their future, for example rejecting certain constructions of success and searching for new models to base their lives on. At a social level, critical language awareness can help students contribute to social change through resisting damaging discourses, and promoting alternatives which have the potential to address emerging global challenges. This case study focuses on the role of the *Language and Ecology Research Forum* in enabling students to both learn from, and contribute to, the international research community, and in doing so put their awareness into action.

Activities

From October 2006 to January 2007, 31 students took the first year module 'Language and Ecology', part of an English Language course in the Humanities Department at the University of Gloucestershire. From the very first class they were encouraged not to think of themselves as just 'preparing' for things they would do later in life, but learning by actively doing things now. They were encouraged to take on the identity of a researcher and become involved in the international research community through participating in the online *Language and Ecology Research Forum*. This was

the first cohort of students to take the module, so there were no role-models of previous students who had successfully played a productive role in the research community. But now there are, and in subsequent years the course will begin by showing students the work of previous cohorts.

The *Language and Ecology Research Forum* was established in 2001 and has become the main international site for Ecolinguistics, which is not so much a sub-branch of linguistics, but linguistics in the full context of society and the ecosystems that society depends on. The site itself brings together an international network of researchers, resources, bibliographies, and an online journal *Language and Ecology* (ISSN 1745-3631). To enable students on the 'Language and Ecology' module to contribute to the forum, a special student section was set up, with spaces for reflective comments, paragraph length 'insights', bibliographic items and full length articles.

Students were initially asked to contribute to any of these categories via email, which, as expected, resulted in no contributions. A second tactic was more successful – that of gathering comments, insights, bibliographic information and articles from the wealth of materials that students produced in active learning exercises during class and in their assignments. Students were, of course, asked if they would like their contribution displayed in the forum, and all expressed delight at having had their work selected. Reflective comments were personal, and so left unedited, but the paragraph length insights and articles were copy-edited to remove inaccuracies and improve the overall quality, and then offered back to students to agree the changes.

The different types of contribution, from brief comment to full article, together with the copy-editing, meant that students from across the spectrum of ability could contribute perspectives to the international research community. Indeed, there were a number of extremely useful insights from students who were not from a strong academic background.

In research terms, the collaboration between students and facilitator is valuable since students can investigate a wide range of discourses that the facilitator is unaware of, and the facilitator can select the most insightful aspects and work with students to put them in a useful form for dissemination. This can help reveal new avenues for future research for the facilitator and student or for future collaborative projects where both are involved. For instance, one student, Paul Slater, had previously been interested in electronic gadgets, and wrote a paper about *Stuff* magazine, bringing to light and critiquing a rather shocking discourse that the facilitator had been completely unaware of. With some copy-editing by the facilitator, the essay was published as an article on the student section of the *Language and Ecology Research Forum*, eventually being accepted as a paper in the online journal *Language and Ecology* (Slater 2007). Through critical examination of the discourse of 'gadgeteering', Paul Slater reports that he has lost his interest in the latest gadgets, and gained an interest in sustainability. His article provides a useful resource for encouraging others to become similarly aware of the role of media in promoting consumerism, and a useful avenue for future research.

The core readings for the module were drawn from the online journal *Language and Ecology*, which is part of the Forum, as well as a series of papers in a similar vein published by the facilitator elsewhere. The readings were selected so that there was constructive alignment between lectures, reading, active learning class activities, and the final assignment that students write. The active learning activities consisted of analysis of a wide range of genuine data: hundreds of pages selected and removed from redundant book stock, popular magazines, piles of junk mail advertisements, collections of nature poems and photographs etc. This helped prepare students to go out and discover discourses in the texts which surround them, and to know how to analyse them when they did find them.

The final assignment instructed students to follow the style of the short, accessible articles in the *Language and Ecology* online journal and produce a similar article, using a similar methodology but with different data. Students were asked to discover and analyse one particular discourse which has not been investigated before in the context of ecolinguistic analysis (and there are many of these). Usually the discourses chosen were ones which the students are deeply interested in in their personal life, and participate in themselves. In this way they are forced to ask deep questions about how the media are promoting consumerist ideologies, and confront discourses such as those of *Stuff* magazine, *Top Gear*, *Heat* magazine, gambling, or advertising, examining the effects of the discourses both on themselves, the wider society, and life-supporting ecosystems. It is the personal dimension which is so productive in stimulating students to discover new insights, which may not always be written up perfectly, but can be copy-edited to be expressed to a wider audience.

In terms of student contribution to the *Language and Ecology Research Forum*, the first cohort of 31 students contributed 44 (unedited) reflective comments, seven short insights (up to 500 words), and six full length articles. Three of these articles were later accepted for publication in *Language and Ecology* (Gargan 2007, Slater 2007, Williams 2007). The three students who wrote the articles then collaborated to publish a chapter on their experience of the 'Language and Ecology' module for the book *Greener by Degrees* (Roberts and Roberts 2007). Later on, one of the students, Paul Slater, received funding from the Centre for Active Learning CETL at the University of Gloucestershire to attend a major HE Academy conference on Education for Sustainability. In this way, students in subsequent years have examples of just how much can be achieved in the first year at university, and can read analyses of areas that they too might be interested in. To read the insights and articles written by the students see the course website at www.ecoling.net/courses.html

Conclusions

This approach works best when students are empowered by critical analysis of texts they are already familiar with, rather than struggling to understand new genres more familiar to the lecturer than the students. Comments on the active involvement in research in the 'Language and Ecology' module were very positive, including the following:

The module was supplemented by an online research forum and students were encouraged to contribute articles and thoughts for possible publication. This encouraged me to research more deeply and to investigate different stances and I was absolutely delighted when my final assignment was published

Enrolling on the Language and Ecology module has been the best decision I have made since joining the University. Not only have I enjoyed it and had a chance to contribute to the international research community, I have also learnt something inspiring and worthwhile for my future.

The active learning in the module made it interesting, lively and inspiring. We discovered links between ecology and language in many different sources, such as popular magazines, the food industry and literature from across the world. The diversity was amazing: every week, a new facet of our own culture and of cultures worldwide was revealed. (Gargan et al. 2007)

Not all components of the approach will be transferable to all situations, but it would certainly be possible to set up one or more of the following components for most courses:

- An online edited series of articles based on the best work of students.
- An online edited series of brief insights extracted from students' work.
- Constructive alignment of readings, active learning activities and assignments so that students can apply established models to original data to generate new insights.
- Co-operation with an online journal to publish students' contributions, or
- Co-operation with an online forum to create a space where insights from the course can be shared.

Aside from benefiting ecolinguistic research through disseminating insights which might otherwise have remained hidden, perhaps the greatest benefit of the approach is the gain in students' self-esteem from having their work valued and publicly displayed. Clearly, however, students participated to greater and lesser extents in the forum, and further research will be necessary to determine the impact of the forum on students who did not have their work selected. Overall feedback, however, suggests that almost all students found that the module significantly enhanced their critical awareness of the texts which surround them, and the implications of the texts for society and the ecosystems that society depends on.

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www.ecoling.net/

Language and Ecology on-line journal:
www.ecoling.net/journal.html

Course page: www.ecoling.net/courses.html

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Scholarship projects for undergraduate researchers (SPUR)

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Summary

The Scholarship Projects for Undergraduate Researchers (SPUR) scheme, at Nottingham Trent University, provides bursaries for undergraduates to work on research projects with academic staff in the summer vacation. The aims are to give the students work and research experience, to foster connections between undergraduate and postgraduate communities, to develop skills of benefit to their studies and to inform the curriculum so that a wide cohort of students benefit from the new knowledge. This case study examines the experiences of one student, **Samantha Lister**, working on the peer-reviewed journal, *Writing Technologies*, with lecturers in English Daniel Cordle and Philip Leonard, and also considers the experiences of another student, **Esmé Coulbert**, who worked with Carl Thompson and Betty Hagglund on the Maria Graham Project. The *Writing Technologies* project included experience of researching funding sources and developing funding bids, copy-editing and publishing issue 2.1, developing the journal's network of contacts, improving its website, and also involved writing biographies of the editorial board and participating in editorial meetings regarding new submissions to the journal

Background

During the first round of SPUR in Summer 2008 Nottingham Trent University provided bursaries for 15 scholarship projects to involve second-year undergraduate students. The bursaries were awarded to research teams from diverse disciplines across the institution. Members of the English department won two bursaries, distributing them to students on the basis of a full bursary application and interview; unsuccessful applicants were given feedback on their applications and interview technique. I applied to the *Writing Technologies* project in April 2008 and was granted the five-week bursary to work on the project after a successful interview. I was particularly interested in taking part in the project because of the opportunities it offered me to gain experience in publishing an online journal, to develop my editorial and research skills and to explore the prospect of post-graduate study. I was also keen to engage with the content of the journal as I had had little experience with this area of research during my studies thus far.

Activities

Students participating in English SPUR projects were given a breakdown of tasks to complete, with a view to developing a multitude of skills specific to each area of research. Regular meetings with tutors were built in to discuss progress and address problems arising in the course of the work.

I began by concentrating on issue 1.1 of *Writing Technologies*, and created a database of the current contributors. I then wrote biographies about each member of the editorial board for the journal's website, listing the institution, research interests, current projects and selected publications for each. Other developments that I made to the *Writing Technologies* website include a new / recent books for review section and a links page which will appear for the first time in issue 3.1. It is encouraging to think

that I have made a contribution to the journal that will last beyond the period of my scholarship.

My search then began for new contacts: scholars who shared research interests addressed within *Writing Technologies*, including the impact of the typewriter, the printing press and new media writing upon the changing nature of English as a discipline. I found this a very interesting process, discovering how much research had been carried out in this area and the number of scholars worldwide who were engaged in this area of research. I was surprised at how broad a spectrum this work covered; the result was that article submissions were possible from academics with a wide range of different research interests. From this research, I created a database of new contacts to whom I could later publicise the journal and who might also contribute to it. This was an extremely worthwhile task with, potentially, a very substantial effect on the future development of the journal.

My next task involved researching funding schemes that were available in order to bid for a grant to develop the journal further. This was a difficult task at first but I soon found promising grants, such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Network Grant, that would enable the editors of *Writing Technologies* to establish a network that would continue beyond the grant period and raise the profile of the online journal as a whole. The network would also allow scholars worldwide to come together at Nottingham Trent University and engage with all the areas of research covered by the journal. One further aim of this network as a result of the grant is the possibility for contributors to collaborate for special issues. I was grateful to be involved in researching and preparing the funding bid as it will be fundamental to the development of the journal and the areas of research that it covers. I am keen to see the outcome of the bid beyond the period of my scholarship and hope a successful network is established. Searching for funding also gave me valuable experience that I may require in order to apply for post-graduate funding or in employment.

One other rewarding task that I was given to work on during the period of my scholarship was the copy-editing and publishing of the second issue of the journal (issue 2.1). This involved editorial meetings to discuss submissions and any changes that needed to be made to the layout of the website. This helpful insight into the work behind the scenes of publishing an online journal enabled me to develop editorial skills which will undoubtedly be useful in my future study and career.

Esmé Coulburt has been working on a second SPUR programme within the English department at Nottingham Trent University. Her work focused on the work of the Maria Graham Project: *The Woman Writer and the Cultures of Travel, Science and Publishing in the Early 19th Century*, and is centred in a completely different period to the *Writing Technologies* journal. The project spans the period of Graham's life, from 1795 to 1842, and therefore much of the research involved relies heavily on manuscripts and archival research. Esmé was given the opportunity as part of her bursary to travel to London and Birmingham to undertake such research. The project requires some knowledge of women as writers in this early period. One of its main objectives is to collate all of Graham's work throughout her life and assess it in relation to the genres of travel writing, to the development of science in the period, and to 19th-century publishing.

Esmé reports:

'Many of the tasks that I have been involved in have been to uncover information such as contemporary reviews of Maria Graham's work and to catalogue them. I have also completed extensive research and surveys on Graham's children's history book *Little Arthur's History of England*, which has been extremely helpful in creating a picture of publishing in this period, but also of Graham's relationship with her publisher. The experience of working on this project has proved an invaluable insight into postgraduate research and has given me the skills to organise research projects for not only my dissertation but also future academic or professional work.'

Conclusions

Working on the *Writing Technologies* scholarship project has been very worthwhile in that I have gained a valuable insight into the work required in publishing an online journal and into academic research. The work experience and skills that I have acquired will undoubtedly aid me in my future career plans. The experience has provided me with an insight into the world of academic research which is rarely gained by undergraduate students, and furthermore prepared me for postgraduate study through my engagement with academic scholars beyond the level required for undergraduate study. I will also benefit from the scholarship programme in terms of the research I will be required to carry out for my dissertation during the third year of my undergraduate degree.

Throughout the scholarship programme, I additionally learnt to deal with challenges that can arise in the publication of an online journal. One unfortunate setback was the delayed publication of issue 2.1 which meant that tasks assigned for me to complete had to be put on hold and I had to use my initiative to find alternative work. This was a good lesson however in dealing with problems as they arise and a successful publication of issue 2.1 was made in the final week of my scholarship.

Overall, I feel the SPUR scheme can benefit students and staff across university departments. I felt appreciated for the work I carried out throughout the period of my scholarship and achieved a sense of satisfaction that I have contributed to an area of research that will continue to develop. I believe other English departments could benefit from schemes such as the SPUR as it not only enables student to gain valuable skills but allows for ongoing research projects within an institution to be developed over a concentrated period of time with the help of the bursaries to support students with their living costs.

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www.ntu.ac.uk/writing_technologies/

The Maria Graham Project: www.ntu.ac.uk/hum/centres/english/the_maria_graham_project.html

Arts and Humanities Research at Nottingham Trent University: www.ntu.ac.uk/hum/research/index.html

February 2009

English Online

Editing Lady Hester Pulter (1605 - 1678)

Alice Eardley with Clare Doyle
University of Warwick

Summary

As part of a second-year undergraduate module '17th-Century Literature and Culture', we asked students to annotate a series of unpublished poems by Lady Hester Pulter (1605-1678). Pulter's poems, together with the students' annotations, and a series of relevant resources, including a biography of Pulter, a description of her literary manuscript, and links to relevant criticism, are now available to all staff and student members of Warwick University via a specially designed website. The project was funded by Warwick's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, and the software was designed by Robert O'Toole, the Arts Faculty e-learning Advisor.

Background

A key aim of the '17th-Century Literature and Culture' module, run by Elizabeth Clarke in the English department at Warwick University, is to introduce second-year undergraduates to a wide range of canonical and non-canonical authors and their texts. One of the authors we have successfully taught since 2006 is Lady Hester Pulter, whose extensive literary manuscript remained widely unknown until it was recovered by Mark Robson in 1996. As yet, no full edition of Pulter's works has been published so for teaching purposes we were forced to rely on photocopies of un-annotated transcriptions of her poems. We decided that for future presentations of the module it would be useful to have an online resource that would provide easy access to Pulter's text, together with a range of supporting resources, including biographical information and detailed information about the manuscript not readily available elsewhere.

In addition to providing a ready-made resource for the study of Hester Pulter and her works, we decided that the process of developing the website could be used to teach and promote many of the other issues and skills central both to the module and to the study of English Literature as a whole. As the HEFCE strategy for e-learning makes clear, '[e]-learning has been criticised for being technology led, with a focus on providing materials, but has relatively recently focused more on the learner and on enabling students and other users to develop more independence in learning and to share resources'. One way of promoting the independent study of early modern texts, specifically through the use of online technology, has been outlined by Matthew Steggle who, in his article 'The Reinvention of Scholia: Etexts and the Teaching of Early Modern Literature', emphasises the significance of the 'art of commentary ... as a teaching and learning activity'. (Steggle 2004) He goes on to argue that the 'challenge will be for students – not just at doctoral level, but at undergraduate level too – to research, compile, hot-link, and web-publish commentaries'. Rather than simply provide the students with the materials they needed for the study of Pulter's poetry, we asked them to supply annotations for her poems, which we then added to the website. In doing this we drew on the precedent of a series of existing projects including The Minerva Britannia Project at Middlebury

College, the University of British Columbia – Okanagan project Homosexuality in Early Modern Literature: A Collection of Student-Edited Texts, and Warwick University's own WikiOmeros project. (Hopkins 2009)

The process of supplying annotation for Pulter's poetry was designed to encourage careful and thorough thought about the text and to establish a practice of deep close reading that could be applied to the works of other writers. Students were also encouraged to become familiar with and to make use of all of the research resources available to them, including the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Early English Books Online (EEBO). While these research skills would be generally useful for students working towards a degree in English Literature they also had a specific relevance for further work on the 17th-century course. As part of their assessment all students are required to write an essay on a document available on EEBO that has never appeared in a modern edition. The work the students were asked to do for the online Pulter edition enabled them to gain an early taste of the work that would be required of them later. It was also hoped that the process of annotating the poems would allow the students to gain some insight into the construction of, and to develop a healthy scepticism towards, the literary editions they regularly use for their studies.

Overall, the project was designed to integrate teaching with the on-going, up-to-date research being conducted in Warwick's Centre for the Study of the Renaissance, specifically work previously done by the Perdita Project team, which for many years had been involved in research into and the cataloguing of manuscripts produced by early modern women, and also my own work on an edition of Pulter's poetry and prose. (Eardley, forthcoming) Students were given the opportunity to engage in their own original research and to directly contribute to the work being carried out by members of staff.

Activities

Initial work for the project involved the creation of the website, which I carried out with the technical support of Robert O'Toole. Using the University's 'Sitebuilder' system I uploaded transcriptions of 50 of Pulter's poems onto the site. I then created a series of additional resources, specifically a description of Pulter's manuscript, a biography of Pulter, a bibliography, and a page providing information about how to conduct research for annotations. With the website in place we introduced the project to the students during a lecture, which allowed me to demonstrate the website via 'PowerPoint' and to explain what was required of them. During seminars we divided the students into pairs and assigned one poem per pair. They were given four weeks, the duration of the Christmas vacation, to complete work on their poem.

The students submitted their work directly to me via an electronic form available on the website. This required the student to provide his or her name and email address, the name of the poem for which he or she was supplying information, and also the specific word he or she wanted to annotate, together with its line number. The form could not be submitted if any field was left blank. The annotations reached me in the form of a spreadsheet and I was then able to vet them and transfer them to the relevant place on the website. I exercised final editorial control over all submissions; if anything was wrong or misleading I referred

it back to the contributing student for correction before the information was posted on the site. The annotations themselves were added to the site in the form of a glossary.

Each word or phrase for which a student supplied an annotation, together with the information provided, was entered into the glossary separately where it was automatically alphabetised. I was then able to create links from individual words within the poems to the relevant entry within the glossary. Within each poem, words with links appear in blue and when selected a pop-up appears bearing the relevant annotation. These annotations are also able to bear links to external resources meaning the reader can be directed elsewhere for further information about a particular reference.

Once work on the annotations had been completed, we used seminar sessions for debriefing the students and for receiving their feedback on the project. We then taught Pulter's text as a regular part of the '17th-Century Literature and Culture' course, using the website as a resource.

An exciting, and initially unexpected, extension to the project came about when we received funding from Warwick's Undergraduate Research Scholarship Scheme (URSS) to employ Clare Doyle, then a second-year undergraduate, for four weeks to contribute further work to the website. We asked her to contribute further annotations to her own selection of poems and also to create a short video for the site. Here she describes the work she did as part of the project:

With the URSS I had the opportunity to research and annotate a selection of the poems over the Easter vacation and selected 10 poems as a starting point, some of which had already been researched by other students, whilst others had previously been unavailable on the website and so were entirely unannotated. Online resources were the primary means by which I carried out my research; I relied heavily upon the online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in my attempts to modernise any archaic spelling and identify the correct definition for the 17th-century context and used websites such as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and British History Online in order to identify dates and individuals that are referenced within the poems. After these initial searches, I then turned to Early English Books Online and Literature Online as a way to find similar uses of phrases or individuals in other writing of the period. One instance where this was especially illuminating occurred whilst researching a poem which refers to Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle; after using biographies and other historical resources, I searched Literature Online and was able to find many other examples of a similar usage of these two figures as types of royalist heroes, thereby uncovering both a historical basis of the poem and its wider political and literary context. As well as this linguistic and historical investigation of the poems, I spent a considerable proportion of the time trying to identify the many literary allusions that Pulter uses. Again, online resources were the predominant means by which I carried out this research and I frequently turned to an online edition of the King James Bible and an online edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Although these texts all exist in physical format, I found that the online versions made my work far more efficient due to the ability to search within the entire edition for a particular word, character or phrase.

The other aspect of my contribution to the website, the making of a short film of Pulter's life, involved a similar dependency upon computer software. I first created a plan detailing the outline of the film including a script for the dialogue, the images which were to be used and the sections of the poems which were to be included within the film. I then visited Hertfordshire in April 2009 with my supervisors to record footage of Pulter's house, gardens, local churches and other landmarks which she references in her poems. Back at Warwick, with help from Robert O'Toole and the University's e-learning team, I used 'iMovie' editing software to construct the film according to the outline I had devised and recorded voice-overs to connect all the differing sections of the film, the final version of which can be viewed on the project website.'

Conclusions

Feedback from students concerning the project was overwhelmingly positive. Many reported initially feeling nervous about using the online technology but once they actually came to use the system they found it extremely straightforward. Generally, they found the opportunity to conduct original research exciting and stimulating and we received several comments along these lines. For one student the project was 'a super opportunity to do something different and grown up' while another described it as '[a]n extremely useful project; one that promoted individual research and gave us the opportunity to contribute original ideas'. Our initial aim to encourage students to develop a strategy for deeper reading of primary texts appears to have been successful. We received several comments indicating this was the case; one student remarked that the project was a '[g]ood exercise in close reading' while another said that it '[r]eally helped me to think about the poems more deeply'. Gratifyingly, several students concluded that they 'would relish the opportunity to repeat this activity with Pulter or another poet'.

Clare Doyle, who undertook particularly extensive work for the project, was similarly enthusiastic:

The opportunity to contribute to the annotations of the online edition was an enjoyable change from the usual essay-based work of the degree course. Initially, I expected to be able to extensively annotate more than the 10 poems I had selected as a starting point, but I soon realized that no amount of time spent researching a particular word or phrase would guarantee an outcome of an accurate and relevant annotation; often the most interesting discovery occurred whilst I was searching for information on another poem, and in other cases it was possible to spend hours investigating a word without coming any closer to an explanation. My experiences as part of the project therefore gave me a greater appreciation for the skill and time needed to create an extensively annotated edition of poetry, and has provided me with a greater awareness of the attention required to thoroughly understand and unravel a literary text. Although in some ways I feel that the time I invested into research did not always materialize into useful annotations, the work has greatly improved my ability to effectively use online resources such as Early English Books Online and Literature Online which has had a positive effect on many of my subsequent essays. I feel that this project was especially beneficial for all the students who took part in the way

that it enabled us to contribute to the research taking place in the department, demonstrating that through careful close reading, we are able to bring something to a text as well as simply taking from it.

A significant indication of the enthusiasm that the students felt for Pulter and her poetry was provided by the anonymous creation of a Hester Pulter profile on the social networking site Facebook. At the time of writing, 'Hester Pulter' has a network of 129 'friends' linked to her site and from time to time she publishes a new poem, composed in a perfect pastiche of the original Pulter's style. Once they had owned up to creating the profile, the students responsible, Katie Bell and Stephanie Taylor, put together a wall display for the department, show-casing all the work that had been done on Pulter during the academic year.

From my own perspective, while I feel the project was generally a success, there are a few things I would change. With regards to the technical side of things, I would slightly modify the submission form so that students did not have to submit each annotation separately. The system was initially set up this way due to the limitations of the template available for creating an online form. More broadly, I would devote some of the introductory session on the project to asking the students to think carefully about the words, phrases and images that they would need to annotate. There is some degree of inconsistency in the work produced and some strange omissions from the annotations. This means that, until these omissions are corrected, future users of the website will have to make do without information that would have been extremely useful. I would also take greater advantage of the opportunity presented by the project to encourage students to critically evaluate the online resources to which they have access. Although I provided links to the most reliable and scholarly online resources (such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*) many students continued to settle for information generated from internet searches, regardless of its origin. I would also, if possible, find a way of assessing the work produced so that it contributed, even by a small amount, to the final mark for the module. As things stood, the effect of not making the work assessed meant that some students worked far harder than others and this at least partially helps to explain the degree of inconsistency evident in the work produced.

Overall, however, we were very pleased with the quality of the work the students produced and were encouraged by their enthusiastic engagement with original research. At Warwick, we now have a useful resource that we will continue using in all future presentations of the '17th-Century Literature and Culture' module. More generally, the process of annotating poetry introduced a level of skill and a degree of discipline to close reading that could be usefully replicated elsewhere.

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Project website

Editing Hester Pulter: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/projects/hesterpulter/

February 2010



Plot-casting: using student-generated audiobooks for learning and teaching

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Summary

This case study reports on a recent pedagogical initiative making use of podcasting technology in the classroom. The project involved getting students to create their own 'talking book' or audiobook recording of a Victorian novel. During Semester One of the academic year 2007-8, members of the third-year undergraduate module 'Sensation Novels of the 1860s' in the School of English at the University of Leeds were invited to create a recording of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*. Each week four students (out of 40 in total) from their respective seminar groups recorded designated chapters, which were preserved as MP3 files using the free digital recording software 'Audacity'. These podcast recordings were then made available to other members of the seminar through a module blog created in the Leeds Elgg weblog community. The blog's RSS feeds automatically notified students each time new podcasts were posted for peer assessment. At the end of term, individual recordings were combined to form a complete recording stored on the Library's MIDESS Digital Repository, where it will be available for free distribution to members of the university in the form of a digital audiobook.

Background

The University of Leeds places great emphasis on research-led teaching, and this project emerged from an interest in devising an effective way of integrating into undergraduate teaching my research on the evolution of reading practices. While reading today is often thought of as a silent, solitary act, this was not the case for readers in previous centuries who often participated in communal readings. For example, one of Dickens' fans was an illiterate charwoman who attended monthly readings of *Dombey and Son* hosted at a local snuff shop. She was just one among many readers in the 19th century who would have heard rather than read such narratives. For obvious reasons, it is difficult to dislodge in student minds the modern conception of fiction as a predominantly solitary recreation as opposed to a communal pastime. My previous efforts to draw attention to this difference had been ineffective due to the time constraints involved in seminar teaching. Usually we settled for reading aloud a short passage at one of our weekly meetings followed by discussion of the ways in which reading aloud differs from silent reading. This did not allow students to experience the difference for themselves, however, and motivated me to develop a method by which students could experience at first hand the difference between reading aloud and silent reading. As I discovered, there is no better way to demonstrate how reading practices commonly used in the 19th century differ from today's methods than through active student participation in reading aloud – a skill for which students are increasingly unprepared.

Practice

I encouraged students to create their own audiobook recordings of Victorian novels. This is not as difficult as it sounds. The technology is already available at most universities; the only expense for my project was the purchase of eight headsets to enable students to make recordings on their home computers. Here are the steps taken by my project:

First, students were assigned chapters for individual recordings during the first week of our 11-week term. The novel was divided into 40 sections, approximately one segment for each student enrolled in the module. The recordings were made through the use of 'Audacity', free recording software available by download to the student's own computer. Free DIY recording software such as 'Audacity' makes it simpler than ever before for individuals to record their own audiobooks. Now anyone can record an audiobook with a voice, a computer, and recording software. This is particularly easy to do through the use of the podcast (a portmanteau word combining the name of Apple's 'iPod' and the term 'broadcast'), a digital audio file distributed over the internet to one's computer. Instructions on how to use the 'Audacity' software were made available through the module website located in the university's VLE. Additional instructions were provided to get students to think about various practical aspects of reading aloud:

- Am I reading slowly enough?
- Will the audience be able to hear me?
- Should I do the characters in different voices?

Students were encouraged to annotate scripts beforehand in order to adapt the printed text for oral delivery. The script was then read aloud into the computer's microphone in as engaging a voice as possible. Afterwards, the recording was saved as an MP3 file. This format had the benefit of being compatible with various media such as email, mobile phones, and ipods. More importantly, the MP3 file could be uploaded to the module blog for peer review by other students.

Second, four of these recordings would be delivered to the blog each week, when RSS feeds would automatically notify other members of the class of new content. This not only staggered the amount of listening required by each student (Victorian novels are very long, after all) but also it recreated the experience of serialisation appropriate to 19th-century novels often read in weekly instalments rather than as a single volume. All students on the module became members of the blog located in the LeedsBlogs weblog community. The blog was a crucial component in making the project genuinely interactive by providing a forum for the discussion of both pedagogical and technical issues. First, students were given the opportunity to introduce their recordings with prefatory comments, and fellow students were given the chance to respond with their own reactions. These replies ranged from admiration of certain narrative techniques to queries about the best way to handle difficult aspects of the narrative. Second, students who had completed recordings were able to offer advice to students who had not yet completed their chapters. I was able to resolve technical difficulties throughout the term as well by providing occasional updates to the blog.

A recording from the 'Plot-casting' project is available in the online version of this case study, at www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies/technology/plotcasting.php The recording, of 'The Story Continued in Several narratives' from *The Woman in White*, is read by Alys Mostyn, and was posted to the blog on 14 November 2007. The podcast is prefaced with the warning: 'here's the next instalment, please excuse the atrocious accents, I couldn't help myself!' It shows an ambitious attempt to dramatise the reading through the use of cockney dialect for the voice of Hester Pinhorn, the cook in an aristocratic household.

Finally, the individual recordings made throughout the semester were compiled into a completed audiobook at the end of term. This digital audiobook was stored on the Library's MIDESS Digital Repository, where it will be available for free download by members of the community. Subsequent trials may vary the set text for recording until a substantial catalogue of recordings is accumulated for public use. Students will be able to point toward this achievement at the end of the semester or, better yet, play it for friends and family who show an interest in their studies. This project thereby instils greater awareness of the ways in which media influence our understanding of literature while at the same time providing the community with a free audiobook.

Conclusions

The hands-on use of digital audio in the classroom is a useful way to enhance student awareness of how various ways of reading influence the reception of literature. After the project's completion, the majority of questionnaires cited the experience of reading aloud as an enjoyable and instructive activity that encouraged students to reflect on its differences with silent reading. One student remarked that the project helped her to think about Victorian novels as 'oral traditions', and another student suggested that the project had revived Wilkie Collins' novel for the 'blog generation'.

The majority of students participating in the project indicated that making audio recordings had influenced the way they think about literature. The most common response was heightened awareness of the difference made by reading aloud to aural aspects of the narrative such as voice and dialect. As one student observed, 'Giving a voice and expression to the characters made me view them in more interesting ways'. A number of students found the oral readings to be more dramatic than silent readings, or in the words of this student: 'it made me think about the performative quality of the texts – the different 'sensations' that hearing it read aloud produces'. Or as another student described her reaction to the novel when read aloud: 'it made me see it as something more vibrant'. This often resulted in a better understanding of individual characters. One student described this altered relationship in the following words: 'I found it enjoyable to get into the nuances of character through interpreting their speech verbally'. An additional benefit of reading aloud was closer attention to the actual text: 'Made me realise how much detail I skip over when reading in my head—you notice a lot more about the writing when reading aloud'. Finally, the experience succeeded in making at least one student reflect on how reading practices have changed over the past century: 'It made me realise how much we have lost by not reading aloud any more'.

The project was not without technical difficulties during its initial run, but I intend to repeat the project next year in order to formulate a model of good practice for other instructors who may be interested in getting their students to read aloud for whatever reason. As this project has demonstrated, 'talking books' can be one of the most effective ways to get students talking about books.

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Resources for the use of podcasting technology in Higher Education are available at the University of Leeds' Staff and Departmental Developmental Unit's podcasting website: www.sddu.leeds.ac.uk/online_resources/podcasting/

January 2008



Text.play.space: creative online activities in English Studies

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Summary

This case study offers an account of some creative-critical online activities which appear as part of a portfolio of assessed online activities on an undergraduate course on the Victorians at the University of Wolverhampton. The activities are briefly described, and examples of how well students can respond to them are given. I argue that this kind of activity can only really work online and wouldn't in a face-to-face situation, and is thus one way that e-learning can open up new pedagogic possibilities in English Studies.

Background

E-learning can enhance and expand both what and how we teach. The corollary of this is that it can also offer students new ways to learn. For the past three years I've been involved in using a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as an integrated part of two third-level undergraduate modules I teach on the Victorians as part of the English Studies degree at the University of Wolverhampton. Students come to these courses knowing that there is going to be an online component, and also knowing that the work they do online is going to be assessed. Over a 12-week teaching term the students take part in a number of online activities which follow on from the topics, discussions and debates that have started in the face-to-face classroom. Although the students all act as individuals in their responses to these activities, and are assessed as such, the space where they demonstrate their learning online is a collaborative one in discussion forums set up for each exercise. I repeatedly emphasise to the class – and my assessment criteria support this – that they will be given credit not only for what they post in response to any given task, but also for how they interact with and respond to the postings of others. In this short case study I want to focus in particular on one kind of online activity that I have been able to bring into the mix. These have a different and distinctive feel to them, and that is because they ask for a kind of imaginative creativity as a way of demonstrating literary-critical knowledge.

Activities

Elaine Showalter says in the opening pages of *Teaching Literature* that she would like to see 'an erosion of the boundaries between literary criticism and creative writing' in 21st-century teaching (Showalter 2003, viii), and Veronica Austen has noted recently that 'rarely do students in literature courses have the opportunity to experience producing their own creative work' (Austen 2005, 138). The following activities inhabit, and contribute to creating that creative-critical territory. In a majority of my online activities students enter discussion forums as themselves, but it is of course possible to be other than oneself in online space. You don't only – or even – need to enter a virtual world such as Second Life in order to take on an avatar or role-playing function in cyberspace. It is perfectly possible within a VLE, and the ludic and identity-swapping possibilities of subjectivity online can be harnessed to educational ends.

On the 'Victorian Vision: Literature and Culture c. 1830-1880' module, 'The Dickens Debate' is our online session which follows from an in-class consideration of *Bleak House*. The session guidelines inform the class that they are going

to participate in a debate with the motion 'This House Believes that the Law is an Ass'. However, the distinctive difference from previous online sessions thus far on the course is that for this activity each and every student must enter the discussion forum as a character from the novel and respond to the motion, and everyone else who enters the forum as such. Here's an example of what can happen:

This house believes that the law is an ass

Do you?

Miles, Rosie @ 23/11/2006 12:52:49

Mr. Skimpole

Well, frankly, I believe that it is quite preposterous that you should even think of asking me such a question. Being the child that I am, I believe that any consideration of the law and the ethics which surround it is to grand an idea for my simple mind. And using such choice language to one so young is in fact quite uncalled for. I hope you are ashamed of yourself Dr Miles.

Quigley, Dominic @ 23/11/2006 16:27:40

RE: Mr. Skimpole

Hey Mr Skimpole!

Ain't it a shame the law's an ass for us children – as un' calls me sometimes an' as ye call y'self? Ye think t' law isn't an ass, as it doesn't punish ye for being a crook, for so ye are, wisher may die if ye're not!!!! I c'n be called a child, I dunnot know nothink, but I'm no thief!!!! Ye too moved me on!!!! Ye're no child, ye dunnot understand children!

Jo.

Schwab, Annie @ 24/11/2006 15:48:46

RE: Mr. Skimpole

Lemme add the law is an ass, as it does nothink fur children like you an' fur children like me!!!!

Jo.

Schwab, Annie @ 24/11/2006 15:50:11

RE: Mr. Skimpole

Sorry child, I would love to hear what you have to say but I can't actually understand what you are on about. Hang on, you look familiar? Are you the child with the smallpox? Aaaaah! Get away from me. I am obviously sympathetic to your affliction but please for the love of God stay away from me. Would money help? Well here is a shilling. Actually I am out of pocket at the moment. Mr Jarndyce ... Where are you ...?

Mrs Skimpole.

Quigley, Dominic @ 24/11/2006 16:53:42

And another:

Lady Dedlock

I simply have scorn for these crooks, these mean villains who bother me with questions about people I ought to have met, about letters I ought to have read ... The law is an ass indeed and Tulkinghorn is a true representative of that kind.

Jacquot, Emilie A. @ 23/11/2006 16:58:46

RE: Lady Dedlock

Ah – I see we agree on something at last Lady Dedlock! Though having cast me aside with no thought for what might become of me, you seem to feel that you are above the law.

You are a woman with no heart, and you need to be made to feel like some of us who have lost everything! I would like to see you rot in some stinking prison cell waiting for an execution which befits the type of woman you really are – yes?

Mlle Hortense

Conway, Naomi J. @ 23/11/2006 19:53:19

RE: Lady Dedlock

Oh, Mademoiselle Hortense, how dare you talk like that to a woman who was kind to you during so many years? You criticize her but you are not better: you betrayed her because of jealousy. Believe me: hatred and anger can just lead to suffering and unhappiness. Forget your resentment.

And if I were you, I wouldn't rely on the law to get a revenge. You have time to die before the law coming to a decision. Look at my poor Richard: the more he works for the Jarndyce vs Jarndyce case, the less results he gets.

Ada

Comte, Melanie @ 23/11/2006 22:22:13

RE: Lady Dedlock

Madame I could not have been jealous of a young inexperienced girl had I not been cruelly cast aside. You say How dare I speak to a lady who was kind to me for so many years. Chut! You, I know, are a kind lady and probably treat your young maid with kindness and compassion. However, I say to you – you do not know how cold and unfeeling Lady Dedlock can be. I only betrayed her, because she betrayed me.

One thing though – you are correct when you speak of the law being so slow – those pigs in chancery are no better qualified than you or I to play with people's lives and emotions the way they do.

Mlle Hortense

Conway, Naomi J. @ 24/11/2006 22:31:09

RE: Lady Dedlock

Poor Hortense, you are so passionate and wild! If YOU had a heart you would not have helped Tulkinghorn, this wretch, to find out my secret. If YOU had been a good maid, you would not have troubled me even if I may have been unfair with you. Rosa is so young, so beautiful, she could have been my ... you know what I mean. If YOU had thought about it twice, maybe you would have realised that the law is an ass, not because you are sent to jail for a murder, but because I am locked in despair in my own body, not able to say anything because the Law would not learn my secret without my entire family being dishonoured. Am I to be called a criminal for what I have done?? Dites-moi, mademoiselle Hortense ...

Lady Dedlock.

Jacquot, Emilie A. @ 23/11/2006 22:23:01

RE: Lady Dedlock

Eh bien, Madame – may I say that if you had once treated me as a confidante, as I was in my previous post by a most genteel lady in Paris, I may have found out something about this – locked in despair in your own body. How poetic you are Madame, how ... *eloquent* is it you English say, yes?

I will now speak plain to you Madame – that is, on the subject of you being a criminal for what you have done. Ecoutez-bien! I care not a bit for what you have done – you are not the first self-made lady to fall. There are very very many in Paris, but none who I feel could be so cruel as to cast a faithful maid aside as you have done. In my simple eyes, that is your crime. In my simple eyes, Tulkinghorn, as a representation of the English fetid law, is also, sorry, was also an ass – he felt he could use emotional blackmail to his own advantage and he deserve to die – oh yes he DID deserve to die.

But you also should pay for the way you have lived your life Madame, and I suppose, ultimately you will, c'est vrai.

Mlle Hortense.

Conway, Naomi J. @ 24/11/2006 22:41:07

In order to do well here, students need to have a good grip on their character as presented in *Bleak House*. Of course Dickens works supremely well for this, as do other 19th-century novels, but the exercise could also work in a meta-textual way using works where the notion of character is called into question, thus drawing attention to the way that characters are constructed (and deconstructed) in different ways. Inhabiting the voice of a character effectively involves the student being aware of how that character has been put together in the first place.

The considerable cast of *Bleak House* meant that every student could pick their own character to play. My session guidelines had also stipulated the constraint that no character must be played by more than one person, which produced a healthy and benign sense of competition in that if a student really wanted to play a given character then they needed to make sure that they entered the discussion forum sooner rather than later to 'bag' them. This also worked to incentivise the class to join in the session quickly, and they also needed to be reading what was being posted in the forum before they joined in in order to be sure that they weren't repeating a character. (1) Another positive secondary effect of the 'Dickens Debate' session was that it encouraged more students to engage in detail with the novel itself. When 'The Victorian Vision' was only assessed by two essays a number of students would 'opt out' of bothering with a long novel like *Bleak House* because they weren't going to choose it as a focus for their assignments. However, once *Bleak House* had an online session attached to it, and the students knew that participating in all the online sessions could optimise their chances of gaining good marks for this form of assessment, then engagement with the novel increased all round, including in the face-to-face classroom.

1. My online sessions are also all timebound, in the sense that they start the day that I have a face-to-face class and then continue for a week. The class thus know that if they visit the discussion forum during this week then there will be considerable activity. There is a certain critical mass of activity necessary on a discussion board for it to be successful.

I have also used the role-playing potential of discussion forums to bring characters into collision from different texts, where a similar attentiveness not only to the particularities of character, but also to the nuance of plot details and action, can be exploited to great effect. My final online session on 'The Victorian Vision' course falls towards the end of term, in December, and exploits the fact that the Victorians practically invented Christmas. I provide links to a number of websites which describe Victorian Christmas customs and practices as well as offering the class some of my favourite Victorian Kitsch websites as an end-of-term gift. The exercise? Once again the class are invited to enter the discussion forum in character, but this time they can be any character from any of the texts we've studied over the entire course. Aside from *Bleak House* these had included Gaskell's *North and South*, Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', Webster's 'A Castaway' and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*. Once in the Forum they were to tell their fellow characters what they were doing that Christmas, drawing on some of the resources they had been given if needed. The first time I tried this exercise was in December 2004 and the results went way beyond anything I had imagined:

John Thornton

Seasons greetings dear friends!

I have decided to send you all shorts for Christmas – cotton that is, not alcoholic! My workers have been doing overtime to add the finishing touch – the special gold embossed 'JT – Pride of the North' monogram. I must reward them with extra fruit in their plum puddings.

The 'Modelled in Milton' range will be available from all high-class haberdashers over the festive season. On the advice of my dear Margaret (she undoubtedly has superior style and breeding), we have used a refined cotton yarn to suit the more genteel taste of our southern clientele – though my mother thinks that my relationship with Margaret and my reading of Thomas Carlyle has made me a little sensitive of late.

For Frederick, I will be sending a special lightweight version, more suitable for warmer climes; for Mr Hale, seven pairs so that he doesn't religiously have to wear the same pair every day; for Margaret, a pair made of the finest silk (I blush at the thought); and for my mother, an extra large version, to hold in all of her northern pride.

Mr. Tulkinghorn will receive a slim version to wear under his Chancery suit; Mr. Krook, an extra special pair from our fireproof range; Lady Dedlock, a pair in which to hide her secret (oops – too risqué!), and for Robert Talboys, a pair from our 'padded seat' range, especially equipped to cushion one's landing at the bottom of a deep well.

For all of those I have missed, I will be inviting you to the special Christmas opening of our new (fluff-free) canteen, which will feature a guest appearance by Mr. Charles Darwin who will be presenting his paper: 'The Origin of Christmas: Is Rudolph the Missing Link?'

Until then, I wish you all a wonderful *laissez faire* of a Christmas.

Wright, Anthony @ 13/12/2004 19:00:35

Jo's Christmas

Oi wud loik to wish everyone a appy Krismus but oi don't know nuffin, so don't know how. The ouse at Tom-all-Alone's, that I used to live in fell down last week, so im livin under a bush now. oi ope u all can give a shillin to a poor crossin sweeper who don't know nuffin an aint dun nuffin rong. woops gotta go here comes that bludy copper again...

Hibbins, Graham @ 10/12/2004 20:53:38

re: Jo's Christmas

Dear Jo, What great catastrophe for you!

You have reminded me of my former life of happiness at Thrushcross Grange. The magnificent fragrant spruce tree that fair reached the ceiling, decorated with beautiful coloured shapes of glass, tiny wooden crosses and flickering candles ... Hidden in the boughs would always be a tiny little sweep holding his chimney sweeper's brush at a jaunty angle. How I wish I were there to see it this day.

Keep warm little Jo. Maybe some kind gentleman will find you a home where you will be well cared for.

Yours truly,

Isabella Linton-Heathcliff

Bridgman, Rosemarie-anne @ 10/12/2004 21:38:05

re: Jo's Christmas

oim pleased oi cud elp u remember ur krismus but oi don't know no thrushcross gunge or no tree for that matter. oi only no the bush oi sleep under. oi do no ware someone doid tho n if u givus alf a crown like that othe nice wumun giv me oi cud sho u. she told me I new nuffin but er is ded now so...

Hibbins, Graham @ 14/12/2004 14:19:28

RE: Jo's Christmas

Dear Jo,

Christmas is a time when we all need to be charitable to the poor. I would like to make the long journey from Milton to Tom-all-Alone's to bring you some of our festive treats but unfortunately I have letters to attend to. I will ask Margaret if she can travel to you by train on the morrow.

God bless you,

Mr. Hale.

Purcell, Justine @ 11/12/2004 14:18:05

RE: Jo's Christmas

thank you mister hale oi cannot tell a lie so don't know nuffin about no margret or no train oi just keep sweeping me crossin. wot r letters n wots god n will he bless me with muny? u see oi don't know nuffin...
Hibbins, Graham @ 14/12/2004 14:25:08

Re: Jo's Christmas

Poor little Jo, another soul excluded from Christmas because you don't have a place in the world. Well, neither do I, little Jo. I too am alone over the festive period. I am grateful that I have a home unlike you but I pay a high price for the roof over my head. Pay me a visit over Christmas Jo, it would be nice to see you were well.
Eulalie J
Morgan, Sarah @14/12/2004 18:06:34

Re: Jo's Christmas

ello eulalie, not sure oi can come un see u at krismus, oi have to get up from me bush n sweep me crossin wen sun comes up n if I sweep it all day oi might earn a penny.

oi think oi saw u t'uther day near me crossin wiv ur purple dress n red air woz that u? oi remember everything bout wot people wear but I no nuffin really...
Hibbins, Graham @ 15/12/2004 12:10:47

Re: Jo's Christmas – a suggestion

ello caddy oi did as u sed n wen n saw missus jellyby but she chased me out the ouse wiv me broom n said oi wasunt in need loik er African childers. can oi com roun to urs n spen kristmus wiv u? oi can danse a bit but oi don't know no music. oi wuden tell noone oi jus link evryfin oi don't know nuffin.
Hibbs, Graham @ 14/12/2004 14:35:49

There is a great *joie de vivre* about all of this, and it was clear that the class was having a ball. I actively encouraged them to be as witty and imaginative as they could be, within the 'believable' bounds of their chosen character, and alongside this there is an awareness of how character and plot details can be harnessed to the creation of altogether playfully new tales. Other encounters involved Margaret Hale trying to persuade the Lady of Shalott, Isabella, Caddy, Eulalie and Lady Audley that they should all join the Victorian Ladies Society (2); a reformed Heathcliff (post anger-management classes) trying to cheer up a rather miserable Tithonus; numerous invitations from one character to come over for Christmas dinner, with details

of what they were eating; several characters from *North and South* enjoying a time-travelling deconstruction of how their characters had been (mis)represented in a recent BBC adaptation of the novel which had been on British television during the autumn of 2004; and even a Queen's Speech to the Empire with a brief lecture on the origin of the Christmas tree.

Conclusions

As part of a portfolio of online exercises on a course I think that such role-playing has an integral part to play. The creative alongside the critical, indeed, the creative as critical, is an enhancement of the possibilities for student learning in English Studies. Needless to say, perhaps, in the light of the above posts, these activities make a very positive impact on the students. In an evaluative questionnaire on all aspects of the VLE work which I give to every cohort one question asks whether any of the online activities were particularly successful. 78% of respondents in my most recent cohort explicitly mentioned the role-playing.(3) This kind of activity also exploits e-learning's potential to facilitate what D. R. Garrison and Terry Anderson refer to as 'its capacity to support reflective text-based interaction, independent of the pressures of time and the constraints of distance' (Garrison and Anderson 2003, 6). Had I tried these activities in the classroom their nature would have changed: they would effectively have become drama workshops and would not have worked with a group of students unused to that kind of live role-play. But when the discussion forum becomes the virtual theatre to which the students bring their written, rather than spoken performances, they collaborate to produce a unique creative response to the texts they have been reading and studying with no sense of limiting self-consciousness. What they produce is also full of a dynamism which results from the whole being greater than the sum of its parts (however fine some of their individual performances are): they need and feed off each other's posts as spurs to their own further creativity. 'We need to start,' suggest Garrison and Anderson, 'by asking what e-learning will allow us to do that we could not do before' (2003, 7), and I hope that this case study has offered one response to that question from an English Studies perspective.

References

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- Garrison, D. R. and T. Anderson (2003) *E-Learning in the 21st Century: A Framework for Research and Practice*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Showalter, E. (2003) *Teaching Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell.

October 2007

2. The Victorian Ladies Society can be found at www.victorianladiessociety.com/index.html. Well worth a visit with one's tongue planted firmly in one's cheek.

3. Comments from the students include the following: 'I enjoyed the ones which involved you getting into characters, as I found this was interesting, and usually quite a fun way of gaining more understanding of character – although I also found it challenging trying to think of what the character would say.' 'When we had to be a character the sessions were successful and dynamic.' 'The Bleak House session [was particularly successful], because it was not only based on knowledge but creativity, which skill is equally important.'

Using online learning journals to enhance students' engagement with literary theory

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Summary

In this case study I describe how online learning journals were used to help students to engage with literary theory on a module on contemporary Canadian fiction. The reflective journals enhanced seminar discussions and motivated students to complete the critical reading. They also brought about some unanticipated benefits, including improving students' writing, and assisting me as the module leader in my preparation for each seminar. When students were asked to evaluate the usefulness of the journals, they were very positive about them, and their comments, along with the text of the journal entries, suggested that they were an effective tool for fostering deep learning.

Context

I developed the reflective journals as part of a final-year module on contemporary Canadian writing, in which students explored the relationship between fiction and history through a series of Canadian novels and a selection of critical pieces. These texts introduced ideas from literary theory, narratology, historiography, postmodernism, postcolonialism, feminist theory and related areas. The first year I ran the module, I came up against the difficulty habitually faced by those who teach English literature seminars: getting students to do the required reading. Moreover, it seemed from students' oral presentations and from general class discussion that where the theoretical material had been read, it had not prompted the kind of deep learning that is needed for denser critical pieces: students had applied tactics from surface or strategic learning. An additional factor was the composition of the class, which included students from two different degree streams. Those from the English Literature stream were likely to be unfamiliar with Canadian history and culture, and those from the American and Canadian Studies stream were on the whole less comfortable with the staples of literary study, close reading and engagement with literary theory.

Elbow and Sorcinelli suggest that reflective journals work best when they are used for the purpose of exploring and processing one's reading (2006, 193). My aim, then, was to use the journals to motivate the students to do the required reading for each class, and also to give them a means of better absorbing its content, not only to enhance their own learning experience but also to prevent the discrepancy in the background knowledge of the two groups from being a barrier to good discussion. Because I was dissatisfied with the way students 'name-checked' various critical movements and theorists without displaying an understanding of them – for example dropping into their oral presentations terms such as 'postmodernism', 'postcolonialism' or 'historiographic metafiction' in superficial ways – I wanted to provide a nonpressurised environment in which they could work through these complex concepts without the fear of being penalised for erroneous thinking or imperfectly articulated prose, and to provoke, in Phyllis Creme's words, 'a kind of edgy nonchalance wherein the learner can be engaged and challenged but also feel free to play with ideas' (2008, 50). As an undergraduate and a postgraduate student myself, I had found that difficult concepts from literary theory sprang to

life when I was able to understand them in a wider context, usually in relation to a primary text or my own experience, so I sought in this activity to give students similar opportunities to ground abstract concepts in something more concrete. I was also keen for them to have some practice at developing their own critical voice, something which would assist them in carrying the cognitive tools of critical thinking beyond the context of their university course (Barnett 1997, 111). As the seminar classroom is a public space in which any utterance is part of a social performance, and in which there is some pressure to produce well-thought out analyses, it is not a particularly conducive place for such reflections. I decided, therefore, on the framework of a private reflective journal, seen only by the student and by me, in the hope of reducing the burden of analytical performance anxiety.

Practice

Over the course of a term, the students were asked to complete nine journal entries of at least one paragraph in length. The instructions which appeared every time they logged into the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to complete an entry are reproduced below. Underpinning these instructions are the four aspects which Brockbank and McGill (1998, 102-103) identify as central to learning journals: they are confidential, they concern the student rather than others, they are a space for reflective reporting, and they function as a vehicle for learning. I also outlined my rationale to the students in class, explaining that the journals were designed to help them process complex ideas, and also to motivate (force!) them to do the preparatory reading so that our discussions in class would be productive rather than being carried by the few diligent students who had done their preparation.

Journal of responses to critical reading and set texts

This is where you should write up your individual journal of responses to the critical reading and the set texts.

Think of it as a 'learning journal' which is yours and yours alone. The idea is for you use this as a tool to help you absorb what is in the critical readings.

All you need to do is, after you have done the required reading each week, to write one paragraph on it. This could be a response, or a reaction; perhaps it sparked off something in your head that illuminated the novel you were reading, or reminded you of another critical piece. It does not have to be profound, or well written, structured or argued – it is for me to see that you have done the reading, thought about it, and posted something to indicate this. (You can, of course, post something longer than a paragraph if you like, but I don't expect more than a paragraph.)

Your journal is private – it cannot be viewed by other members of the group, only by you and me. You can also, potentially, use your journal entries in other parts of your assessment. You may come back to ideas that you had some weeks earlier while framing an essay question. You may take something you wrote in draft form here, tidy it up, make it into an argument and use it as a posting in the online discussion forum.

One of the things that can make classes in literature really dire is if students haven't done the reading – or if one person has done the reading and takes over the discussion. I am sure you are all familiar with both of these dynamics, and want to avoid them as much as I do. If you do the reading, we will have good discussions and good classes – this is a way to help you structure your reading and also motivate you to do it. I want to use this online journal to enhance both your individual learning and also our classroom environment. (It is also something that cannot be done at the last minute – it's very clear to me when you posted!)

By the end of the course, you should have at least nine postings. The course outline sets out the nine weeks when you need to post (under the weekly headings 'Work required in preparation for this class').

Assessing learning journals is not straightforward. As Brockbank and McGill observe, the values promoted by critical reflection are collaborative rather than inspectorial (1998, 100), suggesting that conventional assessment techniques may not be appropriate. However, some assessment has to take place: if journals are not assessed then strategic learners may not undertake the work. Moreover, as Macrorie (quoted in Moon 2002, 93) points out, using a collaborative rather than a hierarchical approach can bring structure and discipline to the student's journal that may not eventuate if the journal entries are not assessed. With these considerations in mind I devised a marking structure that would ensure that students did the task, and the reading, without penalising them for imperfectly developed thoughts. Any student who posted a paragraph prior to the start of class that showed evidence of having done the set reading and engaged with the ideas in it received full marks for the task (five out of five). Entries which suggested the critical engagement or reading had been less than fully sustained still received four out of five, something I put in place on the basis that some reflection before class was better than none. These marks went down to two and one respectively if the date stamp indicated that the entry had been posted after the class began. The total number of marks available for the journals only accounted for five per cent of a student's overall mark, but this was enough to motivate the majority of students to complete most of their entries.

It emerged from the students' evaluations that receiving an individual response from the module leader to what they had written was much appreciated. Moon (2002, 79) remarks on the subtlety that is required to balance the need to assess learning journals with the creation of an environment where learners feel sufficiently free to express themselves. In light of this, it seemed important to give feedback showing I had given serious thought to the students' points, so they knew that they would not be able to get away with superficial or hastily-produced responses. In my comments – usually no more than a single paragraph – I tended to pick out substantive points and respond to them, to give clarification if the student had a question, or pose further questions for the student to think about. These tactics were similar to those which students in a study by Todd et al. found to be the most useful in journal feedback: suggesting, evaluating, offering added information and supporting (2001, 356).

I set up the feedback system so that students who wanted a response from me had to post their paragraph 24 hours in advance of the class, to give me sufficient time to respond. This system worked well, because the students who valued my comments got their entries done 24 hours in advance, which produced a manageable number of replies to compose (around eight, which took about 40 minutes to an hour). Those who wrote their entries after the 24-hour deadline received credit for them, provided they were done before class so as to have an optimal effect on the discussion and on their own learning. The other benefit of this system was that it meant students received feedback on their journal entries within seven days of writing them, usually within a day or a few hours. Showalter (2003, 59) is one of many who point to the importance of giving prompt feedback in order to enhance what students learn from assessments. 'The most meticulously marked and carefully annotated paper, returned a month after it has been written, will make less impact on the student's improvement than briefer comments returned immediately.'

Results

From what I observed in class and in the students' final essays for the module, I considered that the journals accomplished the two main aims I had wanted them to achieve. First, they helped the students to engage with the theoretical reading. The process of writing can act as a trigger to cognitive activity (Richards and Lockhart, quoted in Todd et al. 2001, 158), and the students recognised this: as one commented on her or his evaluation form, the journals 'enabled me to consolidate what I've read – actually try to synthesize the articles and apply them to the other reading'. Second, they made class discussion much more lively and participative. I was particularly pleased with this as a learning activity because the main thing I had done had been quite simple: putting in place a structure on the VLE that caused students to take a more active role in their learning. There was some extra work involved in the initial set up, although not for subsequent years, as I simply rolled over the journal from one year to the next. There was also the time taken to read all the responses and respond to those which were written 24 hours in advance, but the rise in conceptual understanding was much greater than if I had expended the same amount of time and energy giving mini-lectures in class on the topics covered in greater depth in the readings.

Here are some sample journal entries:

[Wylie's article] made me think about how many layers of interpretation and filtration a specific phase in history goes through before it reaches the contemporary reader ... There is also the question of who is accessing the 'history' and for what purpose. One could be researching for an essay, in which case searching for specific 'quotable' aspects of a text may take prominence. In the specific example [of the TV costume drama *The Tudors*], one could be accessing history for entertainment (as with the example), and thereby could simply accept the 'history' presented as fact.

I saw a movie this week that, like *Green Grass Running Water (GGRW)* used the same process of creation of a hybrid text (the text here being a TV show in the movie) and 're-forms/reforms the rules of recognition of the dominant discourse to create a new discourse'. That movie was 'Bamboozled' by Spike Lee ...

In re-inventing that show, the director is trying to open the white audience's eyes to how racist and shocking these [minstrel] shows were and how they pictured black people not so long ago. In the story, the black audience appreciates the criticism of the white coloniser mentality and the uneasy white audience comes to distance themselves and allow themselves to appreciate the critical show they can enjoy with black people.

Like in GGRW, the show is designed for two different crowds, both affected by the colonial past of their country and the jokes, puns and references are understood in different ways, creating links between the colonised and the coloniser.

Knelman's article was particularly useful in understanding the more intricate details of the history of the case (and those that were not covered by Attwood's afterword). It raises questions about the reliability of the press, sensationalism and public discourse – ultimately in the novel Attwood is critical of their treatment of Grace Marks (for example the inconsistencies in the facts). Attwood fills in the gaps in the case – is this a better example of historiographical metafiction than any other text we have read so far?

One issue that the novel raised for me that I found particularly thought-provoking is the nature of history. Knelman suggests that history is created by the people that record it: '... history is not 'real' but mediated by texts that can be contradictory' – Attwood pieces together the contradictory texts in order to make a unified whole, even if it is not the 'truth'.

While these entries are not free from errors, and have some way to go before the nascent thoughts in them could coalesce into the points of an argument, what I like about them is that they show students translating the ideas in theoretical writing into their own language, into their own terms, and bringing them into dialogue with other cultural forms which can be used to make sense of the concepts. One student articulates the distortions implicit in the process of representation by reference to a television show which, because it misrepresented his own British cultural context, brought home to him how distorted historical representations could be even while laying claim to some kind of mimetic authenticity. A second finds a parallel in an American film to the textual strategies in Thomas King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, using this resonance with American culture to understand how texts speak differently to different audiences. A third finds phrases from a critical essay on Margaret Attwood's *Alias Grace* to put into words her own grasp of the unreliability of textual evidence and of representation more generally. Although the language is not perfect, it does not stand in the way of understanding what is being said. It was satisfying to see students explicating texts and theorists in meaningful and straightforward language rather than the self-conscious jargon-heavy language with which they had attempted to explicate contested concepts like 'postmodernism' prior to the introduction of the journals.

Conclusions

Overall, the journals seemed to have been an effective tool for fostering skills of critical reflection. An important factor in their success, I believe, was the way they absolved students from having to produce the kind of polished prose that is expected in formal essays within the discipline. As Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006, 193-95) observe, this kind of 'low-stakes writing' – informal writing that is either unassessed or assessed informally – can help those who do it to arrive at new insights and understandings. Among its benefits are the ways that students are made to take an active role in processing the material – articulating theoretical ideas in their own words, relating them to their existing knowledge – rather than taking a more passive stance such as listening to a lecture. Students' 'high-stakes' writing can also be improved, as low-stakes writing provides a place to practice and can help with writing fluency. One student submitted an unassessed practice essay mid-way through the term, which was written in very convoluted language. When she was unable to explain verbally the argument she was trying to make, I brought up her learning journal on the screen and pointed out to her that it was clear from the entries that she did have a grasp of much of the material and, moreover, had expressed herself much more clearly in the journal than in the essay. Being shown the distinction between over-wrought language behind which lurked a lack of understanding, and straightforward prose in which the ideas were clear, was something of a revelation for this student, who went on to produce a much clearer and less jargon-filled final essay.

When I evaluated the journals at the end of the course, and asked the students whether they should be retained on future iterations of the course, students were very positive about them. Comments included:

I found the journal useful because it really motivated me to get the reading done. It also made me reflect on what I'd read and not only treat each article / book separately, but try and see how they informed each other. It's helpful to have something to look back on and use for my essay.

Yes, keep them on! They were a great way to really get to think about the different articles and link them to the books or other articles. Having written helped me clarify my thoughts and the ideas risen in class more. This led to more interesting / challenging conversations. If you do have time to put more comments that was also great to redirect or question some of our points.

I thought that the learning journals were very useful, mainly because they forced me to read everything and then go away and think about them. It is nice to have something structured to do every week. It also gives another point of reference, and the comments encouraged further thinking. It's good to have feedback every week, you feel like you're getting somewhere and improving.

These were really helpful to ensure I kept up with the reading. Having thought about the texts and what jumped out in our reading before the class, I think really benefited in class discussions.

For the future, I would say definitely keep the relaxed nature of the journals as sometimes it brings out some great ideas when there is less pressure.

What emerged from the evaluations is that for most students, the journals did what I had hoped: motivated them to do the reading, helped them engage with the complex ideas in it and find connections across the various primary texts and secondary texts, acted as scaffolding for their essay writing, improved class discussion, and gave them the opportunity to 'bring themselves into a relation with new knowledge' (Creme 2008, 51) in a low-pressure writing environment. Some students mentioned the difficulty of finding time to do them, especially towards the more pressurised end of term (for example 'it is difficult to keep up to date with them towards the end of term when we have loads of third-year assessment work to do'), but these students nonetheless recommended keeping them for future classes. The interaction with the module leader in the form of feedback was particularly appreciated, as it was a structure which acted as external motivation to do the reading:

I would keep the learning journal: I especially appreciated the encouragement it gave me to do all the reading for the week. Purely as a motivational tool it is successful.

Even though it seems silly, it made sure everybody read the text and coursepack so there weren't just a few people holding up the class because everybody had read it.

Means you have to read the book, but because of the short space of time involved I found it difficult to engage with the texts enough to make an informed entry.

I occasionally pulled an (anonymised) sentence or two out of a journal and put it on the screen at the start of class for students to think about, or brought it up as a point to consider in discussion. I also put together a handout with a selection of the best comments. This was an effective way of validating the work the students put into the journals, and demonstrating that not only did I read and consider seriously the ideas in the journals, but also that they were coming up with topics worth discussing. One student suggested in his or her evaluation that this kind of sharing was beneficial: 'Maybe share the journals a bit more as I may have been a bit more inspired with insight into other people's when I was struggling.'

It would be possible to do the journals in written notebooks and hand these in rather than hosting them online. In the context of this module, I found there were particular benefits of using a VLE to host the journals. It was instantly clear who had done the task on time and who had not, making marking easier. Students could submit their entries remotely at any time, and I could read them remotely at any time, something which meant that I was able to attend an overseas conference in the middle of the term and still keep up with what students were saying in their journals. Additionally, the students had a record of their work which they could look over at the end of the course as they were preparing their final essays. Terrion and Phillion (2008, 585) outline some of the other benefits of using electronic journals rather than hard copies: they allow for contemporaneous but not necessarily simultaneous dialogue, and geographic distance is no barrier to communication.

Finally, reading the journals as I was preparing the class gave me an idea of what the students found easy, what was more difficult, and where the gaps in their knowledge were. As a relatively new teacher this was something that was reassuring: I could plan the lecturing portions of the class with a better sense of whether the material had been understood and what had engaged or confused the students. The trade-off, of course, is increased preparation time. More experienced teachers, or those more familiar with the knowledge gaps of students in their programme, might have found that the payoff did not balance out the extra time spent. With a relatively small class of about 25, and usually around eight or so journal entries to respond to, I found the extra time demands to be reasonable. The activity does not lend itself quite so well to larger classes, although if teaching assistants are used then they could perhaps take on the task of monitoring and / or responding to entries. Teaching assistants might well experience the same reassurance in being able to get a sense ahead of time about what the students grasped and what was causing them more trouble.

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July 2009

Out and About: English in the Community

Creative writing in Cardiff Museum

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Summary

Creative writing students visited Cardiff Museum to use items in the collection as the basis for their work.

Background

As a part of the three modules of Creative Writing that I teach in the Autumn semester at Cardiff University, I take individual groups out to Cardiff Museum and Art Gallery. Prior to this, I may send them outside briefly, to improve their powers of observation: of landscape, setting and character – but this outing is our first major trip beyond the classroom. I generally visit the galleries in advance and plan a worksheet based on the venue's temporary exhibitions, regular displays and featured paintings (Cardiff often themes contemporary painters with older works).

I take the students on the visit about halfway through their course, so they have already gained some confidence and the small group workshop has encouraged independent working. Earlier in the Creative Writing module we have explored the ways in which published writers find their voice and subject matter, looking at texts and the inter-connectivity between form and content. We also discuss how some student writers draw heavily on their own experience, while others respond better to the mysterious or to pictures and objects. The museum is a catalyst and liberator for all: for those who enjoy exploring the unknown, for those who find it difficult to escape memoir, for those who find the classroom constricting or stuffy, for those who feel the presence of everyone else a negative or competitive force. In class we consider many fine literature extracts, but sometimes the layered complexities and sophistication can be daunting to the new practitioner. Our visit to the museum encourages greater creative freedom and touches upon different, and complementary, explorations and cultural adventures.

Activities

The students meet in the museum lobby and the group is given a worksheet and museum map, then sent away to observe, reflect and write. Students generally have 15 minutes or so to explore and 40 minutes to make rough notes before we meet in the foyer café for a coffee and cake (one of the highlights!) and then go to a workshoping room where students edit, feed back in pairs, polish work and end by reading something out loud. The worksheet makes clear that everyone will have to read, even if it is just a sentence. I have discovered that some form of light pressure is necessary, otherwise the students are likely to wander for so long they never get down to fruitful composition. Paintings and sculpture seem to produce the more startling and unusual work (often encouraging diverse narrative voices or new points of view) and therefore I direct them to these areas. However, I do not preclude students from following strong interests that lie elsewhere (the natural world, archaeology, the basking shark, porcelain etc.).

In my handout, I make sufficient directed and open suggestions to nudge even the most recalcitrant student toward some form of imaginative or observational response: considering potential dialogues between characters in paintings, describing (in detail) situation or landscape, conjuring monologues, imagining the before or after of paintings, imagining the museum as a setting for invented characters who have a chance, or clandestine meeting. Because students are encouraged to use a stream of consciousness method and to write without constraint, the combination of the vividness of the paintings, the solidity or lightness of sculptures (Rodin, Degas, Hepworth) and the inspiring and liberating geographic space (airiness, good light, solitude) diminish inhibition and self-censorship, and nurture engagement. Many of the students, in the questionnaires mention the calm and peace of the place.

Some of my students have never been to Cardiff's beautiful Victorian museum (with particularly fine displays of paintings) that sits just a hundred yards from the University. Introducing students to history, art and archaeology is educational in the most general sense and the visit helps to broaden understanding and encourage connectivity. Our visit is fun, informal and allows me to sit and talk to students who, on university territory, can be shy and withdrawn; in the coffee break, they also engage more enthusiastically with one another. The visit feels like it isn't work; we're being subversive, escaping to secret corners, communing with disparate worlds, entering a dialogue with the past and also with a more keenly felt present. Each of us makes a choice about which art or object we will privilege with our attention. In turn, each of us is worked upon - often in surprising ways – by a complex and unpredictable paradigm of image, association, colour and atmosphere. Stimulated by the richness or enigma of scenes, characters and objects, our imaginations and understanding are pushed in new directions. One student stated, 'It broadened my perspective concerning art and how artists' styles can be formed into words', another that it was an 'inspiration', a 'chance to explore ideas that would not have come to my head in the classroom'. One of my students writes that 'unusual situations are depicted' that they 'wouldn't have thought of otherwise'; another that 'I was able to imagine things I otherwise would not have,' and one that there were 'loads of ideas for plots and characters'. One student states that the museum gives a sense of 'a larger world' and another says 'The close interaction with stimuli is so much more thought-provoking than looking at an image in a book or on the web.' Yet another says of the visit 'I think paintings can be very inspiring, and the concepts behind them are helpful for story ideas. The relationship between image and text is fascinating.'

Conclusions

When I come to mark the students' portfolios, some of the most successful, poised, mature, original and fluent work has come from our sessions in the museum and Art Gallery. A piece from one of our third-year students now undertaking an MA in Creative Writing is included in the online version of this case study. It would be a stretch to suggest that the museum trip opened up the possibility of such post-graduate study, but it certainly developed the student's confidence, and posited a different and more liberating approach to text and self, a powerful sense that the potential for stories lies all around. What is noticeable in all my students' work during the visit (and for some, this

continues after) is a greater attention to detail and nuance, as if the layering of paint and intricacies of scene, combined with the quiet and space have slowed and intensified perception. They open their eyes; they really start to see what is and what might be. Later, in our museum workshop, students also, in their verbal delineation of what they choose to respond to, begin to 'own' culture and in the process take their personal choices and writing emphases more seriously.

Having a worksheet is in itself a solution to an earlier problem. The students trail in over a period of 30 minutes (despite my injunction to be on time). Standing in the foyer with a sheaf of papers allows the earliest to set off immediately and the stragglers to catch up. Another problem I needed to resolve was that the first year I ran the course, I put the session on in Week 10. It was an enjoyable final social, but students complained they weren't able to make use of peer workshoping and properly polish the writing they'd so enjoyed starting. Now, the visit takes place just before reading week (Week five of 10). In many of the questionnaires, the students state that the remaining problem is lack of time ('the hour flew by' says one) but some students have lectures before or after, limiting timetable adjustments. Interestingly, individual students or small groups often return in their own time and continue to engage with this unique space. Our small peer workshoping groups in Cardiff encourage autonomy, self-motivation and independent learning; the trip to the museum builds on this and perhaps it is inevitable, that once offered the place as a cultural possibility, they will make use of it again.

In the Spring semester I use the Museum a second time – also the covered market in the centre of town. I am planning to undertake a trip to the central library.

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Capturing the Moment – a student response to the Cardiff Museum visit by Sarah Wicks: www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/resources/sustain/response1.php

December 2010



Writing for social purpose – ideas for sustainable teaching and learning

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Summary

This case study reports on a project funded by the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS) at the University of Sheffield. At the University of Brighton undergraduates were given the opportunity to examine the social responsibility of the writer through a series of workshops and seminars led by local writers, actors, comedians and politicians. Students were expected to produce their own socially conscious creative piece and to reflect on the process. This study reports on the students' experience of this module and ways in which the module impacted on their development. We argue that Higher Education (HE) needs to create learning environments for undergraduates that can help students understand how their degrees might influence and help them in their sustainable careers, studies and lives post-university.

Background

The responsibility of education in promoting social change has underpinned government responses to the sustainability agenda. Between 1998 and 2003 the UK Government operated a 'Sustainable Development Education Panel' whose work was developed by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). DEFRA's sustainability mission statement asserts that the people and government of the United Kingdom

need to make a decisive move toward more sustainable development. Not just because it is the right thing to do, but also because it is in our own long-term best interests. It offers the best hope for the future. Whether at school, in the home or at work, we all have a part to play. Our small everyday actions add up to make a big difference (DEFRA, 2009).

At a post-compulsory level, The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) committed the HE sector to environmental causes and a wide project of sustainability awareness across the sector. Organisations such as the Environmental Association for Universities and Colleges (EAUC) and the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) sought to establish networks and collaborative projects with the aim of integrating sustainability broadly across institutions.

Although many universities developed sustainability policies as a response to government recommendations, fewer enabled discourses of sustainability to permeate the curricula of the arts and humanities. In the context of wider curriculum developments, interdisciplinarity and innovative approaches within individual disciplines, literature and literary studies remained under-represented and unexplored in debates regarding the incorporation of sustainability into HE teaching and learning. Recognizing the educational and social value of literature and literary studies, the authors of the module sought to address this absence.

In April 2009 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and CILASS issued a call for projects designed to promote the relationship between literature and sustainability. In response to this call, Dr Katy Shaw, Senior Lecturer in English Literature, and Jessica Moriarty, Senior Lecturer

in Creative Writing, were awarded funding to author and deliver a second-year undergraduate module called 'Writing and Social Consciousness' to Humanities students at the University of Brighton between October 2009 and January 2010. The module was written on the basis of a shared belief between the writers that it is necessary to develop a social consciousness in order to operate fully in a democratic society. The authors sought to create a module that would encourage students to see themselves not simply as individuals but as necessarily integrated members of a wider community and system of social relations.

Underpinning the module design was a belief that the very best literature can provoke, move and motivate and is therefore vital to the ongoing development of the sustainability agenda. In asking questions without definite answers, the module enabled students to ask what they are capable of as readers and writers today. Over the course of the semester, staff and students engaged with each other and with external literary practitioners at an emotional and intellectual level to nurture a supportive and safe environment in which critical thinking and creative response could occur.

The module also aimed to raise student awareness of employability issues through embedded course content and access to professionals and industry experience. In her study of desirable graduate skills, Sarah Sayce concludes that sustainability literacy is fast becoming a 'must have' for all graduates of the future (Sayce 2009). During the module, students were made aware of how their experience of engaging with external experts such as novelists and speech writers would contribute to their future employability and that employers are seeking sustainability literate graduates who are sensitive to these contemporary concerns and debates.

Activities

By encouraging an interdisciplinary focus on issues surrounding the sustainability agenda as well as helping students develop confidence in writing, research and presentation skills through individual and collaborative work, the module aimed to encourage students to develop a raised awareness and critical understanding of the social world, recognition of themselves as active agents and an appreciation of a corresponding sense of social responsibility. Enabling professional and academic specific specialists, (including actors, writers, politicians and comedians), to work with students from a range of humanities disciplines, the module encouraged students to consider such issues as ways in which literature can contribute to and promote sustainable communities, how writers can understand the need for the appropriate and applicable treatment of social issues in literature and how literature can be influenced by the environment and social awareness.

Through contact time students were encouraged to consider how they respond or contribute to social groups and to reflect on their own political agency as a writer and reader. As the module developed, students began to broaden this discussion into wider perspectives on the role of the arts in promoting social consciousness in contemporary society. Sessions necessitated both critical and creative engagement with a range of writings. Involving independent as well as collaborative inquiry-based learning, contact time ranged from lectures and seminars and workshops and seminars with guest speakers to writing workshops, group presentation and tutorials. Outside the classroom, students were expected to post their creative work on a blog, situated online at the University's intranet

studentcentral, to comment on each work and give constructive feedback. This formed the basis of a reflection as part of the assessment. Reading for each week was sourced in a student handbook that was made available online (for environmentally friendly reasons).

In designing the module, the authors sought to develop an established historical partnership at the University of Brighton between literature and the community, as well as to confirm their own existing networks with local writers' groups and the local community presses Queenspark Books and Waterloo Press. Queenspark Books are a local community publisher with extensive experience gained over 36 years. Their work has received wide recognition which has earned them financial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Their publications focus on narratives that might otherwise remain silenced and includes collections of creative writing as well as local community histories. Queenspark are the university's official printing partner and this mutually beneficial relationship has allowed our students' literature to grow and develop in partnership with that of local communities. Waterloo Press is a small local press established to provide platforms for new writers. The press has established a strong catalogue of poetry and prose and is committed to promoting the work of local writers. As a result of working with these community organisations and in discussing issues of social consciousness and sustainability the authors were inspired to design an undergraduate module that would develop these existing strengths and actively involve students in ongoing debates about the relationship between literature and sustainability.

An inter-disciplinary (Creative Writing and Literature) teaching team worked with external experts to offer innovative experiences of the topics under discussion. Collaborating with local practitioners students drew on their local community to make links between their learning at university and the world beyond. Working with the local short story collective Short Fuse, students engaged in a creative writing workshop concerned with the relationship between the individual and society. After this event, students were offered an exclusive opportunity to enter their creations into the Short Fuse local writing competition with the winner appearing at their monthly event at local community arts venue, 'The Komedia', in December 2010. Engaging in a workshop with local comedy writer Jill Edwards, students thought about promoting social consciousness, performed their work and presented their agendas to the outside world. Combining work in literature with the real world of publishing and commissioning, Jill encouraged students to articulate their beliefs to a diverse range of audiences. While working on Anthony Cartwright's latest novel *Heartland*, students considered how literature can help us to understand why a community might turn to the politics of the extreme right in times of political and social transition while local crime writer Peter James joined students for a session on novel writing. He answered some questions about his work, his role in the promotion of the social consciousness of crime, the impact of crime on the community and why the Brighton community forms the backdrop to much of his work.

At the beginning of the module students were asked to sign a consent form saying that they agreed to take part in the research and were happy for their comments to be used in presentations and publications, accepting that while the authors would attempt to ensure their anonymity, this could not be guaranteed. At the end of the module, students were asked to take part in a focus group so that we could gain insight into their experience of the module and evaluate the

impact of a heightened awareness of sustainable living on their personal, academic and vocational development.

Student feedback for the module

Feedback from the student focus group suggests that:

1. The workshop environment was effective in raising students' awareness about sustainable living and of their ongoing personal development, and it enabled them to identify the skills they were acquiring in HE and how these might relate to their post-degree ambitions.

My writing style, initially, was very ornate and over-the-top, but now I find I'm trying to make it more succinct, concise, but whilst maintaining my personal kind of experience on it by writing about something I'm passionate about. (Val)

2. The students benefited from participating in creative workshops led by local writers, actors, politicians and comedians.

I just want to do creative writing. I enjoy it far more than my other subjects, so I think I might try and do that. I like it because it's actually given me a reason, this lesson [to write]. (Ali)

It's given us direct examples from the industry. It shows that it's attainable if you work hard enough. (Tim)

3. Students benefited from the opportunity to discuss their world view and writing process with their peers and tutor. These sessions provided opportunities for the students to identify their own processes and to consider how they were developing as practitioners and learners.

I found the feedback process horrifying – you comment every week. How scared I looked [...]. And that stopped a couple of weeks ago but [...] I found it really good. I mean, I've stopped shaking when I read my stuff out loud, so I'm really glad I took this module because now I'm not so terrified of reading out my work out loud. (Jane)

I think the pressure that we have to read our work and get feedback has been really good because I would never have shown my work otherwise. So I think it's easier every time you do it – it makes it that bit easier (Roiseen)

4. The students' experience of the writer / actor / comedian / politician-led workshops was both enjoyable and beneficial, with students welcoming the opportunity to discuss and debate their writing in an informal setting, outside their normal learning environment. This enabled them to see the value of their discipline in the world and their own value within their discipline.

Tutor: *So it's something about applying what you're learning to the real world?*

Group: Yes

Tutor: *Do you think you would've got that without the guest speakers?*

Abi: No.

Tutor: *From your other modules, do you think you've had that awareness from other modules?*

Group: No. Not at all.

5. The module helped students to articulate their learning in more depth and with more confidence than in other modules. This in turn supported their development as undergraduate researchers and helped them to use the

experiences they had gathered outside HE to enrich their creative writing without feeling vulnerable or exposed.

I'm really excited about coming in [to the lecture] and reading it out and getting feedback [and] just to get, like, recognition for your work. (Ali)

6. Students' confidence in their written work was enhanced by constructive feedback and encouragement from tutors, guest speakers and peers.

I think the opportunity of being able to read our writing out loud and get feedback is like really rewarding because when I'm at home reading out my writing I'm just told to shut up. Well, it's not quite like that, basically they can't be bothered. (Jane)

7. In focusing on sustainable living, workshops helped the students to consider their place in the world and how their teaching and learning experiences might help them evolve as learners and people.

I think that if anyone really looks at the world we live in and the situation the world is in and our species is in, they are angry [...] and if we don't have the sort of ways of exorcising our anger or discontent with things through writing, or through the media that surrounds us [...] then the alternative is you just become a bitter and distant person. So, if at the very least you're not trying to change the world, at least you're selfishly doing it for yourself to feel better about it. (James)

Conclusions

Outputs from the module included an anthology of poetry looking at mental health issues, a film script set in post-apocalyptic Brighton, a short story about female sterilisation in order to curb population expansion and a dramatic monologue exploring the effects of capitalism. The feedback from the focus group and students' assessed reflective commentaries suggests that the students clearly understood the benefits of discussing socially responsible writing and their own potential impact on a sustainable future. They learned how this might be achieved through their writing, but also through their work and lives post-university. Enabling and empowering students to consider how they might make meaningful changes in the world contributes not only to their university experience but to a more hopeful future for us all. Undoubtedly, the contributions of local writers and professionals to the workshops offered the module were invaluable in terms of providing students with unique insights on the world beyond the classroom and encouraging them to consider their own personal, vocational and academic development in post-degree life. In the future, the authors hope this module can be further developed and sustained for the benefit of staff, students and the local community.

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December 2010

Poetry and sustainability

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Summary

Students went on a field trip to Kingley Vale nature reserve in West Sussex as part of a module on contemporary poetry and the environment. This case study was part of the English Subject Centre's 'Bringing the Outside In' case studies initiative.

Background

The field trip is part of a level three undergraduate module entitled 'Reinventing Nature: Contemporary Poetry and the Environment'. The aim of the module is to develop students' awareness of the ways in which texts construct and deconstruct various attitudes to nature with particular reference to poetry and its ability to take us beyond instrumental and anthropocentric assumptions. The title, 'Reinventing Nature', stems from the fact that ideas about nature are reinvented all the time and that poets are also reinventors of these ideas themselves. Wordsworth, for example, changed our view of the Lake District forever. In exploring the variety of ways in which a number of contemporary poets engage with nature as a subject, students have to engage with and critique different social constructions of nature that are current at the beginning of the 21st century.

While English Studies has, over the last thirty years, engaged with issues of race, class and gender, until recently it has had little to say about environmental crisis. However, an increasing number of writers are dealing with the environment in their work. Living as we do in an age of unprecedented environmental change, it seems vital that we engage our students with writing which deals with issues such as pollution, global warming and population growth. A critical understanding of the ways such issues are negotiated in literature can help provide students with the tools necessary to understand the increasingly 'heated' debates surrounding, for example, global warming. Ultimately, students will carry such ideas with them when they graduate and will be able to engage more effectively in debates about what a socially and environmentally sustainable society might look like. The module also aims to make interdisciplinary connections, particularly with science. Our education system's tendency towards specialisation means that most English undergraduates have only a limited understanding of scientific concepts such as evolution and climate change. On the module students are required to engage with a variety of scientific ideas through the poetry studied.

My motivation for organising the field trip was to engage students with an actual environment. After I finished my first degree, I worked for the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers as a schools officer. My brief was to engage children with a hands-on experience of the natural world. During this time I became aware not only of environmental issues, but also of the effects of direct sensuous experiences of nature. One aim of the field trip was therefore to give students an embodied experience of a natural environment. In addition to this, the field trip was intended to inculcate an understanding of basic ecological concepts related to one specific environment as well as raising awareness of the interdependence of the human and the natural.

Activities

Before embarking on the field trip, the students engaged with the work of a number of contemporary poets writing about nature, as well as interrogating concepts such as 'Nature', 'Pastoral', 'Ecology' and 'Environmentalism'. The expectation was that by encountering and learning about a real environment, they would be able to begin to grasp how ecological concepts can inform our understanding of nature, as well as seeing how we culturally construct many of our ideas about it. Kingley Vale Nature Reserve is situated on the South Downs close to Chichester. The reserve is managed by Natural England and we were shown round by the local warden. The reserve contains a number of different habitats, including extensive yew woods as well as downland turf. However, Kingley Vale is not a natural landscape. It has been shaped by millennia of human activity. For example, there are three Bronze Age burial mounds on the summit of the hill. Remains of Neolithic field systems can also be seen on the valley slopes. The areas of downland turf would quickly disappear under scrub if it were not for systematic grazing. The warden gave the students an account of the human as well as the natural history of the reserve, emphasising the ways in which humans have a hand in managing the natural processes that we saw around us.

Conclusions

The field trip was rated by many students as a highlight of the module. Comments suggested that it gave them a deeper understanding of the interrelationships between the natural and the human in a local environment. This increased understanding fed through into the seminar room, where student discussions of the work of specific poets often reflected the experience of the field trip. For example, on a number of occasions students referred specifically to the field trip when looking at the work of a poet who wrote about a particular landscape. It is of course very hard to quantify the overall effect of the field trip, or the module as a whole for that matter, on students' environmental awareness as such shifts in attitudes are often incremental and may take place over long periods of time. However, I did ask students to fill in a questionnaire at the end of the module about whether their attitudes had changed because of the module. I began the questionnaire by asking students if they had had any experience of environmental issues at school and whether they thought this had affected their attitudes in any way. This interested me in particular because when I worked as a schools officer with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers in the 1980s, the environment was high on the agenda in primary schools. The answers to these questions suggested that about half of the students had had some teaching about environmental issues at school. Bearing in mind that a few of the students were quite mature, I was surprised that more of the younger ones didn't have some experience of the issues. Of those that did, most said it had made them more aware of their own impact on the planet. Asked about the impact of the current module, most students said that it had made them more aware of the issues. However, when asked whether their behaviour might change because of what they had learnt, the answers were more mixed. A number had clearly taken the module because they were already interested in environmental issues. Their answers tended to suggest they would carry on as before. A number did say they would consider issues such as driving and flying less and recycling more. However, a number gave answers

that suggested that they saw the whole issue as so vast and removed from their own lives that any action would be futile.

This last response raises an important issue for Education for Sustainable Development. How do we raise students' awareness of environmental issues without making the whole issue seem so overwhelming that personal action seems pointless? In fact I am careful in the module not to present environmental issues as intractable, but this is a perception that many may already bring to the course. However, I do think it is vital that education gives students some sense of agency.

Further reading

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Assessment and Feedback

Theatre programming as a problem-based assessment for use in teaching Scottish and Irish drama

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Summary

This case study looks at the use of a theatre programming exercise as both an assessment tool and a technique for exploring the contemporaneity of play-texts, working on 20th-century Irish theatre with a mixed level two group coming from different educational and ethnic backgrounds.

In writing up this technique I have drawn on experience gained working with students in both Scotland and Lancashire. I readily acknowledge their contribution to the development of the work, what I have learnt from them and from the generous input of many industry sources.

Background

Before I came down to Lancashire to head up the Department of Performing Arts at Edge Hill, I worked at Queen Margaret's in Edinburgh in the Drama Department. I was the programme leader for the Drama and Theatre Arts degree and the subject leader for what was then the first named specialism in Literary Management in the UK.

As part of training my fourth-year Literary Management students I was in contact with Michelle Volansky, then literary manager and dramaturg for Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, and Michelle asked my students to suggest some contemporary Scottish plays for Steppenwolf. This entailed extensive research into the client theatre and the selection of a series of plays we felt would meet Steppenwolf's needs and also make a particular statement about Scotland and what we felt was important about the contemporary Scottish stage. Students had to analyse the artistic and economic issues underpinning Steppenwolf's work, but crucially had to construct an analysis of the potential cumulative impact of their choices.

Programming in the broader classroom context

Programming is just one of the many tasks that literary managers become involved in; however, it is only more recently on Merseyside, teaching a level two module on '20th-Century Irish Theatre', that its application to a broader range of teaching has started to emerge. One recent group of learners included Drama students from Ulster, the north west and the rest of the UK. 50% of the group were US study abroad students, none of whom were drama majors, but most of whom claimed Irish ancestry. Similarly around half of the Merseyside students saw themselves as Scouse first, but Irish came a fairly close second. Therefore the group comprised native learners, diaspora learners and others.

Some of the most challenging ideas for students to get to grips with, particularly non-theatre majors, are around the cultural significance of a particular text or type of theatre – the ability to assess its contemporaneity - does it, in the Quaker phrase, 'speak to our condition'? This is particularly the case with theatre that claims for itself insight into issues of national identity, where non-specialists encounter a quagmire of cultural crosscurrents.

Two particular areas of challenge presented themselves early on to this Irish Theatre class.

- The non-theatre majors found it hard initially to get past a purely literary response to the play-texts, to see them as pre-texts for performance and as both products and cultural artefacts – for consumption and ownership.
- There was a marked divergence between the views of Ireland and Irish history identified within the work by the diaspora and native learners, whilst those without Irish roots (including a couple of Scots who took to sniping from the Celtic sidelines) initially tended to step back from the discussion as somehow being disenfranchised in the argument.

I had planned a programming exercise as an alternative final assessment to practical performance work; however, as I introduced them early on to the principles behind programming and together we modelled a 'season' for Liverpool Playhouse, the impact of the exercise on their understanding of the subject as a whole became clearer.

When considering programming, the ideologies underpinning the work of particular companies or theatres, particularly those with a 'mission statement' to represent something of their nation's character and culture, are placed in their pragmatic context – a process that sometimes reveals more of the idealism at the heart of the work, and sometimes shines a spotlight on practice that falls short of lofty aspiration. At the other end of the spectrum, the unspoken cultural assumptions underpinning decisions made apparently on purely commercial terms are laid bare.

Having learnt to examine a theatre's artistic choices with an eye that acknowledged many of the other constraints / goads to one choice or another, it then became much easier to project the model onto other times and places – the emergence of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, the significance in its choice of plays, became easier to place within a historical and cultural context; the work of Field Day came into sharper focus when examined in light that also illuminated the other commercial work around at the time.

A particularly interesting development was in students' sensitivity to the varying themes, imagery, mini-myths and narrative structures being employed by playwrights, directors, designers et al., for example, in relation to the issue of emigration and the emigrant – two particularly useful works to look at here are Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come* and David Grieg's *The Speculator* – which I consider to be a much under-rated play. The students visited Bolton's Octagon Theatre to see an Irish play in performance and their fine stage-setting for Martin McDonough's *Beauty Queen of Leenane* provided a practical example of the use of visual imagery as cultural shorthand. Issues of language and translation also became topics of hot debate (see Friel's *Translations*) ... the presentation of history – the idea of history – became a live issue and provided an opening into discussion of post-colonialism both as a positive force, bringing on new voices and re-discovered histories, and as a cultural cul-de-sac, enforcing new stereotypes in its turn.

Assessment

The module as a whole had two assessments, the first comprising a conventional essay. The second task offered a choice of assessments of which the programming exercise was one. The use of varieties of problem-based learning, enquiry-based learning or problem-based assessment is comparatively common within the Performing Arts; however, it is used less within text-based modules. The exercise of programming for a specific theatre entails the placement of works together within a 'real-life' situation that demands an engagement with the multiple and cumulative meanings contained within the texts. This enables students to work from their own initial standpoint to ultimately place their individual stamp on the final product.

- Native learners could re-assess the audience reception of work about their country and confront some of the expectations of others about their choices.
- Diaspora learners were confronted with the often unspoken assumptions underpinning their consumption of a diaspora version of the native culture.
- Non-native learners were given knowledge and able to demonstrate skills that gave legitimacy to their opinions within the group.

In the majority of cases, pairs of students undertook the programming task. These were the instructions given to the students:

Assessment 2 – 50% group presentation

In 15-20 minutes present a theatre board with a proposal for a season of Irish theatre. 'PowerPoint' or OHP available. You must take account of the theatre's profile and pay particular attention to the issue of contemporaneity. Choose from one of the profiles below.

A medium scale repertory theatre in a southern English city – one main house (650 seats), two studios (200 seats). They've recently done *The Importance of Being Earnest* on mainstage and two years ago *Krapp's Last Tape* in the studio. 60% of their revenue comes from subscriptions. There isn't another repertory for 50 miles around.

A small arts centre in Liverpool – five years old. 250 seats in a multi-purpose venue, there's a café / art gallery open throughout the day and into the evenings. Except for the pantomime, they're not a producing house. They've never done an Irish play.

A medium scale arts centre attached to a university in Wales or Scotland. There is a 500-seat auditorium which is a receiving house and a 150 seat studio theatre, used by community groups and for small-scale touring. There is an art-gallery and café / bar, opening onto a sizeable foyer space. There is a separate theatre bar open in the evenings. The student theatre group are very attached to doing Beckett.

A medium sized LORT (League of Resident Theatres) theatre in New York State (650-seat mainstage, 300 seat studio). It is largely dependent on subscription funding. There is a sizeable Irish-American community in the vicinity, but they are not generally regular theatregoers.

Steppenwolf in Chicago. Go to their website for details.

Your choice of theatre, to be agreed with the tutor.

In the event I hardly needed to have created the fictional mini-biographies, because every group chose to work on an existing theatre and / or company. The real companies undoubtedly provided them with potential for a great deal more research and information on which to base their work; however, the mini-biographies acted as prompts to the types of conditions / information they should be seeking to engage with, for example, recent repertoire or day-time catering. Most students chose to include a 'PowerPoint' display in their presentation.

In the assessment, the class played the role of the theatre board and could ask questions of the team after their initial presentation. The board could subsequently give their opinion of the extent to which the presentation convinced them; however, they were not directly involved in the grading. Their feedback was passed on to the students. At level three or with students I had trained previously in peer assessment I would have enabled them to contribute directly to the grading of the work.

In the four to six weeks they may be working on this task it is possible to present students with unexpected variables to their scenario, for example, part way through their work, a playwright's agent calls to refuse them the performing rights for a particular play – is it key to the cohesion of their season? If so, what can be done to replace it? Almost more difficult – the theatre receives additional funding for one production in conjunction with a particular event (for example St. Patrick's Day) – what should this money be spent on and why? Do you spend it on a schools' project, do you use it to bring a celebrated Irish actor to your theatre – who and in what role? (For UK-based students in this class, the attraction was James Nesbitt, who was being offered a lot of work this way, whilst two US students aimed to bring John Malkovich back to Steppenwolf to direct *Waiting for Godot*.)

The peripheral elements (special events, ticketing deals, corporate sponsorship, funding opportunities) provide variety and interest, scope for imagination and ingenuity, particularly for non-theatre majors; however, the core of the task is selecting a group of three to five play texts, seeing them both individually and in concert as saying something about Irish theatre and Ireland.

I have provided a skeleton list of items for consideration and research when programming at the end of this case study.

When it came to the assessment itself the diaspora students, both UK and US, displayed a real sensitivity to a range of issues around the representation of Irish theatre by, with and for diaspora audiences.

- Two students from Liverpool with travelling connections constructed a season for the Playhouse which culminated in a community production of *Once a Catholic* to involve the Irish Travelling Community and utilising specialist EU funding aimed at supporting cultural work with travelling communities.
- A US student from upstate New York, a business major, analysed the theatre-going habits of the Irish American community around her home and developed a well-balanced season designed to tempt more of them to become regular theatregoers, mixing challenging choices with more 'comfortable' pieces, providing foyer concerts, talks and exhibitions – bracketing the productions in ticketing deals and underpinning the season with links to local school / college curricula.

- Two Scottish drama students decided to do a comparison of the challenges of programming Irish plays for the Tron in Glasgow, and for PICT (Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre) whose artistic director, when approached by them for comment, was candid about the levels of comfortable expectation his season ticket holders, key to his economic planning, had of his Irish programming choices. These students developed a cunning plan to feature two PICT-favourite comic actors, firstly in Lynch's *The History of the Troubles (According to My Da)* and subsequently in grittier, but still witty, roles as a bridge to more challenging repertoire for audience members who already knew their work. Their declared aim was to get O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie* onto the PICT season. In the eventuality, they didn't score as highly as they might have done, not really having got to grips with the political and cultural connections between Glasgow and Ulster thrown up by their choice of work for the Tron and, whilst at first sight perfectly sound, their PICT strategy was undermined by the actors in question being rather too old for the O'Rowe piece for which energised and dangerous youth is a requirement. The students had become so caught up in their overall plan that they'd neglected the necessary fundamental engagement with the play-texts.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, this assessment task proved suitable to a much wider variety of students than it had first been intended for and the opportunities for the development of transferable skills it provided were particularly useful in opening up the subject to non subject specialists and providing students from a wide variety of backgrounds with a meeting place for mutually supportive and collaborative work. The activity could be adapted to non-dramatic uses: for the student of literature, for example, the exercise of programming plays for a theatre could translate into programming speakers for a literary festival.

Some fundamental points about programming

In order to undertake the assessment task the students must research not just suitable plays, but the cultural and economic frameworks within which those texts will sit – taking due note of the limited availability of some commercially sensitive information. Key topics include the following:

Who does your theatre serve?

Audience demographics, catchment area.

How does it aim to serve them?

Mission statement.

How successful is it at what it does?

Profile from previous five to 10 years of operation (commercial confidentiality, financial profile), sources of funding, sponsorship, size of subscription income, the competition – other theatres, their size and proximity, profile.

Resources available

Numbers of auditoria, size, flexibility, personnel (artistic director, designer, resident company, outreach team – youth, TIE company – their tastes and successes), production budgets (estimated on previous years' productions), peripheral services (café / restaurant, gallery space).

Programming profile

What is the pattern to their year? Is there a Christmas show? Are there slots devoted to works with guaranteed schools and college curriculum tie-ins? Do they do new work? If so, where and at what time? Do they already do Irish / Scottish theatre? If so, what plays and how often? How does the theatre promote them? What is the tone of the press releases? Were they well received?

What are your ambitions for the season?

What is new theatre? A range of work? Financial security? Within the comfort zone for the subscribers' tastes? Pushing at the edges of that zone – developing those tastes? Bringing in new audiences – where from? Are there special events that could provide tie-ins? Marketing – what is the 'hook' for your season? Anniversary of Playwright X's death, play Y premiered at this theatre 50 years ago – is this an artistic hook or a marketing hook?

How do your plays fit together?

In commercial terms / in artistic terms? What do they say, intentionally or subconsciously, about Ireland, its people, their hopes / fears / ambitions? Do they reinforce stereotypes or refute them? Are they consciously seeking to 'voice the nation?' (As an exercise consider the Edinburgh International Festival's drama commissioning choices for 2005 – looking at the multi-cultural nature of 21st-century Scotland.) Special ticketing deals. (A good example to look at here is the 2005 Edinburgh Festival Synge Cycle deal – it had novelty (first time all the plays were put on together); timing (advertised as a 'long-held artistic commitment' on the part of the director); opportunity (festival goes more likely to commit to whole cycle / combination of pieces); variety (mix of well-known and lesser-known pieces, full-length and one act); celebrity (influential canon, playwright, 'hot' company).

Are you going to need to 'explain' the plays through platform events, etc.? Are they likely to prove controversial?

All the information gleaned from the above feeds into the questions below:

Programming – the basic questions you need to ask yourself

1. What is your theatre like? Size, number of auditoria, technical facilities, peripheral spaces (restaurant, art gallery), community / educational involvement (Youth Theatre), audience demographics, ticketing policies, funding structure, surrounding community make-up?
2. Has your theatre done this type of work before? If so, when? How well was it received (by critics, at the box-office)? Is there a spin-off to be had here, for example, latest play by previous popular playwright? Re-appearance by popular actor/s in similar roles. If you're planning a themed season is there a 'hook'?
3. What is the competition like in the vicinity? What Irish theatre might they have done recently and how was that received?
4. Why are you thinking of doing this type of work now? Is there a significant date / anniversary at hand? Has there been community demand?
5. What are the artistic imperatives behind your choices? Is this work an ambition / particular enthusiasm of the artistic director, theatre board, leading actors.

6. What influences your choice of pieces within a typical season – what is the mix? Classics (on the school curriculum), new writing (specialist funding, smaller venue? Mission statement), solid commercial successes (age according to venue – the smaller the venue the longer it takes for hits to filter down to them). Which pieces are ‘bankers’, which are ‘builders’ – aiming to develop the audience base as well as to provide a good night out for the existing clientele? Which pieces will scare the living daylights out of your subscription ticket holders – and do they constitute a significant percentage of your income? Are they amenable to being ‘stretched’?
7. The economics – what will it cost to stage? Size of cast? Guest artists or resident company or amateur such as Youth Theatre? Settings, costume design, production values? Can you get sponsorship, commercial tie-ins?
8. Where can you place the work to best effect within the artistic year? Are you going to risk ‘bunching’ works or is it best to spread them out?
9. What is the whole package you can work around this?

An artist’s agent is obliged to seek the best deal for their client. If you’re a small venue seeking to produce a very recent hit play, particularly if there are larger producing houses within a certain radius, you’ll likely be refused if the agent feels they can get their client a larger fee from a larger venue. It’s like performing rights only gradually being released for amateur performance. On the other hand hosting a try-out before a West-End transfer, or co-producing with other houses far enough away to pool resources but not deplete either’s audience base, can boost both the resources available for any given production and the overall reputation of the venue / company.

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Make your own: editing a Renaissance play

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Summary

This case study describes how students go about preparing an edition of a Renaissance play entirely from scratch for a core module on an MA in English Studies (‘Renaissance Literature’). In the process, they learn about principles of editing, associated theoretical and practical problems, and the protocols and pitfalls of preparing a text.

Background

Only a tiny fraction of the extant corpus of Renaissance plays is widely available in reliable and user-friendly editions. However, almost all can now be read through Literature Online or Early English Books Online or, in most cases, both. Many of the plays which are not widely known may indeed be of poor artistic quality or suffer from textual difficulties or continuity glitches (sometimes arising from multiple authorship): in Peele’s *Edward I*, for instance, a character who has previously been beheaded is referred to as plotting a further rebellion, while in Field, Fletcher and Massinger’s *Knight of Malta*, one character is referred to, without explanation, by two entirely different names. In Richard Brome’s *The Queen’s Exchange*, which a student has edited for this module, two characters who are separately named, Alberto and the hermit, appear to be the same character – the hermit and his servant carry the banished and wounded Segebert off in Act II Scene iii (in Northumbria) only for Segebert to reappear in the West Saxon court in Act V Scene ii, accompanied by the original banished lord, Alberto. There is no intervening scene that explains the connection between the hermit and Alberto, but the implication is clear, which provided something of a headache for the student who edited it.

Nevertheless, the nitty-gritty, hands-on engagement with these texts which producing an edition of them demands is something which students, in my experience, find both enormously informative and, in most cases, enormously enjoyable.

Even though we do not collate manuscript variants or press-variants for this exercise and confine ourselves to plays which exist in only one text, the preparation of an edition demands an extraordinary number of skills. At the most basic level, the module requirement that editions should be modern-spelling makes it imperative to be able to spell, punctuate, and parse an English sentence correctly. The typically frequent references to classical deities and other mythological motifs all require to be glossed, which generally constitutes a useful refresher course in itself. Students need to remind themselves of (or grasp for the first time) the fundamental principles of iambic pentameter, so that they can spot if (as so often) any lines of verse have been mislined during the printing process. They soon learn that errors can, and usually will, creep in anywhere, and that they matter. Many of the students have chosen Roman plays – that is, 17th- or late 16th-century plays dealing with subjects from Roman history – and have been on a very steep learning curve about the Caesars, Latin phrases, Roman customs, and the cultural meanings of classical texts in the Renaissance. It has been hard work, but they have been glad to do it, and have all benefited enormously. Finally, having wrestled with all this, they are required to supply a 4000 word introduction setting the text in its historical and critical context.



Activities

The initial allocation of texts takes place well in advance, at the point when students choose the module. I ask students whether they would prefer comedy, tragedy, or history, whether they would like a play with a local setting or one based on a true story, and so on, and together we arrive at something which stands a reasonable chance of being interesting to them. The module runs for one semester, and is supported by weekly seminars of two hours each. After an initial introductory meeting, the first week is devoted to a session called 'Lineation: Establishing a Text – Verse or Prose?'. The second looks at the structure of a critical edition, with case studies of the contents pages of the Arden and Oxford editions of *The Tempest*, on which I invite students to do a compare-and-contrast exercise. A later week covers the 'band of terror', the textual notes often to be found at the foot of the page in a scholarly edition. We usually focus specifically on a passage from the Arden 2 *Hamlet*, where, underneath the page on which the Player King breaks off his speech in tears, there appears the following set of notes:

515. whe'er Capell (whe'r); where Q2, F. 516. Prithe] Q2; Pray you F.

517. of this] Q2; not in F. 519. you] Q2; ye F. 520. abstract] Q2; Abstracts F, Ql. 522. live] Q2, Ql; liued F. 524. bodkin] Q2; bodykins

F. much] Q2; not in F; farre Ql. 525. shall] Q2; should F, Ql.

531. To First Player] As they follow Polonius, Hamlet detains and steps aside with I Player. White.

Slowly, and I hope humanely, students are encouraged to make sense of this and to see why it is interesting. A later week looks at reviews of editions from *The Year's Work in English Studies* and other sources. I also invite past MA students to come along for one week and talk about what they learned from the module, whether they have anything to recommend, and whether they would have done anything differently; this also serves a number of ancillary purposes, since it helps build links between MA and PhD students, and I hope too that it is encouraging for current students to learn that two of their recent predecessors have had notes published in *Notes and Queries* which arose from their work on their plays (Duxfield 2004; Wilkinson 2005), and that a third has built up his introduction into a paper which he has successfully delivered at a conference and is now consolidating into an article. The remaining sessions include one in a computer-enabled room which involves introducing the students to useful resources such as previous products of the module (and of the undergraduate version) at www.shu.ac.uk/emls/ie/mls/resources.html; other online editions of Renaissance plays at www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/ren.htm and at <http://web.uvic.ca/shakespeare/>; and information about individual plays and playwrights at www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/ren.htm, <http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/reed/>, Dave Kathman's biographical index of English drama before 1660 at <http://shakespeareauthorship.com/bd/>, www.litencyc.com and Gabriel Egan's non-Shakespearean drama database at www.gabrielegan.com/nsdd/index.htm

We also look at the three invaluable online resources to which SHU fortunately subscribes, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and Early English Books Online, and we talk about ways of presenting material and which format the students find most helpful: where should notes be? Where should note markers go?

What sort of things should be glossed?

All the other sessions are run on a clinic basis, with all of us collectively looking at difficulties and cruxes which students have encountered in their texts. Each student in the group is asked to bring a page of the 'original' text and the equivalent page of how it now looks in their treatment of it. We all really pore over these, paying attention to every tiniest detail. This year I too have brought passages from Ford's *The Broken Heart* and *The Fancies, Chaste and Noble*, which I am currently editing for the Oxford complete Ford; next year my colleague Matthew Steggle will be doing the same with Richard Brome's *The English Moor*, which he is editing for the *Complete Works of Richard Brome*.

The module has not been without challenges. It does demand a considerable range of skills, including an ear for verse, which is extremely helpful for this purpose but also extremely hard to teach. There have been some bad moments, when students have been totally stumped by an unfamiliar word or name. By the same token, though, it has also been an extremely useful tool for teaching students that the most dangerous word of all is the one you think you don't need to look up. The module has generated several publications: as well as the two notes in *Notes and Queries* and the conference paper, there has been a piece about editing theory in *Literature Compass* (Duxfield 2005). Most importantly, this has proved to be a module which enthuses and engages students; indeed some of them become quite passionate about 'their' play. They can choose a text which plays to their strengths: for instance, a student with a strong interest in mediaeval Scottish history chose to edit J. W.'s *The Valiant Scot*, which centres on William Wallace. They can choose which aspects of the edition to develop: one student, noticing that a high number of the characters in her play died by poison, made a special study of this and ended up writing her MA dissertation on death by poisoning in Renaissance drama; another concentrated his efforts on the uncertain date of his play, unearthing previously neglected evidence for the dating which he is currently developing into a note for *Notes and Queries*.

Conclusions

Over the four years it has been running, no student has failed this module, and some have been awarded higher marks for it than for any of their previous work, in a just reflection of how much energy and care they have brought to the task. What they learn from it stands them in good stead for all their other work too, for it involves not only the editing of a specific text but exposure – often for the first time – to the idea of why we need editions and what questions we should ask before we buy, cite or trust an edition of any text from this period.

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April 2006

Using screen capture software in student feedback

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Summary

This case study looks at an innovative way of providing feedback to students on their written work in English Language Teaching (ELT) courses. This method has already led to considerable interest in the academic world (including articles in the THES (December 2006) and The Guardian (June 2007)) and can be used by lecturers in many other disciplines.

This method is based around the idea of using 'screen capture software', software which basically allows you to record the screen of your computer as if you had a video camera pointed at it. Everything you do on the screen is recorded and can be played back as a video and if you have a microphone connected it will also record your voice. Though the technology has been around for many years it is only recently that its possibilities as a tool for providing student feedback have been investigated.

Background

Screen capture software allows you to record the screen of your computer as if you have a camera pointed right at the screen. If you have a microphone connected to your computer then your voice will also be recorded. So for example if I wanted to teach you how to create 'a table' in 'Word', I could simply turn on the screen capture software and begin actually to make a table in 'Word'. I could simply record myself doing this. I could also comment on what I was doing, as all my comments would be recorded too. I could then save the video and send it to you. You could play it back and listen and watch as I explain to you how to make tables in 'Word'. You could yourself have a 'Word' document open and jump from watching the video to actually making a table.

For an example of how the technology is used in this way look at www.blackboardlearningvideos.com

I realised I could extend this idea to student feedback. If students send their essays to you as 'Word' files (or in other word processing formats) it becomes possible for you to open up their work on your computer, turn on screen capture software and begin to record yourself correcting and marking the students' work. Remember, however, that everything you say or do will be recorded! Any words you highlight, any comments you make about students' essays, any points of grammar you focus on or underline-whatever you do will be recorded as video. You can then send the resulting video to the student. They can listen and watch as you talk about their essays. You can for example tell students to watch the essays and re-draft their essays based on what you have said on the video.

There were several key factors that drew me towards the idea of giving 'live video feedback'. Firstly it offered a possible solution to the issues around face to face contact. Research has shown that students like face to face contact as it gives the students and teachers a chance to really understand the route of many of the errors. Fregeau (1999) points to the fact that students want face to face contact with their students. Of course the obvious problem with face-to-face contact is time. Could producing 'video feedback' offer a solution to this problem or at least could it be a halfway house between handing back a student a

written piece of work with comments on it and actually meeting the student to mark their work?

The second factor was the lack of interest in the feedback process. Several researchers have found that students take little interest in their feedback. This could be partly due to the fact that students often don't understand the feedback we provide them with. Fregeau (1999) and Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) have pointed out that correction is often inconsistent and even contradictory. Truscott (1996) has even suggested that much of what we do with correction is a waste of time. In a quick show of hands in my class seven out of 12 students admitted that if I don't do anything with the feedback either in the classroom or as part of their homework, then they are unlikely to do more than quickly look over it. Zamel (1985) points out that students find feedback vague, confusing and even contradictory. Could producing 'video feedback' muster up more interest in the feedback process? Could the fact that video feedback provided both visual and oral information help to overcome the misunderstandings between teacher and student that Zamel and others have commented on?

A third factor was the need to get more involved in the writing process. As Muncie (2000) writes, 'Feedback is seen as essential to the multiple-draft process'. An obvious answer is to collect in students' plans and mark them, get students to peer review and support each other at different stages of the process and to programme activities that build towards draft writing. Kroll (2001) believes that planning is one of the two most important factors in the writing process. My feeling was that 'video feedback' could offer a solution here. Students could send in their plans. I could open them up on my computer, turn on screen capture software and record myself talking about the plans – pointing out problems, suggesting alternatives etc. – and then send the video back to the students. The students could listen and watch and use my ideas to help them to write a better plan or first draft.

A fourth reason which motivated me is in many ways outside the scope of my own discipline of ELT. In the area of multimedia there is a lot of interest around the work of Richard Mayer. His work is based on the idea of 'dual coding', i.e. that information is passed to us through two main channels: the ears and the eyes. Mayer's work has shown how the combination of both the visual and oral channels produces the 'deepest learning' (especially if the information from the two channels complement each other). There is a tendency to overload the visual channels and not make enough use of the 'aural channels' in multimedia. Video feedback uses both channels and I was particularly interested in trying to maximise and combine the use of both in providing feedback to my students.

Activities

There are all sorts of screen capture software products on the market. There are basically two stages to the production of the videos. 'Matchware' is a very easy product to use and 'Camtasia' is probably the best known product in the market. To record your computer screen you don't need anything special. Most computers have microphones or a cheap set of earphones and microphone will do. To record just requires one or two clicks of a button. From that moment on everything on the screen is recorded and anything you say will also be recorded. It doesn't matter what you do with your computer. You can open up different programmes, go to the internet or begin writing. The software simply records the screen of your computer as if you have a video camera pointed at it.

Once you have made the videos you need to save them and compress them. You can play the videos back instantly to check the recording but you will need to compress them so that they can be sent to students or uploaded onto the internet (or returned to the students in some other way). Compression is not especially difficult but you will need to consider things like the quality of the sound, the size of the screen etc. as these will all have a bearing on the file size. I have found that with either 'Matchware' or 'Camtasia' you can simply use the default settings. This way you don't need to do anything. I set the screen size to *800*600 and press the button. It does however take a few minutes for the files to be compressed and converted into 'Windows Media Player' files, which are small and easy for the students to view.

I worked with a class of 12 Chinese students on an English for Academic Purposes course for my very first steps into the world of using screen capture software as a form of giving feedback. After some preparation in the class, students were asked to write an essay about the 'economic impact of the expansion of the Chinese economy'. Students were told to send their essays directly to me and that I would record myself correcting their work and then send back the videos. I did a demonstration for them in class and explained how they might use the videos. I pointed out that they could play, pause and rewind the videos and that it might be a good idea to listen and take notes or try and make the corrections I was suggesting directly onto their essays.

Producing the videos was much easier than I thought. I opened up their essays on my screen and began to record myself as I worked through the essays, pointing out mistakes, pointing out good areas, using the highlighter in 'Word' to focus on mistakes. I then saved the videos, compressed them and sent them straight back to the students. There were a number of surprises.

- I chose not to actually correct anything but just to use the highlighter tool in 'Word' to show where the mistake was and then to say what I wanted the students to think about in order to correct the mistake.
- I found myself explaining what I thought the reason for the mistake was as well as suggesting what to think about to correct it. I said things like 'Perhaps you thought ...' and 'You need to think about ...'.
- It was much easier to correct the work. You are able to talk as you correct and this actually makes the job of correction much more enjoyable as well as of course providing key information to the student. The process seemed a lot more fun and easier to do than using a pen and paper.
- I had forgotten how powerful all the tools in 'Word' could be. If I highlight, underline or make something bold it all comes out in the video and I hadn't considered that before. It made the correcting process very visual and gave me all sorts of tools to work with.
- I found my marking was rather disorganised. I hadn't decided to focus on a specific area and I found myself correcting much more than I usually would and in a rather disorganised fashion.
- I found myself reading the essay out aloud as I went through it and of course all that was recorded. Again this caused a problem.

- It was easy to return the videos as the students had sent me their essays by email so as soon as I made them I sent them back the video.

The students received their videos and were told to watch them and then redraft their essays based on my feedback. The second essay would be marked in the more traditional way. In the next lesson we had an informal feedback session about the idea.

- The students loved the idea. All 12 students said it was an interesting way of getting feedback.
- Some pointed out that at times I spoke very fast.
- Some pointed out how useful that it was that I used the highlight tools, etc. and that I should make greater use of them.
- Students liked the idea that they could play back the videos again and again and stop and pause them.
- All the students had used the videos to re-draft their essays.
- Some students felt that I shouldn't read out the contents of their essays as I worked through them. This confused them as they were not sure when I was pointing out a mistake and when I was simply reading the content. I realised that I needed to quickly read through the essays before turning on the screen capture software so that I didn't find myself reading through them as I was doing the corrections.

This very first run and several more were very much an introduction to the whole idea. There were several key things that needed to be overcome to really improve the idea.

- I needed to be much clearer about what I was going to focus on. I felt it could be far more useful as a tool at the earlier stages of the writing process where I could focus more on organisation and content and less on surface errors.
- The file sizes were a problem because all the files have to be compressed and this takes time. I needed to find ways to make the compression stage quicker.
- I needed to read the essay first so that I didn't end up reading the essay aloud as I was marking it.
- I wanted to make more use of the tools in 'Word' which would make the marking very visual.

Later on in the course I began a second type of feedback. Students were asked to write plans for their essays and then submit them. I would then record myself giving comments on their plans using screen capture software. I used exactly the same process as before (i.e. the students sent their plans to me and I opened them up on my screen and then turned on screen capture software). Some interesting things came out of it:

- The videos were much shorter as there was not so much to comment on and this made the compression time a lot quicker.
- I was much more focused with my feedback. I commented on the organisation and on the ideas.
- I made as much use of the tools in 'Word' as possible. I wrote onto their plans in a different colour and made use of the highlight tool and the bold tool.

- One of the problems was the plans themselves. Some students gave me much more material to work with than others and this made the feedback harder or easier to do.

The students found these feedback videos useful. In a series of recorded sessions with six of the students it came up as a point that the stage when the videos are used is important and can make the videos more or less useful. One strange comment that came up again and again was that the students thought that the videos were a great source of 'listening material'. All felt that the videos made the whole process of feedback more interesting, they liked the fact they were both visual and oral and especially liked the fact they could be played, paused and stopped. Some students claimed they watched and listened to the videos four or five times before redrafting their essays. Some students explained that they had their essays open on the screen and jumped between watching the video and making the corrections to their work. Students felt that the corrections were very personal and that though it wasn't exactly the same as meeting up with the teacher, it was much better than just receiving written feedback. They all said they found it easier to follow the mistakes and understand the points the teacher was making (in comparison to just pointing out mistakes in the margin).

Conclusions

Much more work needs to be done in this topic and indeed I am currently doing several much larger studies. Some are with students in areas other than ELT. One of the biggest problems is the organisation of the feedback. It certainly seems to help when the focus is on the plans and organisation of their work rather than just on the surface errors. Correcting surface errors can be difficult because there are often too many errors to focus on and it can be difficult to really understand why the students made the mistakes.

A second problem is time. Making the videos is very fast – indeed I have found it easier and quicker to mark the work using this method than I did with traditional ways of marking. Being able to talk really makes the process enjoyable as you can provide so much more information to the students. However, compressing the videos is the problem. A long video can take four or five minutes to compress. Interestingly enough there is an easy solution to this. You can make all the correction videos first and then set up a 'batch compression' where you compress a number of videos at the same time. The problem with this of course is that you have to become technically more competent with the software.

What does seem clear from this very small and initial piece of work is that students find the whole process very motivating. Re-drafted essays were returned to me very quickly and students commented on feeling more motivated and interested in the process of feedback. Of course this could wear off with time.

The reaction from the academic world has been very interesting. Institutions that run distance learning courses are especially interested in the idea as it can help to overcome the problem of isolation on courses and the lack of personal contact with tutors. It would be interesting to see distance learning organisations using the idea.

Special needs groups have also pointed out that the combination of both visual and oral information can provide additional support to some of their students.

It would be interesting to do a comparative study of students using and not using the video feedback. Could we prove for example that the students pick up on more of the mistakes that the teacher pointed out? It would be interesting to see if the videos led to better re-drafts of their essays or if we could prove that students remember more of the errors that were pointed out to them.

At present my own interest is focused on how best to use the idea. I have been experimenting with using the videos for 'classroom feedback'. So I mark the essays in the 'traditional way' but then produce a long 'class feedback video' which talks about the general problems that have come up in the class. I then send the video to all the students. This saves a lot of time in class as I don't have to go over general problems in class time. The students also like it as they find it very useful when they go to write further essays. They can listen to and watch me talking about their last essays and use it to remind them of things they need to consider in the future.

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- You can watch some examples of Russell's video feedback at the following web-links. You will need speakers to hear the commentaries.

www.russellstannard.com/king/king.html
www.russellstannard.com/grammar/grammar.html
www.russellstannard.com/present/present.html

Sources for the software

- 'Camtasia': www.techsmith.com/
 'Camtasia' is probably the best known piece of software. You can download a trial version here.
- 'AutoScreenRecorder': www.wisdom-soft.com/
 Provides a free copy of the basic tool or you can pay for the professional tool.

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Supporting non-traditional students preparing the final year undergraduate project in BA English Language Studies

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Summary

Following a student survey, a number of changes were made to the running of the final year project in English Language. The work behind this case study was partially funded by the WriteNow Centre for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Background

Producing a long 'dissertation' (or 'project' as a third-year undergraduate independent piece of work is often called) is likely to be the most challenging task that undergraduates will have faced. Such a module provides them with the opportunity to work on an extended task which they design themselves in conjunction with tutors. Single Honours students often have to write a project of around 10,000 words or more, to be completed over their entire final year which occupies an important place in determining the students' Honours classification.

Among the 'new' universities ours is not alone in having a large number of students from 'priority postcode' areas, and diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, up to 20% of our students have some level of dyslexia or dyspraxia. By the time they arrive at their third year, existing English Language Studies (ELS) students have researched book-based literature to complete a range of 2000 word, referenced, critical writing tasks, and some independently chosen text analyses. However, we work against a background of significant fluidity in the student body. To illustrate, approximately 10% of the students in third-year BA ELS have transferred from European-based universities. Some, by no means all, of these students have apparently been less exposed to a critical approach than our own students despite the credit transfer system of the Bologna agreement (European Union ENQA 2005).

When we assumed responsibility for the English Language Studies Project Module, there were six hours of front-loaded class tuition. This covered an introduction to the project and choice of topic, an introduction to research methods, and a workshop with the subject librarian on literature search. After this very short introduction students were required to submit a project proposal form. Thereafter, the tuition was individual: ten 30 minute sessions of tutorial support spread across two semesters, the onus being on students to make tutorial appointments. Most students were writing review-based projects. We found that in order to achieve the required length of text (9000 words), many students, rather than using more sources, were summarising a few book sources at greater length than they had done in their essays, making for rather weak results. Weaker students would often write about each book or article chronologically, leading to considerable overlap in reporting ideas. We wanted to find ways to enable students to build up their confidence to read more critically and also to produce some independent research, so we set up a project where students would have to do some primary research.

Student survey

We had the opportunity from the academic year 2008-9 to carry out a small piece of action research on the project module, which coincided with departmental changes to all project modules. We analysed a selection of projects. Then we issued pre- and post-module questionnaires to students with a mixture of quantitative and qualitative items regarding the project experience. These were delivered to two small cohorts of students (50 students). A volunteer was also sought to write a log about her experiences during the project module. Fortunately, we had 100% response to the post-project questionnaire delivered to the first cohort of students.

The information we gleaned was as follows: before the project very few students indeed had any prior experience of doing any research. Most students experienced extremely positive feelings about undertaking an individual project. Despite this, about half the students reported negative feelings such as 'uncertainty', 'confusion' or 'anxiety', particularly with regard to choosing and defining their project area, hardly a desirable situation.

After the project students stated that the most useful aspect of tuition was the relationship with the tutor.

Based on our knowledge and on the projects we analysed, the principal demands and weaknesses of the Project module seemed to us to be fourfold, centring on:

- Time and self-management
- Project topic choice
- Structure of the Project
- Criticality

Among the diverse student responses to the post-project questionnaire there was also a cluster of responses highlighting the first three of the aspects above.

Perhaps our greatest concern was time management: keeping up the momentum. Some students, after planning their proposal around week four of the first project semester, abandoned reading for their project in order to work on taught modules with pressing deadlines, resuming work on their projects only late in the second semester of the module. A few students failed to make much progress with their reading at all. Dyslexic students were particularly at risk as is shown in the case of Student T. Her intention was to write about the language of Trinidadian lyrics. Unfortunately she did not recognise the link with readings from previous modules on style and sociolinguistics and could not compile her reading list. Although generally confident in approaching tutors, T did not consult us between week 3 and week 10 of this module, but went to her friends who persuaded her to focus on musical style rather than language analysis, as the following extract from her log shows:

Week 4

My friends suggest that I should try emailing some DJs and getting their views on what I am writing about. I email Martin Jay, who recommends I read a book by an artist called Chalkdust. I start to feel a bit more hopeful.

Week 7

I am looking on the internet for inspiration on a new topic.

So she was no further forward. This example is not as extreme as it may seem.

In their post-module questionnaire students made suggestions, including viewing more sample projects than those to which they then had access. This fitted in with our leaning towards the 'genre approach' advocated by Swales and Feak (2000; 2004) and Paltridge (2002). They also strongly suggested that they wanted us to apply more pressure on them to produce their draft work during the course of the module.

Activities

The following changes were made at various moments in the teaching cycle:

Project type and choice of topic

We encouraged students to move away from a format based principally on evaluating secondary sources and suggested they undertake a piece of primary research, such as a survey, case study or text analysis, backed up of course by a literature review. We had seen this type of project run very successfully on a former Open University undergraduate module (E300 – 'The English Language') for many years. We asked students to break down their projects into clear broad sections consisting of: introduction, purpose and scope of own investigation, a short literature review, methodology (including ethics where applicable), methods of analysis, report on findings, conclusion and self-evaluation, bibliography and where applicable appendices.

This allowed students to blossom. To illustrate, a Polish-born student first briefly reviewed both ESOL teaching to young children and Polish immigration, then wrote a brief observational study of the language utterances and behaviour of a Polish-speaking child learning English in a London primary school. Theory was related to students' own lives and thus we believe we were facilitating more of a 'deep learning approach' in the sense of Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle (1984).

Even so, considerable guidance in narrowing down students' project topics was necessary. We therefore frontloaded teaching time from six to 10 hours of workshops at the beginning of the module to allow more refining of project topics and initial assistance with reading lists, reducing later individual tutorial time. The timetable of support workshops is below:

Week 1

1. What is a project? Balance between a critical report on reading and primary research.
2. Meeting a student who is half way through their Project in order to draw on their experience.

Week 2

Research Methods – drawing on links to studies met in second-year Sociolinguistics module, or on any customer questionnaires which students might have completed at some point in their lives.

Week 3

1. Consideration of previous projects – looking at them from the genre approach.
2. Students work together to give an initial list of three possible topics which interest them and suitable methods for studying each – other students consider how realistic any of these are.

Week 4

1. Revision of critical reading skills – with relevant texts
2. Building up a reading list and learning how to use search engines via the library website – workshop with the librarian.

Week 5

Presenting to peers a proposal and some reading done during the last two weeks.

Week 11

Group session: students to compare progress in their reading and writing up of the literature review, and to progress their methodology for their practical investigation working in groups with common interests.

Week 8 of second semester

Session on editing.

Use of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) within the module

In order to address the students' sense of confusion we tried to make information much more accessible. For some students their first point of contact with the module is the module handbook in the VLE. Drawing on our knowledge of learning styles theory (Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall, 2008) we tried to cater to a greater extent for students with visual learning styles. We reduced the verbal length of the handbook and made more diagrammatic illustrations including one of the narrowing down of areas of investigation according to four parameters: background thinking (sociolinguistic / psycholinguistic etc.); geographic space under consideration; period of time to be considered; group of people to be studied. We also provided a basic alphabetical glossary of research-related vocabulary which was just as useful for our native speakers as for our EU and International students.

A course of action, based on the genre approach, was to make available several abridged undergraduate projects in PDF format with sections labelled and marginal comments. It was important to us that these projects be as different from each other as possible to avoid the risk of students thinking that there is only one way of writing a project.



We began to handle tutorial advice by email when circumstances such as family illness meant students could not attend face to face and to contact students whom we had not seen for a while. One student stated that for her this was the most important aspect of our teaching.

Collaborative work

Some of the extra class workshop time was used so that groups of students could collaborate on refining their titles and specifying suitable methods of research. Peers were remarkably realistic in spotting unachievable 'dream projects' such as one involving physically interviewing students in Nigeria. It was an effective way of trimming topics and titles down to manageable amounts without damping students' enthusiasm. More recently we have encouraged students to form small groups around common interests, in this way offering opportunities for collaboration, as recommended in the English Benchmarks (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007) and the Bologna 'tuning' document (European Union ENQA, 2005).

Time and self-management

One way of tackling the time management challenge was to use a technique more used in study skills sessions with first years than third years: we issued our students with a calendar of suggested 'milestones' against which they could map their progress, showing how the final three weeks of time for the two-semester 9000-word project ideally needed to be available for editing and proofreading. On their project proposal forms students were asked to set provisional dates for completion of each item of their proposed reading, their writing and their steps in their practical research. We also marked in the diagram we issued a continuing search throughout the project period for literature leading to the eventual modification of reading.

When the tutorials began, students and tutor jointly made a pro forma record of progress, items discussed and short and mid-term targets agreed at the end of each tutorial, which was then emailed to the student.

Freedom and self-management are all very well, but similar experiences to those of Student T above led us to proactively contact students deemed as high risk who did not appear for tutorials. Student evaluation of this aspect was very positive. One self-doubting student was particularly grateful:

Had it not been for my tutor's constant reminder that I could do the project and the fact that he kept me on track, I would not have made the effort to even show it to him. It's sad that some people are too embarrassed to show their work for fear that it may be too inferior compared to other people's.

Refining Reading Lists

The extra teaching session held in the fifth week of the module gave students the opportunity to report how successful some of their searches had been. Students with topics where there was apparently less material available were then encouraged to make an individual appointment with the librarian in order to expand their reading lists.

The literature review

Although there is no compulsion to review the literature within a single section of the project (it could be spread out in chapters of findings), the 'single section structure' is a safe way for the novice to handle it (Swales and Feak 2000). Our project literature review, although now only around 4000 words in length, was for most students still the most difficult aspect of writing the project.

It is, therefore on the literature review that we chose to focus much of our attention. The advice manuals then available seemed to concentrate upon types of enquiry, research methods, and keeping and organising records. For example, Judith Bell's book *Doing Your Research Project* (2005) which then served as our students' manual, states that a literature review should provide the reader with a brief idea of current knowledge and major themes within the subject area of the research. Students are advised to find categories within the research literature and to note them (Bell 2005, 21). This is of little help to those with various different sub-topics who are having trouble sorting them out. For one student writing about the attitudes of British migrants in Spain to Spanish, this meant sorting out statistical data about British migration, sociological issues and linguistic issues.

The 'architecture' of a literature review will depend on the ideas which the student groups together (Swales and Feak 2000, 118-124). Both John Swales and Christine Feak (2000 and 2004) and Chris Hart (1998), though writing for post-graduate students outside our subject area, provide the helpful suggestion of giving students practice sets of article abstracts to discuss their potential arrangement into clusters, which is a procedure we successfully tried.

We also played 'puzzle games' by showing students excerpts of projects and asking them to give both linguistic and content-based evidence to deduce what section of a project they stemmed from. Finally groups of students were provided with the opportunity to order sections of a sample literature review, giving reasons for their choice, and comparing their solution with the original.

Reading and criticality

Students were given brief exercises in critical reading (following on from those covered in the first year of the degree), involving them in criticising and synthesising sources. They were invited to consider the discipline, period and school from which writers stemmed, and what evidence the authors gave.

It was useful to point out to students how methods of citation show one's attitude to the text read and how much citation might be appropriate. Ken Hyland (2004) observes that citation and evaluation of previous experts of the field occupies more space in research articles in the humanities and social sciences, including Applied Linguistics, than in hard sciences and we felt this was valuable knowledge for many of our students. Conversely, students who joined us from Law degrees had to be warned against using too many direct quotations.

Hyland (2004) also provides an account of ways of citing (direct and indirect; critical and neutral) including the verbs most commonly applied in Applied Linguistics and Sociology, the two epistemological areas in his list most closely allied with ELS. This was the kind of knowledge which we could apply with our students at the editing stage of the project.

Conclusions

The first year we tried these changes project grades of weak students in particular improved, and a higher proportion of students gained As. However, results may vary annually and will depend on many factors, including the commitment of members of a cohort of students.

Nearly all students liked the option of choosing a practical project with some primary research. Most benefited from overt consideration of project structures – and experienced reduced levels of anxiety, after our focus on the demystification of the structure and purpose of projects. Students with disabilities and diverse learning styles were better catered for, but several of them would ideally still have greater support. There was high student use of electronic communication as a tutorial resource, and of documents on our VLE. The calendar provided has been ranked a popular innovation, but approximately a third of students still worked 'last minute' such that their final editing and proofreading still left something to be desired.

Not all students would need such detailed guidance as that we provided, but it is our contention that very many students could benefit from these procedures, and that there are benefits for tutors too in not having to repeat the same information over and over again in tutorials!

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